

Better Understanding Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

Assumption, Bellingham – Fall 2020

My dear friends and fellow Assumption parishioners,

Though I have not focused on it as much as I might have liked, we are still in the “Year of the Eucharist” begun by Archbishop Etienne last Corpus Christi, so I thought this might be an opportune time to provide a teaching document on Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (EMHCs). This document will also serve as a foundation for bringing back EMHCs after their long hiatus due to COVID-19.

In the Archbishop’s introductory letter to the Year of the Eucharist, “Work of Redemption,” he asked “all our priests to spend time prayerfully reviewing the liturgical documents and texts so that we may humbly examine our practice as presiders and our fidelity in celebrating the Eucharist. Let us commit ourselves to greater fidelity to both the prayers and the rubrics of the Roman Rite...” To that end, most of this letter will be focused on the relevant liturgical documents and drawing out how I would like to implement them at our parish.

However, I should say that my personal experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has also inspired me to take a closer look at these documents. As many of you experienced personally, I began to take the Eucharist house-to-house so that our parishioners could receive the Eucharist at least once during the Easter Season, an activity that used to be far more common in priestly ministry. This experience had a profound effect on me as a priest and as a pastor, and every trip caused me to reflect even more deeply on the ministry of the distribution of the Eucharist. I hope that you, too, have been led to similar reflections following the shutting down and subsequent restoration of public Mass. Being denied the Eucharistic celebration was difficult and disheartening, but the Lord also seems to have brought deepened Eucharistic spiritualities out of this trauma.

Thank you for joining me in this reflection on the nature of the Eucharist and the ministers entrusted with its distribution.

May the Lord always draw us closer to himself!

F. Moore

The Documents of the Church

It is dangerous for me, as a priest, to claim anything on my own authority. As Archbishop Sartain was fond of saying to priests, “Your opinion has no power to save anybody.” Instead, it is important to me that we all seek the *truth* together, apart from our opinions. To that end, here is a list of the documents I have referenced and will be citing in the course of our exploration.

1. [Immensae Caritatis \(1973\)](#)¹ – [IC] The document that originally allowed for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion and which explains why this permission was granted. Before this document, only priests and deacons were allowed to handle the Eucharist.
2. [Redemptionis Sacramentum \(2004\)](#)² – [RS] A document on various abuses related to the Eucharistic celebration. This document sought to correct some of the laxity and experimentation that had arisen since the publication of IC.
3. [General Instruction of the Roman Missal \(2011\)](#)³ – [GIRM] The introductory instructions for the Roman Rite of the Mass. Other instructions are contained in the pages of Roman Missal itself, but this is the bulk of the instructions.
4. [Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America \(2011\)](#)⁴ – [NDR] A supplement to the GIRM from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
5. [Many Gifts, One Spirit \(2020\)](#)⁵ – [MGOS] The local policies for the Archdiocese of Seattle. The portion on the Eucharist was revised by Archbishop Etienne in preparation for the Year of the Eucharist.

¹ <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/on-facilitating-reception-of-communion-in-certain-circumstances-2178>

² http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html

³ <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal>

⁴ <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/norms-for-holy-communion-under-both-kinds>

⁵ <http://www.seattlearchdiocese.org/Archdiocese/Policies/Documents/Eucharist.pdf>

Ordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

“By virtue of his sacred ordination, the Bishop or Priest offers the sacrifice in the person of Christ, the Head of the Church. He receives gifts of bread and wine from the faithful, offers the sacrifice to God, and returns to them the very Body and Blood of Christ, as from the hands of Christ himself. Thus Bishops and Priests are considered the ordinary ministers of Holy Communion. In addition, the Deacon who assists the Bishop or Priest in distributing Communion is an ordinary minister of Holy Communion. When the Eucharist is distributed under both forms, “the Deacon himself administers the chalice.” (NDR #26)

Many of us do not realize it, but up until 1973 only clergy were normally permitted to distribute Holy Communion. Though there were likely practical reasons related to education, the motivation for this restriction has always gone deeper. Theologically, it is *Christ himself* who gives us the gift of his body and blood, and it is the bishop or priest who stands in the place of Christ at the head of the liturgical assembly. In the logic of the Mass, it is Christ *in the priest* who offers up the sacrifice and it is Christ *in the priest* who then distributes that sacrifice of himself to the faithful in the Eucharist. Deacons, though not as closely associated with Christ in his priestly function, are configured to Christ *the servant* and so have assisted the priests at Mass from the earliest days of the Church, especially by distributing from the chalice and bringing Communion to the sick.

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

In 1973, however, the Church decided that the important theological symbolism of having the priest be the one to distribute communion could be forfeited if the faithful were not able to receive communion for lack of a priest. This led to the introduction of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. However, because the symbolic association of priest and Eucharist remains important, these ministers are still supposed to be considered *extraordinary*.

