Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Spirituality



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Although online Masses became and remain for many a blessing during these months of closed churches, the biggest loss for me has been the inability to receive Communion. From the day of my first Communion 70 years ago, I have had a desire to receive the Eucharist as often as possible.

I grew up in a small coal mining town; our nearest Catholic church was two towns away, but we attended Mass every Sunday. I didn't think about it much as a child, but most adults in the 1950s in our little church did not receive Communion every Sunday.

For some reason, my parents encouraged me to receive Communion every Sunday, though they did not. When I reflect on their attentiveness to my weekly reception of Communion, I wonder what made them feel unworthy to approach the altar with me.

One of my most vivid memories was a Sunday Mass when I knelt at the Communion rail eagerly waiting for the priest to give me Jesus, but the priest did not see me. No one else was at the Communion rail. I knelt there alone for what seemed forever, feeling the eyes of everyone on me (except those of the priest!).

I cannot remember how long it took until I decided to return to my pew and to my parents and my brother (who did not make his first Communion until the year after I did). After Mass, my father went to the priest to explain what had happened and the priest then gave me Communion.

I do not remember when receiving Communion at every Mass became the norm, but I do remember when Communion in the hand became our option. One of my cherished memories of my mother at that time was her simple faith in not understanding those who refused Communion in the hand. Her beautiful questioning reflected her own belief: *Why would anyone not want to touch God?*

I recalled this several months ago when I was attending Mass online, experiencing the absence of Communion, and remembering the 16-year anniversary of my mother's death.

Although there are advantages to online Masses, such as availability of worship at any time, plus the choice of a homilist, there is the "hole" at Communion time. We

are often offered the invitation to pray a prayer of spiritual Communion. I understand the importance and the comfort in spiritual Communion, but I struggle with some of the words/phrases in the prayer I usually hear, the Act of Spiritual Communion by St. Alphonsus Liguori.

It begins: *My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love you above all things and I desire to receive you into my soul.*

Just a thought about those last three words. When I say this prayer, I stop after*, I desire to receive you.* "Into my soul" suggests to me a separation between body and soul. All of me wants to receive Jesus as I also remember the words of Augustine, "We become what we receive." I want this transformation; not just in my soul, but in my body, all of me.

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The prayer continues, *Since I cannot at this moment receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart.*

The word *least* is another problem for me because it suggests to me that I am asking God to come in the smallest degree. But God is always more than I ask for; God is bigger than I imagine. God is always about abundance. Jesus, our Good Shepherd says, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."

Next, we pray, *I embrace you as if you were already there*.

But God is already "there," but even better, God is always here, alive within me. Therefore, I pray instead, "O God, I embrace you who lives within me always."

And therefore, this final sentence is unnecessary: *Never permit me to be separated from you.* Our God is an everywhere God; We can never be outside of, or separated from our beloved Creator, but we can be unaware of, or forgetful of the Beloved.

My last line would be, "Remind me today, my God, that in you I live and move, and have my being."

I suspect that words such as *least* and *as if you were already there* and *in my soul* are indicators of our human unworthiness. I also suspect, now that I look back to my childhood experience of being the only one at the Communion rail, that the feeling

of unworthiness kept the adults, including my parents, in their pews.

Though my parents seemed to have instilled in me that I was worthy, now that I have grown in age and wisdom, I share my present-day truth often when I talk with others about worthy versus unworthy: No one is worthy. And while it is true that these are words we say before we present ourselves to receive Jesus, "Lord, I am not worthy," I stopped saying that years ago; not because I believe my parents' assessment of my spiritual life, but because I know the opposite is true.

When I participated in Mass online and now, gratefully again, in person, I say, "Lord, you have made me worthy to receive you. By your word I have been healed."

Those words not only admit that I know my unworthiness but also recognize that it is my God, my Creator who makes me worthy. All that I am is pure gift; nothing that I do can ever earn me any worthiness points.

Rather than focusing on me, on my sins and my failures, I changed the words for my before-Communion prayer so that my thoughts are turned to my God of abundant mercy in whom I am alive, the God I am to make visible to our world.