



# How to Make a Spiritual Communion

As Catholics, we recognize that the Eucharist is the “source and summit” of our faith. The innumerable gifts received in holy Communion draw us more closely to Christ. But there also are a variety of reasons why someone might not be able to receive the Eucharist in sacramental holy Communion. Because the sacraments are gifts from Christ, not rights, we receive them on his terms — which is the Church’s terms — and never on our own terms. Such a perspective can be helpful, especially when considering circumstances in which we might be unable to receive holy Communion for one reason or another.

Sometimes reception of Communion is not possible because of one’s own actions. Perhaps the individual is in the state of mortal sin, by which we turn ourselves away from God, and in which case only sacramental confession may repair the situation. Or perhaps the regulation to fast one hour prior to receiving Communion was not followed. Or maybe an individual is fasting from the Sacrament for the purposes of spiritual growth or due to a general sense of unworthiness.

Then there are situations in which individuals are unable to receive holy Communion through no or little fault of their own. For instance, one might be restricted from access to the sacraments by infirmity or handicap, food allergy, or living in a remote area where sacraments are celebrated according to an irregular schedule. There’s also imprisonment, emergency travel, or other outstanding complications that might limit one’s access to the Eucharist. Finally, in dire circumstances, such as times of war or pestilence (including pandemics), Catholics could even be prohibited from attending Mass and unable to receive holy Communion even outside of Mass unless as Viaticum (in danger of death).

Despite all of this, people of faith know that the Good Shepherd does not abandon his flock. God’s grace is not closed off, for, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, God “himself is not bound by his sacraments” (1257). There is always a remedy to situations preventing the reception of holy Communion — and one of the remedies is making an act of *spiritual* communion.

Spiritual communion is a devotion for those who are unable, for whatever reason, to receive sacramental holy Communion in a given situation. The Church offers no prescribed ritual or formula to make a spiritual communion, but anyone can do it.

In such situations, how might Catholics achieve unity with the Lord? Each situation is remedied by its particular circumstances, but the Church’s tradition provides a path for those who are without the sacraments for one reason or another.

## Mass and Communion Obligations

It should be noted that the obligation to attend Sunday Mass and reception of holy Communion are two different things. As mentioned above, not all Catholics receive holy Communion at Mass. In some circumstances, Communion is administered outside of Mass, perhaps weekly, to those unable to attend Mass. This is not typically an option, however, for those who simply did not attend Mass or were unable to receive at the Mass they attended.

It’s noteworthy that frequent reception of holy Communion is a more recent phenomenon, commonly tied to encouragement of the practice by Pope St. Pius X (pope from 1903 to 1914). For many centuries, “regular” reception of Communion was not very regular at all. Take, for instance, St. Louis IX (1214–70), the French monarch renowned for his own sanctity, who received holy Communion only six times a year — and that was thought to be frequent at the time. The fact is Catholics are obliged to receive Communion only once a year, during the Easter season, often referred to as our “Easter duty.” At the same time, the *Catechism* tells us, that we should not downplay that “the Church warmly recommends that the faithful receive Holy Communion each time they participate in the celebration of the Eucharist” (1417).

This interesting dichotomy — that the Church requires Catholics to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation (around 60 days, give or take, per year) while it obliges Catholics to receive Communion only once per year, according to universal law — tells us that our obligation to participate in the Mass is not contingent upon receiving holy Communion.

## An Act of the Whole Church

One is typically unable to receive Communion because one is unable to attend Mass. Nonetheless, all the baptized share in the work of the Church’s worship of God. All members of the Church — the members of Christ’s own body — are united with him in each and every Mass. As such, we are all together offered to the Father in sacrifice, as the *Catechism* teaches:

“In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value. Christ’s sacrifice present on the altar makes it possible for all generations of Christians to be united with his offering” (1368).

Because all the baptized are incorporated into Christ’s body, every time Christ is offered to the Father in the Eucharist, the entire Church mystically is present and offered to the Father, “whole and entire” (1368). This means that the whole Church shares in the spiritual benefits of each and every Mass celebrated throughout the world. And we can mystically unite ourselves to Christ’s sacrifice through spiritual communion.

Some Catholics are unable to attend Mass and receive Communion because they do not have priests to celebrate the sacraments regularly, or because they are prevented from doing so by some extremely dire circumstances (such as an inability of the Church to celebrate public Masses in times of war or pestilence). In those cases, the Church has taught that God does not abandon his people. A 1983 letter to bishops from the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated that the faithful “do not thereby lack the grace of the Redeemer. If they are intimately animated by a desire for the sacrament and united in prayer with the whole Church, and call upon the Lord and raise their hearts to him, by virtue of the Holy Spirit they live in communion with the whole Church, the living body of Christ, and with the Lord himself. Through their desire for the sacrament in union with the Church, no matter how distant they may be physically, they are intimately and really united to her and therefore receive the fruits of the sacrament.”

## Practicing Spiritual Communion

When we are unable physically to attend Mass, we may consider the practice of spiritual communion — an act to which the saints have given a consistent witness.

St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–82) encouraged the practice. “When you do not receive communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you,” she wrote.

St. Jean-Marie Vianney (1786–1859), the famous country priest from Ars, France, once said: “When we feel the love of God growing cold, let us instantly make a spiritual communion. When we cannot go to the church, let us turn towards the tabernacle; no wall can shut us out from the good God.”

And so, how might we go about making a spiritual communion?

There is no ritual prescribed by the Church for making an act of spiritual communion. Nevertheless, there are specific steps one can take. Before doing so, it is appropriate to seek the Lord’s pardon and forgiveness for sins and, if in the state of mortal sin, make a sacramental confession as soon as possible. It is customary for this to include some sort of penitential act and pray an Act of Contrition.

To make an act of spiritual communion, it is important that three criteria are met: (1) an expression of one’s faith, particularly belief in the real

presence of Christ in the Eucharist; (2) an expression of one’s desire immediately to be united sacramentally with Christ in the Eucharist; and (3) an expression of one’s desire to stay united with Christ and enjoy the fruits made available through sacramental reception of holy Communion.

While there is no formula prescribed by the Church, prayers composed by various saints are part of the Church’s rich treasury of devotions. One of the more popular acts of spiritual communion comes from St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787):

“My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the most Blessed Sacrament. I love you above all things and I desire to receive you into my soul. Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace you as if you were already there, and unite myself wholly to you. Never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.”

## Living Communion

Finally, remember that attendance at Mass and receiving holy Communion are acts of the worship of God. As we are conformed to Christ in the sacraments, we must conform our very lives to his. With that in mind, St. Paul says our moral life, when properly ordered, is an act of worship.

We receive holy Communion in order to live eucharistically, and so by our lives we can worship and live in communion with Jesus. Paul says, “I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1).

Pope Benedict XVI taught, in his book *Called to Holiness*, echoing St. Paul, “Our body, with his [Christ’s], becomes God’s glory, becomes liturgy ... the true liturgy is that of our body, of our being in the Body of Christ, just as Christ himself made the liturgy of the world, the cosmic liturgy, which strives to draw all people to itself.”



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