

# Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion



*“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”*

**(1 Corinthians 10:16)**

## **PRAYER FOR THE EMOHC**

Heavenly Father,  
I thank you for calling me  
To serve you and your people in this community  
as an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion.  
You know that I could never be worthy of such a high  
honor.  
Help me by your grace that I may not cause scandal.  
Allow others to encounter Jesus in the witness of my  
words and actions,  
Just as I hope to bring our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament  
as spiritual nourishment to your faithful people.  
Grant your strength and holiness  
to all who humbly assist as coworkers with your priests.  
While your priests offer the sacrifice of your Son  
And consecrate the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation;  
May we be extensions of their priestly hands  
in bringing the Eucharist to those who hunger and  
thirst.

*Adapted from Divine Mercy Parish, Sacramento, CA*

### **A Ministry Founded Upon Humility**

While Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion are today found in most parishes, it remains a service to the community that is both controversial and seemingly slighted even by just authority. Traditionalists contend that only the consecrated hands of a priest should distribute Holy Communion. The piety behind this view is rightfully supportive of the dignity of the priesthood; however, it is wrong to elevate the role of our clergy at the cost of



maligning or belittling the lay service of our good people. Priests are getting older, many are frail and the numbers are not what they once were. I know a parish where the solitary priest because of age and infirmity stopped giving out communion and told those in line that he was sorry but that he was tired. He asked the people still waiting for the sacrament to get first in line "next week" so that they could receive. Many parishes have no resident priest at all. Were it not for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, the consecrated hosts would remain in the tabernacle and God's people would spiritually starve.

I suppose the Church is always concerned about confusion from the simple folks. We even saw something of this in the illogical leap that some adherents made from the appearance of altar girls and women priests. The first was a matter of mutable practice or discipline; the second was prohibited as a matter of immutable doctrine. Only the priest can celebrate the Mass. This truth is not compromised by assistance in distributing Holy Communion. Indeed, the lay volunteers function as extensions of the priest's hands. It is for this reason that there are term limits for Extraordinary Ministers and restrictions to the jurisdiction of certain parishes. While a bishop, priest, deacon and a properly installed acolyte can function throughout his diocese; Extraordinary Ministers are commissioned to function at the pleasure of their pastors only. Back in the 1990's, I recall

that Rome even sent out a directive that Extraordinary Ministers should not be scheduled or that, at a minimum, such schedules should not be published in bulletins. The fear again was that an “extraordinary” concession might be viewed as “ordinary.” Practicality made such a policy difficult or impossible to follow. The situation created tension within two departments of the Holy See. Many within the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith argued with canonists that the word “minister” should not be used at all in reference to this new form of Church service. Meanwhile, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments argued to keep the word “minister” as part of its nomenclature for those assisting with Holy Communion. I offer this short history and explanation of this “ministry,” so that those who come forward will appreciate how humility belongs to this service ahead of much else in the life of the Church. None of us are worthy of the great gift entrusted to us. While the distribution of Holy Communion might sometimes come across as mechanical, it remains a profound sharing of the gift of Christ from the Supper Table of the Lamb. We are helping to feed God’s people. We are instruments enabling our brothers and sisters to have a divine encounter with the living Lord. The reception of the Eucharist is a spiritual consummation of the Mass as the nuptial marriage feast and celebration of Christ. Not to profane the sacred, but note that we often help to pass the food at the family dinner table. Here we are extending not something from the oven but a mystery from heaven. Deeper than a biological or secular family, we are a family in faith. We have been formed and gathered in love. We are nurtured and fed by

the bread of life and the chalice of salvation. More than by rules and semantics, the ministry of distributing Holy Communion is profoundly humbled by our intimate association with the great heavenly mystery.

### **Recent Changes to the Protocol**

The EMHCs are no longer a part of the entrance procession. Consequently, they need to check in with the celebrant prior to Mass so that he knows they will be assisting. While the priest is receiving communion they should enter the sacristy and quickly wash their hands. Similarly, after communion they dip their fingers into the ablution bowl and dry them on a finger towel or purificator. They may also wash their hands (again) in the sacarium.

