

THE GATES OF HEAVEN ARE LIGHTLY LOCKED- PART X: THE COMMUNION RITE

I. The Communion Rite is the part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist that focuses on the reception of Holy Communion. It consists of: (1) the Lord's Prayer and the related prayers; (2) the Rite of Peace; (3) the breaking of the Eucharist under the form of bread; (4) the reception of Holy Communion by the faithful; and (5) the Prayer after Communion. See General Instructions to the Roman Missal 80-90.

II. The Our Father and the related prayers prepare us for Holy Communion with the ideal prayer that Jesus taught us.

A. The priest introduces the Our Father with the invitation, "At the Savior's command and formed by divine teaching, we dare to say."

1. This phrase connects the calling of God and the growth and the confidence that His Law gives.

2. The phrase first emphasizes the fact that Jesus Himself gave us the Lord's Prayer during the Sermon on the Mount and the related preaching. See Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4. And thus in praying this common prayer together, we are fulfilling His will.

3. But God's law does not only govern us, but makes us a more glorious people. And so the invitation also says that we are formed by divine teaching.

4. And the invitation concludes with the confidence of His friends the sons and daughters of God, a glory that God offers us through Jesus. See John 1:12-13; 15:14-17; Gal. 4:1-7; 1 John 3:19-24; Ps. 15. See Catechism 2777.

B. The Our Father in the fullest form is listed in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew. Matt. 6:9-13. The Gospel according to Luke records a shorter version in the midst of Jesus' teachings on prayer and good works. See Luke 11:2-4.

1. As described in the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus gives the prayer in the context of His discourse on sincere almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. That portion of the Sermon focuses especially on simplicity in prayer and of forgiveness. Throughout the entire Sermon, there is an emphasis on "your Father" or "your heavenly Father" drawing His faithful along and rewarding them. There is a special emphasis in the Beatitudes on the peacemakers being called children of God.

2. The prayer addresses God as "our" Father, emphasizing that we pray together as a Church, and that our adopted sonship in God is in the context of the Church. Only Jesus can rightfully pray, "My Father." See Catechism 2790.

3. The prayer has seven petitions. The first three focus upon God's name, His kingdom, and His will. The last three pray for deliverance from the guilt, temptation, and evil of this world. And the middle petition is "Give us this day our daily bread," which connects the purity and holiness of God to this realm where we need His protection. See Catechism 2803 – 2854.

4. The beginning of the Our Father both recognizes the relationship God has with us as a loving Father, but also the distance between heaven and earth. The Sermon on the Mount emphasizes that we must try to imitate the ways of the Father in heaven and rely on Him, thus connecting heaven and earth, as the Eucharist above all does. See Matt. 5:16, 45, 48; 6:14, 26, 32, 7:11. In the Old Testament, God was known as Father to the nation of Israel and to the king, see, e.g., Duet. 32:6; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1; Mal. 2:10; 2 Sam. 7:14, but this prayer, and the life of Jesus generally emphasize His person fatherly concern for all people together and each one of us. We thus sense both the awesome majesty of God, and also our status as His adopted sons and daughters.

5. The first petition is that the name of God be hallowed, or made holy in our reverence. Part of the idea is that God has given us access to Him through His name; and thus His name is most sacred, as emphasized in the Second Commandment. At the beginning of the freedom of the Chosen People God revealed His name to Moses. See Ex. 3:14-16. Thus, the psalmist and many others sing to the glory of God's name, see, e.g., Tobit 11:14, Judith 16:2; Isaiah 12:4; Dan. 2:20, Ps. 9:2, 91:1; 135:1, 149:3. The name of God, and especially the name of Jesus in very powerful in saving history, see, e.g., Ps. 33:21, 124:8, Prov. 18:10; Joel 3:5; Mark 16:17, Luke 10:17; John 16:23-24, Acts 2:21, 3:16. Thus, a failure to reverence His name indicates a weak or no faith, and is punished by God. See Ex. 20:7, Rev. 13:1-10. The glory of God's name is one reason for the salvation of Israel. See Is. 52:5, Ez. 36:20-23. And so, for each of the faithful, the glory of Jesus's name has great power and glory. See John 14:13

6. We ask that God's kingdom come. At one level, we seek for His kingdom that will come at the end of all things. But we are also asking that His kingdom on earth increase through our faith, and especially through the celebration of every Mass.

