

## ***Ten Questions on Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion***

(From the *Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter*, October 2002, pp. 99-100)

### **1. Are Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion really necessary at Mass?**

While extraordinary ministers may never distribute Holy Communion in the place of priests and deacons, their ministry is often needed to facilitate the distribution of Holy Communion “when the size of the congregation or the incapacity of the bishop, priest, or deacon requires it.” (*Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds [Norms]*, no. 28) All should be grateful for the exemplary ministry provided by so many Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion throughout the dioceses of the United States of America.

### **2. Who appoints Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion and who regulates their ministry?**

While individual priests may depute persons of good Christian reputation to serve as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion on an *ad hoc* basis (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM]*, no. 162), it is the diocesan Bishop who is responsible for this ministry. The Bishop may issue norms pertaining to the selection, preparation and fulfillment of this liturgical role (*Norms*, no. 28).

### **3. Why may only a priest or deacon distribute the Precious Blood into other chalices during the *Agnus Dei*?**

In a March 22, 2002 letter (Prot. 1383/01/L) to Bishop Wilton D. Gregory, USCCB President, Cardinal Jorge Medina Estevez noted that the duties of an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion are, by nature, limited to assisting ordained ministers and then only when a clear need to do so presents itself. “Any extrapolation from that provision in the direction of other responsibilities that they may fulfill as a consequence of that extraordinary deputation may indicate that the extraordinary nature of their deputation is in danger of being obscured. No such deduction or extrapolation of additional responsibilities is legitimate for an essentially extraordinary provision. It is for this reason that the Holy See has ascertained the need at the present moment to reassert such a distinction both by making certain clarifications in the general liturgical norms of the Roman Rite, and by refraining from the approval of new legislation that would extend the competence of extraordinary ministers into areas that were not previously encompassed according to the understanding of the legislator.”

### **4. We have no deacon at our parish. If Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion can't help with the distribution to ancillary chalices, won't this unduly lengthen this part of the Mass?**

Presuming as many as eight chalices for distribution to the faithful, practice has shown the filling of these chalices by one person takes less than ten seconds per chalice. During the additional minute and a half added to this rite additional tropes may be added to the singing of the Lamb of God.

### **5. Because we have no deacon or concelebrating priests present, we must use eight extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. How can they receive Holy Communion in a reasonable amount of time?**

The Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion approach the altar as the priest receives Communion. (see *Norms*, no. 38). When a large number of ministers are needed, the priest may go

to the first two ministers and give them the consecrated bread. He may then give them the Precious Blood, after which they may assist him in communicating the rest of the extraordinary ministers. After all the extraordinary ministers have received Communion, the priest celebrant returns to the altar. The ministers without vessels may then approach the priest and he hands each their proper vessel. (see *Norms*, no. 40) When a deacon is present, he may assist the priest in the actions assigned to him at this time.

**6. How is the consecrated bread distributed to the faithful?**

“Holy Communion under the form of bread is offered to the communicant with the words *The Body of Christ*. The communicant may choose whether to receive the Body of Christ in the hand or on the tongue. When receiving in the hand, the communicant should be guided by the words of St. Cyril of Jerusalem: “When you approach, take care not to do so with your hand stretched out and your fingers open or apart, but rather place your left hand as a throne beneath your right, as befits one who is about to receive the King. Then receive him, taking care that nothing is lost.” (*Norms*, no. 41)

**7. How is the Precious Blood distributed to the faithful?**

“The chalice is offered to the communicant with the words *The Blood of Christ*, to which the communicant responds, *Amen*.” (*Norms*, no. 43) After each communicant has received the Blood of Christ, the minister carefully wipes both sides of the rim of the chalice with a purificator. This action is a matter of both reverence and hygiene. For the same reason, the minister turns the chalice slightly after each communicant has received the Precious Blood. (*Norms*, no. 45)

**8. What does a minister do if the Blessed Sacrament is dropped or spilled during the distribution of Holy Communion?**

“Should there be any mishap—as when, for example, the consecrated wine is spilled from the chalice—then the affected area...should be washed and the water poured into the sacrarium.” (*Norms*, no. 29)

**9. May Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion assist with the purification of the sacred vessels?**

A decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (March 22, 2002, Prot. 1383/01/L) states that “the diocesan Bishop may grant to priest celebrants the faculty for extraordinary ministers to assist with the purification of sacred vessels after the distribution of Communion at Mass when this is necessary.” This indult extends for a period of three years, *ad experimentum*, and was made effective by a decree signed by Bishop Gregory, dated March 22, 2002. The complete text-of this decree may be found on the USCCB website.

**10. May Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion assist with the consumption of what remains of the Precious Blood after the distribution of Holy Communion?**

Yes, they may consume what remains of the Precious Blood from their chalice of distribution, but always in accord with whatever norms may have been published by the diocesan Bishop. (see *Norms*, no. 52)