

WHAT WE GIVE UP WHEN WE GIVE UP THE CUP

BY NICK WAGNER, posted in: Eucharist, [liturgy](#). [REPRINTED ON BLESSED TRINITY WEBSITE WITH PERMISSION](#)

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Large numbers of dioceses in the United States are banning communion from the cup for the faithful at Mass. While the reason given for the ban is to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, it seems to me that there are deeper, perhaps subconscious, motivations for the ban.

When we restrict access to the communion cup to the clergy alone, we are giving up the model of church as the People of God, which was established by the Second Vatican Council. We are affirming a previous model of church in which the laity were not seen as essential to the offering of the sacrifice of the Mass nor the accomplishment of the mission of the church.

The reason we are willing to withhold the communion cup from the laity has partly to do with history and partly to do with what we mean by “worship.”

A little history

Historically, for the first five centuries of Christian worship, communion under the forms of both bread and wine was normative and essential. Then over the 6th through the 13th centuries, participation of the laity in communion dropped dramatically. And while it has always been *possible* for the laity to participate in communion by receiving under the form of bread, the church eventually legislated that the faithful may never share in the communion cup.

A fundamental reason for the decline in the communion of the faithful, especially through sharing in the communion cup, was a growing cultural distinction between the sacred and profane worlds. The clergy came to be more and more associated with the sacred, and the laity with the profane.

Similarly, the Eucharistic elements came to be associated more and more exclusively with the realm of the sacred—that is, the realm of the clergy and not the profane world of the laity. In Rome, which tended to be more conservative than the rest of the church, communion from the cup remained as an option for the laity until the 13th century. But by the end of the 13th century, even in Rome, the laity were formally prohibited by law from sharing in the communion cup.

And that was the practice of the church until the Second Vatican Council in the mid-20th century.

Theology of worship

The Second Vatican Council called for a radical reform in the way we worship. As part of the reform, the laity were once again encouraged to receive communion under both forms. The reason behind that change is important to grasp.

Up until the Council, our image of church was a pyramid. The pope was at the top, then the bishops, then the priests, then the religious sisters and brothers, and then the laity. The pyramid implied holiness, authority, mission, and governance. Those at the top were more holy, and had more authority. They were solely responsible for the mission of the church, and they were the rulers of the church. Those at the

bottom were less holy, had no authority, and supported the mission of the church by supporting the clergy.

The Second Vatican Council rejected the pyramid model and instead described the church as the People of God. This shift is most clearly designated in the Constitution on the Church, Chapter II.

Chapter III—coming after the People of God—discusses the hierarchy. That chapter more often describes the bishops as shepherds and pastors instead of authoritarian rulers. The ultimate purpose of the hierarchy is “the nurturing and constant growth of the People of God” (18) so that they may be fruitful in their “obligation of spreading the faith [which] is imposed on every disciple of Christ” (17).

Eucharist as the model

The primary way the hierarchy nourishes the People of God and instructs them about the mission of the church is through the Eucharist.

In the pyramid model, the sacrificial offering of the Mass is the job of the hierarchical priesthood who act *in persona Christi*—in the person of Christ—when presiding at liturgy. In the People of God model, the clergy still act *in persona Christi*. But the sacramental identification with the priesthood of Christ in the Mass is no longer exclusively reserved to the clergy:

Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches and rules the priestly people; acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the Eucharistic sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. But the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist. They likewise exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity. (Constitution on the Church, 10)

This matters.

It matters because of what the Second Vatican Council is teaching about the nature of the church.

Pyramid model of Eucharist

If the church is a pyramid, then the mission of the church rests primarily with those at the top. As both a model and nourishment for the mission, the priests must offer the sacrifice of the Mass and share in its fruits—communion. In this way, they learn and model that mission is about sacrifice for the sake of nourishing the world with Christ. The role of those at the bottom of the pyramid is to assist the clergy in fulfilling the mission of the church. They are not seen as co-offerers of the sacrifice, and sharing in the fruits of the Mass—communion—is solely a personal spiritual benefit. It is not essential to the mission.

People of God model of Eucharist

If on the other hand the church is a People of God, the mission of the church is the responsibility of all the baptized. The entire priesthood—both hierarchical and baptismal—offers the sacrifice of the Mass. “each of them in its own special way.” All who offer the sacrifice must share in the fruits of the Mass—communion—in order to learn and model that the mission is about sacrifice for the sake of nourishing the world with Christ.

If this is the model, then every Eucharist must include the sharing of the communion cup with the entire priesthood. The present-day teaching on communion from the cup is found in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal:

Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it takes place under both kinds. For in this form the sign of the Eucharistic banquet is more clearly evident and clearer expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal Covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord, as also the connection between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Kingdom of the Father. (281)

The General Instruction further states that “at the same time the faithful should be instructed to participate more readily in this sacred rite, by which the sign of the Eucharistic banquet is made more fully evident” (282)

Given this very clear teaching of the church, why would we ever want to celebrate a Mass that was lacking as a sign and in which the Eucharistic banquet was less clearly evident? Why would we ever ask the faithful to forgo the communion cup at Mass?