- The kingdom of God is complete in the heavenly realm. Jesus drinks the chalice anew in this kingdom, see Matt. 26:29. And He promises that His disciples will eat with Him in His kingdom. See Matt. 22:1-14; Rev. 3:20.. And so, especially as indicated in the parables of the kingdom and in the Book of Revelation, the final kingdom will come at the end of all things. Mat 22:2; 25; Acts 1:6.

- But the kingdom of God is also in part present already. See Matt. 4:17, Mark 1:15; Luke 11:20, 16:16, 17:21. Thus, God's faithful are meant to increase the glory of His kingdom and live by its precepts, bringing the kingdom more to earth. And, as indicated by the Book of Revelation, the kingdom breaks through in the prayers of the faithful and especially at every Mass, the first promise of the everlasting banquet.

7. The prayer "Thy will be done" is particularly poignant, given the fact that in the agony in the Garden, Jesus prayed that prayer again. See Matt. 26:42; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42. In the encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus even says that doing the will of His Father is His food. John 4:34. In the Bread of Life discourse, He connects His saving power to His loyalty to the divine will. See John 6:35-40.

- In this prayer, we ask God that we be able to discern His will and carry it out in practice. See Catechism 2826.

- The phrase “on earth as it is in heaven” indicates that, by adhering to God’s will, we are joining heaven and earth together, achieving a union that is also at the heart of every Mass.

8. At the center of the prayer, we beseech God to give us this day our daily bread.

- At one level, the focus on this day indicates that we will trust God for the future. We are not asking right now for enough to sustain us forever, but will instead rely on God each day.

- But the day also means that we are in contact with God here and now. Each day He renews the covenant. See Catechism 2836.

- The Greek word for “daily” (epiousios) is translated could mean: (1) bread which sustains us; (2) bread above nature which comes down from the one who sustains us; (3) bread for today; or (4) bread for tomorrow. All of these meanings converge with the analogy to the manna in the desert, which the Israelites received day by day, except for the day before the Sabbath, when they received two days’ worth so that they would not have to work on the Sabbath. See Ex. 16. Part of the idea was to keep them trusting in God, rather than their wealth.

- Jesus took up this image of manna in describing Himself as the bread of life. See John 6:32-33, 49-50. And the Eucharist is above all the bread we pray for. See Catechism 2837. But also the daily bread stands for all of our needs on the journey to the greater kingdom

9. We ask God to forgive our sins, recognizing our need to forgive others. The connection between the receiving and conferring forgiveness is a frequent theme of Jesus’ preaching. See Matt 5:7; 6:14-15, 18:21-35; Luke 12:57-59, 17:4; see also James 2:13. In describing the need to forgive so as to obtain forgiveness in the midst of His discussion of prayer, Jesus also indicated that, when we pray sincerely, God make us able to forgive sins.

10. In speaking of the need to forgive sins, Jesus tends to speak at the same time about the need to avoid creating temptations. See Matt. 5:6-7, 18:6-9, 15-22; Luke 17:1-4. And so we ask God not to lead us into temptation.

- Part of the idea is that both involve freedom from sins and the wiles of the devil, forgiveness dealing with freedom from past guilt and avoiding temptation freedom from future guilt; they are different sides of the same coin. While we know that temptation is inevitable in the world, see Luke 17:1, we ask that we be close enough to God that we will not experience any unnecessary temptation. If we are faithful to God, we will not experience any temptation that we cannot handle. See 1 Cor. 10:13.

-There is a difference between trials, which are needed for growth, and temptations to sin, which we should avoid. See Catechism 2847. We ask God

not to let us fall into temptation, but not deliverance from all trials.

- However, if one is arrogant or distant from God, God allows temptation to draw a person back. See Sir. 14:20-15:20; James 1:13-15. We ask that this effect not happen. The phrase “trespasses” more literally means the debt owed to God from sin. It thus reminds one on the parable of the unforgiving servant. See Matt. 18:21-34.

-It may seem odd to ask God not to lead us into temptation, when God tempts no one anyway. See James 1:13-14; Catechism 2846. However, God does allow temptations when we are not faithful or attentive to Him. And we are asking God not to have these temptations occur. It may be that God will allow them anyway, as He allows war, strife, poverty and many other ills. But, as we pray for an end to these other maladies, we pray to avoid temptation.

