

# The Case for Standing to Receive Communion

by Andrew Likoudis · February 20, 2026

Many sincere Catholics associate kneeling with greater reverence and standing with something less. It's an understandable instinct. But when we look at how the Church herself has understood these gestures across history, a clearer picture emerges. The question is not one of "more" or "less" reverent postures, but of fitting ones. And the Church's own tradition, encompassing its patristic, liturgical, and magisterial sources, gives us a great deal of clarity once we step back and consider the full sweep of Christian practice.

For the first 800 years of Christianity, the norm across the entire Church — East and West — was to receive the Eucharist standing and in the hand. To stand was to proclaim the Resurrection, the freedom of the redeemed, and the dignity of those who had been saved. Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil, Eusebius, John Chrysostom, and Augustine all witness to this same practice and its underlying motive. The faithful stand before the Lord present in the Eucharist because Christ has raised them up.

St. Cyril gives theological support for this in his *Mystagogical Catechesis* 2.4: "For as Christ, after He was crucified and buried, rose again on the third day, so you also, in the figure, have been raised together with Him." He goes on to explicitly instruct the faithful to approach standing, "making your left hand a throne for the right" to receive the Body of Christ (*Mystagogical Catechesis* 5.21). Eusebius preserves a similar account from Dionysius of Alexandria, describing a communicant who "stood by the table and extended his hand to receive the Holy Food" (*Hist. Eccl.* VII.9).

So what about kneeling? In the early Church, kneeling was the posture of the penitential order, of those excommunicated or undergoing public reconciliation, of those not yet restored to the full life of the Church. This is why the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325) commanded that Christians not kneel on Sundays or during the entire Easter season. Canon 20 of that Council states that "prayer be offered to God standing," because the Church would not allow a penitential posture to overshadow or contradict the sign of the Resurrection. Tertullian, in his treatise *De Corona Militis*, backs this up.

*"We consider it unlawful," he writes, "to fast, or to pray kneeling, upon the Lord's day; we enjoy the same liberty from Easter-day to that of Pentecost. (De Cor. Mil. s. 3, 4).*

This prohibition of kneeling during prayer naturally extended to the liturgy. Even today, the Eastern Churches preserve this same resurrectional symbolism by maintaining the ancient discipline of standing throughout their liturgies entirely, including during reception of the Eucharist.

The penitential character of kneeling in the early Church was not merely symbolic but juridical. St. Basil, in his canonical letters, distinguishes between the kneelers (*hypopiptontes*) and the co-standers (*systantes*). The kneelers were undergoing penance and not yet restored to full Eucharistic participation. The co-standers were reconciled and permitted to remain standing with the faithful, though not yet receiving Communion. The terminology tells you everything: to "stand with" the Church signified restored communion.

For centuries afterward, standing remained the universal Eucharistic posture. Kneeling for Holy Communion developed much later in the Latin West, arising as medieval piety evolved, and as feudal gestures of homage — the vassal before the lord entered Western religious life. As Joseph Jungmann, SJ, writes in his *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*,

*“In the Middle Ages, the bodily posture of the faithful grew more and more unlike that of the priest. The bow of the head, as at the blessing, gradually became a sign of the congregation’s humility. ... On the other hand, kneeling was still generally limited during the first millenary to days without festive character. ... First kneeling was proclaimed by the deacon’s *Flectamus genua* for the people’s meditative prayer which introduced the orations. Then, for the people, kneeling was transferred to the respective orations themselves, and on non-festive days the bowed but standing position, ... was also changed to kneeling. Already by 813 the Synod of Tours represents this attitude as the fundamental characteristic posture of the faithful (always, of course, excepting the days when, in honor of Christ’s Resurrection, one prayed standing). ... It was not till the eucharistic movement of the thirteenth century that any inroad was made here, namely, by kneeling at the consecration” (Jungmann, Vol I, 240).*

It is important to note that the contemporary norm of standing is not a modern invention but a conscious retrieval. The reform did not create a new Eucharistic posture but restored one that had been universal for the Church’s first millennium. In that sense, standing at Communion reflects the ressourcement principle Vatican II embraced, of a return to earlier liturgical clarity where such recovery better expresses the theology the rite is meant to convey.

The question of posture should not be conflated with the distinct question of the mode of reception, whether on the tongue or in the hand. The arguments for standing and kneeling developed primarily along theological-symbolic lines, whereas the manner of reception followed a different historical trajectory, and one tied more closely to arguments of practicality. Communion in the hand, widely attested in the early Church, gave way in the medieval West, along with kneeling, to reception on the tongue, as concern for safeguarding the sacred species increased. Reception on the tongue eventually became the established juridical norm of the Latin Rite and has been retained as such, even as, in 1969, the Holy See, in the indult, *Memoriale Domini*, permitted Communion in the hand in many regions, so that both modes of reception are now permitted.

