



**W**hen Catholics from all the nations and cultures of the world gather for a eucharistic congress, like the one in Rome in June 2000, they celebrate a tremendous sign of unity. All who participate in this Eucharist are fed by the same life of Christ. At the same time the worldwide eucharistic celebration is a *sign* of unity it is also a *source*, or cause, of unity. We are nourished by the same body and blood of Christ, strengthened in unity.

Yet there's a flip side of the coin. As remarkable a display of unity as eucharistic congresses are, they also show us how far we are from unity among all Christians. A eucharistic congress makes us long for the day when all Christians can share in the one body of Christ: intercommunion. To what degree is intercommunion possible today? Are there ways we can hasten the day when all communions can participate in one Eucharist? This *Update* will explore what the Catholic Church teaches about intercommunion and why.

### LONGING FOR INTERCOMMUNION

**T**he fundamental meaning of any sacrament can be found in the prayers which accompany the sacramental action. In each of the seven sacraments we invoke the Holy Spirit and petition the Spirit to make us holy and to build up the Body of Christ. This petition is the key to understanding the sacrament: The primary petition of the eucharistic prayer is for unity in Christ. We ask that the Spirit change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ so that we who eat and drink might be changed into the Body of Christ. "Let your Spirit come upon these

BY THOMAS RICHSTATTER, O.F.M., S.T.D.

## GUIDELINES FOR NON-CATHOLIC GUESTS

### For our fellow Christians:

...Because Catholics believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life and worship, members of those Churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to holy Communion. Eucharistic sharing in exceptional circumstances by other Christians requires permission according to the directives of the diocesan bishop and the provisions of canon law (Canon 844, 4).

Members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church are urged to respect the discipline of their own Churches. According to Roman Catholic discipline, the Code of Canon Law does not object to the reception of Communion by Christians of these Churches (844, 3).

**For those not receiving holy Communion:** 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.

**For non-Christians:** We also welcome to this celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. While we cannot admit them to holy Communion, we ask them to offer their prayers for the peace and the unity of the human family.

Complete official guidelines can be found on the Internet at

[www.usccnccb.org](http://www.usccnccb.org)

EXCERPT FROM THE U.S. CATHOLIC BISHOPS' OFFICIAL GUIDELINES

gifts to make them holy, so that they may become for us the body and the blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ.... May all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit" (Eucharistic Prayer 2). "Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ" (Eucharistic Prayer 3). The other eucharistic prayers have similar invocations.

If "unity" is at the heart of Eucharist, why can't all Christians—Protestants, Orthodox, Catholics—share holy Communion?

Different Christian Churches answer this question in various ways. Some Christians favor "open Communion." Open Communion is the position that holds that no one can stop a baptized person who believes in Jesus Christ from receiving Communion in any Church. They would say that open Communion is the preferred option because the Holy Supper is a *source* of unity—a means by which unity among Christians can be achieved. This, however, is not the official Roman Catholic position.

Other Christians believe that the condition for receiving holy Communion in another Church is unity of faith in the Real Presence. Intercommunion will be possible when the Churches reach a doctrinal consensus regarding Eucharist. While much progress has been made regarding

Real Presence, the official Catholic position asks for more than common belief in the Real Presence. Some Christians—Catholics included—hold that sharing holy Communion is only proper between Churches which have a historical succession of bishops and true priesthood. For real (valid) Eucharist, you need real priesthood. This is an important element of the Catholic position.

The official Catholic position holds that holy Communion is not only a source of Christian unity, but it is also a *sign* of unity—real unity, existing now. "Strengthened in holy Communion by the body of Christ, [the faithful] manifest in a concrete way the unity of the people of God that this sacrament aptly signifies and wondrously causes" (Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 11).

We cannot put forth signs of unity when obvious division still exists. Receiving Communion at the same altar is not a sign of unity when we do so with the intention of separating afterwards to return to our various Churches. In short, the Catholic Church teaches that we should not pretend to have true unity if, in reality, we are separated from other Christian bodies. That separation is often seen now not so much over basic beliefs as it is over mutual recognition of the validity of Holy Orders.

The Eucharist is more than food for the individual Christian. When we come

together to celebrate the Eucharist we express who we are as Church. The liturgy, especially the Eucharist, "is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 2).

## ROMAN CATHOLIC LAW

Pope John Paul II explains the Roman Catholic position regarding intercommunion in his encyclical letter on ecumenism, *That All May Be One*. He says that Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* (#22-23) "pointing out that the post-Reformation Communities lack that 'fullness of unity with us which should flow from Baptism,' observes that 'especially because of the lack of the Sacrament of Orders they have not preserved the genuine and total reality of the Eucharistic mystery,' even though 'when they commemorate the Lord's Death and Resurrection in the Holy Supper, they profess that it signifies life in communion with Christ and they await his coming in glory'" (#67).