“Only out of true necessity is there to be recourse to the assistance of extraordinary ministers in the celebration of the Liturgy. Such recourse is not intended for the sake of a fuller participation of the laity but rather, by its very nature, is supplementary and provisional. Furthermore, when recourse is had out of necessity to the functions of extraordinary ministers, special urgent prayers of intercession should be multiplied that the Lord may soon send a Priest for the service of the community and raise up an abundance of vocations to sacred Orders.” (RS #151)

“Indeed, the extraordinary minister of Holy Communion may administer Communion only when the Priest and Deacon are lacking, when the Priest is prevented by weakness or advanced age or some other genuine reason, or when the number of faithful coming to Communion is so great that the very celebration of Mass would be unduly prolonged. This, however, is to be understood in such a way that a brief prolongation, considering the circumstances and culture of the place, is not at all a sufficient reason.” (RS #158)

Extraordinary Needs

In order to respect the theology and discipline of the Church, we now have to ask what constitutes an “extraordinary need” here at Assumption Parish, and we should commit ourselves to using EMHCs only when these needs are present.

The Homebound

The first and most important need that presents itself is those parishioners who are unable to receive the Eucharist because they are confined to their homes or an assisted living facility. This need was mentioned explicitly when EMHCs were introduced by IC in 1973: *“outside Mass when distance makes it difficult to bring communion, especially as viaticum to the sick in danger of death; or when the sheer number of sick people, especially in hospitals or similar institutions, requires several ministers.”*

While, before COVID-19, the priests of Assumption had been saying Mass in assisted living facilities on a monthly rotation, the number of these facilities meant that sometimes residents in a certain facility might only have Mass once a year. Add in the number of people confined to their homes (now increased due to COVID-19), and serving our homebound parishioners clearly presents itself as an extraordinary need that a single priest cannot address alone.

Large Masses

RS #158, quoted above, does allow for EMHCs when the Mass would be “unduly prolonged” due to the sheer number of communicants, but prohibits their use merely for a “brief prolongation.” Unfortunately, these standards are not defined numerically and each community is left to determine their meaning in the community’s own context. For myself, I have been asking the question, “At what point does the distribution of communion take so long that the moment switches from one of prayer to one of impatience?” At school Masses, for example, I have been listening for when the students begin to shift and squirm in their places, an occasion which has obviously been different for different grades.

For the moment, I am going to set the standard of extraordinary need at Assumption to “more than 100 communicants,” which is approximately how many communicants we have at our COVID-19 Sunday Masses. Once we exceed more than 100 people receiving communion, we will introduce an EMHC, and will introduce another EMHC for every 100 communicants after that. This standard, however, is subject to change as we discern for ourselves the difference between an “undue prolongation” and a “brief prolongation.”

Offering the Chalice

Understanding the Documents

Another thing we often fail to remember is that, up until very recently, only the priest received from the chalice. This had been the practice of the Roman Rite since late antiquity, and is still generally preserved:

“In addition to those cases given in the ritual books, Communion under both kinds is permitted for:

- a) Priests who are not able to celebrate or concelebrate Mass;*
- b) the Deacon and others who perform some duty at the Mass;*
- c) members of communities at the Conventual Mass or the “community” Mass,⁶ along with seminarians, and all those engaged in a retreat or taking part in a spiritual or pastoral gathering.” (GIRM #283)*

In addition to these circumstances, communion under both kinds is permitted in other ritual books for adults following their reception into the Church and for couples at their wedding, to give two examples. It is clear that the basic assumption of the universal liturgical norms is that reception of communion from the chalice is not a common practice, especially at Masses with large groups of people.

However, GIRM #283 does give additional permissions:

“The Diocesan Bishop may establish norms for Communion under both kinds for his own diocese, which are also to be observed in churches of religious and at celebrations with small groups. The Diocesan bishop is also given the faculty to permit Communion under both kinds whenever it may seem appropriate to the Priest to whom a community has been entrusted as its own shepherd, provided that the faithful have been well instructed and that there is no danger of profanation of the Sacrament or of the rite’s becoming difficult because of the large number of participants or for some other cause.”

Our Archbishop has not officially created his own norms on this topic, but instead merely restates GIRM #85 in our Archdiocesan norms (MGOS: EU15):

“It is most desirable [...] that, in the cases where this is foreseen, [the faithful] partake of the chalice (cf. no. 283), so that even by means of the signs Communion may stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated.”

Of course, the “cases where this is foreseen” in the GIRM are few and far between, as noted above; nevertheless, offering the chalice in the Archdiocese of Seattle is *assumed* to be the norm by our bishops and diocesan leaders, certainly at least for Sunday Masses.

This disconnect between the universal liturgical norms and our local practices creates an odd situation regarding EMHCs. The universal norms assume the chalice will only be distributed on special occasions, often in small groups, so it remains practical to insist that the chalice still only be distributed by clergy.

⁶ Note: “Conventual Mass” and “community Mass” are specific references to monastic or religious communities when used in liturgical documents. They do not mean parish Masses.

However, the local practice of offering the chalice regularly, even outside of special occasions, makes this insistence impractical, forcing us to habitually use *extraordinary* ministers in *ordinary* situations.