The broader cultural history of kneeling helps make sense of how we got here. As the historian of medieval gesture, Przemysław Mrozowski observes, kneeling in the ancient world was not originally a universal sign of worship, but a posture related to social hierarchy:

*“Kneeling and bowing to the ground constituted a way generally adopted by many peoples of the ancient East to pay respect to persons from the top of the social hierarchy. This posture was also often used in religious cult. Its widespread use shows that in its genesis it was close to the natural gesture: kneeling down is an almost spontaneous reaction when a person ... comes in touch with something which is superior or which terrifies him and requires that he should demonstrate he is aware of his insignificance.”*

Kneeling, then, emerged and developed within cultural frameworks shaped by hierarchical imagery — lord and vassal, superior and subject — which naturally influenced devotional expression in the medieval West. While such imagery can convey humility before divine majesty, it is not the only theological register available within Christian worship and it carries assumptions that don’t map

neatly onto the Christian God, who is not simply the most powerful being in a cosmic pecking order but the transcendent source of all being.

Mrozowski's study confirms that although kneeling gradually acquired religious meanings, "there is not a shadow of a doubt that praying in the standing posture was the general, basic practice in the first centuries of Christianity." Early Christian iconography overwhelmingly depicts the faithful standing as orants, with arms raised, while kneeling appears only sporadically, and when it does, it was "semantically connected with sin and the sense of guilt; it was a symbol of fall and a sign of penance."

None of this means that kneeling before Christ is somehow wrong. Christ is indeed Lord. Yet the New Testament also insists that He "no longer calls you servants... but friends" (John 15:15). Kneeling in self-abasement indeed has its place in the Christian life, but Holy Communion is not primarily a moment of penitential abasement. That moment has already occurred — in the Confiteor and in the words, "Lord, I am not worthy." The Communion procession unfolds within the liturgical proclamation of the Resurrection. The baptized approach not as condemned sinners begging for mercy, but as sons and daughters restored to dignity through grace.

In the Eucharist, after all, Christ does not confront us in visible majesty, but comes in sacramental humility under the appearance of bread, seeking communion and intimacy with His people. Receiving the Eucharist signifies participation in His risen life and incorporation into His Body. That's quite different from a simple gesture of subordination before a superior.

To stand before the Lamb is not pride. It is fidelity to what the sacrament accomplishes. Communion is not a vigil before a fallen Lord but an encounter with the Crucified One who now lives. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). In the Eucharist, the faithful are not merely reminded of Christ's victory but sacramentally drawn into it. In receiving Him, we are elevated by grace to participate in the life of God. The Fathers called this theosis — the very end toward which redemption is ordered. As St. Athanasius put it, "For He was made man that we might be made god" (De Incarnatione 54.3). Maximus the Confessor would later insist that "For the Word of God, who is God, wills always and in all things to accomplish the mystery of His embodiment." (Ambigua, 7.22). The Eucharist, described by the Church as "the source and summit of the Christian life," reflects this culmination.

So what is reverence, then? It is not reducible to maximum self-abasement. Reverence means being fully aware of what is happening in the Mass and responding in a way that reflects the mystery before us. In the moment of Communion — where the symbology of standing most clearly fits what's being celebrated — reverence means allowing our posture to be attuned to the truth of the Paschal Mystery. We are receiving the Risen, Incarnate Christ. As St. Cyril taught, our bodies should testify to that.

Standing also expresses biblical readiness. The Eucharist is food for the journey, and Scripture describes the posture of those awaiting the Lord as standing ready, like the wise virgins with their lamps lit; servants awaiting their master; and Israel eating the Passover standing, loins girded, prepared for a journey.

In the Communion procession, we move together as one Body — the Church, the Bride of Christ — toward the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. The Church today explicitly calls the faithful to stand to

receive Him, because posture should express what Communion truly is — Christ feeding His people who have already been raised with Him. Kneeling is allowed as a devotional option. But standing is the norm, and the norm exists for a reason.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), §160, states:

*“The norm established for the Dioceses of the United States of America is that Holy Communion is to be received standing, unless an individual member of the faithful wishes to receive Communion while kneeling.”*

It’s worth noting that earlier versions of the GIRM went even further, insisting that the faithful who kneel should be catechized and given pastoral attention to help them understand why standing matters. The 2002/2003 GIRM, §160, read:

*“The norm for reception of Holy Communion in the dioceses of the United States is standing. Communicants should not be denied Holy Communion because they kneel. Rather, such instances should be addressed pastorally, by providing the faithful with proper catechesis on the reasons for this norm.” [emphasis added]*

The GIRM also specifies the appropriate act of reverence built into the newer norm (§160):

*“The communicant bows his or her head before the Sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the Body of the Lord from the minister.”*

The reverence, in other words, is already built into the rite. It doesn’t need to be supplemented by a different posture.