### **Communion Stations**

Once all EMHCs have their vessels, they proceed reverently to their communion stations. The priest will give quick instructions as these stations vary depending upon attendance and the number of Extraordinary Ministers available. As the minister of the cup, the deacon takes a chalice to the baptismal font side of the church and distributes the precious blood. If we are offering one species, his placement will vary in concert with the Extraordinary Ministers. The priest celebrant will usually distribute from the front center aisle. Another minister will also do so beside him. If the cup is offered, then these will be offered from the front (both the baptismal font side and the pulpit/ambo side). Frequently ministers will be sent to

the back, distributing from the middle aisle and in the church choir loft.

### **The Distribution of Holy Communion**

The EMHC holds the host slightly above the ciborium, looks at the communicant, and in a clear voice says, “The Body of Christ” to which the communicant responds “Amen.” These are the only words to be used. Nothing is to be added or subtracted, not even a name. Then the host is placed in the hand or on the tongue according to the manner indicated by the communicant. If a communicant begins to walk away carrying the host, the EMHC should say in a subdued voice, “Please consume the host now.” Despite the potential for embarrassment, you may have to follow a person back to his pew and retrieve the host if it is still not consumed. We must be careful because of recent concerted efforts at sacrilege and desecration. When communion under both kinds is offered, it is the communicant’s option to receive from the chalice.



In giving the precious blood, the EMHC holds the chalice up slightly and says in a clear voice while looking at the communicant, “The Blood of Christ” to which the communicant responds “Amen.” As with the host, these are the only words to be used. The communicant should hold the chalice firmly in both hands and drink from it.

However, in the case of a physical disability or weakness, the EMHC should be ready to assist in holding the chalice. You

should be very guarded about children. After the precious blood has been received, the EMHC should wipe the rim of the chalice, inside and out, with a purificator and turn it slightly before presenting it to the next communicant. The EMHC should be careful not to wipe in a manner where the purificator is dipped into the precious blood. The chalice is always ministered to the communicant; it may never be left for self-communication, except in the case of concelebrating priests.

Special care must be taken in cases of intinction. The EMHC dips the host partially into the cup provided, raises it slightly and says in a clear voice while looking at the communicant, "The Body and Blood of Christ" to which the communicant responds "Amen." The EMHC then places the host on the tongue of the communicant. The practice of self-intinction is not permitted.

### **How to Proceed After an Accident**

Those EMHCs finishing distribution before others can move to assist those ministers who still have communicants to serve. When a host falls to the floor, the EMHC should pick it up immediately.

If the precious blood is spilled, the area should immediately be covered. It should then be blotted and washed after Mass with water and a purificator. The purificator should be rinsed and wrung out in the sacarium.

When a host falls, many times a communicant (out of respect for the Lord's presence) will still want to receive it. If not, given that self-communication is not permitted, the host

must either be given to another minister or taken immediately to the altar and placed on the corporal. The priest might later consume it or (if touched by the mouth), it may be placed in a water-bowl or glass. This is reserved in the tabernacle. After it is dissolved (and no longer a host) the water is poured down the sacrarium.

### **After Holy Communion**

Once EMHCs are done with distribution, they return their vessels to the altar where any remaining hosts are taken by the priest or deacon to the tabernacle. Any leftover precious blood should be consumed at the altar by the priest or deacon. The priest or deacon will cleanse the communion vessels and place them on the credence table.

### **Taking Communion to the Sick & Homebound**

Jesus went out to the forgotten people: outcasts, the suffering, the sick, the oppressed, etc. We must also make sure that those missing from the Sunday worship are not forgotten by us. Jesus healed and fed his people. As a supplement to the work of the priest, EMHCs take communion to the sick and the homebound. They minister in the name of Christ and his Church. This work manifests the concern of the faith community.



Patients in the hospital and shut-ins find it a great comfort and source of healing to have Holy Communion brought to them as often as possible. EMHCs may make communion

calls on any day of the week. The EMHC becomes a vital link between the parish and the member who is sick or homebound. It is beneficial for visits to the sick and homebound to occur after Sunday Mass so that the link between the parish liturgical celebration and the parishioner is maintained.

Taking a parish bulletin also helps to insure that link. The parish may also have a special blessing and dismissal for EMHCs after communion; the assembly is sending them forth to do their ministry on the behalf of the whole parish community. EMHCs do not replace the ministry of the priest to the people, but rather extend and expand it so that all will have more regular contact with Christ in Holy Communion.

