

CLERGY CORNER

Father Steve Callahan

Can non-Catholics Receive Communion?

Dear friends,

Can a non-Catholic Christian receive communion at Mass? The most accurate answer to this question is not a simple “no” or “yes” but “it depends.”

Let me start with a simple statement of Catholic belief about the Eucharist. In every celebration of Mass, we believe that the gifts of bread and wine are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit into the Body and Blood of Christ. This is sometimes called the Real Presence, in other words, not just a remembrance of what Jesus did at the Last Supper, or not just a symbol, as some other non-Catholic religions believe, but the actual presence of Christ. We believe as Catholics that Jesus really meant what he said in chapter 6 of John’s gospel.

There are two aspects to participation in the Eucharist: one is as a sign of unity and the other is as a cause of unity. It would be accurate to say that the Catholic tradition has put an emphasis on Eucharist as a sign of unity. Other non-Catholic traditions who celebrate the Eucharist put the emphasis on cause of unity. Sadly, the mainline Christian traditions, while sharing a common belief on many core aspects of the Christian faith such as the Trinity, interpretation of Scripture, and baptism, do not have a shared belief about what the Eucharist is. For that reason, we believe it is dishonest to invite non-Catholic Christians to share in the Eucharist at Mass when we do not have a shared belief about what it is. Nevertheless, there are exceptions which allow a non-Catholic Christian to receive the Eucharist at Mass.

One exception involves Christians from any of the Eastern Orthodox traditions (e.g., Greek, Russian), which believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. And, while there is not full communion between the Catholic and Orthodox faiths, we recognize their sacraments as valid, and they can at their initiative participate in the Catholic sacraments of penance, Eucharist and anointing of the sick.

Exceptions for Christians of other non-Eastern Orthodox traditions (e.g., Episcopalian, Lutheran) are more restrictive when it comes to being able to receive the Eucharist: danger of death or other grave necessity where they cannot approach a minister of their own community and they manifest faith in the Catholic understanding of the sacrament.

I or any other priest, for reasons discussed above, cannot invite non-Catholic Christians to receive the Eucharist at Mass. I am aware of the reality of non-Catholic Christians who do believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and choose in conscience on their own initiative to come forward at Mass and to receive communion. I do not believe it is appropriate for me to refuse to give them communion in such a circumstance. This situation would call for a conversation with the person outside of Mass about the belief of the Catholic Church regarding the Eucharist.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Father Steve Callahan

