

# FROM THE PASTOR'S



## Most Holy Body & Blood of Christ – June 10, 2007 C

### WHO SHOULD AND SHOULDN'T BE ADMITTED TO HOLY COMMUNION IN OUR CHURCH FAMILY?

Some years ago, *U.S. Catholic* magazine had an article titled: ***Let's Stop Posting Bouncers at the Table of the Lord.*** The author of the article whose father-in-law is Lutheran writes: *The Catholic Church's strict rules against non-Catholics receiving the Eucharist in Catholic liturgies and its even stricter rules against Catholics receiving communion in non-Catholic liturgies have been a source of great irritation, frustration, offense and pain both for the many Catholics who have family members from other Christian churches and in Catholic ecumenical relations with these churches.* Like many of you, I have experienced this pain when ministers from other churches ask me if they can receive Holy Communion at our Mass and when I attend a Protestant service at which eucharist is served.

But this is not just an issue for non-Catholics. It is also an issue for Catholics who feel barred from Holy Communion because they are in a marriage not blessed by our church. In addition, this question can and should be an issue for all of us insofar as we should not come to Holy Communion while in the state of grave sin, which raises another question. What is grave sin? In this column, I may raise more questions than I answer. But I think it is important for us to talk about these issues.

#### **On the issue of non-Catholics receiving Holy Communion in our Church**

Most Protestant churches have an "open-communion" policy. By this I mean that all baptized Christians who believe in Jesus are invited to receive Holy Communion in their church when it is served. In addition to being baptized and accepting Jesus as one's Savior, other Christian churches stress the importance of belief in the presence of Jesus in the elements of bread and wine. One Lutheran church states: *"You are invited to share Holy Communion with us today if you are a baptized Christian who believes Christ is present in the sacrament and forgives sins."* Many non-Catholics and Catholics wonder why our church does not have an "open-communion" policy. The article, ***Let's Stop Posting Bouncers at the Table of the Lord,*** asks *"why on earth should we Catholics worry so much about whether every baptized Christian might sneak a piece of*

*Our Lord's Body and Blood? Do we really believe that it is our exclusive property whose consumption we must police? If we truly believe that the eucharist is the source and summit of our faith lives, wouldn't we want to make that special "needed grace" as widely available as possible rather than looking for ways to restrict access to it?"*

#### ***The Catholic Church's position on intercommunion***

On the inside cover of *Today's Missal* you will find these words: *"Because Catholics believe that the celebration of the eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness in faith, life and worship, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to Holy Communion."*

In contrast to most other Christian churches, the Catholic Church sees the eucharist not only as the Body and Blood of Christ, but also sees it as a *sign* of the oneness of faith which we celebrate and which *already* exists amongst her members. Hence, our eucharist celebrates not only our belief in Jesus and his presence in the eucharist, but also our common belief in other faith matters, e.g., seven sacraments which includes confession, our acceptance of the Pope as the successor of St. Peter, our beliefs about Mary and the saints. Our church leadership would say that if our Eucharistic celebration is, among other things, a *sign* of our common Catholic belief system, it would not be honest to invite to our table baptized Christians who do not yet share our beliefs. We would be trying to celebrate a unity that does not yet exist.

#### ***The Rite of Full Communion***

Baptized Christians who decide to become Catholic are received into our church through a rite called *The Rite of Full Communion.* During this rite, the baptized candidate professes his/her faith in what the Catholic Church believes and teaches to be revealed by God. Our church teaches that this is the appropriate moment for other baptized Christians to begin to receive holy communion in our church.

#### ***Exceptions to the Rule***

While non-Catholics are ordinarily not invited to Holy Communion in the Catholic Church, there are some exceptions. Canon 84, 4 states: *If the danger of death is present or if, in the judgment of the diocesan bishop or*

*conference of bishops, some other grave necessity urges it, Catholic ministers administer (the sacraments of penance, Eucharist and anointing of the sick) licitly also to other Christians not having full communion with the Catholic Church, who cannot approach a minister of their own community and who seek such on their own accord, provided that they manifest Catholic faith in respect to these sacraments and are properly disposed.*

The law is one thing, the *interpretation* of the law is another.

