

HANDBOOK FOR

EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION



Reflections, Prayers
and Practices for
Your Journey in Ministry

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INTRODUCTION

The Eucharist constitutes the very life of the church, for the Lord said, I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me shall ever be hungry, no one who believes in me shall ever thirst. THIS HOLY AND LIVING SACRIFICE, I

Over the years, I have participated in various workshops and had the opportunity to speak with parish extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. In so doing, I have found that, often, the training provided at the parish level for new ministers of communion consists of a brief session on only one aspect of this important ministry, the practical skills. The focus is usually on choreography: when to come forward to serve, what to do when you are in the sanctuary, where to stand when you serve communion, and what to do when the communion rite is finished. Although these skills are important, they are not enough to fully be an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion at Mass.

For ministry to be effective the formation provided must also include an understanding of the theology and spiritu-

ality of worship. Otherwise, the ministry is reduced to just “giving out” communion. And so, in this booklet, I hope to provide a solid sense of what the Eucharist means to Catholics. I truly believe that this is important for a minister’s formation and must be included in a comprehensive training session.

Additionally, many Catholics are still unfamiliar with the documents that came out of the Second Vatican Council regarding liturgical renewal and the role of lay ministry. They are not aware that their role in the Mass is to participate fully, consciously, and actively. They have never been helped to delve into the deeper meaning of the communal celebration of the Eucharist and their responsibility within it.

During training sessions, I present the relevant documents and try to help participants understand not only their role as communion ministers but their role as part of the assembly. Many of the ministers in these sessions treat the material as if it were all new to them—and most of it is!

This booklet also explores the significance of Sunday in the Christian tradition, the meaning of Sunday Eucharist through a focused look at the communion rite, and the practical, theological, and ritual dimensions of the ministry. These thoughts are intended to refresh you in your love of the Eucharist and in your appreciation of what the church asks of those who serve in the Sunday assembly.



CELEBRATING SUNDAY EUCHARIST

Since the very first days of the church, the day for the community celebration of the Eucharist has been Sunday. For the early Christians, whose neighbors consecrated this day to the sun, the day of worship was regarded in several different ways: as the Lord's Day; as the first day of the week, signifying a new beginning; or as the eighth day, signifying completion and fulfillment. The liturgical calendar puts Sunday as the first day of the week, and Christians still call this day the Lord's Day, the day when Christ defeated death and the Spirit blew upon the disciples (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2174).

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (CSL), which came out of Vatican II, tells us that our principal attention must be given to the liturgy, "the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fount from which all the Church's power flows" (CSL, 10).

Sharing in the Eucharist is the heart of Sunday for all the baptized. Sunday is the day when Christians remember the salvation that was given to them in baptism and makes

them new creations in Christ. Jesus gave us the gift of the Eucharist in memory of his life and death. This celebration makes us active members of his body.

How does baptism lead us to Eucharist? Baptism marks the moment in which all Christian life is born. In receiving the grace of baptism, we become a part of the body of Christ and are saved not only as individuals but also as members of the body. Having become members of the church, we no longer belong to ourselves but to Christ, who died and rose for us. We die to our old selves and become alive in Christ as the body of Christ.

The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, another document from Vatican II, tells us that just as baptism is the source of responsibilities and duties, the baptized person also enjoys rights within the church: to receive the sacraments, to be nourished with the word of God, and “the right to receive in abundance the help of the spiritual goods of the Church” (37). Thus, the waters of baptism lead us to the table of the Eucharist and give each of us a place of honor at the table of the Lord, both on earth and in heaven.

Participation in Sunday Eucharist

The gathering of the whole community for Sunday Eucharist remains integral to our identity as Catholic Christians. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* instructs us that, “the Sunday celebration of the Lord’s Day and his Eucharist is at the heart of the Church’s life” (2177). It is in the breaking of the bread that Christians experience and recognize the risen Lord. Through this communal celebration of the Eucharist we are sustained by one another’s faith by sharing in the eucharistic meal of bread and wine. All are gathered together to pray.

The priest presides over the faithful people gathered and leads the prayer. He proclaims the message of salvation, joins the people to himself in offering the sacrifice to the Father through Christ in the Spirit, gives the faithful the bread of eternal life, and shares in it with them (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [hereafter GIRM], 93).

Paragraph 14 of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states:

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people” (1 Peter 2:9; cf. 2:4–5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.

Thus, the principal concern of the liturgical reform that followed in the wake of Vatican II has been to promote the full and active participation in liturgy by all the faithful.

Our tradition describes four ways that Christ is present in the Eucharist: 1) in the faithful gathered, 2) in the person of the priest presiding over our worship, 3) in the word proclaimed, and 4) in the eucharistic meal of bread and wine shared. It is the presence of the Lord that fashions us into one body. We are to take an active part in the dialogue and participate fully. We gather not just with the persons in our community but with the entire church throughout the world, as well as with those who have gone before us in death.

Know too that Christ is present in those gathered, in their praying and singing. As stated in Matthew’s gospel

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (18:20). The faithful gathered together for worship makes the body of Christ visible in the worship space. We are a people called to present to God the prayers of the entire human family. We grow together in unity by sharing in Christ’s Body and Blood. We give thanks for the mystery of salvation by offering his sacrifice. This is who we are: a people holy by their origin, but becoming ever more holy by conscious, active, and fruitful participation in the mystery of the Eucharist (GIRM, 5).

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

- ◆ *How do you celebrate Sunday, the Lord’s Day? Is it a day of quiet for you, one that is different from the rest of the week?*
- ◆ *Both baptism and Eucharist are sacraments of transformation. How do these two sacraments complement each other? How does the liturgy clarify the connection between these two sacraments?*
- ◆ *When you arrive for Mass on Sunday, do you believe that your primary role in the liturgy is to be an active participant? How do you express that belief?*

FOR YOUR PRAYER

Think about ways that you can better prepare yourself in your daily prayer to celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday. Bring your thoughts and prayers with you to the liturgy. Remember those whom you have promised to pray for and include them in the prayers of intercession.