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## Receiving the Gift of Divine Life

by Bishop Daniel on January 5, 2016



To the faithful in Christ Jesus in the Diocese of Springfield,

In the collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas Day—just two days ago as this letter is made public—we offer the petition that we may “share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity.” This is the personal and practical nub of the gospel: We who are in ourselves under the thrall of sin and death are given an opportunity to share in the very deathless life of God. In his second epistle, St Peter writes that Christians are “partakers in the divine nature.” (II Peter 1:4) In the classic icon of the Holy Trinity, the Persons of the Godhead are gathered for what is a figuration of the Eucharistic meal, but there is clearly a vacant place at the table—a place that draws the viewer irresistibly to “holy *communion*” with the Trinity.

God shares His divine life with us in various ways—in His Word proclaimed among the baptized faithful as they gather for worship, in the nuts-and-bolts life of the community as its members eat and study and work and serve together, but most clearly in the sacraments. In Baptism we are made regenerate—born again—by water and the Holy Spirit. And in Holy Communion, we are fed with the Body and Blood—what could be more emblematic of one’s life than those two elements?—of our crucified and risen Lord and Savior. As we sing in Hymn 324: “Lord of lords, in human vesture, in the Body and the Blood; he will give to all the faithful, his own self for heavenly food.” His own self, his own life.

But the divine life of God is always a gift, and never an entitlement. We have not earned it, we do not deserve it, and God is not indebted to us in any way. It is grace; it is pure gift. A gift is not taken, it is received. We do not grab or grasp at gifts (mature adults, at least, do not); we accept them with gratitude, with open hands. This distinction is subtly borne out in the language we use around the “delivery” of Holy Communion. I was raised in a free-church evangelical tradition, with a “mere symbol” understanding of the presence of Christ in the elements, and we spoke of “taking” communion. When I became an Episcopalian in young adulthood, I observed that people spoke of “receiving” communion. No one taught this to me; it’s just something I picked up. This may seem like a small difference, but it’s a very significant one.

What I *was* taught is that the proper way to present myself for the sacrament at the rail is with hands crossed (not cupped), one over the other, palms up. This is a posture of reception, of grateful acceptance. As an alternative, I could receive directly on the tongue, indicating a desire to do so by leaving my hands lowered while opening my mouth and extending my tongue. It startles me when I am administering Holy Communion and someone extends the thumb and forefinger of one hand, expecting to *take* the host from

me. (I always assume such a person is a visitor or newcomer and has not yet been appropriately instructed.) It is the responsibility of clergy in charge of congregations, and those who assist them, to periodically remind the faithful of what constitutes normative practice.

It is in this larger context of receiving the *gift* of our Lord’s Body and Blood that I raise the issue of intinction. When I became an Episcopalian in the mid-1970s, I was given a choice between drinking from the chalice in the normative way, or retaining the consecrated bread in my hand while the chalice-bearer dipped it in the chalice and placed it on my outstretched tongue. In more recent years, I have noticed an increasing percentage of communicants retaining the Body of Christ in their hands, then taking it between their thumb and forefinger and dipping it themselves into the chalice. I find this troubling.

I can well imagine that the motivation for this innovation lies in a concern over the spread of germs. A communicant might surmise that she knows where her own hands have been, or that he is unaware of the last time the chalice-bearer’s hands were washed. In a time when there seems to be a new and more virulent flu virus every year, and with the incidence of infections like MRSA on the rise, these concerns are understandable. Nonetheless, let me offer the following by way of counterpoint:

- **Intinction-by-communicant demonstrates less than full reverence for the awesome and sacred mystery of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements.** By some measures, even the standard Anglican practice of receiving the host in the hand skates close to the edge of inappropriate casualness. In Eastern practice, both elements are received via a spoon directly into the communicant’s mouth. In the Roman rite, until relatively recently, only receiving on the tongue was permitted and laity were not even offered the chalice. That standard has now been relaxed in most dioceses in the direction of something like our own, but there is still a great emphasis on maintaining a proper attitude of reverence toward Jesus as he is sacramentally present.
- **Intinction-by-communicant obscures the reality that Holy Communion is *received*, not *taken*.** In the Eucharist, we do not feed ourselves. Christ feeds us his own Body and Blood, his own life, his own self. The celebrant alone, as *alter Christus* (“another Christ”), standing *in persona Christi* (“in the person of Christ”), self-communicates. Everyone else receives the sacrament from another person, as from Christ. To dip the consecrated bread in the chalice and place it in one’s own mouth steps back from this important spiritual truth.
- **Intinction-by-communicant spreads more germs, not fewer, than other methods of administration.** A well-trained and experienced chalice bearer is in a far better position to avoid finger contact with the consecrated wine than are communicants themselves. By the time a chalice is returned to the altar, there has been a great deal more finger contact with the consecrated wine on the part of communicants than by anyone assisting with the service.

What are the alternatives?

- **Receive from the chalice in the normative manner.** I understand that this is considered “gross” by some, that there is a certain “yuck” factor. However, consider this: The Celebrant (usually, sometimes the Deacon) is the one who consumes whatever remains in the chalice after nearly the entire congregation has already drunk from it! Yet, there is no higher incidence of disease or infection among the clergy than among the general population. There is also something to be said for the fact that most chalices are lined with precious metal, which is not a hospitable environment toward microbes.
- **Receive by intinction in the traditional sense**, retaining the consecrated bread in the palm of your hand and allowing yourself to *receive* the precious Body and Blood on your tongue. (This can be accomplished with zero hand-to-tongue contact provided the communicant extends his or her tongue in a manner that would, under social circumstances, be considered rude!)
- **Receive in one kind only.** The teaching of the Church is that the full sacramental “product” is fully available under either element. If you receive the consecrated bread only, you receive both the Body and Blood of Christ. If you receive the consecrated wine only, you receive both the Body and Blood of Christ. You’re not cheating yourself in any way by doing this.

In order to allay anyone’s fears about the spread of germs, I commend the practice of anyone who will be handling the Eucharistic bread, either before or after consecration, retiring from the sanctuary sometime during the Offertory for the purpose of washing hands with soap and warm water, and publicizing this fact as a standing notice in the bulletin.

It is my intention and hope not to get legalistic about this. Unless I’m the one holding the chalice (an exceedingly rare event), I will not be the Enforcer, nor will I expect the clergy of the diocese to assume that role. My hope is that what I have offered here will be received (indeed, received, not taken!) in a spirit of openness, charity, and generosity. No one’s immortal soul is at risk over the issue of intinction! In the context of the missional challenges that lie before us in this diocese, and the suffering going on around us in the world, it is at best a secondary issue. Yet, even secondary issues are worthy of attention, reflection, and appropriate action ... all of which I am hoping will be the response to this pastoral letter.

Faithfully in Christ,

+Daniel Springfield

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**Contact Us**

Episcopal Diocese of Springfield  
821 South Second Street  
Springfield, Illinois 62704  
Tel: (217) 525-1876  
Fax: (217) 525-1877  
[diocese@episcopalspringfield.org](mailto:diocese@episcopalspringfield.org)  
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