

Communion Services

ISSUE: What is a Communion service? When may a Communion service be celebrated? Who may conduct such a service? Does a Communion service fulfill the obligation to attend Mass on a Holy Day or Sunday?

RESPONSE: The Western Church provides specific norms for Communion services in the *Roman Ritual* and in *Eucharistiae Sacramentum* (On Holy Communion and the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside of Mass). The Eastern Churches allow reception of the Eucharist outside of the Divine Liturgy in accord with the particular law of each Church *sui iuris*.¹

A Communion service is a Catholic liturgy that may be celebrated when no priest is available to celebrate Mass. It includes the readings of the day and the distribution of the Eucharist. It is not a Mass. Recognizing the primary duty of priests and deacons to distribute the Most Holy Eucharist, if no priest is available to celebrate Mass, it is permissible for a Communion service to be conducted by a deacon. In the absence of a deacon, a Communion service may be celebrated by one of the lay faithful. It is necessary that the person celebrating a Communion service have proper approval by lawful ecclesiastical authority and follow the norms of law for the liturgical rite. Finally, a Communion service does not fulfill the obligation for Holy Days and Sunday Masses.

DISCUSSION: Our Lord humbled Himself to take the form of man and die for our sins. He further humbled Himself to take the appearance of bread and wine and nourish us on our journey to heaven's glory. In His humility, we find our salvation. The *Code of Canon Law* summarizes:

Canon 897: The Most Holy Eucharist is the most august sacrament, in which Christ the Lord Himself is contained, offered and received, and by which the Church constantly lives and grows. The Eucharistic Sacrifice, the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord, in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated over the centuries, is the summit and the source of all Christian worship and life; it signifies and effects the unity of the people of God and achieves the building up of the Body of Christ. The other sacraments and all the ecclesiastical works of the apostolate are closely related to the Holy Eucharist and are directed to it.

Canon 898: The faithful are to hold the Eucharist in highest honor, taking part in the celebration of the Most August Sacrifice, receiving the sacrament devoutly and frequently, and worshipping it with supreme adoration; pastors, clarifying the doctrine on this sacrament, are to instruct the faithful thoroughly about this obligation.²

Ideally, one should receive the Eucharist during the celebration of the Mass. "Sacramental Communion received during Mass is the more perfect participation in the Eucharistic celebration. The Eucharistic sign is expressed more clearly when the faithful receive the Body of the Lord from the same sacrifice after the Communion of the priest."³

Because of the importance held by the Most Holy Eucharist, the Church desires to make this Sacrament readily available to the Catholic faithful. Recognizing that some parts of the world suffer from a lack of priests, the Church provides for reception of this Sacrament outside of the celebration of Mass. A Communion service is the means by which this takes place.

A Communion service follows a structure similar to the Mass. Because a priest is not present, the prayers reserved to him are excluded (eg: the Canon of the Mass). Other prayers are modified to reflect the role of the one presiding (eg: the penitential rite and final blessing). Because Mass is not celebrated, there is no sacramental representation of Christ's one Sacrifice on Calvary. Consecrated Hosts are taken from the tabernacle right before the assembly recites the Our Father. After the sign of peace, the minister takes the Host, raises it slightly over the vessel or pix and, facing the people, says: "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those

who are called to His supper.”⁴

It is important to be aware that the Communion service will have some striking similarities to a Mass, especially if a deacon celebrates the liturgy. Please exercise caution before assuming that a Mass is being celebrated by someone other than a priest. If a person other than a priest does offer the Eucharistic prayer, it is important to note that the bread and wine are not consecrated; only a priest has the power to consecrate the Eucharist.

The local bishop may permit extraordinary ministers, including lay people, to provide Communion for the benefit of the faithful “whenever it seems necessary for the pastoral benefit of the faithful and a priest, deacon or acolyte is not available.”⁵ He may also allow this if Mass is not celebrated at scheduled times.⁶ The bishop may authorize a local pastor to apply his directive in the pastor’s parish. Because the bishop is not required to allow extraordinary ministers, the celebration of Communion services must reflect his opinion and guidelines on the matter.

Provided there is no priest to celebrate Mass and the norms of the bishop are followed, there is no reason why a Communion service could not be conducted during the week. We say this with special regards to parishes who do not have priests to conduct daily Mass. The purpose of the Communion service is to impart the sacramental grace of the Eucharist to the faithful when there is no priest available. There is nothing wrong with having a Communion service on any day of the week provided that the proper guidelines are followed.

Catholics are bound by obligation to receive Holy Communion only once a year (Canon 920), but are obligated to attend Mass on all Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation (Canon 1247). These obligations are separate and distinct. A Mass is a complete celebration of our Lord’s sacrifice on Calvary; nothing can be placed in its stead. A Mass can only be celebrated by a priest. If one cannot attend Mass on a Day of Obligation because of physical or moral impossibility, the obligation is satisfied. In short, there are only two ways to satisfy the obligation to attend Mass, either go or not be able to go because of impossibility.

With this in mind, no sin is committed if you cannot attend a Mass because there isn’t one offered within a reasonable distance from your home (usually applicable only in areas where the population is fairly spread out and there is a lack of priests) or because it is impossible for you to get to a Mass (e.g. blizzard conditions, illness, etc.).

Because it is not a Mass, a Communion service does not fulfill the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days. This is not to say that Communion services are not a legitimate form of celebration. If impossibility to attend Mass on a day of obligation arises, or no Mass is available during the week, a Communion service is of great benefit to the Catholic Faithful. As Canon Law exhorts:

If it is impossible to assist [attend] at a Eucharistic celebration [Mass], either because no sacred minister [priest] is available or for some other grave reason, the faithful are **strongly recommended** to take part in a liturgy of the Word, if there be such in the parish church or some other sacred place, which is celebrated in accordance with the provisions laid down by the diocesan Bishop; or to spend an appropriate time in prayer, whether personally or as a family or, as occasion presents, in a group of families (emphasis added).⁷

With that said, we too would strongly recommend attending a Communion service if there is no Mass being celebrated in your area. While this does not fulfill the obligation in the strict sense, it does make available the communal aspect of the Church and also imparts grace through the reception of Holy Communion:

Too much importance can never be attached to the Sunday assembly, whether as the source of the Christian life of the individual and of the community, or as a sign of God’s intent to gather the whole human race together in Christ. All Christians must share the conviction that they cannot live their faith or participate – in the manner proper to them – in the universal mission of the Church unless they are nourished by the Eucharistic Bread. They should be equally convinced that the Sunday assembly is a sign to the world of the mystery of Communion, which is the Eucharist.⁸

In closing, we must remember that the Most Holy Eucharist is the Real Presence of Jesus Christ, the fullness of

His divinity and humanity. Whether attending Mass, a Communion service or in private adoration, we must approach Him with proper reverence due our God.

¹ Catholic faithful belonging to an Eastern Rite Church are encouraged to contact their local chancery for the particular law on this topic.

² The *Code of Canons for the Eastern Churches* (Canon 698) contains different wording but the same theology of Eucharist.

³ *Eucharistiae Sacramentum* (On Holy Communion and the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside of Mass), Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, 1973, no. 13; cf. Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), no. 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 32.

⁵ *Eucharistiae Sacramentum*, no. 17 (NB: Acolyte does not refer to an extraordinary ministry nor an altar boy. It refers to a specific, liturgical office held by a man, usually in preparation for the priesthood.).

⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 26.

⁷ *Code of Canon Law* 1248§2.

⁸ *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, no. 50.

Further inquiries in this matter can be directed to CUF, your diocesan liturgy office, or the Bishops Committee on the Liturgy of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (202-541-3060).

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