

# "DOMINE, NON SUM DIGNUS" *Lord, I am not worthy*



In Advent of 2011, the Catholic Church revised the Roman Missal and the prayers we say at Holy Mass. It was a bit of an adjustment for each of us to use the words, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." This more accurate translation of the original Latin text is taken from the Gospel passage in St. Matthew where a centurion asks our Lord to heal his sick servant. Jesus says that He will come and heal him. The centurion humbly utters these words aware of two things: First, his desire for our Lord to bring healing and second, his unworthiness to receive our Lord into his home (Mt. 8:8).



These words capture what each of us should be aware of each time we attend Holy Mass and approach the altar to receive our Lord in Holy Communion – our desire to be closer to Him and to receive His Real Presence into our very body and soul, and also our own unworthiness. Now, let us be clear, none of us are worthy, but the Lord Jesus, the Divine Physician, can say the word to heal our souls to receive Him. He knows of our unworthiness and yet He loves us and wants to bring His healing into our lives so that we might truly experience that love.

In this, my third Pastoral Letter, I continue my humble effort to bring greater awareness to our relationship with the Lord in the Eucharist. In my first letter, *Venite Adoremus*, I explained the importance of Eucharistic Adoration, which accompanied the opening of our Eucharistic Adoration Chapel at St Michael's. In the second letter, *Dies Domini*, I spoke about the importance of keeping the Lord's Day holy and our attendance at Holy Mass each Sunday. In this third letter, *Domine, Non Sum Dignus*, I want to address our spiritual preparation for receiving our Lord in Holy Communion worthily.

I want to begin by asking those reading this letter to read it from the pastoral heart of your parish priest and spiritual father who cares for your soul and genuinely desires your spiritual well-being without any sense of judgement or condemnation. I am aware that sometimes, topics such as this, can be misinterpreted and could even upset someone. I assure you, I write this with complete awareness of my own sinfulness and my unworthiness, but also with the desire for each of us to be better disciples of the Lord Jesus.

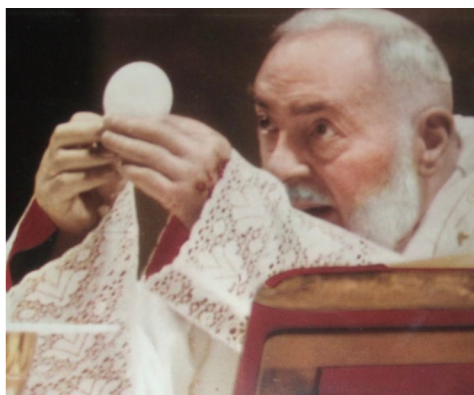
I think it is first important to note that when Jesus taught His followers about the Eucharist, explaining that they must "Eat His body" and "Drink His blood," many responded, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" Sadly, "as a result of this, many of His disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him" (John 6:60, 66).

How beautiful, how sacred and how reverent would we all be if we said each time we left our pew to receive Holy Communion, “may I receive *THIS* Communion as if it were my *first* Communion, my *only* Communion and my *last* Communion.”

In this brief pastoral letter, I would like to address just a few things that I truly believe can make a significant difference in each of our spiritual lives and also in our parish.

## THE COMMUNION FAST

One of the essential elements of proper preparation for the reception of the Eucharist is called the “*Communion Fast*.” For many centuries the Church required a strict fast from midnight before one could receive Holy Communion – not eating or drinking anything. In the 1950's Pope Pius XII introduced a much more moderate and relaxed practice of fasting before receiving Holy Communion (three hours of fasting from food and one hour from drinking). This was done to make it easier for Catholics to receive Holy Communion more frequently, especially at later morning Masses. In 1964, Pope Paul VI announced that the Eucharistic fast would be reduced to one hour before Communion for both priests and the faithful. This obviously doesn't apply to those with a medical situation that could compromise their health (Canon Law, 919). This means that those who need to take medicine are not breaking the fast.



