



The Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion

For Catholics, the Eucharist is the most important sacrament and the center of faith itself.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls the Eucharist “the source and summit of Christian life” (1324) and “the sum and summary of our faith” (1327). All other works of the Church spring from it:

“The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself” (CCC, 1324).

Other than priests and deacons, only one other group of people has the extraordinary privilege of distributing the Eucharist to the faithful at Mass or, if needed, in their homes, hospitals and nursing homes.

These men and women are Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (EMHC) who, through their own devotion to the Sacrament, feel called to share it with others who need this vital spiritual and sacramental gift.

The laity have not always had this enormous opportunity.

A Look Back

In the early church and for several centuries afterwards, it was a common practice to have the non-ordained distribute communion. Then the view of the Eucharist began to change, culminating with a decree (in the ninth century) that laity could no longer distribute Holy Communion except in the case of necessity. The most common “case of necessity” being the administration of Viaticum (Holy Communion for the dying). Throughout the centuries, the possibility of other exceptions have arisen, especially in times of persecution and social unrest. Until recent times, however, these were exceptions, not the norm.

In 1969 the Church issued the document *Fidei custos*, which first allowed baptized and confirmed laypeople to assist in distributing Communion under certain circumstances. Many believed the document to be unclear and written with missionary lands in mind, especially since it referred to instances where priests were unavailable and, in 1969, this was not the case in many parishes across the developed world. Debate ensued about the required conditions for





EMHCs and, in response to the confusion, Pope Paul VI (now Pope Saint Paul VI) authorized the document *Immensae caritatis*, which clarified the conditions and situations in which such extraordinary ministers would be appropriate. In addition, he outlined norms for the establishment of the roles across the world.

Even in *Immensae caritatis*, Pope Paul VI suggested that the extraordinary minister's role was only in times of absolute necessity:

"It is primarily the function of priests and deacons to distribute Holy Communion to the faithful who seek it. It is eminently fitting, therefore, that they should devote a reasonable part of their time, in keeping with the needs of the faithful, to this exercise of their ministry... The local ordinary may give to other extraordinary ministers the faculty to distribute Holy Communion whenever this seems necessary for the pastoral good of the faithful, and when no priest, deacon, or acolyte is available" (*Immensae caritatis*). Since the publication of these documents and the decrease in the number of priests and deacons serving our parishes, the need for extraordinary ministers has grown.

An Immense Responsibility

For each sacrament, the Church has designated ordinary or usual ministers. This designation of ministers and their competence to administer the sacrament are not directly established by doctrine, but by canonical discipline. The ordinary minister of Holy Communion is a bishop, presbyter, or deacon (Canon 910 in *Code of Canon Law*).

Baptism is one's title to ministry. By Baptism and Confirmation, all Christians share in the priesthood of Christ and have the potential for taking significant responsibility for the public worship of our community. Serving as an extraordinary minister is not given as a reward in recognition of one's past contribution or because someone is better than another. Rather, it is an immense responsibility to be called from the community as its representative. While all are called to be the presence of Christ, some are called to invite each communicant, to make an act of faith in the Lord, present body and blood, soul and divinity, in the Eucharist.

Eucharistic ministers accept God's call to help the assembly, the Body of Christ made visible, and to be united with Christ their Lord in Holy Communion. Everything done and said by the

Eucharistic minister should help others to receive the Lord Jesus more lovingly and reverently. All those gathered are attempting to consecrate themselves into His Body as Jesus has consecrated Himself into Bread for us.

A minister who lacks faith cannot offer dynamic faith to others. The one who does not know Christ cannot lead others to the Lord. Faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the most critical quality for a minister of communion. Indeed, it is required for all those who present themselves in the communion line.

The positive interior qualities of the extraordinary minister (reverence for others, prayerfulness, faith, etc.) or their regrettable absence will likewise be evident to others in the worshipping community. There must be an essential unity between our life inside and outside the liturgy.

All of us must become what we receive. We must become and live as the Body of Christ. Only then can the Eucharist charge us to be that sign of God's love in our world.

May we continue to be blessed with those men and women who come forward to answer the call to bring Christ in the Eucharist to one another. May our communities be renewed by their generous spirit and faithful witness. May we all strive to be of greater service to the Church and the world, allowing our lives to be governed by the fullness of the Eucharist.

For you hear the words, 'the Body of Christ' and respond 'Amen.' Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your 'Amen' may be true.

-Saint Augustine (Sermo 272)

To learn more about the upcoming revisions to the liturgical norms in the Diocese of Bridgeport, visit www.formationreimagined.org. Meetings will be held throughout November for those who wish to learn more.