Any celebration of Eucharist in which the communion cup is withheld from the laity is a regression to the pyramid model. We are saying that sharing the cup with the laity really isn't really necessary—and perhaps the laity in general are not absolutely essential to the priestly mission of the church.

What we are giving up

The health concerns around a virus outbreak are real. We should all take prudent measures to minimize risk. In the celebration of the liturgy, however, the greatest risk is just showing up. According to the Center for Disease Control, the virus is spread by being in the same room with infected people who cough and sneeze (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/transmission.html>).

If some study does appear that demonstrates sharing in the common communion cup is a significantly greater hazard than merely being in the same room with infected people, we should expect the ban to be applied equally to the hierarchical and the baptismal priesthood where large numbers of both are gathered—at the Chrism Mass for example.

When we ask the baptized priesthood to give up the communion cup, we are giving up a model of church that identifies the faithful as coresponsible for the mission of the church. Pope Benedict XVI said we must have a change of mindset about this:

Co-responsibility demands a change in mindset especially concerning the role of lay people in the Church. They should not be regarded as “collaborators” of the clergy, but rather as people who are really “co-responsible” for the Church’s being and acting. (“Message on the Occasion of the Sixth Ordinary Assembly of the International Forum of Catholic Action” [10 August 2012])

Unless we change our mindset, especially about our communion practice, we are affirming a pyramid model of church in which the laity are not seen as co-offerers of the sacrifice of the Mass and are merely regarded as “collaborators” of the clergy.

We are not just giving up the cup.



DO WE NEED ANOTHER TELEVISED MASS? LITURGY IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

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In the United States as well as many other regions, we are in the midst of a health crisis do to the coronavirus outbreak. And that in turn has led to a spiritual crisis of sorts. Most dioceses in the U.S. have cancelled or severely restricted the celebration of Mass.

This is a golden opportunity to look at what both pastoral leaders and worshipers believe about Mass, real presence, and the role of the baptized priesthood in the liturgy.

In my lifetime, the church has given us two lenses through which to view these central issues of faith. The current lens, the current teaching of the church, comes from the Second Vatican Council. When the bishops called for a reform of the liturgy, they had one overarching concern:

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people...is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else. (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 14; emphasis added)

The Mass that we celebrated before the Second Vatican Council—the Tridentine Mass—provided a different lens. The primary way the people participated in the real presence of Christ in the Mass was through “ocular communion” at the moment of consecration when the priest (whose back was to the people) would elevate the consecrated elements.

There was a clear separation, both physically and culturally, between the hierarchical priesthood and the baptismal priesthood. No one, in fact, ever referred to those of us outside the communion rail as part of the priesthood of Christ.

The lens with which many Catholics in the United States today view the liturgy is perhaps betwixt and between the lens of full, conscious, and active participation mandated by the Second Vatican Council and the lens of the Tridentine liturgy focused on ocular communion. It is true that in the United States, the reform of the liturgy has done much to encourage the full, conscious, and active participation of all of the baptized. However, there is still much that we need to do.

Where we still need to grow since Vatican II

Much of the celebration of the liturgy of the word is experienced through the lens of participation. However, when we get to the Eucharistic Prayer, we are still influenced by a lens of ocular communion.

For example, the rubrics allow for the optional ringing of a bell after each consecration. This harkens back to the Middle Ages when the practice was introduced to encourage the ocular communion of the otherwise nonparticipating assembly.

Many presiders still elevate the elements at the prayer of consecration in the manner of their medieval counterparts, reinforcing the ocular nature of communion. The rubrics themselves direct the presider to “show” the consecrated elements to the people, which is distinguished from “raising” (*elevans* in Latin) the elements at the Great Amen.

Few musicians follow the rubric that the communion song is to begin at the moment the priest receives the sacrament (GIRM 86). They tend to wait until after the priest has taken Communion for himself, believing that it’s more respectful to keep silence during the “priest’s Communion.” Those that do begin the Communion song “while the priest is receiving the Sacrament” (GIRM 86) are sometimes asked by parishioners to delay the music a few moments longer to allow them to pray.

Some parishes have yet to restore the communion cup to the assembly. In places where the cup has been restored, many worshipers bypass it. And during flu season, many dioceses are quick to withdraw the cup. All of this is justified by the theology that people receive the full grace of the sacrament solely by receiving the body of Christ in the form of bread. Without out disputing the theology, the GIRM emphasizes that communion has a fuller sign when it is shared under both kinds (281).

Most parishes distribute hosts that were consecrated at a previous Mass. Again, the justification is that people are still receiving the full grace of the sacrament. This in spite of the rubric:

It is most desirable that the faithful, just as the Priest himself is bound to do, receive the Lord’s Body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass and that, in the cases where this is foreseen, they 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. (GIRM 85)

Another aspect of full participation that is still underdeveloped is the practice of liturgical prayer in the domestic church. The ancient church had a clear sense that the households of believers were indeed churches. They called them *ecclesiola* or “little churches.” The teaching that the home is a church was recovered by the Second Vatican Council (see Constitution on the Church, 11). However, the teaching is not well known and not widely practiced. Many of us still think of the parish church as the only place where liturgy happens.

