



A User's Guide to the Holy Eucharist:

**How to Get the Most Out of
Your Worship Experience**

Dear friends,

I am excited to offer to you *A User's Guide to the Holy Eucharist*, and I hope that you will find it useful as you participate in the worship life here at Christ the King. This guide is for both newcomers to, and veterans of, the Episcopal Church. I am a lifelong Episcopalian, yet my own engagement with the Holy Eucharist was transformed when I recently encountered the material shared in this guide. I invite you to take a look and see what it offers to you.

The text in this guide is excerpted from *In Your Holy Spirit: Traditional Spiritual Practices in Today's Christian Life*, written by Michelle Heyne, OA. I came to know Michelle back in 2018 when I entered into the novitiate process of the Order of Ascension, which is a dispersed Benedictine Religious Community in the Episcopal Church with a charism for renewing and revitalizing parish churches. Michelle was the first lay person elected to lead the Order of the Ascension and she continues to focus her work on the experiences and perspectives of the laity.

My affiliation with the Order of the Ascension has greatly enriched and enlivened my own faith journey, as I have entered into a deeper engagement with the Daily Office, the Holy Eucharist, and my understanding and appreciation of ascetical theology and practice in the Anglican Christian worship.

My hope is that this guide is as helpful for you as it has been for me, and that together as a worshipping community we will continue to grow in our engagement with and experience of Christian worship.

Christ's Blessings and Peace,

The Rev'd Richard G. Proctor, OA
Rector, Christ the King Episcopal Church

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BUILDING YOUR OWN SENSE OF COMPETENCE

- o **Show up.** Trust that simply being present is the first and most important step.
- o **Choose to participate.** Recognize that your active role in the congregation is as valuable as the roles of the altar party, even if not as visible. See yourself in the active liturgical role of Worshiper, rather than in the passive role of observer or audience for a performance.
- o **Become familiar with the services you attend.** Read through the Prayer Book or the service leaflet outside of worship and notice the structure and order, the choices that are made, the content of the prayers. Check out the rubrics (the italicized comments interspersed throughout the various services) for additional directions, options, and sometimes clarifications.
- o **Experiment with not reading along or holding anything in your hand during the service.** Instead of focusing on what you're doing, let the congregation carry you in worship. If you know the service by heart, you may find that different parts catch your attention or you hear the prayers in a new way. OR, you may be surprised to learn how familiar you are with the prayers and other aspects of the service. **On the other hand, you may know very little but stepping back may give you some space to learn organically and to worry less about "getting it right."** This is similar to learning a language by immersion-it's tried-and-true method.
- o **Are these aspects of the service you've always had questions about?** Why do we do that? When are we supposed to do this? Talk with someone in the parish who might know or who might know where to find out. You may find that others have similar questions and would value the chance to talk.



PREPARATION

Participation in worship can be enhanced when we allow ourselves to enter into a different space and time. It can be helpful to center yourself when you first come to church through prayer or focused breathing. You might want to read the lessons of the day before the service starts, and then allow yourself to listen to them (rather than reading them) during the service.

- o **Get to church a little early so you don't feel rushed.**
- o **Allow yourself a brief time of silence when you first arrive.** Consciously enter into a sacred time and a sacred space. This may be a time to avoid chatting with others.
- o **Assume a posture that helps you feel centered.** This will differ for people. Some kneel and pray. Some sit and close their eyes. Some carefully notice the environment, the other members of the community.
- o **Prepare for going back into the world by being truly present during worship.** Allow yourself to see worship as key to your renewal of baptismal identity, as critical to reconnecting with yourself and your reliance on God. This will help you enter more fully into your daily life, and the ways in which you live your faith organically with family and friends, at work, in civic life, and in the church community.

WAYS TO EXPERIMENT WITH USE OF THE BODY

- **Consider changing where you sit.** Your sense of comfort and degree of participation can be greatly affected by where you are in the church, whom you sit near, whether you can see or hear. Notice how different locations help or hinder your participation. For example, I've noticed that while I am mostly more comfortable sitting the back of the church, I also feel more rushed following communion since the service picks up again almost immediately after I return to my pew.
- **Physically turn toward the liturgical action, paying attention with your stance, your eyes, your ears.** Look at the deacon and listen while he or she reads the Gospel, rather than reading along in your bulletin. Tune in to rhythm, noticing your movements and responses in the context of both the liturgy and the rest of the congregation.
- **Commit to trying something new for the duration of the service or for several weeks.** Examples are crossing yourself, genuflecting, a simple bow when the crucifix passes in procession. Reflect on how it felt and what it was like for you. Try it again and reflect again.



