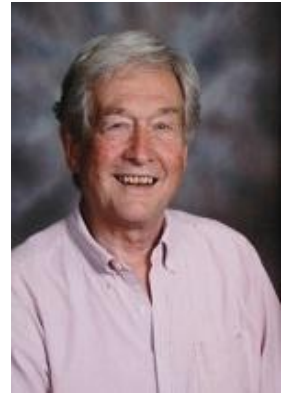


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RECEIVING COMMUNION With a Note About the Lavabo

1 I've told you before, faithful reader, that when I was a kid, we had communion in my home church only four times a year! And my Dad was the pastor! That would have been quite typical in those days – the 1930s. Not simply Lutherans, but also Anglicans, had only the barest acquaintance with the Eucharist. And other Protestants were even farther behind, still caught up in Nineteenth Century American Revivalism.

2 I'm happy to report that Lutherans and Anglicans and many Protestants as well have returned, today, to a more apostolic, a more catholic – small c – practice. Holy Communion on every Lord's Day has become SOP – Standard Operating Procedure – in many non-Roman Western churches. That's all to the good, in my view.

3 But most of us are still learning how to adapt to this new state of affairs. Our actual communion practice remains wretched, in my opinion, with communion monitors, in many parishes, ushering people to the Table row by row, exerting unseemly social pressure on those who choose to linger and meditate. Or on strangers and seekers in our midst who do not have the foggiest idea as to what we're doing. ("Hey, you! Get up there! It's your turn!")

4 Have we become comfortable enough in our newly restored practice of communion-every-Sunday to dispense altogether with communion monitors? To allow worshippers to come forward to the Table without any direction from ushers or monitors? To allow worshippers in the forward rows of seats to linger and meditate, if they choose, rather than to commune first thing? To allow those in the rear seats to come forward to the Table immediately, if they choose, rather than wait until last? It's surely worth some experimenting in our churches.

5 In any case, we need renewed instruction, I believe, in how to commune. How to receive Bread and Cup as worshippers. Hence this posting.

6 Still a prior question pertains to worship leaders, especially the Presiding Minister (PM). In a fully-equipped chancel, every Credence table should have a Lavabo (from the Latin for "wash". See the English "lavatory".) Altar guilds should be instructed to provide a Lavabo and fresh towels – Maniples? – for every celebration of the Holy Communion.

7 The Credence table – from the Latin for “believe”. See the English “creed” – is that small piece of furniture in every church that carries the accoutrements for the Service to follow. Note that the actual Bread and Wine to be used will be carried forward during worship at the Offering, along with collected gifts of money: a basket of Bread, a flagon of Wine. (In Eastern Orthodox tradition, this is The Great Entrance.) But the actual Cup to be used, and the linens such as purificators for wiping the Cup, should repose on a Credence near at hand to the Table/Altar before the Service begins. Along with a Lavabo and towels.

8 The Lavabo will be a small, shallow bowl – silver, or ceramic, or glass – with sufficient water to wash the PM’s hands before he handles the Bread and Cup. If you want to be a real ritual fuss-budget, the PM can enlist an Acolyte to pour water over his hands into the Lavabo. Then the PM dries his hands on a towel, also near at hand on the Credence, or folded over the wrist of the Acolyte.

9 What of these dreadful alcoholic “hand sanitizer” pumps you often see these days in many churches, sprouting like loathsome toadstools throughout many church chancels? I’ve seen dozens, one at the end of every aisle of seats in the nave! At the doors of every entrance or exit! Contemporary Western Christians have become paranoid about germs!

10 I suppose these have a value. But I’d want to keep them discretely hidden on the Credence. Never on the Table/Altar. Hidden from view in its place somewhere on the Credence. And I’d use them, when I preside, *before* I wash with a Lavabo. That is, I’d wash my hands in water *after* using that alcohol pump. That chemical fragrance, supposedly masking the smell of the alcohol, is more than I can bear. I want to wash it off with water before I handle Bread or Cup.

11 Now as to worshippers receiving communion. In earlier days, Roman Catholics were often instructed to receive the Bread on their tongue, delivered there by the hand of the priest. (All those stuck out tongues!) You saw a kind of baby bird, getting its nourishment from its mother.

12 Actually that’s not such a bad image, when you think about it. But those were also the days – years! – before the laity were allowed to receive the Cup. And the priest often ended the Mass with messy fingers! I’d vote for receiving Bread and Cup in your hands.

13 I was taught as a kid to place my right palm, open, on my open left palm, the left hand “forming a throne for the right hand.” (If you’re a lefty, it’s legitimate to reverse those instructions: Left on right.) Then you look the Communion Minister warmly in the eye and say “Amen” to her distribution formula, such as “The Body of Christ.” Then lift the Bread to your lips.

14 But resist the temptation to pick at the Bread, as it is offered, with thumb and forefingers, like a kid with Hallowe’en candy. That way, the Minister of the Bread is more likely to drop it. And it is simply an un-informed and even in-elegant gesture. Extend both hands, palms up! And don’t neglect that eye contact! And your “Amen!”

15 When the Cup is administered, take the base of the Cup lightly in your hand and guide it to your lips. Don't join your hands behind your back and lean in to the Minister, mouth open. That's an almost certain invitation to spilling! And in most circumstances, you need NOT take the whole Cup from the Minister, the full weight of the Cup in your hands. Just allow the Communion Minister to carry the Cup, and use your own hand – left or right – on the base of the Cup to guide the lip of the Cup to your own lips. Much safer and simpler. And more elegant. It's a sign you know what you're doing. That you've done this before!

16 Don't neglect to smile warmly to the Minister of the Cup, eyes locked, as she administers it, speaking her distribution formula. And add your "Amen!" This is a most personal moment. Make the most of it!

17 If you're celiac? Or alcoholic? Then you may receive either Bread or Cup, and return to your seat. You need not receive both. The so called Doctrine of Concomitance assures us that to receive one only is the same as to receive both: Bread and wine "inhere" in each other.

18 And remember: The baptized people present are the Body of Christ. Even if you fast completely from both Bread and Cup on a given Sunday, you are meeting our Lord in them.

19 One more thing: The Christian witness is to a sacramental world. God gathers the stuff of nature – the molecules, as I like to say! – to bring about a Heavenly Invasion of our world! The Infinite uses the Proximate and the Contingent to heal and to bless. The Spiritual pitches tent in the Physical, the Material, to ennoble and to enrich us – to make us the Body of Christ.

20 That conviction makes more sense to modern people – to this modern person, anyhow! – than rigid insistence on what I call the cannibalistic aspects of Holy Communion. (Luther perhaps to the contrary notwithstanding!)

21 I like those words in the new hymn (469) in our *ELWorship*: "...We become what we receive."

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