

Was I wrong to receive Holy Communion?



Dear Father Kerper: I was taught that people should not receive Holy Communion while in the state of mortal sin and that they must go to Confession before receiving. But I've also heard that in an emergency a person can recite the Act of Contrition and receive without going to Confession. I've done this a few times, but I always feel guilty afterwards. Was it wrong for me to receive Holy Communion?

Your expression of Catholic teaching about not receiving Holy Communion while being aware of unconfessed grave sins is perfectly correct. However, your statement about reciting the Act of Contrition needs extensive clarification. To avoid a merely legalistic response, we need to deepen our understanding of the Eucharist as an event that manifests a person's complete harmony with the person of Christ, which includes living according to his teaching and example.

We discover this key principle in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said: "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and

be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23)

Though this passage does not pertain directly to the Eucharist (which did not yet exist) Jesus steadfastly insists that any genuine act of public worship must reflect an essential harmony between God and the one who worships. In this case, the deliberately unresolved discord between the person who attempts to worship and someone else makes worship impossible. Why? Because the adamant refusal of reconciliation breaks one's relationship with the Lord, who commands forgiveness. Hence, any act of public worship performed by someone who persists in serious sin becomes a fraudulent statement about one's true relationship with God.

Considered this way, we can see that the prohibition against receiving Holy Communion in grave sin is not primarily a legal penalty. Rather, it attempts to foster spiritual integrity by stressing that the "outside" – receiving the Sacrament – should correspond to the "inside" – the essential harmony between God and the communicant.

Unfortunately, some good Catholics miss this point entirely by focusing exclusively on a handful of specific sins, such as missing Sunday Mass or eating meat on a Lenten Friday. Some will worry about these sins even while they ignore a lifetime of gravely sinful behavior, such as holding grudges, always refusing alms to beggars, raging in anger, and habitually violating the Lord's Day.

Before receiving Holy Communion, then, we should carefully examine the overall patterns of our behavior, not just a few well-known sins. We must ask: At this moment am I truly in harmony with God and my neighbor? If not, then I must wonder whether I will violate my own sense of spiritual integrity by taking Holy Communion publicly. It will potentially be a lie.

"Careful and honest self-examination of our spiritual condition, even if it prevents us from receiving, should always express reverence and love, not just fear."

Now let's look at saying the Act of Contrition in an "emergency." Is this good enough? No.

Canon 916 of The *Code of Canon Law* provides precise guidance about receiving Holy Communion in the state of "grave sin." It states that if there is a "grave reason" for

receiving the Sacrament, and if Confession is not available, then a person can make a “perfect act of contrition” while also intending to go to Confession as soon as possible.

Note the requirement for a “perfect act of contrition.” This is not the same as hurriedly reciting a formula in order to fulfill a ritual law. Not at all. Rather a “perfect act of contrition” is the sincere expression of sorrow to God for one’s sins. Moreover, the “perfection” here pertains to the motive for the sorrow: it must flow entirely from the penitent’s love for God, not from fear of punishment.

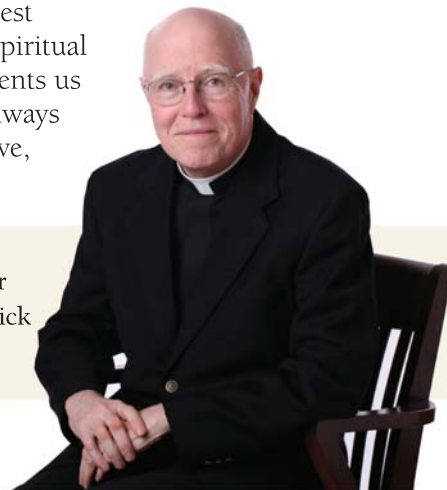
If someone has fallen into patterns of grave sin, especially things like grudge-keeping and habitual indifference to the worship of the Lord, the ability to make a “perfect act of contrition” will surely diminish.

You use the term “emergency,” which never really occurs because lay people are never obliged to receive Holy Communion at any specific time. I suspect that by “emergency” you actually mean being at Mass on Sunday or perhaps at a funeral or wedding when everyone present receives the Sacrament. Some Catholics now feel obligated to receive Holy Communion at such times, fearing that the others will presume that the non-recipient has committed a grave sin.

This potential embarrassment is not an “emergency.” After all, at the beginning of every Mass we confess our sinfulness, and before Holy Communion we say, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but say the word and my soul shall be healed.” By refraining from receiving Holy Communion when we have serious doubts about our spiritual condition we actually beautifully affirm our deep respect and love for the Eucharistic Lord. Why would we do anything else?

Some people dismiss concerns about whether to receive (or not to receive) the Holy Eucharist as old-fashioned legalism and even contrary to proper participation in Mass. But the concerns are well founded. Even Saint Paul, the great enemy of legalism, said this to the Christians of Corinth: “Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.” (1 Corinthians 11:28-29)

Surely the Lord wants us to partake of his Body and Blood often and joyfully. Careful and honest self-examination of our spiritual condition, even if it prevents us from receiving, should always express reverence and love, not just fear.



■ **Father Michael Kerper** is the pastor of Saint Patrick Parish in Nashua, NH.

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