

Liturgical Q & A:

Reception of Communion by Lay Eucharistic Ministers

Question: For many years in my parish, the Eucharistic ministers have received Communion after everyone else. Now they have been told that they are to receive right after the priest. Why the change?

Response: Since 1973, laypersons have given welcome assistance to the priest and deacon as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. In some parishes these ministers, along with the priest and deacon, have received Communion before ministering the Body and Blood of Christ to the assembly. In other parishes, the ministers have served their sisters and brothers first and then have received Communion last. One explanation for this latter practice is that it shows the members of the assembly that we value them enough to serve them first and attend to ourselves last, much as we might do for guests in our own home. Yet official liturgical directives have never approved this practice.

The new *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) specifies that extraordinary ministers of the Holy Communion “do not approach the altar before the priest has received Communion” (#162). This is repeated in the *Norms for the Celebration and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States*, approved by our country’s bishops in 2001 and approved by the Vatican in 2002: “If extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are required by pastoral need, they approach the altar as the priest receives Communion. After the priest has concluded his own Communion, he distributes Communion to the extraordinary ministers, assisted by the deacon, and then hands the sacred vessels to them for distribution of Holy Communion to the people” (#38). And to make this absolutely clear, we are told that “The practice of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion waiting to receive Holy Communion until after the distribution of Holy Communion is not in accord with liturgical law” (#39).

Why this insistence that extraordinary ministers receive Communion before sharing the Body and Blood of Christ with the assembly? This order helps us to grasp a basic truth of the Eucharist we celebrate: Jesus Christ is the sole giver of this sacred food, the only host at this sacred banquet. Everyone else is a guest, including the priest, deacon, and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Christ is the giver and the gift; we are all receivers. Reverently and humbly receiving the Body and Blood of Christ from the priest or deacon may be the best immediate preparation that



extraordinary ministers can have for reverently and humbly ministering the Eucharist to others. This sacrament is the fullest sign of Christ’s self sacrifice unto death. In receiving it before the assembly does, extraordinary ministers are invited to make some of Christ’s self-giving their own in the words and gestures of their sacred ministry.

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Liturgical Catechesis on the Eucharist

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