

# EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION

## A THEOLOGY OF LAY LITURGICAL MINISTRY

*“But you are a ‘chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises’ of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light”*  
(1 Pt. 2:9).

All liturgical ministers are members of the body of Christ, the “holy people and royal priesthood” who participate in Christ’s ministry of redemption and salvation. In the Mass, the lay faithful exercise this ministry in various ways, but the fullest and most fundamental expression of it has always been “conscious, active and fruitful participation in the mystery of the eucharist” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal, Third Typical Edition, 2002*—GIRM, #5), a participation “to which the Christian people have a right and duty by reason of their Baptism” (GIRM, #18).

Some of the faithful are called to serve God’s people in a more particular way through one of the many liturgical ministries that have flourished in the Church since the Second Vatican Council. This diversity of roles, functions and ministries enriches our celebrations and assists us in our prayer. Serving in one of these ministries is both an honor and a responsibility, and those who commit to it deserve nurturing and support. This handbook has been prepared to help lay liturgical ministers to acquire a deeper understanding and love for the liturgy, their ministry and ultimately the Lord whom we all serve.

## **I. EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION**

*“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it and giving it to his disciples said, ‘Take and eat; this is my body’” (Mt. 26:26).*

Of the many ways the faithful participate in the celebration of the Mass, none is more vital than the “common partaking at the Lord's table” (GIRM, #96). So important is this sharing that the practice of taking the Eucharist to those unable to attend the celebration has existed in the Church since ancient times. The earliest “Communion ministers,” although never designated by this term, were ordinary Christians who carried the Eucharist to sick or imprisoned family and friends.

Over the centuries, the practice of distributing Communion during Mass and carrying it to the sick became the sole responsibility of ordained ministers, but the need for all Christians to share in the Eucharist never diminished. In 1973, so that the faithful might have greater access to holy Communion and share more fully in the fruits of the Mass, Pope Paul VI, in the instruction “*Immensae Caritatis*,” once again extended to the lay faithful permission to assist priests in distributing holy Communion.

Bishops, priests and deacons are the usual or “ordinary” ministers of Communion since this is an intrinsic part of their role. The lay faithful are “extraordinary” ministers since they serve only when there are not enough ordinary ministers present to distribute Communion.

This is a ministry of both invitation and challenge, for when Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion distribute from the plate or cup into the outstretched hands of the assembly, they not only invite the assembly to receive the body and blood of Christ, but they challenge the assembly to become it as well. Those who minister Communion are likewise invited and challenged. They are invited to serve the body of Christ at the eucharistic table and challenged to build up the body by the way they live. Love for the Eucharist should be evident in a mature and lively faith which enables them to bring Christ to all they meet long after the liturgy has ended.

## II. TRAINING AND FORMATION

The lay faithful who are called to ministry have the right to adequate training from their parish communities before being assigned to service in the assembly. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion require training in the details of how communion is distributed in the liturgical space where they will serve. Equally important is on-going formation that develops skills, deepens understanding of the Eucharist and encourages spiritual growth. The Office of Liturgy has resources to assist parishes with the important tasks of training and formation.

Training for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion includes

- Learning the names and location of the sacred vessels and linens used during the distribution of Communion.
- Learning proper reverence for the eucharistic elements.
- Learning when to come forward, where to stand and what to say while ministering from the plate and cup.
- Learning how and when to take reserved hosts to or from the tabernacle.
- Learning how and when to purify and clean the sacred vessels after communion.
- Practicing these responsibilities so as to carry them out with confidence and dignity.

Ongoing formation includes opportunities for

- Understanding the importance of symbol and ritual in Catholic worship.
- Deepening knowledge of the theology and structure of the Mass.
- Deepening understanding of the Eucharist as the sacrament of unity and service.
- Deepening appreciation for the many modes of Christ's presence within the Christian community.
- Reflecting prayerfully on the Sunday readings.
- Studying Scripture to foster a greater love for God's word.
- Gathering with the parish for prayer, reflection and fellowship on a regular basis throughout the liturgical year.

## III. COMMISSIONING

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion must be fully initiated Catholics, at least 16 years of age, who manifest their love for the Eucharist by participating in the sacramental life of the Church and the activities of their parish. Qualified persons who have been discerned as candidates for this ministry must be recommended by their pastors and designated by the bishop. This is accomplished by the pastor forwarding their names to the chancery. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion are commissioned to function within their own parish for a period of three years. The commission may be renewed once and expires after three years or if the person moves away from the parish. Commissioning should take place during a parish celebration according to the rite provided in the *Book of Blessings*.

## **IV. PREPARATION**

Those who exercise a liturgical ministry are expected to develop their ministerial skills by taking advantage of the training and formation opportunities offered by their parish or through the Office of Liturgy. In addition, they have a serious responsibility to prepare in a more immediate way for the liturgies at which they will serve.

For Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion this more immediate preparation includes

- Arriving in enough time to become calm and unhurried before the liturgy and to check for any changes or special instructions.
- Dressing in a way that reflects the importance and dignity of this ministry.
- Serving when scheduled and notifying a responsible authority and/or arranging for a substitute when not available.

## **V. MINISTRY TO THE SICK AND HOMEBOUND**

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion also carry Communion to the sick and homebound. Anyone who regularly performs this aspect of the ministry likewise receives training, commissioning and on-going formation. To establish the connection between the Sunday assembly and those members who are absent, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion ideally are sent directly from the Sunday celebration.

## VI. DURING THE LITURGY

### The Entrance Procession

- In many parishes Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion simply sit with the assembly until it is time to distribute Communion. In some parishes they walk in the entrance procession, then take their seats in the assembly. Whatever the parish practice, it is important that the ministers know and follow it.

