



The Catholic Archdiocese of  
Canberra and Goulburn

# Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

## Historical background

The Church has always had great devotion to, and reverence for the Eucharist, (the Mass) and for much of Christian history, lay people handled the sacred vessels and touched the sacred species. In the early Church, communion was received in the hand, and it was normal practice for the faithful to take home the consecrated bread for distribution to the sick, both family and friends, and to reserve the sacrament in their homes for communion during the week (Eucharist was on Sundays only).

These practices were the norm until the eighth century. From the ninth century onwards, the handling of the sacred species by the lay faithful was strictly forbidden, even though exceptions were made, especially for the giving of Viaticum to the dying. At this time, the faithful were considered presumptuous if they received Communion more than a few times each year. Eventually, because of this reluctance, a Church law was introduced, requiring Catholics to receive Communion at least once during the year.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, respect for the sacrament had become so great that the prohibition on touching the sacrament was absolute; no exceptions were made, even if a dying person had to be deprived of Viaticum.

Last century, Pius X's promotion of frequent Communion and Pius XII's abolishing of the long fast before Communion, encouraged more frequent reception.

Many liturgical changes stemmed from Vatican Council II, including the recovered understanding of the Mass as a special meal. The Council opened up the possibility of receiving Communion in the fullness of the body and

blood of Christ. It was in this context that the 1973 Roman proclamation *Immensae Caritatis* authorised lay ministers to distribute Holy Communion. This privilege resulted from a renewed understanding of the implications of the extraordinary dignity and vocation of the baptised.

Other reasons for the introduction of lay (Extraordinary) Ministers of Holy Communion were pragmatic and liturgical. The growth in the Catholic population, the increased numbers receiving Communion, and the

declining numbers of priests mean that extra ministry (service) is needed both within Mass and to lead Celebrations of the Word with Communion on Sundays, in hospitals, aged-care facilities and homes. Ordained ministers (bishops, priests, deacons) are the ordinary ministers of Holy Communion, but suitable lay persons, formally educated and commissioned as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, assist the liturgy in several ways.

There are several liturgical advantages of having additional ministers of Holy Communion as well as the priest:

1. At a meal, people eat together. Having extra ministers makes it possible for most people to receive and consume the precious food and drink more nearly simultaneously.
2. Most parishes have one priest only. Apart from the undesirability of unnecessarily prolonging the Mass, a slow process of receiving Holy Communion would be out of proportion with the other parts of the Mass. This would destroy the proper balance between the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Communion Rite.
3. The extra time then available is increasingly being used for short periods of silence in the celebration, particularly after the readings and Holy Communion.

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*Rite of Commissioning Special  
Ministers of Holy Communion*

4. Many sick and elderly people long to have Holy Communion on Sundays, a very busy day for the clergy. Extra ministers make it possible for the sick to be more closely (in time) and visibly “present” to the Sunday Mass.

## Some Theological Considerations

- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion are “official assistants” to the clergy.
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion emerge from the body of worshippers to undertake their service, and return to their seats at its conclusion. They are both part of the assembly and servants of the assembly.
- Everything in life comes from God. In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the assembly (congregation) offers natural and humanly-transformed gifts to God: symbols of love, hope and humility. It offers the little it has. Out of infinite and gracious love, God transforms poor human gifts into the living presence, the richness, of Christ.
- In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest prays over the assembly, asking God to transform the people. They thus become strengthened as the Body of Christ. In Communion, they eat the Body (and drink the Blood) of Christ. Augustine told his community “Become what you are...There you are on the table, and there you are in the chalice.”
- The whole assembly has a great responsibility to live as the members of a Body with Christ as its Head, acting as Christ’s eyes, ears, heart, hands and feet. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion have a particular responsibility to live lovingly and generously, to be open to God’s transformation. There is an essential unity demanded of ministers’ lives, both inside and outside the liturgy.
- The “Rite of Commissioning Special Ministers of Holy Communion” contains words that are sobering and deserve reflection:
 

“In this ministry, you must be examples of Christian living in faith and conduct; you must strive to grow in holiness through this sacrament of unity and love. Remember that, though many, we are one body, because we share the one bread and one cup.”
- An Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion’s human, personal and spiritual qualities will impact on the community. Prayerful, reflective, faithful and affirming ministers can strengthen the parish community.

- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion ensure that “receiving Communion” is a genuine experience of the assembled community eating and drinking together, as at another meal or banquet.
- In a sense, no one is worthy to be an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion need to be sure, though, to balance “Lord, I am not worthy” with “Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb”. Ministers need to be both joyful and humble, aware both of the mystery and intimacy of the moment.
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion profess their own faith in saying “the Body/Blood of Christ” as they serve their brothers and sisters. Ministers also call forth the faith of others when they respond “Amen!”
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion need to deepen their knowledge and love of the Eucharist: to become familiar with the various parts of the Mass, and the theology and spirituality of Communion, and of the mystery of Eucharist.

## Some practical considerations

- At least ten minutes before the start of Mass, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should let the pastor or appropriate minister/s know they have arrived.
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion need to work out suitable arrangements for Communion stations before Mass begins. Any kind of confusion or distraction from the Eucharistic focus needs to be avoided.
- After receiving Christ’s Body and Blood, ministers proceed to their designated places. Normally there are two ministers of the chalice for every minister of the Body of Christ. Those ministering the chalice stand some distance from the minister of the Sacred Host, to allow an uncongested flow of people.
- Ministers pass on Christ’s welcome to his table. They are called to be at ease with other people, without regard for their race, status, age, or social background. In Christ, all are sisters and brothers.
- This ministry should never be rushed. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion walk slowly and with dignity to the altar, and to their position at a communion station. The minister of the Lord’s Body and Blood walks with unhurried, deliberate movements. Each communicant needs to be personally present to the sacred action.

- It is important for ministers to focus their attention on the person to whom they are ministering to give full attention to the person standing in front of them.
- Ministers speak to the person, holding up the host/ chalice and saying 'the Body/Blood of Christ'. Eye contact is most important.
- When the communicant is in place and properly composed, ministers place the host in the outstretched hands, or on the tongue, of the person, allowing each the opportunity to indicate the manner in which s/he wishes to receive. The host should not be dropped from a few centimetres' height.
- Ministers hand the chalice to the communicant. When the chalice is returned, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion carefully wipe the rim with the purifier, slightly rotate the chalice, and raise their eyes to welcome the next communicant.
- Ministers need to show their reverence by the way they handle the ciborium/chalice, their gestures, movements and pace. Ideal are movements that are dignified, graceful, purposeful and unobtrusive.
- Sometimes children or adults will approach and ask for a blessing (by a sign agreed in the parish). Ministers may place a hand on their head or shoulder and use an appropriate, simple prayer, e.g May the Lord Jesus bless you today and every day of your life.
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion are members of the community. There is no need for special vesture, cross or sash.
- To show due reverence for the sacred species and those in the assembly, ministers need to ensure their hands are clean before approaching the sanctuary (e.g. avoid handling money).
- The ministry includes taking the Eucharist to the sick and house-bound, and also to the dying (Holy Communion is then called Viaticum food for the journey; Viaticum, not Anointing, is the Sacrament of the Dying).
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion are appointed by a parish community to exercise this ministry within their community.