Fasting is a practice that helps us to prepare for Holy Communion by enkindling within us a *hunger* for God and a *thirst* to be in communion with Him. We also fast before receiving Holy Communion as a way of reminding ourselves that we are preparing to receive something sacred and divine – the bread come down from heaven. Practically speaking, this means that for the hour before we receive Holy Communion or about 30-40 minutes before Mass begins, we should avoid eating or drinking anything except water (unless medically necessary), including candy or gum.

This is also important to teach our children. While a bottle for an infant is clearly different, bringing snacks, cereal, or candy for children wouldn't be teaching them the proper reverence for both the House of God and proper preparation for Holy Communion.

## RECEIVING IN A “STATE OF GRACE”

Even more important than the “Communion Fast” is a deeper spiritual preparation that requires an examination of our conscience and the state of our soul before receiving the presence of God in the Eucharist. Think of how particular God was with Moses in the creation of the Ark of the Covenant – the gold container that held sacred artifacts of Israel (EX 25:22-27). Think of how our Lord preserved Mary from the stain of sin by having her Immaculately Conceived in the womb of her mother, St. Anne, so that she might be the “Ark of the New Covenant” – having the Body of Christ in her womb. (Luke 1:35)

The entire concept and the very mystery of the Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ has been a point of contention in the Church from the very beginning. It is a hard teaching, it is a great mystery, but let us not forget what happened after the crowds left Jesus. He turned to His Apostles and asked if they would leave too. St. Peter responded, *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life"* (John 6:68).

Allow me to start with a story. As many of you know, every summer a number of my seminary classmates and I get together for a week's vacation. It is a time for us to relax and enjoy each other's company. Each year a different priest hosts and we choose a different location of the country to visit. Each day we celebrate the Holy Mass together in a room that we convert into a temporary chapel. On one of our annual trips, we went to visit one of the local churches in the city. When we walked in, Mass was already being celebrated and so we quietly waited in the back of the Church and during the distribution of Holy Communion we all noticed the same thing - being that all of us are priests and are usually distributing Holy Communion ourselves at this point, this is not something that we would normally observe.

What each of us witnessed was a rather significant irreverence on the part of those in line about to receive Holy Communion: Some were chatting with people along the way, waving and shaking hands; Others were looking around for people they knew; Some were chewing gum; Some walked right out the door with Communion still in their mouths; One was even sending a text message on her cell phone; All of this going on while most of the congregation piously approached the Altar to receive Holy Communion. When we got back to the house, we all expressed to each other a common anguish about the present situation, presuming that this is not a situation that is unique to this one Church. We asked ourselves how things have gotten this bad. When did we forget that as we approach the Altar, we should be preparing ourselves to receive the Most Sacred and precious gift that God has given us - the Body and Blood of His only Son in the Blessed Sacrament.

In contrast to this sort of irreverence that we have probably all experienced at one point, allow me to point to the image of children receiving their First Holy Communion at our parish. Many have commented on how inspiring the photos are of these children with such Eucharistic Amazement on their faces. A lot of effort goes into preparing these young Catholics for one of the most important moments of their lives. As a priest, I will say that there are very few things as beautiful to me as seeing young girls and boys with hands folded, tongues outstretched, eyes filled with excitement and looking very eager as Holy Communion is placed on their tongue for the very first time. If only we could all be filled with such pious anticipation and amazement every time we receive our Lord.



Obviously, we can never judge how prepared or focused one is to receive Holy Communion internally from their external disposition (nor should we ever judge anyone's heart or soul, for that matter). However, we should all strive to be both externally and internally focused as individuals when we approach the Altar to receive Holy Communion.

One of the most important things I was ever told about the preparation for Holy Mass as a priest can easily be applied to each of us in our own preparation to receive our Lord in Holy Communion. I was told, *"Say THIS Mass, as if it were my first Mass, my only Mass, my last Mass."*

We should desire to welcome our Lord into our lives with a pure heart and clear conscience. Think about it, we would never welcome an important guest into our homes without first making sure that it is clean and properly prepared. Much more should we prepare our souls for our loving Savior who died on the cross for us. Let us all fight against the minimalist attitude that says, *"at least I am there,"* or *"we are all sinners,"* – an attitude that only leads to a lukewarm faith. Let us strive to always give our Lord the effort He deserves.

St. Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians addressed this very issue. He teaches us that, *"whoever eats the Body of the Lord or drinks His blood in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let one examine himself, for if we eat and drink without discerning, we eat and drink judgment upon ourselves"* (1 Cor 11:27-28). These are powerful words that we should all reflect upon often.

Sadly, many come to receive Him spiritually unprepared, or worse, in a "state of sin." As I have mentioned numerous times, this is indicated by the fact that the lines for Holy Communion are often very long, while the lines for confession are often very short. This is not because Catholics have stopped sinning, but because many have lost the sense of the incredible holiness of Jesus in the Eucharist. I can't encourage enough the practice of frequent confession in order that we might remain in the state of God's grace and properly disposed to receive Holy Communion worthily. Confession is certainly readily available in our parish.



To receive Him worthily in Holy Communion, Catholics must first be in communion with Christ, a communion which is ruptured by mortal sin. When we have committed a grave sin, such as missing a Sunday Mass or a holy day of obligation without valid reason for example, we need to go to Jesus in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (confession) before coming to receive Him in Holy Communion.

I think it is important here to provide a clear distinction about sin: The Church distinguishes between *"mortal sin"* and *"venial sin"*—between sin that is *"deadly"* and sin *"that is not deadly"* (1 John 5:16, 17). Mortal sin is the corruption of the divine and supernatural life we received at baptism, which is sanctifying grace. Venial sin, though not deadly, wounds and weakens our desire to allow God's grace to act upon us. It distances us but does not completely separate us from God the way mortal sin does.

For something to be a *"mortal sin,"* it has to be something that is grave matter (breaking one of the Commandments, for example), we have to know that it is wrong, and we have to freely choose to commit the sin anyway, knowing that it damages our relationship with our Lord.

Venial sins are forgiven at the beginning of Holy Mass during the Penitential Rite, in which we pray, *"I confess to almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters that I have sinned..."* At the end of that public act of penance, which presumes interior repentance, the priest says a prayer of absolution – *"May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins and bring us to everlasting life."* In this penitential rite, venial sins are forgiven.



If we are aware of having committed a "mortal sin" we should refrain from receiving Holy Communion until we have gone to confession. Mortal sins are only forgiven in sacramental confession. Jesus, the Divine Physician must first be allowed to "raise us up" from our spiritual grave so that He might restore us to Communion with Him and His Church (Luke 7:11-14). Only then can we be "given something to eat," which is the Eucharist (cf. Mark 5:35-43).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that "According to the Church's command, "after having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year." Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first

received sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession. Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time." (CCC 1457)

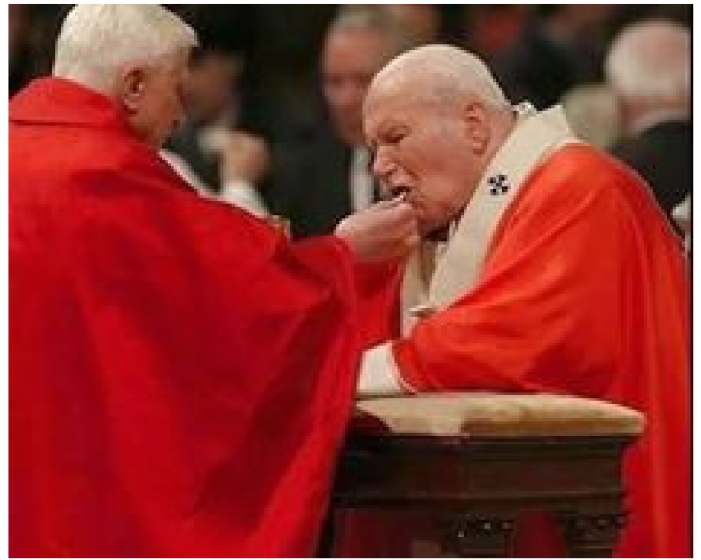
Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI, addressed a very common misconception that all who attend Mass should receive Holy Communion. Allow me to quote him here at length, as his words are much more eloquent than mine:

