

Basics of Catholicism

In the earlier discussion on the Eucharist, the need to prepare for receiving Our Lord was mentioned several times. While I hope this is not a new concept for people, the unfortunate reality is that many Catholics either don't remember how to prepare themselves for Mass, are unclear about what preparation for Mass involves, or simply have never heard of the idea of preparing ourselves to receive Our Lord in the Eucharist. In response, we will look at what Catholics are called to do in order to prepare themselves for Holy Communion.

While the obvious first question is "Why?", it's important to remind Catholics of what we need to do to prepare. As with anything that involves our relationship with God, we need to ensure that we're in the state of grace, meaning that we have no unconfessed mortal sins on our souls. It's been said before, and will be reiterated many times, that mortal sins are those sins which are a complete turning away from God and His commands. By committing a mortal sin, no matter how insignificant we may consider them to be, we turn completely away from God and cut ourselves off from His grace. Because mortal sin cuts us off from God, we are no longer in union with Him. To receive Communion in this state is to receive Our Lord unworthily, which St. Paul warns us against in his First Letter to the Corinthians: "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord." (1 Cor 11:27)

Of course, maintaining a state of grace is only the first step to preparing for Mass, and one we should be conscious of throughout our lives. We should not seek to be in this state of grace only before receiving the Eucharist, but should make every effort to maintain our relationship with God throughout every moment of our lives. Frequent Confession and Communion should be an essential part of any Catholic's life.

The second part of preparing for Mass is to undertake a one hour fast before reception of Communion. This is probably the most misunderstood precept of the Church, as it's not a fast for one hour before Mass, but before receiving Our Lord in the Eucharist. During this one hour, we are to fast from any food and drink, including gum, coffee, soda pop, and the like. The only exceptions are water, medicine, and any medically necessary food or drink. For most of us, this minimal fast should be no difficulty to accomplish every time we receive Communion.

So, with that reminder of what we are called to do in preparation for Holy Communion, we need to consider why we even have the idea of preparation. Preparing ourselves to receive Our Lord in the Eucharist is something extraordinary in our lives, as there are very few things for which we make a conscious effort to prepare: special meals, quizzes and tests at school, certain appointments (doctors, tax preparation, etc.) and so on. For the most part, we don't go through our lives preparing for upcoming events, unless they are special occasions or important things that need some steps or time to get ready.

We take the time to prepare ourselves to receive Communion because we are receiving Our Lord Jesus Christ, and

is the most special and important thing that we can do in our lives. To get the most benefit out of the Eucharist, we need to make the effort to prepare ourselves physically and spiritually before receiving Him. We prepare spiritually by being the state of grace, and prepare physically by consciously abstaining from food and drink for a short time.

Of course, being in the state of grace and one hour fast are the bare minimums necessary before receiving. If we truly wish to be prepared to receive Our Lord and open ourselves to His grace, we can prepare ourselves further. As mentioned earlier, the one hour fast is pretty minimal as a fast, and there is great spiritual benefit to maintaining a longer fast, such as three hours. By fasting for a longer period, we can enter into a point where we truly desire the reception of Our Lord in the Eucharist in a physical sense out of hunger, as well as the spiritual desire to unite the suffering of the fast to His suffering on the Cross.

Just as someone who plays sports prepares himself or herself before games by exercising and stretching, we can also enhance our spiritual preparation by taking time before Mass for spiritual exercises. This, of course, means arriving at Mass early instead of right as the processional is beginning (or worse yet, after Mass has started!), and spending time in silent prayer. It is always beneficial to take a few minutes before Mass to reflect silently on the Eucharist, as well as ask for the openness to God's grace as we hear His Word proclaimed and receive Him in Holy Communion.

Another practice which is highly encouraged before Mass is to enter into the Liturgy of the Hours or devotional prayer, such as the Rosary or Divine Mercy Chaplet. By entering into devotions that focus us on Our Lord and His life, we become more open to His work in our lives and draw us closer to Him. Likewise, praying the Liturgy of the Hours unites us to those throughout the world who are praying with one voice the same psalms and Scriptural passages.

Unfortunately, this practice of entering into prayer before Mass has fallen into disuse for many of us. In its place, many Catholics engage in chatter with others who are attending Mass and neglect any kind of spiritual preparation. While being social with our fellow parishioners is a worthwhile activity and is an important part of parish life, it is also disrespectful to those in the pews trying to pray if it is done before Mass in the church nave (also commonly known as the "worship space"). If we wish to visit with others before Mass, it would be more respectful to other parishioners to do so in the entrance to the church - if not outside, weather permitting. The best practice, of course, is to remain after Mass and spend time with other parishioners instead of rushing off to whatever other plans we have.

All this is important, because we need to remember who we are receiving in Holy Communion, and prepare to receive Him. Just as the wise virgins in Matthew chapter 25 were prepared to receive the bridegroom, may we be prepared to receive Our Lord!