Consequently, the current law of the Roman Church states that ordinarily Catholics can receive the sacraments only from Catholic ministers (Code of Canon Law, Canon 844). However, the law itself gives some exceptions to this general rule. "Whenever necessity requires it or true spiritual advantage suggests it, and provided that danger of error or indifference is avoided, the Christian faithful for whom it is physically or morally impossible to approach a Catholic minister are permitted to receive the sacraments of penance, Eucharist, and anointing of the sick from non-Catholic ministers in whose Churches these sacraments are valid" (Canon 844, 2). The fact that exceptions exist is a sign of hope.

## SHARING COMMUNION WITH EASTERN CATHOLICS AND ORTHODOX

Some years ago I was in Egypt, visiting a fellow Catholic priest at his parish. While I was there, his friend, the pastor of the neighboring Coptic parish, died. The Coptic funeral was a situation where Roman Catholics

would be permitted to receive Communion from a non-Catholic minister. Roman Catholics recognize this Church as having valid priesthood and valid Eucharist. The long friendship of the two pastors made this a time when receiving Communion at his friend's funeral would have constituted a "spiritual advantage." It was impossible to approach a Catholic minister because it was a Coptic funeral Mass. But there was another consideration that kept us two Catholics from receiving Communion: Coptic-church law forbade it. We did not receive out of respect for *their* law.

The same would be true for a Catholic visiting an Orthodox parish anywhere. But what happens when the above situation is reversed, when a member of an Orthodox Church wishes to receive Communion in a Catholic Church? Here Catholic canon law states: "Catholic ministers administer the sacraments of penance, Eucharist, and anointing of the sick licitly to members of Eastern Churches which do not have full communion with the Catholic Church if they seek such on their own accord and are properly disposed" (Canon 844, 3).

I experienced an example of this in Kerala, India. I was staying with a good friend who is pastor of a Catholic parish of the Syro-Malankara rite. An elderly couple who lived next door to the parish church, although they were Syrian Orthodox, came to daily Mass and received holy Communion with us. This is permitted by the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (Canon 673, 3, which is very similar to our Canon 844, 3).

These provisions in the law are in keeping with the current Catholic position that the Eucharist is a sign of actual unity already achieved. There is sufficient unity between the Catholic Church and these sister Churches to warrant intercommunion under the circumstances spelled out in the law. They have true faith in the Eucharist, apostolic succession and valid priesthood.

## SHARING COMMUNION WITH PROTESTANTS

**B**ut for Catholics where I live, these examples seem to miss the point. The question here is not about Syro-Malankara Catholics or Coptic Orthodox. The question is: What about Protestants? Can we share Eucharist with them?

We have seen that the official Roman Catholic position of restricting the sharing of holy Communion is based on the principle that Eucharist is a sign of Church unity already actually achieved. But years ago the larger issues of Church unity and ministry did not play a determining role. In my early training I learned that Protestants could not receive holy Communion at Mass because they did not believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It was never explained to me exactly what they did believe, but I knew it was not what we believed. Since then, I have learned that it is often dangerous to presume to know what someone else believes.

For example, I remember the day some years ago when Laura, a young

Catholic girl, came to the rectory with her Protestant fiancé, Mike, and asked me to help them plan their wedding. Because marriage is a sacrament and the wedding ceremony is first and foremost an act of worship—a prayer time—I asked Laura and Mike, "Have you ever prayed together?" "Sure," they replied, "we often pray together." "Have you ever gone to church together?" And again the answer was yes. "Each Sunday we go to church together," Laura replied. "Sometimes to mine, sometimes his."

I asked, "Do you ever receive Communion together?" "Of course not," they both replied. When I asked why not, Laura explained, "Because we Catholics believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and Protestants believe in merely symbolic presence."

Intrigued by this idea of "merely symbolic presence," I asked Mike if he would take his Church's Communion bread, and put peanut butter and jelly on it. Mike looked at me in surprise and shock. "Of course not, Father! It's not bread for a sandwich; it's the Body of the Lord." "If you believe that holy Communion is the Body of Lord," I asked, "why

## BELIEF IN REAL PRESENCE



**I**n discussions with both Catholics and Protestants I have found that many Christians are unaware of the wonderful progress that has been made by both Catholics and Protestants in our common understanding of Christ's Eucharistic Presence. For example, I think many Catholics would be surprised to learn the source of the following statement:

"The words and acts of Christ at the institution of the eucharist stand at the heart of the celebration; the eucharistic meal is the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, the sacrament of his real presence. Christ fulfills in a variety of ways his promise to be always with his own even to the end

of the world. But Christ's mode of presence in the eucharist is unique. Jesus said over the bread and wine of the eucharist: 'This is my body...this is my blood...'

