

COMMUNION FROM THE ALTAR

By Diana Macalintal, Director of Worship, Diocese of San Jose, March 2009

The Church urges that the faithful at Mass receive Communion from the elements consecrated at that Mass, not from hosts reserved in the tabernacle. Now, aren't the hosts in the tabernacle the same Body of Christ as those received from the altar? Yes. Consecrated hosts not consumed at Mass are reserved in the tabernacle. So why make a fuss? Because the difference is not in the consecrated elements but in the action that happens before we share those elements.



The Mass is made up of the Liturgy of the Word, in which we hear the Scriptures and respond to them through the homily and intercessions, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This second section is not simply when we share Communion. First, we must bring to the altar the bread and wine to be consecrated and our offering for the poor. In this simple presentation of gifts, we see one way the Eucharist is a sacrifice. We imitate Jesus, who gave his very life for others, by giving ourselves through the sacrifice of the earth and the work of our hands, that formed wheat into bread, grape into wine, and labor into care for those in need.

Next we unite with the priest who speaks the Eucharistic Prayer in the name of the community. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), the document that directs the Mass, says that the “meaning of the Prayer is that the entire congregation of the faithful should join itself with Christ in confessing the great deeds of God and in the offering of Sacrifice” (78).

The culmination of Christ’s sacrifice of praise is our sharing in his Body and Blood. Thus, in the same way that Christ’s sacrifice of his very body is preceded by a life lived as an offering of praise to the Father, so too do we precede Communion with the sacrifice of our lives and our offering of praise to God. Through the Eucharistic Prayer, the bread and wine we place on the altar is intimately connected to the Body and Blood of Christ we receive from that same altar. This is why GIRM 85 says, “[i]t is most desirable that the faithful, just as the priest himself is bound to do, receive the Lord’s Body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass...so that even by means of the signs Communion will stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated.”

When we distribute hosts from the tabernacle at Mass, we devalue our participation in Christ’s sacrifice of praise to the Father and sever the sacrificial connection between the offering of our lives and Christ’s salvific offering of his. This connection is the heart of the Eucharist; it is what distinguishes Mass from a Communion service. This is why the Church asks that hosts from the tabernacle should be used only for Communion to the sick outside of Mass and for the distribution of Holy Communion outside of Mass.