

## **The Mass (Part XXIX)**

*by Fr. Tim Church*

### Communion (Part 2)

It is necessary in the contemporary suburban church to use extensively “Extraordinary Ministers of Communion”, commonly called “Eucharistic Ministers.” Since it is an ordinary experience that 1200 or more people may be present at a typical Sunday Mass and there are five (even as many as ten) masses on a weekend, it would approach being impossible for one or two priests or deacons to administer communion to those who were present. To most laity, this does not prove to be even slightly problematic, but there are some important principals of liturgy and theology at work.

The most dramatic of these has to do with the role of mediation in the practice of the Christian religion. This is, in fact, an established role throughout the Jewish and Christian experience. Abraham, the father of our faith, represented the future people of God, and was the mediator of the first covenant with God’s people. Moses was the great mediator of the Old Testament Law, established in the Covenant that we usually call the Ten Commandments. Jesus is the mediator of the New Covenant, established through his sacrifice on the cross. Now, the idea of mediation here is that a person stands between us and God, but not to keep us separate, or to exclude us from the encounter in any way. It is in order to bring us back together again. The church itself is understood in the light of this mediation. All the People of God carry the message of salvation to the world.

Now, there is one small intended drawback with regard to this. It creates dependency relationships. I have always been amused by the negative connotation that the word “dependency” carries. It is, however, both a necessary and positive aspect of life. Certainly dependency can mean something negative. When our freedom to act in a productive and positive way is diminished or removed by a relationship, then it is negative or destructive. We call this dysfunctional. But we can’t live very efficiently without dependency. I am dependent on others for my shoes, and they are dependent on my willingness to pay for them. Within the Church, a different kind of dependency is present, one that involves our spiritual care for one another. Each person in the parish is the object of another’s fulfillment of the command of Christ to love one another. Even the very structure and organization of the Church demonstrates this. We are dependent on the priests of the parish and the ordinary ministers of communion to provide us with the source and summit of our Christian Life.

In obedience to Christ’s authority over the church, we have always clung to this principal. The communion of the people reflects this. It begins with the priest, who alone can give communion to himself (self-communicate). A deacon is an ordinary minister of communion but even he would not normally communicate himself in the Mass. Only on (hopefully) rare occasions would either the deacon or a lay person communicate themselves. This would be at a liturgy in which a priest is absent, a “communion service”. On all other occasions the communion of the people begins with the priest communicating either the deacon or Eucharistic Ministers. They never communicate themselves.

This hierarchy of mediation is furthered by the priest handing the vessels of the communion to the Eucharistic Ministers, rather than them taking it from the altar. This insures an authorization by the priest to those who will function as Eucharistic Ministers.

Once these concerns for the orderly conduct of the parish gathered for communion are satisfied, the focus turns to the very reason we are here. The communion of the people includes several important liturgical gestures. As we approach the minister of communion, we indicate our respect by a bow before we receive. This is in accord with the instructions of Missal:

*When receiving Holy Communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the Body of the Lord from the minister. The consecrated host may be received either on the tongue or in the hand at the discretion of each communicant. When Holy Communion is received under both kinds, the sign of reverence is also made before receiving the Precious Blood. (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Adaptations of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, third typical edition)*

There are many practical aspects of moving hundreds of people through the church to receive communion. It is a testimony to the spirit of Catholic Liturgy that we do this, and we do it effectively. We may find ourselves sitting quietly for a few minutes waiting for others to receive communion. Someone observing this ritual may imagine it to be an unproductive pause in the action of the Mass. We may be distracted by a funny hat in front of us, the sound of a child in back. But, even if we cannot for some reason receive communion, the movement of the community to receive the Crucified Lord is a moment of uncommon awe. Here is the solution to all our problems - the moment at which we and our world are made whole again. Here is our God among us to heal, comfort and forgive.