11. The prayer ends asking that we be delivered (or more literally “freed”) from “evil” or “the evil one.” The idea is that evil is a constant threat, but as long as one is faithful, the threat is weak because of the presence of Christ. See, e.g., Luke 22:31-32; John 16:33, 17:13-15; 2 Thess. 3:3-4; Rev. 14:12-13.

C. The Prayer of Embolism completes the Our Father, bringing it back up to a celebration connecting heaven and earth.

1. The prayer continues along the same lines of asking God to deliver us from all evil and brings in more directly the notion of a true peace and a freedom from sin and distress that is the first promise and preparation for the everlasting kingdom.

2. Part of the idea is that, at least within the Church and at especially every Mass, there should be a peacefulness and holiness that draws the world towards God, as unity that Jesus prayed for at the Last Supper. See John 17. Acts of the Apostles describes the Apostles as maintaining this peacefulness within the Church even as the Church was being persecuted. See Acts 1:13-14; 2:42-47; 4:32-37, 6:1-7; 9:31.

3. The response to the prayer (called a doxology) is “For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are Yours, forever and ever.” This prayer comes from a prayer in the Didache, a church document from the first century that explained many of the rules for the early Church around Rome, including how the Mass proceeds. See Didache 10. They are also at the end of the Lord’s Prayer as recorded by Matthew in some versions of the Bible. However, Catholic translations of the Bible do not include these words on the grounds that the addition was probably a scribal error that added a common prayer to the text.

- This prayer emphasizes the glory of Jesus as the Son of Man who rules invisibly over all things even now and who will return in glory to establish His visible and final reign of splendor. See Dan. 7:13-27; Matt. 25:3-33; Rev. 1:7, 19:11-16.

-As the Catechism points out, at one level this prayer restates the first three

petitions of the Our Father, calling upon the glory of God's name, His kingdom, and the power of His grace that leads us to do His will. It also implicitly asks for the defeat of the devil's claim to kingdom, power and glory in the world. See Catechism 2855.

III. The Rite of Peace sets the stage for the harmony needed for a worthy reception of the Eucharist.

A. The rite of peace then picks up on this prayer for peace, recalling Jesus' words at the Last Supper, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you." John 14:27. They are words meant to inspire confidence in Christ's presence in the midst of what is often a troubled world. See also John 16:33.

B. The priest asks that Christ give us His forgiveness and look upon "the faith of the Church" instead of our sins. The letters to the Roman and Galatians emphasize that, by faith in Christ, we obtain forgiveness of our sins even before we are worthy. See Romans 4; Gal 2:15-3:29. There is a strong notion that we are not on our own, but receive salvation in the context of the Church. As with the paralyzed man who was brought to Jesus or the daughter of Jarius, others help us also along the path to holiness. See Mark 2:1-12, 5:21-42; James 5:13-16; Hebrews 12:1-3.

C. The prayer then invokes the image of the peace of the kingdom and unity of God and calls God to grant that to us. Jesus calls His apostles to that peace and unity at the Last Supper, saying that through that unity the world would believe. See John 17:20-26. And the First Letter to the Corinthians says that that peace and unity is essential for the mission of the Church, especially in the context of the Eucharist. See 1 Cor. 11:17-18, 12:1-31; see also Eph. 2:14-22. Part of the idea is that we are calling upon the order of the saints and angels in heaven, as described especially in the Book of Revelation, to descend to us at the Mass, and thus guide the Church. See Rev. 3-4; see also Heb. 12:22-24.

D. As St. Paul generally does at the beginning of His letters, the priest asks that God's peace come upon those gathered. See, e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal 1:2; Eph. 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col. 1:2.

E. There is then the option, generally used, of offering a sign of that peace with one another. The idea is in part that we should be at peace with each other, especially those within the Church, in order worthily to worship God. See Matt 5:23-26; Mark 11:25.

IV. The priest then breaks the bread as the congregation sings or says the Agnus Dei, the prayer to the lamb of God.

A. The Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) helps prepare us for communion by recognizing Jesus as the final Paschal Lamb, who frees us from sin and leads us into freedom.

