

## UNDERSTANDING THE MASS AND THE GENERAL INSTRUCTION OF THE ROMAN MISSAL

### What does GIRM say about the “breaking of the bread” and Communion?

After the Sign of Peace a number of things happen that prepare both the consecrated bread and wine as well as the assembly for Holy Communion. Both GIRM and the U.S. adaptations have made some changes in this part of the Mass that will be noticed by the liturgical ministers and assembly members and, therefore, call for some explanation.

#### Breaking of the bread

The breaking of the bread begins after the Sign of Peace. More than simply a pragmatic gesture, the presider breaks the one bread (pours from the one carafe of wine) and this symbolizes that by our sharing in one loaf (cup) we are made one Body in Christ (GIRM no. 83). The Lamb of God accompanies the breaking of the bread and is repeated as long as it takes to complete the action.

GIRM expressly states that this “rite is reserved to the priest and deacon” (no. 83). This means that Eucharistic ministers can no longer help the presider with the distribution of hosts

into the number of needed vessels or pouring the wine into a number of cups.

The USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) document “Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America” was approved on June 15, 2001, was confirmed by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments on March 22, 2002, and promulgated as particular law in the U.S. on April 7, 2002. During this process the U.S. bishops requested an indult (permission to change the law) that Eucharistic ministers be permitted to help with the distribution of hosts and wine; this was not granted by the Congregation with the reason given for not granting this indult is that Eucharistic ministers *only* assist the priests and deacons in distributing Communion *when necessary*; they may not assume any other liturgical role and distributing the hosts and wine into various vessels is considered a separate role for which they are not commissioned.

#### Communion

Unless the diocesan bishop determines otherwise, the assembly kneels when the presider lifts the Eucharistic bread and cup and says, “This is the Lamb of God . . .” and then the assembly proceeds to receive Holy Communion. The U.S. bishops have established for the United States standing as the posture for receiving Communion (see BCL *Newsletter* XXXVIII, July 2002), which may be received in the hand or on the tongue (Norms, no. 41). Further, the gesture of reverence before receiving Communion is a head bow (before receiving both the Eucharistic bread and from the cup). It is left to the diocesan bishops to determine when the faithful may receive Communion under both kinds (GIRM no. 283), but the USCCB recognizes that a fuller sign value is apparent when the assembly receives both the sacred Body and Blood (Norms, nos. 11 and 16). The general tone of the U.S. bishops’ Norms is that receiving the precious blood is to be encouraged.

GIRM explicitly states that the assembly (including the extraordinary ministers of Holy

Communion) may not communicate themselves (no. 160). This means, also, that a communicant may not retain the Eucharistic bread, go to a cup minister, and dip the host in the cup. Also, Eucharistic ministers (and, clearly, the presider and deacon) may not receive Communion last (Norms, no. 39). GIRM (no. 43) mentions sitting during the period of silence after Communion, but the U.S. bishops have adapted this so that the assembly may sit or kneel.

GIRM is silent about extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion; the U.S. bishops continue to affirm the important pastoral/liturgical service of these ministers and the need for them in most parishes. Two indulgences were requested from the Congregation and granted: the Eucharistic ministers may help purify the vessels and they may help consume what remains of the precious blood (the Congregation noted that this latter permission did not need an indulgence). Probably the biggest change and greater difficulty with the new norms concerns when the Eucharistic ministers approach the altar. In many parishes they approach and stand behind the altar during or right after the sign of peace. The U.S. Norms now require that they approach the altar “as the priest receives Communion” (Norms, no. 38). The *BCL Newsletter XXXVIII* (October 2002) makes the following practical comments: it will only add a minute or so to the preparation of Communion for the presider or deacon to distribute the precious blood into other chalices; when there is a large number of Eucharistic

ministers, the presider may give Communion to a couple of them (both hosts and wine) and then these may help him distribute Communion to the other ministers. In other words, the presider himself doesn't have to distribute Communion to all the Eucharistic ministers. The presider himself, however, must distribute vessels of Eucharistic bread and the cups of consecrated wine to the Eucharistic ministers (Norms, no. 40).

## Catechesis

One final comment about catechesis before any changes are implemented: although the promulgation dates for these documents are quite clear, not all dioceses may begin to implement GIRM or the new U.S. adaptations in the same way at the same time. This doesn't mean that some bishops will be “go getters” and others will drag their feet! One thing we have become clear about in our experience over the past forty years of liturgical renewal is that before adaptations are made catechesis of all the faithful is necessary. These changes aren't put into place simply for the sake of change but to improve our celebrations of liturgy. Therefore, it is important that adequate instruction be given to all (priests, deacons, laity) before changes are implemented. Without adequate explanation, we'll simply continue the misunderstandings and hurt that have been all too prevalent in all too many liturgical communities. Before any changes are introduced at the parish level, then, it is important that thorough catechesis be given by someone competent in liturgy.

## For prayer and reflection

I am most aware that we all share from the same loaf to become the one Body of Christ when . . .

The whole Communion rite disturbs me most when . . .

I express my reverence for the Blessed Sacrament in these ways . . .

— *Joyce Ann Zimmerman, C.P.P.S.*  
*Institute for Liturgical Ministry*  
*Dayton, Ohio*