EMHCs should demonstrate both empathy and compassion. They should be sensitive to the sick and homebound person's spiritual, emotional, and material needs. They should always take care to maintain the confidentiality and dignity of the individual. They should also stay in close contact with the pastor and inform him if the person is in need of sacramental anointing, the sacrament of reconciliation, or a pastoral visit. The parish also has a Sick Book. The EMOC should mark in this book every time Holy Communion is taken to a particular person.



According to the document *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside of Mass*, “The Eucharist for Communion outside of church is to be carried in a pyx or other covered vessel; the vesture of the minister and the manner of carrying the Eucharist should be appropriate and in accord with local circumstances”. Dress in appropriate lay attire when bringing communion to the sick or homebound.

### **Dos and Don'ts of Bringing Communion to the Sick and Homebound:**

#### **Do:**

1. Make an appointment to visit. Ask how the person is feeling and if there will be other practicing Catholics present so you will have sufficient hosts for all to receive. Also, ask if they can prepare a table with a cloth, candle, cross or crucifix.
2. Make sure you have an appropriate ritual and a missalette with the pertinent Scripture readings.
3. Begin informally. Introduce yourself to those who are present and briefly explain what you have come to do. Pay attention to how the sick/homebound person is feeling.
4. Invite those who are present to participate in the prayers. If they feel comfortable, enlist the help of family or friends to do the readings.
5. Offer them the host, or a small piece of the host and have a cup of water handy if the person has difficulty swallowing.

6. Create links to the parish, e.g., bring a parish bulletin, share news from the parish; ask, if there is anything the parish can do for them, if they need to see a priest for the sacrament of reconciliation or anointing of the sick.

7. Thank the person for the opportunity to pray with them and for their hospitality.

**Don't:**

1. Don't visit a sick person if you are not feeling well yourself. Find a substitute.

2. Don't stay too long or take the role of a counselor or confidant.

3. Don't compete with a television or radio. Politely ask if these can be turned off during the service.

4. Don't carry the consecrated host in a plastic bag, purse, pocket or other unsuitable container. Instead, use a pyx to carry the consecrated host.

5. Don't ever accept "personal" monetary gifts from communicants in payment of services. Sometimes the EMOC might be asked to take an offertory envelope back to the parish. While this might be okay, if we use caution, the preference is that checks be mailed.

6. Don't leave the consecrated host if the person cannot receive it. Instead, return at a later time to see the sick person. Return any consecrated host to the tabernacle in the church. Don't take hosts home or leave them in your car.

## **BACKGROUND & HISTORY**

St. Augustine, in the 5th century taught us, “What you see...is bread and a cup. This is what your eyes report to you. But your faith has need to be taught that the bread is the body of Christ, the cup the blood of Christ...If then, you wish to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle as he says to the faithful, ‘You are the body of Christ and His members’...You reply ‘Amen’ to that which you are, and by replying you consent... Be a member of the body of Christ so that your ‘Amen’ may be true... Be what you see, and receive what you are.”

Centuries later St. Thomas Aquinas gave us an explanation of how this mystery happens. He called it transubstantiation. By that he meant that the “accidents” (the visible reality) of bread and wine remain, but the “substance” is changed into Christ’s Body and Blood. This has also come to be understood as what Catholics mean by the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharist.

### **Communion on the Tongue or in the Hand**

On May 29, 1969, the document *Memoriale Domini* gave permission for the faithful to optionally return to the ancient ritual practice of receiving Holy Communion in the hand and this went into effect in the United States on November 20, 1977. Lay people could now receive Holy Communion reverently, either on their tongue or in their hand. About this practice, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem wrote in the 4th century: “Make your left hand a throne for your right, because your right is going to receive the King; make a hollow of your palm

and receive the body of Christ, saying after it: 'Amen!' ... Then, after you have partaken of the body of Christ, come forward to the chalice of His blood....”

### **Extraordinary Ministers Approved**

On January 29, 1973, the instruction *Immensae caritatis* was issued by Pope Paul VI. With this instruction, the diocesan bishop was given permission to designate lay men and women to distribute the Eucharist as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. It stated that “...this faculty may be used whenever there is no priest, deacon or instituted acolyte present, or when the ordinary minister is prevented from administering Communion because of other pastoral obligations, ill health, or advanced age, or when the number of the faithful is so great that, unless Extraordinary Ministers assist in the distribution, the celebration would be unduly prolonged.” It should also be noted that when Communion under both kinds is offered, the deacon, if present at Mass, is the ordinary minister of the Sacred Cup.

