

The Reception of Holy Communion (Part 6) – Why Can Only Catholics Receive Holy Communion? (follow up)

Exclusive and Harsh? Or a Covenant Commitment/Renewal Each and Every Sunday?

As we return to this reflection on receiving holy communion and why only Catholics can receive the Eucharist, it would be a great help to look at one of the great Saints of the early Church who is a pagan convert named St. Justin Martyr. He was an educated man and a philosopher, but was greatly impacted by the witness, beauty, depth, and truth of the Catholic Christian faith in the early to middle 100s, which led him to convert. Because of his education and his familiarity with the Roman government at the time as well as the perspective of Roman leaders, he later wrote a number of public defenses/explanations/testimonies of the faith to the government at large. One of his writings includes the following explanation of the Christian worship on Sundays:

*“...And this food is called among us Eucharistia [the Eucharist], of which no one is allowed to partake but the man **who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined.***

For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.” - First Apology, 66

We mentioned in our last reflection that only Catholics could receive because it was more than just a personal choice to receive or not. In fact, it is like a renewal of wedding vows with Christ in the sense that when we say “Amen” right before we receive, we are not just saying “I personally believe Jesus is present here,” **but rather** we are saying, “I believe in you, Jesus, and I give all of myself to recommit to my sacred vow of my relationship with you, **which involves** (1) believing what is true about you and the church as well as (2) living how you desire me to live as I follow you.” We see this very clearly in St. Justin Martyr’s letter in the 100s about the Mass and the Eucharist. He says, those two exact things {and he also includes the Sacrament of Baptism first as well!} when he mentions that “no one is allowed to partake [of the Eucharist] but the man (1) **who believes that the things which we teach are true...and (2) who is so living as Christ has enjoined.**”

Two quick clarifications at this point. First, the Catholic Church is not saying that everyone who is Catholic has to understand perfectly every single theological point of every teaching in order to receive holy communion. However, for those clearly defined dogmas and doctrines, there should be a shared belief here for anyone to receive (both for people born Catholic and others who are not Catholic but want to receive holy communion/the Eucharist). In addition, as far as “living as Christ as enjoined,” this does not mean that venial/small sins should stop any Catholic from receiving holy communion {we will talk about this more next week!}. However, the Catholic Church has been very clear that if someone has committed a bigger/mortal sin, then they should go to confession before receiving holy communion. Overall, the Eucharist is a person. Holy communion is Jesus Christ, and we are recommitting to living our sacred vows with Him at every Mass. We can only imagine the depth of his love for us every single time.