One can ask, what might be examples of “grave necessity?” The ***Roman Directory for Ecumenism*** lists among the examples of “grave necessity” the possibility of a non-Catholic spouse receiving communion at his/her marriage to a Catholic. But the same directory does not say that non-Catholic *guests* at a wedding are invited. In this situation, a Catholic wedding Mass intended to be a celebration of unity unfortunately, can be experienced as a sign of division, especially for devout non-Catholics who would very much like to receive Holy Communion on this special occasion.

### ***Speaking of exceptions***

According to the article, **Let’s Stop Posting Bouncers at the Table of the Lord**, even the late Pope John Paul on different occasions, communed Protestant church leaders and ambassadors. One Catholic archbishop is mentioned as having said that the Pope gave communion to Lutheran bishops at a Mass in his private chapel. I believe that there are special occasions that cry out for sharing eucharist with devout Christians from other churches, especially those Christians who receive eucharist on a regular basis in their own church and believe that Christ is present in the bread and wine, e.g., funerals and weddings. On the other hand, I think that non-Catholics who themselves choose to receive Holy Communion on a *regular basis* in a local Catholic parish should seriously consider joining the church’s *initiation process*, a process that would lead them into *Full Communion* with our church family.

### ***A question of emphasis***

One way to distinguish the different approaches to the *intercommunion* issue might be to say that churches with an “open communion” policy tend to emphasize the beliefs various Christian churches have in common, whereas churches with *restrictive policies* seem to emphasize areas of disagreement. For the latter churches, intercommunion is only meaningful when unity of belief actually exists among those coming to the table.

All of us should pray often the last Supper prayer of Jesus, “*that they all may be one.*”

### ***Cohabitation, Divorce and Remarriage situations***

Catholics who cohabit or who are not married by a priest are not supposed to receive the sacraments according to church law. This situation can be easily “fixed” in lots of cases. For example, the cohabiting couple can get married in the church if there is no impediment to marriage. A Catholic who is married outside the church to a Catholic or non-Catholic can have their marriage blessed in the church (providing neither has a previous marriage in which case an annulment may be needed.) In most cases, Catholics with a previous marriage in the church can apply for and obtain a decree of nullity for their first marriage.

Non-Catholics with a previous marriage wishing to marry a Catholic in the Catholic Church would also need a decree of nullity from the Catholic Church because the Catholic Church views marriages between two non-Catholics as valid until proven otherwise.

There are lots of Catholics in marriages that could be blessed in the Church, but somehow they haven’t pursued the matter. If you are in such a marriage, I urge you to call me so that we can see if your marriage can be blessed in the church.

But what about Catholics who do not have valid grounds for an annulment or who are married to a non-Catholic who does not have valid grounds for an annulment or is unwilling to seek an annulment? This is a very difficult and painful situation, especially for the devout Catholic for whom receiving the eucharist is very important. People in these situations are strongly encouraged to talk to a priest regarding a possible “pastoral solution” for his/her situation.

### ***What about the rest of us?***

Are there times when Catholics should remain in their pew and not receive Holy Communion? The inside cover of *Today’s Missal* states that a Catholic “*who is conscious of grave sin is not to receive the Body and Blood of Christ without sacramental confession except for a grave reason, e.g., there is no opportunity for confession. In this case, a person should make an act of perfect contrition with the intention of confessing as soon as possible.*

This raises the question of what is and isn’t a *grave sin*. Traditionally, our church states for a sin to be grave or mortal *three conditions* must be present. First, there must be ***grave matter***, some action that causes significant harm to others or ourselves or is a serious affront to God (e.g., murder, adultery, blasphemy.)