*"Nowadays some say that the Eucharist is the continuation of the meal with sinners that Jesus had held, a notion with far-reaching consequences. It would mean that the Eucharist is the sinners' banquet, where Jesus sits at the table; that the Eucharist is the public gesture by which we invite everyone without exception. The logic of this is expressed in a far-reaching criticism of the Church's Eucharist, since it implies that the Eucharist cannot be conditional on anything, not depending on denomination or even on baptism. It is necessarily an open table to which all may come to encounter the universal God."*

Ratzinger continues, *"The Eucharist is not itself the sacrament of reconciliation, but in fact it presupposes that sacrament. It is the sacrament of the reconciled, to which the Lord invites all those who have become one with him; who certainly still remain weak sinners, but yet have given their hand to him and have become part of his family."* (Ratzinger, collected works, volume 11 Ignatius Press 273-274).

Before being elected Pope, he also answered a formal question presented to his office (Cong. For the Doctrine of Faith) by bishops of the United States concerning the reception of Holy Communion, by those in public life who have publicly manifested separation from the communion with the Church. Cardinal Ratzinger clearly answered that question with the following response:

*"Presenting oneself to receive Holy Communion should be a conscious decision, based on a reasoned judgment regarding one's worthiness to do so, according to the Church's objective criteria, asking such questions as: "Am I in full communion with the Catholic Church? Am I guilty of grave sin? Have I incurred a penalty (e.g., excommunication, interdict) that forbids me to receive Holy Communion? Have I prepared myself by fasting for at least an hour?" The practice of indiscriminately presenting oneself to receive Holy Communion, merely as a consequence of being present at Mass, is an abuse that must be corrected."*



Both practices – fasting before receiving Holy Communion and being free from any grave sin is a sure way to begin being spiritually prepared to worthily receive Communion. Sadly, younger generations are almost totally unaware of these pious practices and some older generations have allowed them to be forgotten. But let us not be mistaken, it is the clear teaching and practice of the Church, who as our Mother, wants us all to be well prepared so that we might receive all the graces and blessings that come from worthily receiving the sacraments.

As we strive to grow in a greater love and devotion to our Lord in the Eucharist let us remember and reflect upon the words that we pray immediately before Communion – *"Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the words and my soul shall be healed."*

Allow me a second story to touch upon the second point I want to make regarding moving our parish and all parishioners toward greater preparation and reverent reception of Holy Communion. In October of 2003, just a few weeks after I arrived in Rome for my seminary formation to the priesthood, the city was filled with many tourists for two extraordinary events. The first was Pope Saint John Paul II's 25th anniversary as pope; the other was the beatification of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Many of my friends and I were privileged to assist at the Mass. Because there were so many people, we were asked to hold up white Vatican umbrellas to indicate where Holy Communion was being distributed. Seeing so many people was a great testimony to a woman who loved our Lord so much and who did such a heroic job of showing that love to the poorest of the poor.

The Missionaries of Charity (the religious community founded by Mother Teresa) have no reservations about reaching out and touching Christ whom they see in the poor, ministering to them as they die in the streets, cleaning wounds and loving them because they see Jesus Christ in them.

As much as they are willing to reach out and touch the poorest members of the body of Christ, they choose, however, not to touch Him in His Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament. All of Mother Teresa's sisters are united both in their many hours of prayerful adoration before the Blessed Sacrament and in the fact that they all receive Holy Communion in the same way – on the tongue.

I recently read an article referencing an interview of Blessed Mother Teresa conducted by Fr. George Rutler, a priest of the Archdiocese of New York. He asked Mother Teresa, "*Mother, what do you think is the worst problem in the world today?*"



She more than anyone could name any number of horrendous things that she witnessed firsthand: famine, plague, disease, the breakdown of the family, rebellion against God, the corruption of the media, world debt, nuclear threat, and so on. Without pausing a second, Mother Teresa said, "*Wherever I go in the whole world, the thing that makes me the saddest is watching people receive Communion in the hand.*" These are certainly powerful words from such a humble and compassionate woman. By this she was referring to the fact that for hundreds of years people would come forward to receive Holy Communion kneeling and receiving on the tongue - an image that provides us a clear reminder in our posture that we are doing something sacred and holy.