### ***Archdiocese of Washington***

### **Liturgical Norms: Holy Communion & EMOHCs**

## **B. OFFICES AND MINISTRIES**

### **Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion**

6.10.1 Bishops, priests, and deacons distribute Holy Communion by virtue of their office as ordinary ministers of the Body and Blood of the Lord. In every celebration of the Eucharist there should be a sufficient number of ordinary

ministers for Holy Communion so that it can be distributed in an orderly and reverent manner.

6.10.2 When the size of the congregation or the incapacity of the bishop, priest, or deacon requires it, the celebrant may be assisted by other bishops, priests, or deacons. If such Ordinary Ministers of Holy Communion are not present, “the priest may call upon Extraordinary Ministers to assist him, i.e., formally instituted acolytes or even some of the faithful who have been commissioned according to the prescribed rite. In case of necessity, the priest may also commission suitable members of the faithful for the occasion.”

6.10.3 This function is to be understood strictly according to the name by which it is known, that is to say, that of Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion, and not “Special Minister of Holy Communion” nor “Extraordinary Minister of the Eucharist” nor “Special Minister of the Eucharist,” by which names the meaning of this function is unnecessarily and improperly broadened.

6.10.4 When recourse is had to Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, especially in the distribution of Communion under both kinds, their number should not be increased beyond what is required for the orderly and reverent distribution of the Body and Blood of the Lord.

6.10.5 This extraordinary ministry was created exclusively for those instances where there are not enough Ordinary Ministers to distribute Holy Communion, due to the consummate importance of assuring that the faithful have

the opportunity to receive Communion at Mass, even when it is distributed under both species.

6.10.6 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 Communion under both species or for using intinction instead of distributing the Precious Blood from the chalice.

6.10.7 Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion may be designated *ad actum* or for a time.

a) Designation *ad actum* is done by the priest celebrant in the course of the Mass, using the rite found in the Missal.

b) When Extraordinary Ministers are to be deputed for a time, this deputation is made in writing by the Archbishop upon the recommendation of the pastor, chaplain, or religious superior through the Office of Worship. The term of office is three years, effective from the time of commissioning. The term is renewable, but application must again be made to the Archbishop. These appointments are made for specific parishes or institutions, and cannot be exercised elsewhere.

6.10.8 The Order for the Commissioning of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion is to be used when these ministers first begin their ministry. However, any ceremony associated with the commissioning or deputation of Extraordinary Ministers must not have any semblance to the ceremony of sacred ordination, nor may such ceremony have

a form analogous to that of the conferral of the ministries of lector or acolyte.

6.10.9 Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should receive sufficient spiritual, theological, and practical preparation to fulfill their role with knowledge and reverence.

6.10.10 To serve as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, persons must

a) be practicing Catholics, distinguished in their Christian life, faith and morals;

b) be at least 18 years old;

c) have received the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist;

d) demonstrate a deep reverence for and devotion to the Eucharist;

e) possess the requisite abilities and temperament to carry out their assigned duties.

6.10.11 Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should always be dressed in a manner consistent with the dignity of their role. A neat appearance and reverential deportment are essential at all times.

6.10.12 While the sacred garment common to ministers of any rank is the alb and cincture, in the case of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, to distinguish their role from the ordinary lay ministries, in the Archdiocese of Washington

it is preferred that they not wear distinctive vesture such as albs.

6.10.13 Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should not be in the entrance procession. They should normally sit in the assembly until the time when they approach the altar to assist in the distribution of Communion, and then return to the assembly at the end of the Communion rite.

6.10.14 Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion may not assist at the Preparation of the Gifts (including distributing hosts among ciboria or pouring wine into chalices), in the *fractio panis*, or in the purification of sacred vessels.

6.10.15 Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion approach the altar as the priest receives Communion. After the priest has concluded his own Communion, he distributes Communion to the Extraordinary Ministers, assisted by the deacon, and then hands the sacred vessels to them for the distribution of Holy Communion to the people. Extraordinary Ministers should not take the sacred vessels from the altar themselves, but should be handed them by the priest or deacon.