When the Church binds a discipline within her competence, the faithful can trust that the Holy Spirit guides her in that act and that God blesses obedience to it. The blessing doesn’t rest on personal preference. It rests on communion with the Church’s ordered worship. Kneeling remains permitted, and the Church does not question the sincerity of those who choose it. Yet there is a real problem when a practice allowed as an exception gets elevated as superior to the established norm. At that point, the Church’s considered judgment about what most fittingly expresses the Eucharistic mystery is being set aside in favor of a private symbolic judgment.

The norm reflects not private taste but the Church’s liturgical discernment, shaped by historical study, theological reflection, and pastoral responsibility. The liturgy is not a private devotional exercise. It’s the public act of the Church. Habitual departure from the Church’s common posture on the basis of personal preference weakens the unity of sign the rite is meant to manifest. Pius XII made this point forcefully in *Mediator Dei*, §58:

*“Private individuals, therefore, even though they be clerics, may not be left to decide for themselves in these holy and venerable matters, ... concerned as they are with the honor due to the Blessed Trinity, the Word Incarnate and His august mother and the other saints, and with the salvation of souls as well. For the same reason no private person has any authority to regulate external practices of this kind, which are intimately bound up with Church discipline and with the order, unity and concord of the Mystical Body and frequently even with the integrity of Catholic faith itself.”*

That's about as clear as it gets. The rubrics are meant to be determined by the Church, not by private improvisation — however sincere. Vatican II reaffirmed this principle and directed that practices which had accumulated over the centuries without magisterial approval, or which obscured the integrity of the rite were to be pruned. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §50, states:

*“The rites are to be simplified, due care being taken to preserve their substance; elements which, with the passage of time, came to be duplicated, or were added with but little advantage, are now to be discarded; other elements which have suffered injury through accidents of history are now to be restored to the vigor which they had in the days of the holy Fathers, as may seem useful or necessary.”*

Standing at Communion is part of this recovered clarity, as a return to the Roman Rite's ancient, resurrectional, and communal symbolism. Kneeling has not been altogether excluded from the rite. It still has a place of significance, especially during Eucharistic adoration and benediction, and the Church still allows it as a devotional practice during Communion for those who prefer it. But the norm is standing, and the Church has made her preference clear.

One objection deserves a fair hearing. Martin Mosebach and others have argued that abrupt liturgical changes, introduced without adequate catechesis, can cause genuine confusion and even the perception of diminished reverence. That's a real pastoral concern, and it shouldn't be waved away. But perception doesn't determine theological truth. The remedy for misunderstanding is patient formation, not the permanent elevation of a historically later discipline to the level of normative status. If standing once signified resurrectional dignity — and still does in the East — the Church may rightly invite the faithful to rediscover its meaning through careful formation rather than assume the symbol has permanently lost its power to communicate the sacred.

It is worth asking, then, why standing was not simply restored as the universal norm after the Council. The answer to that question is pastoral and pragmatic rather than theological. The universal GIRM §160 says:

*“The faithful communicate kneeling or standing, as established by the Conference of Bishops.”*

The Consilium recognized that adding another contested reversal to an already turbulent moment of reform risked compounding the faithful's disorientation — not because standing represented an objective rupture with tradition, but because it would be perceived as one by those whose Eucharistic piety had been formed around kneeling for generations. Rather than fight that battle while simultaneously defending the reformed rite, Rome deferred the question to episcopal conferences, permitting standing where local custom already supported it. That its restoration was entrusted to local discernment rather than universal mandate says nothing about its theological weight. Rome recognized its coherence with the reform's own *ressourcement* logic, and made room for it to take hold where the faithful are ready to receive it. And where the theology has been received and the symbol understood, standing becomes not merely a permitted option but a bodily proclamation.

If Christ has raised you up, then let your body give witness to that reality. The Eucharist is the Paschal Mystery made present to us, and if we receive the Risen One, then standing becomes a fitting witness to the life He has restored in us. Kneeling has its honored place in the Christian life — in adoration, in repentance, in those moments when we fall before the majesty of God. Revelation

itself shows the elders and angels prostrating before the Lamb (Rev 5:8, 5:14; 7:11). But it also gives us another image: the great multitude of the redeemed, clothed in white, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, holding palm branches (Rev 7:9). This is the posture of the redeemed — those who stand in the light of His Resurrection.

And so, the Church asks us to stand because she wants the Resurrection to be written not only in our creed but in our very bodily bearing. She wants the Communion procession to reveal what the Eucharist proclaims: that Christ feeds a people He has lifted from the Earth on the Cross, restored, dignified, and sent forth.

We kneel in many moments of the liturgy. But here at the moment of receiving the Risen Lord the most fitting gesture is the one that echoes Easter morning. Christ stands alive before us, and the saints stand clothed in white before the Lamb. In this moment, the Church invites us to do the same.