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COMMUNION ETIQUETTE

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The Lord warns us against majoring in the minors, yet he gives the minor things their due: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and dill and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (Matthew 23:23). When we consider what the Law of Christ and his Church requires of us in the administration of the Lord's Supper we must therefore pay attention both to the "weightier matters of the law" as well as the lighter, the "etiquette" required by custom, reverence, and charity.

1. Who should receive Communion? The Sacrament of the Lord's Body is reserved to those who have been admitted to his Body by Baptism (in water and the Name of the Trinity), and been Confirmed and strengthened with the Holy Ghost (by a bishop in historic succession), or who are "ready and desirous" to be confirmed. We include in this latter category the baptized who have been admitted to communion in other churches, and are visiting with us, or sojourning among us.

2. How often should we receive Communion? It may be received weekly or daily (though not more than once a day); but at a minimum it should be received at Easter, and other major feasts, such as Christmas and Whitsunday.

3. What is required of those receiving Communion? The requirements of those receiving Communion, set forth in the Liturgy and in the Exhortations (pp. 85-89), are summed up in the Catechism: "to examine themselves, (1) whether they repent them truly of their former sins, steadfastly purposing to lead a new life; (2) have a lively faith in God's mercy through Christ, with a thankful remembrance of his death; (3) be in charity with all men".

4. Who should not receive Communion?

(a) Grievous Sin. Those who are in grievous sin receive communion at danger to their souls. Repentance and an intention of making amends is required before they receive Communion (rubrics pp 84-85).

(b) Unquiet Conscience: A person with an unquiet conscience may abstain from Communion, but he should not lose time in quieting his conscience, by repentance, and if necessary with the help of a priest

(p. 88).

(c) Spiritual Communion and Blessing. All such persons – the unbaptized, the unconfirmed, the penitent awaiting absolution - may make an act of spiritual communion (the Communion hymns are a good means to this #189-#213). They are also welcome to seek a blessing at the rail, by crossing their arms across their breast.

5. How does one receive Communion?

(a) Posture. Kneeling is the standard posture from the Confession through to the Prayer after Communion. Kneeling for a long time can be irksome, and for those with bad knees painful. In the pews, if you must sit, do so: but please do not lean back: if you do, the person behind you will not be able to kneel without putting his nose in your ear. Likewise, at the altar rail, the customary posture is kneeling: those of you with bad knees, however, are most welcome to stand.

(b) Receiving the Host and the Chalice. The host is normally received in the hand. For reverence, and convenience, please cross your right hand over your left (palms up) to receive the host. Do not drop them to the level of the rail – this is not food for the belly! - but lift them up to the level of your breast. When you have received the host, lift it up to your lips to consume.

Many churches now use a shallow chalice. Ours however are of the older design – tall and deep. It is therefore helpful for the communicant lightly to grasp the chalice by its bowl or base, without wresting it from the minister of the chalice, and to tilt the cup to the degree required to receive a sip. Do not tilt your head to the cup: hold your head up straight, and tilt the cup to yourself.

(c) What about intinction? Last week's Wall Street Journal had an uncharacter-istically sloppy headline: "Swine Flu Spells End of the Common Cup". As the article itself made clear, this not so: "hands are often more infectious than mouths". Provided the chalice is silver, and the cup wiped and rotated, the tradition of the Common Cup poses no unusual health risks, and is the preferred practice.

Many people at St. John's were taught years ago to receive the wine by dipping the host in the wine (a practice known as intinction). While this practice is customary, I would advise great caution. Not only is it potentially unsanitary – if your fingers should touch the inside of the cup or be dipped into the wine - but it also risks irreverence. Please do not drip wine while transferring the host from the cup to your mouth.

Alternatively, leave the host visible in your (open) palm for the priest to intinct. To receive the host in this way, please open your mouth wide and slightly extend your tongue.

6. Should one sing the Communion Hymn? The hymn at communion is meant for all to sing, who are not otherwise engaged. Please do so kneeling or at least sitting forward.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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