

Four-Minute Reflections on the Mass

Reflection 13: The Communion Rite, Part II

The Liturgy of the Mass is rich with signs of communion with Christ and each other. One ancient sign of unity that comes right after the sign of peace is “the breaking of the bread.” In fact, the entire Eucharistic rite was once simply known as, “the breaking of the bread.” By participating in the one bread that is broken and shared, we express symbolically the reality of being one in Christ.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul says: “The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for all partake of the one loaf” (*1 Corinthians 12:16b-17*). The unity Paul speaks of is highlighted by the priest breaking the large consecrated host and sharing at least some of the fragments with those present. The deacon may also assist in the breaking of the bread. While it is desirable that as many as possible share in the bread that is broken, the use of smaller hosts consecrated at the same time is a practical necessity at most Masses.

The sign of our unity with Christ expressed by the breaking and sharing of bread continues as the priest adds a small piece of the consecrated host with the consecrated wine. This gesture, introduced in the eighth century, signifies the unity of the Body and Blood of the Lord in the work of salvation. A prayer, dating from the middle of the eighth century, is spoken inaudibly by the priest and requests the fruits of Communion for everyone present.

Since the breaking of the bread was especially lengthy in the earlier celebrations of the Mass, it was accompanied by a chant. This later became what we call the *Agnus*

Dei - the Lamb of God. The words "*Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world*" are taken from the acknowledgment given Jesus by John the Baptist (*John 1:23-26*). It acknowledges that Christ is

the Paschal Lamb who has conquered death. The chant was originally sung by the people and was repeated for as long as necessary. As the time required for the breaking of the bread became briefer, it gradually was reduced to the text as we know it and is usually sung only three times, although it may be repeated, if necessary. From the tenth century on, it has always ended with the words - "grant us peace," linking it to the sign of peace. Today the *Agnus Dei* is a litany-song of the choir, cantor and congregation, and may be repeated as often as necessary, but does not include the priest who is engaged in breaking of the bread.

After the Lamb of God concludes, the people kneel and prepare to receive Communion. The priest prepares himself by a prayer said quietly while those celebrating with him do so by praying silently. With these prayers, all are ready to receive Communion.