The U.S. Bishops recognize this disconnect in their supplement to the GIRM:

“In practice, the need to avoid obscuring the role of the Priest and the Deacon as the ordinary ministers of Holy Communion by an excessive use of extraordinary ministers might in some circumstances constitute a reason either for limiting the distribution of Holy Communion under both species or for using intinction instead of distributing the Precious Blood from the chalice.” (NDR #24)

Application to Assumption

It is not appropriate for us at Assumption to set policies wildly out of sync with the rest of the Church or with our diocese, so our application of these norms will seek to strike a balance, neither unduly restricting the chalice to the people nor ignoring the guidance of the Church regarding EMHCs. Specifically:

1. We will continue to offer the chalice at Sunday and Solemn Masses. We will, however, not offer the chalice at daily Masses, unless such a Mass constitutes a special occasion.
2. When offering the chalice, we will have two chalice stations for every one host station. This is because the number of host stations is specifically tied to how long it takes to distribute communion, and, in practice, two chalices stations are necessary to keep pace with the distribution of hosts. If we were to offer fewer chalice stations, we may introduce the “undue prolongation” we have been trying to avoid.
3. For an ordinary (non-COVID) Sunday Mass, this would likely mean a change to having two host stations and four chalice stations covering the nave, with a third host/chalice group covering the transepts and choir.

Extraordinary Spirituality

A High-Standard Ministry

One of my great concerns about EMHC ministry here at Assumption and all throughout the United States is that it has become little more than an easy, low-barrier way to “help the parish.” While I deeply appreciate anyone who wants to help the parish in any way, I hope it has also become clear from everything mentioned so far that being an EMHC should be an *extraordinary* experience that is approached with awe and trembling. Nothing about it should be low-barrier.

In fact, RS #155 goes so far as to require every long-term EMHC to be approved by the diocesan bishop, something that is not required for any other lay ministry in the Church:

“If, moreover, reasons of real necessity prompt it, another lay member of Christ’s faithful may also be delegated by the diocesan Bishop, in accordance with the norm of law, for one occasion or for a specified time, and an appropriate formula of blessing may be used for the occasion. [...] Finally, in special cases of an unforeseen nature, permission can be given for a single occasion by the Priest who presides at the celebration of the Eucharist.”

Given that the Church sets such a high standard for serving as an EMHC, it seems incumbent on us at Assumption to create an EMHC culture that assumes an equally high standard.

A Vision for the Ministry

To that end, I would like to provide my vision for our EMHCs.

First and foremost, I would like to see the role of EMHC become **a primary ministry** for those who undertake it. Oftentimes, even when they serve the parish in multiple ways, parishioners have one ministry which they consider to be their *primary* ministry, the one that always gets first priority for scheduling, the last one they would ever want to give up. For how many parishioners does being an EMHC get top billing? Have we made this a serious enough ministry that serving as an EMHC is a sufficiently significant undertaking? That no EMHC feels like they *need* another ministry in order to serve the parish satisfactorily? Given that the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith, the reverent distribution of Communion should always be a *primary* consideration for all who dare to carry it out.

Secondly, I would like to see serving as an EMHC become **an expression of a charism**. As the Holy Spirit calls a person deeper into the profundity of their Catholic faith, different *and particular* spiritualities will emerge in that person’s life, and these spiritualities are often matched with particular modes of service. Those who are attracted to the humanity of Jesus are often called to serve the poor. Those who are inspired by the teachings of the Church are often called to catechize. Similarly, it is my hope that those who serve as EMHCs will do so because the Holy Spirit has already been calling them to a particularly *Eucharistic* spirituality.

Finally, I would like to see the corps of EMHCs become **a communion of prayer**. When I was a seminarian at St. Anthony’s in Renton, the Hispanic EMHCs would pray together each Wednesday for an hour-and-a-half, just in preparation for their Sunday ministry. While this exact approach may be impractical, if our group of EMHCs are all people who feel a special call to the Eucharist and who view their EMHC role as a

primary ministry, then the desire to pray together, maybe monthly, should naturally emerge, and I hope that it will.

Application to Assumption

Given all of this, I am specifically going to ask the following here at Assumption:

1. That those who wish to serve as EMHCs spend one hour each week praying with the Eucharist, either with the tabernacle or at Exposition.
2. That, to the greatest extent possible, EMHCs for Mass are also EMHCs for the homebound.
3. That we no longer have EMHCs deputed for a single purpose (e.g. bringing communion to a spouse or a neighbor). Instead, we should rely on the already established EMHCs to make these homebound visits.

Implementation

Building a new culture around EMHCs will certainly take time, just as it takes time to discern charisms and provide the necessary formation. I understand that not every standard I have laid out will be practical to implement right away. However, I am hoping that, by understanding the teachings of the Church about EMHCs and by making clear my desires for the ministry, we can begin to work toward these standards together as a community, united in Christ through the Eucharist.