

What Changes Will There Be For Lay Eucharistic Ministers ?

One great blessing for the Western Church bequeathed by the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council was the restoration of Communion under both kinds to the laity. Although initially restricted to certain individuals on special occasions, the 1973 Vatican decree “*Immensae Caritatis*” permitted Conferences of Bishops to extend the occasions when people could receive from the cup and also authorized the deputation of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist to assist the priest and deacon, when needed.

The original 1969 *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) made no mention of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, and the 1975 revised GIRM only mentioned such ministers in the context of instituted acolytes, one of two formal “ministries” received by candidates for the diaconate and the priesthood. In many parishes, however, it has become commonplace since 1973 for men and women to assist at larger parish Masses in ministering the Body and Blood of Christ to the assembly, a situation not envisioned in 1969.

The details as to what such ministers could or could not do or when they should approach the altar during Mass were never explicitly specified in the 1975 GIRM or auxiliary documents. When a question was raised as to whether extraordinary ministers could cleanse the vessels for the Eucharist during Mass as it is permitted for them to do outside Mass when bringing Communion to the sick, in 1978 Rome replied positively. The 1984 U.S. Directory for Communion under Both Kinds, “This Holy and Living Sacrifice,” included additional directions, but other details were not addressed.

The 2002 edition of GIRM, in the revised Roman Missal, acknowledges that extraordinary ministers other than instituted acolytes may assist priests and deacons during the Communion rite of Mass and the GIRM's text has been expanded to include specific directions. In particular, the GIRM now notes that the breaking of the bread is reserved to priests and deacons (n. 83). It also notes (n. 162) that other ministers of Communion should not approach the altar until after the priest has received Communion and that such ministers receive the vessels with the consecrated elements from the priest.

The revised 2002 U.S. “Norms for Holy Communion Under Both Kinds” further specify that extraordinary ministers should receive Communion after they come to the altar but before distributing Communion to the assembly (Norms, nn. 38-40). The practice of such ministers assisting in distributing the hosts into separate vessels and of pouring the consecrated wine into auxiliary chalices is no longer permitted.

When all have finished receiving Communion, extraordinary ministers may assist the priest or deacon in consuming what remains of the precious Blood, and, if needed, may assist in cleansing the vessels (Norms, nn. 52-54).

Since the ministry exercised by extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of the Church, we are still in the early stages of understanding what is appropriate, in light of liturgical tradition and of theological and pastoral concerns. This may mean that practices thought appropriate a few years ago may need to be reexamined after further reflection. Certainly it is inappropriate to reduce the ordained ministry of the priest to merely saying the Eucharistic prayer and doing little else! Concerns about what non-ordained should or should not be doing during the liturgy were expressed in a 1997 Vatican Instruction on the collaboration of non-ordained in the ministry of priests. This Instruction re-iterated a principle expressed in earlier documents that, when lay men and women assist at the Communion rite (often of necessity where priests are scarce), their service should always be seen as “extraordinary” and supplemental to the ministry of priests and deacons.

The history of the liturgy reveals that it has been a reality in flux, adapting to place, culture, and era. It is a great step forward to have the 2002 GIRM presuppose that Communion can be distributed under both kinds at essentially any Mass (n. 85, 283), a practice that is of core importance in our understanding of what the Eucharist is about. Some of the details as to how the Lord's Body and Blood are ministered to the assembly, by whom, and what such ministers do or do not do, are really of secondary importance, and those details may be subject to additional changes in the future.