"What Christ declared is true, and this truth is fulfilled every time the eucharist is celebrated. The Church confesses Christ's real, living and active presence in the eucharist. While Christ's real presence in the eucharist does not depend on the faith of the individual, all agree that to discern the body and blood of Christ, faith is required." This statement is not from the pope, but from the World Council of Churches (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, E13).

The progress that Churches have made in interdenominational understanding and pastorally sensitive exceptions to bans on intercommunion are signs of hope. Progress towards Christian unity is taking place. We must pray, with Jesus (see John 17:20-21),

THAT ALL BELIEVERS MAY BE ONE.

don't you receive Communion at the Catholic Church?" Mike explained, "In our Church, we believe that receiving Holy Communion has a spiritual, religious meaning; whereas Catholics believe that it is merely a physical act, some sort of cannibalism." I found it very interesting how both of these devout young Christians had somehow picked up a stereotype of the other's belief.

Although many Protestants have true belief in Christ's eucharistic presence, our laws regarding their participation in Catholic Eucharist are more restrictive than those we saw above regarding the Orthodox Churches because we do not share the same degree of unity with the Protestant Churches that we share with the Orthodox. "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" (Canon 844, 4).

The law allows for some exceptions—"when grave necessity urges it." The Roman Directory for Ecumenism (1993) lists among the examples of this "grave necessity" the possibility of a non-Catholic spouse receiving Communion at a Catholic wedding. But the directory insists that local bishops and bishop's conferences spell out the times when this "grave necessity" might be present. There are times when eucharistic sharing between Episcopalians and Catholics in the United States might be possible when similar sharing between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in Ireland might not. It is difficult for Rome to make laws which are applicable to all the countries of the world.

While the Roman directory suggests that the non-Catholic party might receive Communion at their Catholic wedding, the question must be asked about the non-Catholic guests. If they are unable to receive holy Communion, we will have a liturgy which makes visible signs of our division when the wedding liturgy itself is intended to give signs of unity—the unity of bride and groom, the unity

of Christ and the Church. That is why it is best on these occasions to celebrate the wedding without a Eucharist.

## OUR TASK FOR THE FUTURE

In the apostolic letter *On the Coming of the Third Millennium*, Pope John Paul II stated: "Among the most fervent petitions which the Church makes to the Lord...is that unity among all Christians of the various confessions will increase until they reach full communion." Our efforts toward ecumenical agreements must show the world "that the disciples of Christ are fully resolved to reach full unity as soon as possible in the certainty that 'nothing is impossible with God.'" In this same context, as the pope calls for "cooperation in the many areas which unite us," he points out that these areas which unite us "are unquestionably more numerous than those which divide us" (#16).

Our task is to emphasize the positive, to realize how far we have come. Today in many places the Churches of a city or area are joining together to work for safe, drug-free streets; jointly sponsoring thrift stores and soup kitchens; pooling resources for emergency financial help to those in need; working together in projects such as Habitat for Humanity. And even though we cannot yet always share the Lord's life-giving bread at one common table, how wonderful it is that so many of our Churches share a common table of the Lord's Word. It is a great blessing that we all experience the redeeming presence of Christ in the proclamation of the same Scripture passages in our churches. "To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in his Church, especially in its liturgical celebrations....He is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church" (*Sacred Liturgy*, 7).

When we speak of Church unity we do not, of course, mean Church uniformity. It is possible, and even preferable, to achieve Church unity while preserving a wide diversity of Church structures and liturgical expressions. "From the beginning, this one Church has been marked by a great diversity which comes from both the variety of God's gifts and the diversity of those who receive them" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 814).

**UPDATE**

## Question Box

1. How is Eucharist a sign of unity?
2. How is it a source of unity?
3. How can you build Christian unity?

The transcendent splendor of Orthodox liturgies; the reverence and ecumenical zeal of the Churches of the Anglican Communion; the gratitude for God's free grace and the Lutheran Church's contributions to liturgy through music; the missionary spirit of the Baptist Churches; the Disciples of Christ's dedication to Church unity; the call to social responsibility proclaimed by the United Methodist Church; the confidence in God's faithfulness as witnessed to by the Presbyterian and Reform Churches—these rich gifts which God has given to each of the Churches are to be preserved and developed until the day we weave them together in a wonderful tapestry to be placed on the table when "many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:11). ■

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