

# EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION

## A Graced Ministry

Each time extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion administer the Body and Blood of Christ to members of the Eucharistic assembly they experience on a profound level the centrality and significance of the Eucharist in the life of the Church. They recognize the presence of Christ in the communicants who come before them. They sense our unity in Christ through the ritual that all of us share. They discover the truth of St. Augustine's words: "If you are the Body of Christ and its members then it is the mystery - meaning you - that has been placed on the Lord's table. What you receive is your own mystery. For you hear 'The Body of Christ' and you answer, 'Amen.'"

This is the graced ministry to which you have been called. This brochure will give you a definition of your ministry, a summary of the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, some useful guidance, and a list of resources that you can consult to deepen your participation in the Eucharist. Since the communion rite differs slightly from parish to parish this brochure does not substitute for careful training in your parish community. Such training and formation will be necessary before you begin serving as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion.

## An Extraordinary Ministry

*Ministry.* Baptism immerses us in the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ in the world. Thus, all the baptized are called and gifted by God to participate in Christ's ministry of service. By coming forward to serve as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, you are responding to this call to ministry.

*Extraordinary.* You are also responding to a call by the Church. The distribution of communion

is ordinarily the function of the ordained or a formally installed acolyte at Mass. Yet, by taking on this additional responsibility in the life of the Church you are responding to the needs of the assembly. You are accepting an extraordinary role in response to the grace of the Holy Spirit that brings so many people to the Lord's table in your parish community. Thus, the Archbishop is appointing you as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion for three years.

*Qualifications.* Your pastor has chosen you for this ministry because he has recognized in you certain qualities that make you a candidate. Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion should be fully initiated Catholics; of a mature age; able to fulfill this role with knowledge and reverence; and outstanding in Christian life, in faith, and in morals.

*Tradition.* As an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion you will be participating in the handing on (or *traditio*) of what has been given to you - namely the life and love of Christ, present and active in the Church's Eucharist. By serving the Eucharistic assembly you will be witnessing Christ's own loving service to his Body, the Church. You will be handing on to others the healing, nourishment, love, and energy that you yourself have received through communion in the Body and Blood of Christ.

## Catholic Theology of the Eucharist

*Gathered by and in Christ.* At his last supper with his disciples Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them, saying: "This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me." And likewise Jesus took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you" (Luke 22:19-20). It is Christ who gathers us to remember and participate in the sacrificial, covenant meal that he shared

with his own disciples. Gathering in community as the Body of Christ, we experience the presence of Christ in sacrament as the food and drink that gives us life (John 6:22-58); that nourishes us on our journey in this life, and unites the Church in love in all our diversity (1 Corinthians 10:16-17); so that Christ might be everything in all of us (Colossians 3:11).

*United with Christ.* In the celebration of the Eucharist, the heart of our liturgical faith life as Christians, we pray “through him, with him and in him.” Our prayer is joined to the perfect prayer of Christ. As he offers his life to the Father, so do we offer our own lives in union with Jesus Christ the Lord.

*Real Presence.* Catholics believe that Christ is present during liturgical celebrations in multiple ways: in the Word proclaimed and preached, in the assembly that prays and sings, in persons ministering sacramental acts (so, for example, when spouses symbolize their matrimonial covenant by reciting vows and wearing rings, it is Christ who seals their covenant commitment). But Catholics also acknowledge a unique presence of Christ established during the Eucharistic liturgy, a presence traditionally called “real”. (Notice that this does NOT suggest that the other modes of Christ’s presence are somehow “unreal”.) Based on phrases spoken by Jesus at the meal shared with his disciples on the night before he suffered (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23-26; Mk. 14:22-26; Mt. 26:26-29; Lk. 22:14-23), Catholics believe that Jesus identified all that he was, is, and will be -- himself and his cause, his ministry and his future -- with the taking, blessing, distribution and consumption of bread and wine under the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Catholics declare that this identification is so powerful, dense, and miraculous that the bread and wine consecrated at Mass are changed at the level of their very being, becoming lasting means of mediating the eucharistic presence of Christ. The traditional phrase describing this unique presence – “body and blood, soul and divinity” – proclaims the Church’s belief that the entire reality of the entire Christ is really

present to the faithful receiving sacramental Holy Communion. Each time we celebrate the Mass and share in the real presence of Christ in Holy Communion, the Word who became flesh in Jesus dwells among us. The Church is then called to actualize the real presence of Christ in the world until he returns in glory. The abiding presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is one of the gifts given to the Church providing evidence of the truth of Christ’s promise that he will be present in the life of his Church until the end of time.

