

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion Brief Theology and History of Eucharist

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, “The Eucharist is a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Father, a blessing by which the Church expresses her gratitude to God for all his benefits, for all that he has accomplished through creation, redemption and sanctification” (CCC 1360).

Catholics actively participate in the Eucharist as the source and summit of their Christian life. This active participation manifests itself by :

- gathering with a community of believers each Sunday and holy day,
- praying together at Mass in word, gesture and song,
- listening together to God’s word,
- giving thanks and praise to God together for the gifts of creation, and in a special way, for the gift of Jesus Christ – his life, death and resurrection, and
- sharing in and becoming the Body of Christ through reception of Holy Eucharist at Mass.

Catholics believe that through active participation in the Mass and in a special way, through the reception of Holy Communion at Mass, they are filled with the real presence of Christ, and are therefore sent to be Christ’s presence in the world until he comes again in glory. St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo, put it this way in the 5th century:

What you see...is bread and a cup. This is what your eyes report to you. But your faith has need to be taught that the bread is the body of Christ, the cup the blood of Christ...If then, you wish to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle as he says to the faithful, “You are the body of Christ and His members”...You reply “Amen” to that which you are, and by replying you consent... Be a member of the body of Christ so that your “Amen” may be true... Be what you see, and receive what you are”.

Centuries later St. Thomas Aquinas gave us an explanation of how this mystery happens. He called it *transubstantiation*. By that he meant that the “accidents” (the visible reality) of bread and wine remain, but the “substance” is changed into Christ’s Body and Blood. This has also come to be understood as what Catholics mean by the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharist.

The Church has always celebrated and revered the Eucharist. In its early history the members of the Christian community did what Jesus told them to do - they took and ate and drank knowing in faith that this was indeed a sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ. The sacred bread was taken in hand and the Sacred Cup was shared by all.

As time went on and the Church no longer consisted of members who had actually seen and known the Lord, and for many cultural and historical reasons, Eucharistic practices slowly began to change. By the 9th century the language of the Mass was no longer that of the people, as it was in the early Church. The altar table was moved from the midst of the people to the back wall of the church. The presider no longer faced the people as he led

them in prayer. The Eucharist became so removed from the people that the Christian community came to see themselves as unworthy of this precious gift, even though they were baptized and redeemed by the Lord. Few people received Holy Communion, and only then on the tongue. By the 13th century the cup was no longer shared with the people. As a result of these and other practices, the people's main contact with the Eucharist was through the elevation of the Eucharistic species which was actually added to the Mass. For the people this elevation was their opportunity to "receive" for "seeing" became "receiving." Jesus' command to his followers to "take and eat, and take and drink" seemed to no longer apply to all believers.

In modern times, the event which began to change this approach to the Eucharist was the election of Pope Pius X in 1903. Pope Pius X knew the great importance of the command of Jesus that believers "take and eat" that he changed the practice of the Church. No longer did a person have to wait until the age of 14 or 15 to be eligible to share in Holy Communion. Children who reached the age of reason, usually about 7 years old, were now welcomed to the altar table of the Lord. By bringing the children to the altar table, Pope Pius X also brought with them their parents and grandparents. Through this action participation in Holy Communion began to be returned to all believers.

Pope John XXIII convened Vatican Council II in 1962. The Council's first document was The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. This fundamental teaching of the Church opened even further the understanding of the Eucharist and many of the practices regarding it.

On May 29, 1969, in the document Memoriale Domini the Church gave permission for the faithful to return to the ancient ritual practice of receiving Holy Communion in the hand and the practice went into effect in the United States on November 20, 1977. Lay people could now receive Holy Communion reverently, either on their tongue or in their hand. About this practice, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem wrote in the 4th century: "Make your left hand a throne for your right, because your right is going to receive the King; make a hollow of your palm and receive the body of Christ, saying after it: 'Amen!' ... Then, after you have partaken of the body of Christ, come forward to the chalice of His blood..."

On January 29, 1973, the instruction Immensae caritatis was issued by Pope Paul VI. With this instruction, the diocesan bishop was given permission to designate lay men and women to distribute the Eucharist as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. It stated that "...this faculty may be used whenever there is no priest, deacon or instituted acolyte present, or when the ordinary minister is prevented from administering Communion because of other pastoral obligations, ill health, or advanced age, or when the number of the faithful is so great that, unless Extraordinary Ministers assist in the distribution, the celebration would be unduly prolonged." It should also be noted that when Communion under Both Kinds is offered, the deacon, if present at Mass, is the ordinary minister of the Sacred Cup.

On June 15, 2001, the Latin members of the United States Conference of Bishops approved the *"Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both*

Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America." With this instruction, provisions were made by the diocesan bishop to allow more frequent eucharistic participation from both the sacred host and the chalice of salvation for the laity in the Latin Church. These norms became effective in the Arch-Diocese of Galveston - Houston on February 2, 2003.

By the reception of Holy Communion, we fully participate in the celebration of Mass. We believe that "the true body of our Lord, together with his soul and divinity, exist under the species of bread and wine" (The Council of Trent). Christ is truly present under the form of bread and under the form of wine by virtue of the words pronounced by the priest during the consecration of the Mass. The whole Christ is truly received whether one takes the Sacred Host only or only receives the Precious Blood. However, receiving both reflects "a fuller sign of the Eucharistic banquet.

The extension of the faculty for the distribution of Holy Communion under both kinds does not represent a change in the Church's immemorial beliefs concerning the Holy Eucharist. Rather, today the Church finds it salutary to restore a practice, when appropriate, that for various reasons was not opportune when the Council of Trent was convened in 1545. But with the passing of time, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the reform of the Second Vatican Council has resulted in the restoration of a practice by which the faithful are again able to experience "a fuller sign of the Eucharistic banquet

On March 25, 2004, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued the document, *Redemptionis Sacramentum*. This document provides instruction on the proper way to celebrate Mass.

As its reason for issuing the document, the Congregation stated: "It is not possible to be silent about the abuses, even quite grave ones, against the nature of the Liturgy and the Sacraments as well as the tradition and the authority of the Church, which in our day not infrequently plague liturgical celebrations in one ecclesial environment or another. In some places the perpetration of liturgical abuses has become almost habitual, a fact which obviously cannot be allowed and must cease."

The Congregation declared: "The Mystery of the Eucharist 'is too great for anyone to permit himself to treat it according to his own whim, so that its sacredness and its universal ordering would be obscured'. On the contrary, anyone who acts thus by giving free rein to his own inclinations, even if he is a Priest, injures the substantial unity of the Roman Rite, which ought to be vigorously preserved, and becomes responsible for actions that are in no way consistent with the hunger and thirst for the living God that is experienced by the people today. Nor do such actions serve authentic pastoral care or proper liturgical renewal; instead, they deprive Christ's faithful of their patrimony and their heritage. For arbitrary actions are not conducive to true renewal, but are detrimental to the right of Christ's faithful to a liturgical celebration that is an expression of the Church's life in accordance with her tradition and discipline. In the end, they

introduce elements of distortion and disharmony into the very celebration of the Eucharist, which is oriented in its own lofty way and by its very nature to signifying and wondrously bringing about the communion of divine life and the unity of the People of God."