6.10.16 Extraordinary Ministers are deputed for the sole purpose of distributing Holy Communion. They are not to administer blessings or lay hands upon people who approach them but who do not wish to receive Communion, even if they are requested to do so. There is one blessing at the end of the Mass for the entire congregation, imparted by the priest.

## BLESSINGS DURING HOLY COMMUNION

Various parishes and parochial schools have instructed non-Catholics and those not spiritually prepared for the Blessed Sacrament to come up in the communion line with their arms crossed so as to receive a blessing and not to be left out. I suspect this practice began in parochial schools with significant numbers of non-Catholic children.

According to the universal Church, can Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion extend blessings upon those who do not receive the Eucharist? Should blessings be given out during this time at all?

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments responded to this question in 2008. Five reasons were given as to why this practice is not permitted by the universal Church.

(1.) A blessing is given to everyone after the distribution of Holy Communion, following the Closing Prayer and before the words of final dismissal. Making the sign of the cross, the priest says: “May Almighty God bless you, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” This makes any particular or individual blessings redundant or unnecessary.

(2.) We must always act in accordance to our vocation or station. Lay people are not permitted to offer blessings during Mass. Outside of the liturgy, there are settings where the laity can extend blessings as in the Filipino custom of receiving blessings from elders or parents. During Mass the emphasis or charge for benedictions belongs to the priest. The *Book of Blessings* also stipulates that “whenever a priest

or deacon is present, the office of presiding [over a blessing] should be left to him” (#18). The instruction *Ecclesia de Mysterior* (1997) also stipulates that there should be no confusion of roles during the Mass and that lay people may not say prayers, make gestures or perform actions that are proper to the ordained priest. This would include the blessing as it is reserved to the priest.

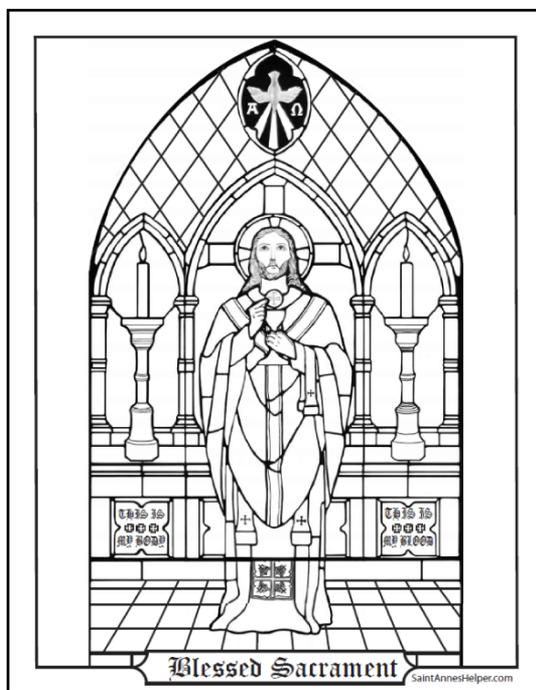
(3.) The laying on of hands by the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion is also explicitly discouraged as the gesture has a “sacramental significance,” i.e. Confirmation and Ordination.

(4.) Further, if one is spiritually or morally not worthy to receive the Eucharist then neither is one properly disposed to receive an individual blessing. This would include non-Catholics and those who are persisting in a state of mortal sin and/or who are excommunicated. A blessing might wrongly imply that they are in good standing or in full communion with the Church.

(5.) Liturgical law stipulates that “no one may on a personal initiative add to or omit or alter anything in [liturgical] books” (Canon 846). Since the practice of blessing those who cannot receive Holy Communion does not appear in the GIRM or Mass rubrics, it is thus strictly prohibited.

Those who take communion to the sick are presented with a short ritual entitled *COMMUNION OF THE SICK* published by Liturgical Press.

The Archdiocese of Washington has regular workshops for EMOHC. The workshops are open to all. For more information, contact [liturgy@adw.org](mailto:liturgy@adw.org) or call the Worship Office at 301-853-4594.



**This booklet is prepared as an aid to assist those who volunteer and worship at Holy Family Catholic Parish, Mitchellville, MD. May it make possible a more active lay participation in our faith community.**

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