*Sent forth for service.* When we celebrate the paschal mystery in memory of the Lord Jesus Christ, we recall the gift of his death and life for the sake of the world. Like the Lord, whose body was broken and life was poured out for us, we are able to continue his mission of service (Mark 10:44-45) through participation in Holy Communion. We are sent forth to be broken and poured out like Christ in order to feed those who are hungry and to satisfy those who are thirsty (Matthew 25:31-46 and John 7:37-39).

*“The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth. Certainly the Christian vision leads to the expectation of ‘new heavens’ and ‘a new earth’ (Rev 21:1), but this increases, rather than lessens, our sense of responsibility for the world today. I wish to reaffirm this forcefully at the beginning of the new millennium, so that Christians will feel more obliged than ever not to neglect their duties as citizens in this world. Theirs is the task of contributing with the light of the Gospel to the building of a more human world, a world fully in harmony with God’s plan.”*

- Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucaristia*

## Spirituality of Holy Communion

*Sacrament of the Church.* Through the Church's ongoing celebration of the Eucharist Christ continues to exist and act in human history. The Eucharist nourishes the Church, binds us together as one body and compels us to bear witness to those who do not enjoy the full communion of the Catholic Church. When we partake in Holy Communion we, the baptized, renew our participation in the life of Christ that we share in the Church. We enter more deeply into communion with Christ, with the divine life of the Trinity, and with one another in the whole Body of Christ throughout time and space.

*Memorial of Christ's Sacrifice.* By participating in the Eucharist we also renew our participation in Christ's sacrifice for the world and the priestly ministry of the people of God. We remember and accept with humble thanksgiving his gift of himself out of merciful love for us. We submit to the transformative power of Christ's passion, death and resurrection in our lives. And we pledge to extend the effects of Christ's reconciling death into the whole world by offering our prayers, our witness, and our lives of service to God in union with Christ until his mission of salvation is fulfilled.

*Heavenly Banquet.* The Eucharist is called the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. By this we mean that in Holy Communion we are nourished with the food of eternal life. God, the Holy One, pours out in us the divine life that makes us holy children of God. We are filled with the life of the Holy Spirit, who forgives our sins, brings us to life, unites us in love, and energizes us for service. At the same time we are given a foretaste of the eternal banquet in the coming Reign of God. We are joined at every Eucharistic table by the communion of Christians around the world, and the communion of angels and saints who give God eternal praise at the heavenly banquet.

## Guidelines for Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist

### *Leading by Example*

Parishioners will look to you for leadership both when you are acting as a communion minister as well as when you are participating as a member of the assembly. It will be your responsibility to model to others what it means to participate fully, actively, and consciously in the liturgy, in the life of your parish community, and in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, every time you come to Mass:

- ❖ *Greet others.* Recognize and honor the Body of Christ in your community from the moment you arrive to the moment you leave the Church.
- ❖ *Fully participate.* Whether it is in singing, listening, praying, reflecting, or offering the Sign of Peace, throughout the liturgy give your full participation to this central action of our faith.
- ❖ *Receive communion with reverence.* Make eye contact with the communion ministers. Bow your head as you receive both the Body and Blood of Christ. Step to the side and stand still as you place the consecrated host in your mouth.
- ❖ *Receive, do not "seize," the consecrated host.* Catholic practice since Vatican II allows us to receive the Eucharist in cupped hands or on the tongue, but not to take it in our fingers. This practice goes back to the earliest days of the Church and reflects our understanding that a gift must be freely accepted and received.
- ❖ *Make it a habit to receive the Blood of Christ.* When you do so, you obey the Lord's command to receive the cup, "and drink from it." You accept in trust and gratitude the graces Christ is offering you through this fuller sign of our unity with Christ in the Eucharist. If

on occasion you are sick, you should choose to refrain from the cup.

