

HOLY COMMUNION FROM THE ALTAR

'That more perfect form of participation in the Mass whereby the faithful, after the priest's communion, receive the Lord's body from the same sacrifice, is strongly commended.' Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §55

In many parishes, receiving the Sacrament of Christ's Body from bread consecrated at the Mass being celebrated is not the usual practice. Instead, the faithful often receive hosts that have been consecrated at an earlier Mass and reserved in the tabernacle. In effect, a "Communion Service" is inserted into the celebration of Mass.

This all too common practice is far from the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and is contrary to the norms of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal. Moreover, this common practice is unnecessary.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, faithfully reaffirming the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, urges that Communion be distributed from bread consecrated during the same celebration of Mass:

'It is most desirable that the faithful, just as the Priest himself is bound to do, receive the Lord's Body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass and that, in cases where this is foreseen, they partake of the chalice, so that even by means of the signs Communion may stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated.' General Instruction of the Roman Missal §85.

There are compelling reasons for ministering Communion from the altar rather than the tabernacle. All of the baptised are members of God's priestly people and their full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy is both their right and duty. The Church has always recognised that the integrity of the sacrifice of the Mass demands that the priest celebrant receives Communion from the bread and wine that have been brought to the altar and consecrated. To distribute Communion from the tabernacle to the faithful who are celebrating the same Mass creates a false distinction between priest and people and undermines the unity of the Church that is expressed when all receive Communion from the bread and wine that have just been consecrated.

The offerings of bread and wine, signs of God's goodness to his priestly people, are presented by the people in the Mass. These same offerings are consecrated by the priest celebrant and become the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. In Communion, they are offered back to people. When the people receive of the Body and Blood of Christ from the altar, they are affirmed in their sacramental communion with Christ and with one another as the ecclesial Body of Christ. This should always be the normative practice because it expresses the essential *communio* of the Catholic Church.

Distributing Communion from hosts consecrated at an earlier Mass and reserved in the tabernacle is not mentioned in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal or in the rubrics of the Mass. It is not part of the Roman Rite and should occur only in unforeseen

circumstances where not enough bread has been provided for the sacrifice of the Mass actually being celebrated.

Some priests and sacristans object that it is too hard to get the number of hosts right. Yet, in parishes that observe the liturgical norms, it is not as difficult as might be thought to estimate the quantity of bread that will be needed. The annual Mass count provides base figures for each Sunday Mass and it is generally straightforward to determine the quantity for Mass on weekdays. The priest celebrant, another minister or the sacristan can generally tell whether the number of people present is above or below the base figure and adjust the number of hosts accordingly.

To establish this normative practice of the Church in every celebration of Mass, it is important not only to get the quantity of bread right but at the same time to cease the practice of the priest or another minister going to the tabernacle after the Sign of Peace to retrieve a ciborium containing already consecrated hosts. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal and the rubrics of the Mass assume that this does not occur. If, in unforeseen circumstances, the need arises during the distribution of Communion, the priest can go to the tabernacle to bring additional hosts. After Communion, any consecrated hosts that remain are either consumed at the altar by the priest or carried to the tabernacle and reserved there (General Instruction of the Roman Missal §163). This is done with reverence but not as if a Blessed Sacrament procession.

The custom of the Catholic Church is to reserve consecrated hosts for Viaticum of the dying and Communion of the sick and housebound, and for Adoration in personal prayer and in the rites of Exposition and Benediction. Out of necessity, the Church in some places where the sacrifice of the Mass cannot be regularly celebrated also reserves consecrated hosts for the celebration of Holy Communion in the absence of a priest, normally with the Liturgy of the Word or the Liturgy of the Hours.

Communion in the Body of Christ from hosts consecrated during the Mass being celebrated ought never be regarded as optional but as normative practice. Sacraments need to not only effect what they signify but to signify what they effect. In the celebration of Mass, this is attained when Communion in the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood is ministered from bread and wine just consecrated, a sign of God's priestly people's participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated and of their communion with the Lord and with each other as the ecclesial Body of Christ.