### The Communion Rite

- “It is most desirable that the faithful receive the Lord’s body from the hosts consecrated at the same Mass” (GIRM 85); therefore, using the reserved sacrament in the tabernacle should be the exception, not the rule.
- Both bread and wine should be offered at the eucharistic celebration to demonstrate Holy Communion as a more complete sacramental sign than bread alone.
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should approach the altar “as the priest receives Communion” (*Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America*—Norms #38) and stand near the altar quietly and reverently.
- How the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion receive communion varies from parish to parish, but they should receive communion before ministering to the assembly because “waiting to receive Holy Communion until after the distribution of Holy Communion is not in accord with liturgical law” (Norms #39).
- “Neither deacons nor lay ministers may ever receive Holy Communion in the manner of a concelebrating priest” (Norms #39); that is, by self-communicating.
- The Lord's body and blood should never be left on the altar for communicants to take themselves, nor should they be passed from one communicant to another (Norms #44).
- After moving to their designated stations, the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion makes eye contact with each person coming forward to receive communion. The consecrated host is held up, but not elevated, for the communicant to see and the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion clearly says, “The body of Christ.” The communicant responds, “Amen.” The host is placed firmly in the hand or on the tongue of the communicant. Whether to receive in the hand or on the tongue is the choice of the person receiving.
- The cup of consecrated wine is likewise held up, but not elevated, for the communicant to see while the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion says clearly, “The blood of Christ.” Again the response is “Amen.” The Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion places the cup entirely in the hands of the communicant. After the communicant has received, the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion takes the cup, wipes both sides of the rim with the purificator, turns the cup slightly and presents it to the next person.

- The words used in presenting the host or the cup should not be changed or adapted in any way, even by the addition of personal names.
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should not perform multiple ministries during the same celebration in keeping with the directive to “carry out solely but completely that which pertains to them” (GIRM #91).

### **After Communion**

- When the assembly has finished receiving, the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion set the sacred vessels in their proper place, usually a credence table to the side of the altar.
- Any remaining hosts should be put in one container and brought to the tabernacle or a side table.
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion “may consume what remains of the Precious Blood from their chalice of distribution . . . .” (Norms #52).
- When all is finished, the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion return to their seats and join the assembly in the post-communion silence and the concluding rites.
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion may be asked to purify, clean and put away the sacred vessels (Norms #53) for the next liturgy in accordance with an indult granted by the Vatican on March 22, 2002.

## VII. GLOSSARY

<b>Alb</b>	A long white robe worn over regular clothing that can be used by all liturgical ministers.
<b>Ambo</b>	A sacred place from which the word of God is proclaimed. It is reserved for the readings, the psalm, and the Easter proclamation (Exsultet), but may also be used for the homily and general intercessions.
<b>Assembly</b>	The people of God gathered for prayer and worship.
<b><i>The Book of the Gospels</i></b>	The book containing the Gospels that is carried in procession each Sunday and from which the priest or deacon proclaims the Gospel.
<b>Chalice</b>	The cup used to hold the wine for consecration during Mass.
<b>Corporal</b>	A white cloth placed on top of the altar cloth to hold the sacred vessels used for the Eucharist.
<b>Ciborium</b>	A covered bowl used to hold consecrated hosts after Mass.
<b>Credence Table</b>	A small table placed to the side of the altar used to hold items used during Mass.
<b><i>Lectionary for Mass</i></b>	The book containing the scripture readings used on Sundays and the readings for Mass during the week.
<b>Liturgical Minister</b>	Someone who serves in a special role during a liturgical celebration.
<b>Parts of the Mass</b>	<p>The Mass is divided into four main parts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introductory Rites - from the entrance song through the opening prayer.</li><li>• Liturgy of the Word - from the first reading through the prayer of the faithful.</li><li>• Liturgy of the Eucharist - from the preparation of the gifts through the prayer after communion.</li><li>• Concluding Rite - the priest's greeting and blessing and the dismissal of the assembly.</li></ul>
<b>Purificator</b>	A clean cloth used for wiping the chalice during Communion and for cleaning it after Mass.

<b>Pyx</b>	A small covered container used to carry consecrated hosts to the sick.
<b><i>Sacramentary/Missal</i></b>	The book containing the prayers used by the priest during Mass.
<b>Sanctuary</b>	The sacred space around the altar usually set apart in some way from the rest of the church building.

## **VIII. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

Bernardin, Cardinal Joseph. *Guide for the Asssembly*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997.

Glendinning, Barry. *Preparing the Eucharistic Table*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996.

Kwatera, Michael, OSB. *The Ministry of Communion*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2004.

Mahoney, Cardinal Roger. *Gather Faithfully Together: A Guide for Sunday Mass*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997.

Tufano, Victoria M. *Guide for Ministers of Communion*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999.

## **IX. CONCLUSION**

This handbook was prepared by the Office of Liturgy to assist you who are called to liturgical ministry. It addresses your responsibilities according to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (3rd edition, 2002), the current directive of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy.

We are committed to supporting you in this ministry and in your desire to grow in your understanding of the liturgy you serve. It is our hope that this handbook will be the beginning of a dialogue among liturgical ministers that encourages us to reflect upon why we do what we do and how to enter into “full, active, conscious” participation in the liturgy through the ministry to which we have been called.

If you have questions, comments, or ideas to add to the revision of this handbook, please direct them to the Office of Liturgy, 197 East Gay Street, Columbus, OH 43215, 614-221-4640, or to [LITMailbox@colsdio.org](mailto:LITMailbox@colsdio.org).

## **A MINISTER'S PRAYER**

(Adapted from an ancient Celtic prayer attributed to St. Patrick).

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
Christ in the eye that sees me,  
Christ in the ear that hears me.

Office of Liturgy  
Diocese of Columbus  
2005