WAYS TO EXPERIMENT WITH STILLNESS, SILENCE, AND UNHURRIEDNESS

- **Focus first on your own physical silence, which is stillness.** Allow yourself to sink into your seat, to feel your feet on the ground, to notice where your body is in the space. Make yourself comfortable so you can better avoid fidgeting or shifting uneasily.
- **Set down papers and books.** In corporate worship, the most common interference with silence is the rustling created as we worry about what's coming next and fuss with the hymnal or leaflet.
- **Look for opportunities to create silence, starting with refraining from filling silences that may emerge with your own sounds.** Intentionally engage the silence and see what happens.
- **Focus on your breathing.** Consider other methods of centering, such as repetitive prayer or phrase.
- **Notice distracting thoughts and feelings, tension or anxiety.** Let these feelings and thoughts enter your awareness and let them depart.
- Create an intention around various parts of the service and engage them, unhurriedly, with that intention in mind. For example, **instead of standing during the Offertory because you are eager to get to the main event, consider standing as a physical representation of what you are offering to God, what you carry on your heart, what part of you might be broken and laid on the altar.**
- Experiment with pacing yourself in relationship to what is going on around you. **Listen to the rhythm of the community's prayer and bring yourself into alignment with that rhythm,** rather than trying to make the community adopt your pace. Participate in the liturgical action until it's done. For instance, if you're singing a hymn, continue to hold the hymnal and sing the text until the hymn is finished rather than setting the hymnal down in the middle of the last verse. **Stand, sit, or pray in response to a liturgical action rather than in anticipation of a liturgical action.**

WAYS TO EXPERIMENT WITH ENGAGING THE WORD

- o **Set down your papers and look at the lector when the lessons are being read.** The lessons in worship are not a form of Bible study; they are part of the liturgy. Most churches today have a Gospel procession, and the Gospel is read from the center of the church. Everyone turns to face the deacon, but in many churches a number of parishioners are staring at the service leaflet, at the text of the Gospel, Rather than looking at and listening to the reader.
- o **Consider reading the lessons ahead of time, either at home or perhaps as a form of preparation when you arrive.** They're also widely available on the web, either as the Revised Common Lectionary or the Prayer Book Lectionary.
- o **Consider a method of reading Scripture based on the tradition of lectio divina.** This method assumes God may speak to us in the meditative reading of Scripture. Begin by praying for openness and illumination. Be silent for a few moments, placing yourself in the presence of God. Read one of the readings for the day. Read slowly and meditatively. Allow the words to echo in your mind. Pause briefly for reflection at a few points in your reading. When you are done offer a brief thanksgiving.
- o **Adopt a stance of curiosity and openness. Assume that God has a word for you in today's worship.** I can certainly be quite critical of sermons, or the way a lector reads, or the content of a particular passage from the Bible. But instead of nourishing that critic, I can consciously shift my focus and my stance and look for what God may be saying to me.
- o **Let a particular word or phrase grab you.** You might find yourself noticing a relationship between the reading or the sermon and whatever you are carrying on your heart in today's Eucharist.
- o **Be aware of your feelings and reactions and consider responding with curiosity rather than judgment.** For instance, if you find yourself angry about something in the sermon, refrain from either telling yourself to be more Christian or simply dismissing what you're hearing. Instead, ask what your anger might be telling you. Is there something behind the anger, such as sadness or fear? What does it mean if you and the priest have different standards or perspectives? If your views seem out of synch with the Biblical message you are hearing?
- o **Be open to the challenges that might arise for you in taking seriously the authority of Scripture, reason and tradition,** including the spiritual authority of the priest and the Church. How do you maintain your own sense of integrity while being open to a broader tradition and a broader community? Will you allow yourself to be influenced by others as well as wanting to influence them?
- o **Give yourself permission to be distracted.** Sometimes, the best thing you can do is tune out what you are hearing and appreciate the beauty of the courtyard and fountain outside of the window.