Second, there must be **full knowledge**, the person must be fully aware of the wickedness of the action. Third, there must be **complete consent of the will**. The person must freely choose to do what is evil. Mental deficiency, unintentional ignorance, passion and external forces can diminish the gravity of sin. (For more on this, see *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, articles 1854-1864.)

The issue of “grave sin” is far from being a black and white issue because of what is sometimes called the *subjective element* of moral actions which refers to the *person* performing the action and the *circumstances* under which the action was carried out. Was the person a mature, well-informed Catholic or someone with poor knowledge and formation in the Christian life? Or, was the person performing the action a teenager or a child? Secondly, what were the *circumstances* in which a particular person carried out a particular action? For example, did he miss Mass because he was sick or because he was lazy? Was the woman who had an abortion aware of the gravity of her action? Did she freely choose this action or was she pressured into it by a fiancé, husband or parents? Did she have the abortion even though her family wanted her to keep the child and promised to help her to raise the child?

In my humble opinion, if there is one reason for us *not* to go to Holy Communion, it is when we carry hate in our hearts and have no desire to even have a desire to pray for the grace to let go of the hate. On the other hand, if we have a desire to even have a desire to let go of the hate, we should come to the eucharist. In this latter case, we come to the eucharist to receive the grace we need to let go of hate and unforgiveness. In a time when it seems few people even question whether they should receive communion, it might be good for us to ask ourselves: what attitude or behavior of ours would cause us to remain in our pew at communion time?

### ***It is not for us to judge***

Some of us may be tempted to judge who should or shouldn't be receiving Holy Communion. We may be tempted to take someone else's inventory. If we have that tendency, we need to remember the stern words of Jesus found in Matthew 7:1-4. *“If you want to avoid judgment, stop passing judgment. Your verdict on others will be the verdict passed on you. The measure with which you measure will be used to measure you. Why look at the speck in your brother or sister's eye when you miss the plank in your own.”* When it comes to the matter of who should or shouldn't receive Holy Communion, our focus should be on ourselves and our own unworthiness rather than being focused on the unworthiness of our neighbor. In proclaiming the teaching of Christ and our church, we must walk the fine

line between a *legalistic* approach that makes laws and rules more important than people and what we might call an *overly* compassionate approach that might lead us to a “anything goes” attitude. Rules and laws are there to guide us. But there are exceptions to all rules. In any given parish, priests may interpret and enforce rules more or less strictly. Needless to say, this can cause some confusion in the minds of parishioners who may encounter a priest in one parish who is a stickler for the law and encounter a priest in another parish who is not nearly as rigid. A great saint, whose name now eludes me once said: “err on the side of charity.” I believe that we can use this advice not only when it comes to helping a needy person but when it comes to interpretation of church law.

Also, the laity themselves could be guilty of embracing one of two extremes. Some may be very legalistic and scrupulous about every detail of the law. For example, they worry if they fasted for the full hour before receiving Holy Communion. They ask if the 3:00 PM wedding Mass on Saturday fulfills the Sunday obligation. On the other hand, the younger generation (50 and under) can err by taking the law into their own hands. They don't care what the church teaches even when the teaching is rooted in Holy Scripture. Somewhere in between is the approach that takes seriously church teaching and church rules without being a slave to them.

### ***A word to those who do not come forward to receive Holy Communion.***

To those people, *Today's Missal* says: “All who are not receiving Holy Communion are encouraged to express in their hearts a prayerful desire for unity with the Lord Jesus and with one another.”

All of us should remember that while the eucharist is the pre-eminent way that we receive God's grace at Mass, it is not the *only* way. If we actively engage ourselves in the prayer and song of the Mass, if we open our hearts to God's word and desire to receive Jesus spiritually at Holy Communion, we can be *sure* that we are recipients of God's grace at Mass.

If you have any comments you would like to share with me about this column, please feel free to do so.

Have a blessed week,