B. The phrase "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" comes from the preaching of John the Baptist, who testified to Jesus before his disciples and especially spoke of the baptism of the Holy Spirit Jesus would bring. See John 1:29, 36. In Revelation, the angels, saints and all creation sing the praises of the Lamb who reigns and saves His people. See Rev. 5:9-13, 7:10-17, 19:1-8.

C. The symbolism of the Lamb is threefold:

1. A Passover Lamb was slaughtered for each family on the day before the Chosen People's liberation from Egypt; and its blood, placed on the door, was the indication for the angel of death to pass over their houses, sparing the firstborn. The family would then eat the Passover Lamb, indicating their communion with the people to be freed. The Lord commanded that the Passover be celebrated in this way as a perpetual institution. See Ex. 12. Jesus Christ fulfills this image through His blood that saves us from sin and death, and by offering Himself as the food of liberation from slavery to sin.
2. Isaiah had prophesied that the suffering servant of the Lord "would be led like a lamb to the slaughter" but through the offering of his life would "justify many . . . and win pardon for their offenses." Isaiah 52:12-53:12. Jesus fulfills this image by offering His life to justify us and win pardon for our sins.
3. The Book of Revelation describes Jesus as the conquering Lamb of God, who both unseals the scroll of God's judgment and stands at the center of the heavenly kingdom, welcoming the Church in all her purity as His bride. Rev. 5:6-13, 7:9-17, 14:1-5, 19:6-7, 21:9-14, 22-27.

D. We pray for God's mercy and for peace. The mercy of God includes both forgiveness of sins and overcoming the effects of sin. See Matt. 18:21-35, Luke 10:37. The 51st psalm begins with the phrase "have mercy on me, O God" and continues with the idea of purification that makes one worthy to offer worship. The Book of Revelation describes the Lamb as providing final peace for His flock in the midst of the travails afflicting the world. See Rev. 7:13-17, 17:14; 21:22-27. God's merciful providence in this life leads to a peace of the soul now, and a final peace in the everlasting kingdom, see John 14:27, 17:33, of which the Mass is a first promise.

E. As the Agnus Dei is being said or sung, the priest breaks the large host and places a piece of the host into the chalice as he says in a low voice "May the mingling of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ bring eternal life to us who receive it."

1. The breaking of bread was a common Jewish custom reflecting the unity of a household or community. Acts describes the common worship (likely the Mass) as "the breaking of bread." Acts 2:42. All of the Last Supper accounts refer to the breaking of bread. See Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24. And, in the multiplication of the loaves, Jesus broke bread, and the Apostles distributed it and gathered together the fragments. John 6:1-13. The distribution of the broken bread, and the gathering together of the parts is a symbol of the unity of the Church, whose people, though scattered throughout the world, share in the one bread of angels. See 1 Cor. 10:17; General Instructions to the Roman Missal 83.
2. The placing of the Eucharistic bread into the chalice is a symbol of the resurrection of Christ, when His life and His body were reunited. For, in Jewish thought, the blood represented life. See Gen. 9:5-6; Lev. 17:11; Duet. 12:23. And, in turn, the Resurrection of Christ is the cause of our own promised resurrection. See 1 Cor. 15:12-19; 1 Thess. 4:14. It is only a symbol of the reunion, for the Eucharist under each species (i.e. under the appearance of bread or wine) contains all of the humanity and

divinity of the risen Jesus; the resurrection Jesus' body and blood can no longer be divided from each other. The difference is that, under the species of bread, the presence of the body of Christ causes all of Christ to be present. Under the species of wine, the presence of the blood of Christ causes all of Christ to be present. See Summa Theologica III q. 76 art. 1. The idea is called concomitance.

V. The reception begins with the preparation for Communion, by the priest and the people and then proceeds on to the reception of Communion itself.

A. The priest then prays for his own purification before receiving communion and then leads the congregation also in praying for purification. Once again, the rite recalls St. Paul's warning that we should be prepared and purified before receiving communion. See 1 Cor. 11:19-32.

B. The priest offers one of two prayers, both of which ask for forgiveness of sins in the present and faithfulness and protection from evil in the future. Knowing his demanding role, the priest professes his faith in the saving work of the Trinity, and asks that the Eucharist apply this salvation to his own life.

C. The priest then genuflects to the Eucharist and holds up the host, either above the paten or above the chalice, and says "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb."