## COMMUNION ON THE TONGUE

Receiving on the hand, though certainly allowed today by the Church in some countries, does not necessarily remind us of the sacredness and solemnity of the reality that we are receiving God himself. Bishop Guido Marini, the former Master of Papal Ceremonies explained that "*It is from this perspective that Pope Benedict XVI began to distribute Holy Communion to the kneeling faithful directly on the tongue. By the example of this action, the Holy Father invited us to render visible the proper attitude of adoration before the greatness of the mystery of the Eucharistic presence of our Lord.*"

In May of 1969, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship issued the document, *Memoriale Domini*, which granted permission for Communion to be received on the hand explaining that "*It is certainly true that ancient usage once allowed the faithful to take this divine food in their hands and to place it in their mouths themselves.*" In that same document, however, the Congregation also declared that "*The method of distributing Holy Communion (on the tongue) must be retained, not merely because it has many centuries of tradition behind it, but especially because it expresses the reverence that the faithful have for the Eucharist.*"

While granting the concession to allow Communion to be distributed on the hands of the faithful, the Church expressed this caution: "*The fact that the lay person is now able to receive Holy Communion in the hand should not suggest to anyone that this is ordinary bread, or just any sacred object. Rather it ought to strengthen one's sense of their dignity as a member of the Mystical Body of Christ. One should possess a respectful attitude that should be proportionate to what one is doing.*"

This all begs the question, has the practice of receiving Holy Communion "*in the hand*" really strengthened and clarified our faith in the Real Presence? Do people have a greater belief and reverence for our Lord in the Eucharist than in the days when all the faithful would kneel and receive on the tongue?

My pastoral letters have all been written in response to the reports that most people who identify themselves as Catholics do not believe in the True Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. I think an essential part of the National Eucharistic Revival must ask the question of how we have come to such a lack of belief. We must ask what we have done that has led to this so that we can fix it.



## KNEELING TO RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION FROM THE PRIEST

I personally believe that one of the only benefits that came out of the covid pandemic was that it gave me the opportunity to restore two traditional practices to St. Michaels and St. Josephs – only the priest, whose hands have been consecrated by Sacred Chrism, distributes Holy Communion and the use of kneelers so that the ancient practice of kneeling to receive our Lord in Holy Communion might be restored. Both practices were brought back during the pandemic to limit human contact but also in such a way as to address the lack of belief in and reverence for the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist. I pray that they have been received that way and have cultivated a greater love for our Eucharistic Lord. This is why we have maintained the practice.

Certainly, there are many faithful, pious and reverent Catholics who come forward to receive Holy Communion on the hand. Many who choose to receive this way have a great love and devotion to our Lord and a desire to adore and worship him in the Eucharist. They come forward and make a *“throne for our Lord with their hands.”* They are to be commended for the reverent example that they provide. Nonetheless, I take this opportunity to encourage all our parishioners to return to this traditional practice of receiving on the tongue while kneeling (if they are physically able to do so).

I will close this pastoral letter with the words of Pope Saint John Paul II. I have been personally inspired and edified not only by his profound writings on the Eucharist, but even more so by witnessing the profound reverence he displayed in celebrating the Holy Mass and receiving Holy Communion himself. He provided us the following reflection:



*“The doctrine of the Eucharist, sign of unity and bond of charity, taught by St. Paul, has been in subsequent times deepened by the writings of very many saints who are living examples for us of Eucharistic worship. We must always have this reality before our eyes, and at the same time we must continually try to bring it about that our own generation too may add new examples to those marvelous examples of the past, new examples no less living and eloquent, that will reflect the age to which we belong” (Dominicae Cenaes, 5).*

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First Sunday of Advent, 2023