- ❖ *Do not dip the consecrated host in the cup.* Catholics drink from the common cup in obedience to Jesus' command and as a symbol of our unity in the life of Christ. Several Church documents including the *Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America* prohibit dipping the host in the cup oneself (*Norms #50*). This practice is not intinction. Intinction is a rare practice in the United States in which a single communion minister dips the consecrated host in the consecrated wine and places it on the communicant's tongue, with the words, "The Body and Blood of Christ." Dipping the consecrated host oneself is, in effect, giving oneself communion, which has never been allowed for the laity. Besides being prohibited it has been shown to be unsanitary. Out of respect for your parish community and reverence for the ritual unity of the Church, please refrain from this practice.

### ***Reverent Service***

A spirit of reverent service to the Body and Blood of Christ present in the Eucharist and in the community is at the heart of your ministry. When you are serving as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, you can show this reverence in many ways:

- ❖ *Attire and demeanor.* In order to allow the assembly to focus on the Eucharist, avoid clothing and actions that draw attention to yourself. This means wearing attire that is neither too casual nor too showy and matching your actions to those of other communion ministers during the communion rite. This might require you to sacrifice your own personal taste or devotional practices in a spirit of service to the community.

- ❖ *Handling sacred vessels.* Your reverent handling of the Eucharist and the sacred vessels will communicate to the assembly the great significance and honor we give to the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist.
- ❖ *Administering the Body of Christ.* The communicant stands in front of the communion minister with one hand palm up, on the other. Ancient writers called this gesture making a throne for Christ the King. Showing the consecrated host and looking in the eyes of the communicant the minister says, "The Body of Christ." The communicant bows the head and answers, "Amen." The minister places the consecrated host on the top hand. The communicant takes a short step to the side and stops for a moment. He or she reverently takes the consecrated host with the bottom hand, places it in the mouth and consumes the consecrated host. Those who choose to receive on the tongue come forward with hands together. The minister places the host directly on the communicant's tongue.
- ❖ *Administering the Blood of Christ.* The communicant moves to the minister of the cup. Holding out the cup and looking into the communicant's eyes the minister says, "The Blood of Christ." The communicant bows and answers, "Amen." Communicants raise the cup to their mouths themselves. The communicant drinks from the cup and returns it to the minister. The communion minister wipes the rim of the cup with the purificator, a cloth used only for this purpose. The minister moves the cup a quarter turn after each communicant. These procedures are both a matter of courtesy and good hygiene. (N. B. Cup ministers should open up the purificator and use the whole cloth rather than wiping the rim over and over on the same small section of cloth.)

- ❖ *Unconsumed Eucharist.* Remaining consecrated hosts should be placed in the tabernacle or consumed. The communion ministers should consume all remaining consecrated wine.
- ❖ *Communion to those with special needs.* During the communion rite you may be called on to serve someone with special needs or limitations, or to go to someone who cannot come forward in the communion procession. They may not be able to hold the cup themselves or to receive a complete host. Respect both the needs and the abilities of each communicant as you administer Holy Communion to these members of Christ's Body.

#### ***Additional reminders***

- ❖ *One ministry per liturgy.* As a rule, liturgical ministers perform only one ministry per liturgy. Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion normally do not proclaim the scriptures or perform another special ministry at the same celebration.
- ❖ *Special designation.* As a rule, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion do not sit in reserved places. Since the ministry of the Eucharist is exercised only during the communion rite, they need not be part of the entrance or closing processions.
- ❖ *Numbers of ministers.* When communion is to be given from the cup, generally there should be two ministers of the consecrated wine for each minister of the consecrated bread, except for intinction as described above. In this way, the communion rite will not be unduly prolonged. However, parishes will develop the practice that best suits their numbers.

- ❖ *Mishaps during communion.* Great care is taken should there be any mishap during the distribution of communion. If a consecrated host is dropped, the minister immediately picks it up and either puts it in the palm of the hand holding the ciborium or plate, or takes it to the altar or side table. The minister consumes it at the end of the communion procession.

If consecrated wine is spilled, the minister immediately wipes the floor with the purificator. The area is covered with a purificator until it can be washed. If needed, the minister takes up a new position for ministering the cup with a clean purificator so that the affected area is not in the path of the communion procession. The area where the spill occurred is later washed or wiped with a wet purificator and the water poured into the sacrarium, a special sink in the sacristy that drains directly into the earth.

