

baptismal commitment to a sacramental ministry is to mistake the part for the whole. It also involves serious role confusion. The role of the priest is to preach and administer the sacraments so that the laity can be faithful witnesses in the world, thus inviting people there to follow Christ (CCC 1142-44).

In terms of lay participation in the liturgy, a diversity of roles also exists. To suggest that full liturgical participation requires lay ministers of the Eucharist is to misunderstand this point. To be present and to take an active part in the singing and praying is full participation; anything else is a strange form of anti-clericalism, which is really very clericalistic at root: the desire of the laity to be priests themselves! In his Bicentennial Message to the United States, Paul VI reminded us that the role of extraordinary ministers is not "the ordinary expression of lay participation".

This confusion is so deep-seated now, however, that one Bishop in a pastoral letter on the liturgy argued that the use of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist proclaims the basic unity of all around the table of the Lord. I must disagree with that point, which is clericalism at its worst. Baptism makes us one (CCC 1297)—not the act of gaining access to a ciborium. In some dioceses pastors have been forced to use these ministers as a sign of their acceptance of "Vatican II" or "the priesthood of the faithful". Yet, ironically, all the arguments brought forth to justify this practice actually diminish the noble calling of Christian laypersons and suggest that the only real Catholics are priests or at the least people who do "priestly" things.

Please note that we are not concerned with heresy here but with an imprudent, unwise liturgical practice, reflective of bad sociology. Like other Americanisms in the Church, this one fails to take a holistic view of reality, neglects long-range implications, and does not

take seriously the nonverbal, symbolic power of liturgical communication.

The only solution to this grave pastoral problem is for bishops and laity alike to insist that *Immensae caritatis* be carefully followed. The decree itself reminds clergy of their important obligations here:

Since these faculties are granted only for the spiritual good of the faithful and for cases of genuine necessity, priests are to remember that they are not thereby excused from the task of distributing the Eucharist to the faithful who legitimately request it.

The correct interpretation of this decree will result in an increased reverence for the Eucharist as well as an increased reverence for the apostolate of the laity.

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# The Proper Use of Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist

**Rev. Peter M. J. Stravinskis**

## The Proper use of Extraordinary Ministers

When may a non-ordained person distribute Holy Communion? According to *Immensae caritatis* (Pope Paul VI's decree permitting this practice) and the revised Code of Canon Law, only under the following clearly defined circumstances: the lack of an ordinary minister of the Eucharist (bishop, priests, or deacon); the inability of an ordinary minister to function because of ill health or advanced age; an unwieldy number of communicants with an insufficient number of ordinary ministers.

## The Abuse of the Church's Teaching on Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist

In an article on lay ministry some time ago, one American Catholic newsweekly observed that on any given Sunday in the United States more Catholics receive Communion from the hands of a layperson than from a priest or deacon. While this is probably an exaggeration, experience proves it close to true.

Over a three-year period, I preached in more than one hundred parishes at weekend Masses; only seven did not use extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist—and none, to the best of my knowledge, fulfilled the requirements of *Immensae caritatis*. Some places have literally dozens of people so deputed (I know of one parish that has 225 extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist). And it is not unusual for people in the pews to observe that some of these

ministers lead less than exemplary Christian lives; some of them are even divorced and remarried.

The unwillingness to use the word "extraordinary" ("special" is a frequent designation) in reference to these ministers is common and suggests an imprudent desire to make this ministry both ordinary and accepted. Furthermore, other titles have crept in—lay eucharistic ministers and, even more theologically unsound, bread ministers and wine ministers. A brief survey of schedules and parish bulletins would show the extent of their use and the confusion of titles.

It is interesting to note here that no other church or ecclesial community professing belief in the Real Presence, such as the Lutherans and Episcopalians, permit laypeople to distribute the Sacred Host.

It also seems clear that *Immensae caritatis* had behind it good intentions, but the lived reality in the United States has had negative consequences. This is one of the most serious problems to emerge in the post-conciliar Church in America since it touches on the very heart of Catholic faith and practice ("the source and summit of the Christian life.", as Vatican II refers to the liturgy) in a most visible way, affecting every Catholic.

First, several items in brief—some sad, others merely strange. In some parishes, the sick now receive the ministrations of a priest (especially the Sacrament of Penance) only irregularly, if at all, forcing them to feel abandoned and marginalized from the mainstream of Church life.

Another example: Although the number of communicants probably peaked around 1968, no complaints were heard about "long" Communion lines. Yet some liturgists argue the necessity of having laypeople as ministers of Holy Communion by suggesting that the distribution of Communion should not exceed

seven minutes. The height of irony is reached, however, when some celebrants sit for a meditation period of roughly that length after Communion.

In some parishes, it has become routine to have laypeople assist with Communion, regardless of the number of communicants or available clergy, even for small daily Mass congregations. Due to the extensive use of extraordinary ministers and laypeople performing other functions, many parishioners see their priests only when they are celebrants of the Mass at the altar. This means that priests are absent from their people at the peak moments of parish life. On the other hand, in not a few parishes, priests are available to greet the people before and after Sunday liturgy—but are not available for distributing Communion.

### **A Lost Sense of the Sacred and a Distorted View of the Lay Apostolate**

The improper use of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist is, of course, a violation of correct liturgical procedure and sometimes a deliberate act of defiance. However, two other serious problems also present themselves: a lost sense of the sacred and a distorted view of the lay apostolate.

Throughout this book, we have been attempting to highlight the sacramental, incarnational aspects of Catholic life in their uniqueness. Underpinning all of this is that we must have a deep sense of the sacred. The making of distinctions contributes to that sense: What we wear to the beach is inappropriate for the church; the rock music of the radio is out of place in a worship service. Were we not to distinguish in this way, all of life would be a plateau, with no mountains and no valleys.

By permitting nearly anyone at all to distribute the Eucharist, we are communicating a message at the symbolic level that this action is

really not all that special. What is anyone's responsibility is no one's responsibility. Surely this is what young boys mean when they say that they are not interested in the priesthood because "anyone can do what you guys do."

The usual reason given for the use of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist (namely, time constraints) fosters the American "in and out" mentality of Sunday Mass. The effect is to blur distinctions of any kind in the Church, forgetting that such distinctions are natural to man. This approach, though most always innocent, nonetheless culminates in a desacralization of the Church, the Eucharist, and the priesthood. We have already seen strong indications of this development, and that is why Pope John Paul II (in *Dominicae cenae*) criticized the abuse of the permission for extraordinary ministers as "reprehensible". Interestingly enough, the desacralization of religion does not increase our appreciation of life in general, rather, it vulgarizes both.

One final area of concern revolves around the significance of the lay apostolate. It never ceases to amaze me as a priest that when I invite people to become active in the work of the Church, almost invariably they volunteer for liturgical ministries. This demonstrates that Vatican II is still not fully understood. The whole point of the Council's theology of the laity was that the laity have their own unique role to play in bringing the Gospel to contemporary humanity—in the world, not in the sanctuary.

The Church operates, at the sociological level, on the principle of a "division of labor." (CCC 1348). Theologically, this is referred to as a "diversity of roles and ministries". St. Paul expresses this in his analogy of the Church with the human body (1 Cor 12:12-22).

Of course, all members are equal, but not all have the same function. Equality is not sameness. To reduce the living out of one's