- The first phrase is again from John the Baptist, pointing the way to Christ, who points the way to Jesus Christ. We are meant to have the same enthusiasm, wonder and excitement of those first Apostles when they met Jesus near the Jordan River long ago.

- The second sentence comes from the wedding song in the Book of Revelation, which celebrates the triumph of the Lamb and His Church over the forces of darkness. See Rev. 19:9. This triumph is present in part at every Mass, when Jesus comes to His bride the Church. But it will occur in completeness at the everlasting wedding feast of heaven. See also Rev. 3:20.

D. The response is, "Lord I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." This response comes from the words of the centurion who asked Jesus to cure his son or his servant. Jesus considered his response to be a prime example of faith, a faith that will lead peoples from around the world to God's heavenly banquet, of which the Mass is a first promise. See Matt. 8:8; Luke 7:6.

E. The priest then receives communion after praying silently "May the body of Christ keep me safe for eternal life" and "May the blood of Christ keep me safe for eternal life." He again recalls that the Eucharist is the greatest sharing even now in the life of heaven, and, if received fittingly, brings one further along the path. See John 6:54. Receiving the Eucharist worthily is meant to give us a sense of heaven that keeps us safe from the attractions of sin.

F. The priest, deacon, and, if necessary, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion then give Communion to the congregation. (An extraordinary minister of Holy Communion must receive the ciborium or chalice from the priest or deacon to distribute to others.) Before receiving Communion, the communicants should make a sign of reverence, which in the United States is now customarily a bow. General Instructions to the Roman Missal 160. The idea is to make a

final sign of reverence before receiving the King of glory. (For a similar reason, the celebrating priest genuflects before holding up the Eucharist and saying “Behold the Lamb of God. . . .” and the concelebrating priests bow at that point and genuflect before receiving the Eucharist from the chalice.)

F. The priest and the deacon are required to receive communion under both species, reflecting Jesus’ command to the Apostles (i.e. the first priests) at the Last Supper to eat and drink His body and blood under both forms. If the local bishop permits the distribution of communion under both species (i.e. under the appearance of bread and wine), and if the celebrant decides to make both species available, others may receive communion under both species, but are never required to do so. For, as stated above, all of Christ is present under each form.

G. The priest, deacon, or extraordinary minister of Holy Communion says “The body of Christ” when giving the Eucharist under the species of bread, and “The blood of Christ” when giving communion under the species of bread. The response “Amen” indicates a full belief in this doctrine with all of one’s mind and soul.

H. After distributing Communion, the priest, deacon, or installed acolyte (a ministry in the Church conferred on seminarians, but also available at the bishop’s discretion on men who are at least 18) generally purify the precious vessels immediately. They can also be purified immediately after Mass.

- The idea is that every particle and every drop of the Eucharist contains Jesus and therefore must be consumed or (if under the species of bread) placed in the tabernacle.

- Before purifying the precious vessels, the minister would pray, “What has passed our lips as food, O Lord, may we possess in purity of heart, that what has been given to us in time may be our healing for eternity.”

- There is a reflection of the prophecy of Malachi that God would purify the sons of Levi (the priestly tribe) that they may offer fitting sacrifice to God. Mal. 3:3-4.

- There is also a desire that purity of heart lead to a sense of the divine realm in Communion and throughout one’s life. See Ps. 24:3-4; 1 John 3:1-3. This sense of the divine realm on earth is a first promise of living in the greater kingdom with the sight of God and the angels and saints forever. See Matt. 5:8; Rev. 22:1-5.

VI. After a time of silence or song, the Communion Rite ends with the Prayer after Communion.

A. The prayer generally asks that God make the Eucharist we have received be the source of greater holiness in our lives and lead us to heaven.

B. By asking God for His help, we seek to avoid the error of the Apostles at the Last Supper when they assumed that their own strength would keep them faithful to Christ. See Matt. 26:31-35; Mark 14:27-31; Luke 22:31-34. Instead, heeding St. Paul’s warning against overconfidence, we place our trust in God, who will guide us through the trials of life. See 1 Cor. 10:1-13. We ask that God strengthen us to bring the fruits of the Eucharist into the world in our own different ways, as St. Paul describes right after his instructions regarding the

Eucharist. See 1 Cor. 12:1-13:13.