

## The Precious Blood at Mass

Beginning September 28<sup>th</sup> of this year, there will be a change as to when the Precious Blood will be distributed at Mass. Starting on that date, the Precious Blood will be available at two of the four Sunday Masses, but not at the weekday Masses. The Sunday schedule will follow an alternating pattern: one week the Precious Blood will be available at the first two Masses (5:00 P.M. & 7:30 A.M.) but not at the last two (9:00 A.M. & 11:00 A.M.). On the following week, the schedule will be reversed. I have seen this work well at a number of parishes (including two where I have been assigned in the past), and I am sure that we will quickly adapt to the new schedule.

I suppose the big question is WHY the change? The most fundamental reason has to do with the Church's understanding of the ministers of Holy Communion (those who distribute the Holy Eucharist). The ordinary ministers of Holy Communion are the ordained clergy – it is an essential element of their ordained ministry to feed, with the Holy Eucharist, the flock that has been entrusted to their care. In other words, when a priest distributes Holy Communion, since he is acting “in the Person of Christ”, it is a powerful reminder to the faithful that it is Jesus Himself (acting in and through His ordained minister) Who is feeding us with Himself. The distribution of Holy Communion is not just some “job” of the clergy, but is very integral to their mission of sanctifying the faithful.

The Church recognizes that the priest may call upon members of the faithful to assist in the distribution of the Holy Eucharist when there is a true necessity. It is important to note, however, that the Church uses a completely different term to distinguish these particular individuals of the lay faithful from the clergy. Those lay faithful who are called to assist the priest are *extraordinary* ministers of Holy Communion (as opposed to the clergy being the *ordinary* ministers). The difference is more than mere semantics. The term itself indicates that the Church sees the use of members of the lay faithful in this role as being an exception to the norm, and not the norm itself. The basic thrust of all of this is as follows: the Church, in attempting to maintain and foster the belief in the absolute sacredness of the Holy Eucharist, mandates that those who normally distribute Holy Communion would themselves be consecrated and set apart by a special sacrament (Holy Orders). Also, as mentioned above, having the ordained as the ordinary ministers of Holy Communion allows for that constant reminder of the fact that it is Jesus Himself (through the hands of the priest) Who is feeding us with His very Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity!

So, should the lay faithful never assist the clergy in the distribution of Holy Communion? No, but it must be recognized that the Church has never envisioned this as being a normative practice for the laity. The mission of the laity is primarily to bring Christ to the world – a very difficult and arduous mission that only they can ultimately accomplish, not the clergy. The habitual use of the lay faithful as extraordinary ministers tends to de-emphasize that unique lay mission by making the laity more like the clergy.

In order to protect both the special mission of the laity as well as the unique sacredness of the Holy Eucharist, the Church has frequently cautioned about the excessive and habitual use of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. For example, the Vatican instruction

"On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of the Priest" states: "To avoid creating confusion, certain practices are to be avoided and eliminated where such have emerged in particular Churches: the habitual use of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion at Mass thus arbitrarily extending the concept of 'a great number of the faithful'." Another relevant quote is from the U.S. Bishops' "Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America" which states: "In practice, the need to avoid obscuring the role of the priest and the deacon as the ordinary ministers of Holy Communion by an excessive use of extraordinary ministers might in some circumstances constitute a reason either for limiting the distribution of Holy Communion under both species or for using intinction instead of distributing the Precious Blood from the chalice."

The manner in which I interpret these, and other such documents, is that the habitual/excessive use of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion is to be avoided. Having extraordinary ministers at *every* Mass seems to fit the description of "habitual use" and this is the main reason for the afore-mentioned reduction. Another reason, although somewhat secondary, is to emphasize the fact that we receive Jesus completely (Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity) under *either* species (either under the appearances of bread or the appearances of wine). On numerous occasions I have had to explain that we do not receive more of Jesus if we receive under both species, but that we receive the same. I fear that a significant number are uncertain on this very important fact – this is not good for the practice of the Faith, and the truth of the completeness of Our Lord's Presence under either Eucharistic species must be emphasized with clarity.

Some will inevitably ask the question, "Didn't Jesus specifically say that we should *drink* His Blood?" I would answer by saying: 1) Jesus also said that if our hand causes us to sin that we should cut it off – did He mean this literally? Of course not, the Church has always provided us with the correct interpretation of Scripture, so too we must trust the Church in correctly guiding us in the area of Holy Communion; 2) in the West the practice of receiving Communion under both species was only for about the first thousand years of the Church's history, whereas Communion was only distributed under the Eucharistic species of bread for the past millennium; and 3) in the East the practice of receiving Communion under both species has always been maintained, but the faithful never drink from the chalice but rather receive Communion by intinction (the Sacred Host is dipped in the Precious Blood) and always on the tongue (a practice also allowed in the West).

I realize that some will not like this change. It is something that I have thought and prayed about for several years; I have not made this decision lightly. I feel that it is incumbent upon me to do everything in my power as a priest to help maintain and foster the absolute dignity of the Most Blessed Sacrament. The renewal of our Catholic Faith always finds its roots in the mystery of the Holy Eucharist. Some may disagree with my decision but I feel that I am merely following the direction of the Church's guidance, and in this regard I believe that one cannot go wrong.

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