- ❖ *Parish Training.* Many other questions about your ministry will arise. Some resources are listed below. Because specific procedures vary from parish to parish it is necessary for specific questions to be addressed in the training sessions in your parish.

### **Communion to the Homebound**

You may be called on to perform your ministry in hospitals, care facilities, or in people's homes. In that case it is imperative that you speak with the Pastoral Care Minister in your parish. This person will give you a pyx (a small vessel for carrying consecrated hosts), important resources, guidelines, and training for your ministry. Communion ministry to the homebound entails much more than administering Holy Communion in the assembly does. Here are a few principles to keep in mind.

- ❖ *The Lord's Day.* Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to the homebound have permission to take communion to them at any time. However, there is special significance in carrying the Eucharist to them directly from the Sunday celebration. The Lord's Day remains the principal day on which the community gathers to celebrate the Eucharist. Although they are separated physically from the worshipping community, the homebound feel more a part of the community and its Sunday liturgy when they share in Holy Communion on Sunday.
- ❖ *Bringing communion.* You will be acting as a bridge between the assembly and the homebound, thus "bringing communion" to them in several ways. You bring the Church to the homebound by sharing your time, the bulletin, news of the parish community, the Word of God from the Sunday liturgy, and the Eucharist. You connect the homebound to the community when you listen to them and promise to share their news with others. You allow them to contribute to the ministry of the Church through their support, work and prayers for the needs of the church and the world.
- ❖ *Ritual.* Ritual speaks to us in powerful ways, especially when we are sick, separated from our loved ones, or separated from the community. It is important to follow a simplified version of the ritual of the Church when bringing communion to the homebound. That ritual is clearly defined in many resources. It includes the basic elements of the Mass – Gathering together, making the Sign of the Cross, listening to and reflecting on the Word, responding with prayer and praise, and sharing Holy Communion. The actual giving of communion should follow the communion rite of the Mass.
- ❖ *Pastoral care.* A communion minister to the homebound is also a pastoral minister. As such you will want to provide a warm, prayerful atmosphere. You need to be reliably on time and to spend an appropriate amount of time with the communicant. You will welcome and include others who may be present. You will seek to listen well, to respond sympathetically, and to respect confidentiality, except in circumstances that your Pastoral Care Minister believes are crucial to the person's health.
- ❖ *Response of the communicant.* Initially some homebound persons may be reluctant to receive Holy Communion from a lay minister. It may be helpful to accompany the priest on your first visit and to assure the homebound that the priest will continue to visit them. It may also be helpful for them to know that you have been specially commissioned and trained for your ministry and that you want to spend time with them.
- ❖ *Mishaps.* If the communicant spits out the host the minister wraps it in a cloth and carries it back to church. The consecrated host and fragments are placed in a covered vessel with water until the host dissolves. The contents are then poured into the sacarium.
- ❖ *Communion from the cup.* On occasion sick people are unable to receive a consecrated host. At the discretion of the priest, they may receive consecrated wine instead. Only in this instance may the Blood of Christ be reserved. It is carried in a vessel that is closed in such a way as to eliminate all danger of spilling. After communion the minister consumes whatever remains and sees that the vessel is properly purified.
- ❖ *Resources.* The ritual for communion to the sick is found in the book, *Pastoral Care of the Sick, Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*. Communion for the

homebound is usually administered using #81-91. Communion in a hospital uses #92-96. Note that some ritual elements may be done only by an ordained minister. Introductory notes at #71-80 help clarify the ritual. Ask your

Pastoral Care Minister for a copy of the ritual and for guidelines for your ministry.

## **SOME RESOURCES**

### **Ritual Books and Church Documents**

*The Roman Missal, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal and the Lectionary for Mass.*

*The Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist: Basic Questions & Answers.* A statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2001.

*Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America,* 2002.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1066-1209, 1322-1421.

*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, an encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, April 17, 2003.

*Administration of Communion of the Sick*, No. 5-303, USCCB Publishing. 800.235.8722.

Bilingual (English/Spanish) edition contains two rites, one for use when Communion can be celebrated in the context of a liturgy of the word; the other, a brief Communion rite for use in more restrictive circumstances, such as a hospital.

*Pastoral Care of the Sick*, © 1983, Catholic Book Publishing Co., NY.