Ocular communion in the time of coronavirus

Where the lens of ocular communion becomes clearly evident is in our response to being unable to participate in Sunday Mass. Every diocese and a great number of parishes have quickly responded by producing televised or live-streamed Masses. In most places where this has happened, it seems to have been their first, and perhaps only, response to help parishioners maintain a sense of liturgical prayer. If this is all we do, we risk reverting to the old lens and inadvertently communicate that people’s participation is mainly by watching.

There is nothing wrong with televised Masses as a spiritual aid. Pope John Paul II even commended them in instances where one could not participate in the parish assembly (see “On Keeping the Lord’s Day Holy,” 54). But televised or live-streamed Mass was already available before the coronavirus restrictions. How is adding hundreds more Mass feeds providing more spiritual aid?

Even more worrisome is the response of some of the faithful. Some have suggested that their parishes deliver unconsecrated hosts to people’s homes so that they could place them on a table in front of their computer monitors for the next televised Mass. That way they could share in communion along with the priest who is being live streamed. It is not clear if some of these potential communicants think that the

hosts will become consecrated simply by “hearing” the words of consecration from a priest online or if they merely want a more tactile experience of ocular communion. One also wonders why, if some households want to add unconsecrated bread to their online experience, they are not also adding a cup of wine.

All these efforts show that people are hungering for communion, both in the sacrament and with their parish family. Yet we need to be careful that in feeding their hunger, we lead them to that fully conscious and active participation that is their right and duty by virtue of their baptism.

What is clear in Pope John Paul II’s teaching as well as in the Catechism of the Catholic Church is that watching Mass is not participating in liturgy (see CCC 2180).

How to celebrate the liturgy fully, consciously, and actively—even when there is no Mass

There are several ways in which the domestic church *can* celebrate authentic Sunday liturgy to keep the Lord’s Day holy. None of these are Mass, of course. But since participating in (as opposed to watching) Mass is not possible, these forms of full, conscious, and active participation in the official rites of the church would seem to reflect the lens of the Second Vatican Council. In fact, the Code of Canon Law recommends that families and individuals participate in these kinds of prayer forms in their homes when they are unable to participate in the eucharistic celebration (see CCL 1248 §2).

Liturgy of the Hours

Sanctifying the hours of the day is an ancient practice in the church. In the early church, the cycle of the day was marked in the domestic church by praying the Lord’s Prayer in the morning, at noon, and in the evening.

In more recent times, especially in German and German American households, the day was marked by praying an evening Rosary after dinner.

And Christian households can also mark that day by celebrating Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours. [*Give Us This Day*](#) has granted free access to their online prayer resource, which includes a simple Morning and Evening Prayer that can be used at home.

Liturgy of the Word

The church teaches that the presence of Christ is with us when we proclaim God’s word and when the church prays and sings. So when we gather as the domestic church to celebrate the Liturgy of the Word, we are gathered in and as the presence of Christ. [*Give Us This Day*](#) is an excellent resource to use for household liturgical celebrations of the word. Also, the United States Bishops have published [*Tools for Building a Domestic Church*](#).

Blessings

Some of us think of blessings as something a priest does. He blesses us at the end of Mass, for example. Or he might do a quick blessing of a personal rosary or a new car just before Mass begins. But blessings are actually liturgies. And there are many blessings that can be celebrated in the domestic church. [*This article*](#) gives a good overview of the purpose of blessings. For some blessing prayers you can celebrate, [click here](#).

Reconciliation

Only a priest or a bishop can preside at the Rite of Penance. However, we can celebrate penitential services in the domestic church. While these services do not provide sacramental absolution, they “are very helpful in promoting conversion of life and purification of heart.... Penitential services, moreover, are very useful in places where no priest is available...” (Rite of Penance, 37). You can [use this outline](#) to celebrate a penitential service in the home. You would not, of course, include “Individual Confession and Absolution.” But the rest of the liturgy can be presided over by a member of the household.

Catechumenate rites

If you have a catechumen in your household, you can celebrate one of several minor rites with him or her. These include:

- [Celebrations of the Word of God](#)
- [Celebration of a Minor Exorcism](#)
- [Celebration of a Blessing of a Catechumen](#)

The church has a rich treasury of resources for celebrating liturgy in the domestic church. All of these answer the mandate of the Second Vatican Council to consider before all else the full, conscious, and active participation of the baptismal priesthood in the liturgy of the church.

If it is spiritually helpful to your parishioners to add a live-stream of your Mass to the hundreds of others that are already available, please do that. But at the same time, catechize the faithful in ways they can celebrate liturgy through the lens of participation so they may continue in their mission to bring God’s salvation to the whole world.

The challenge before us is greater than just surviving the coronavirus outbreak. The disease will be contained, a vaccine will be developed, and we will eventually return to more normal lives, including the celebration of Masses in our parishes.

But we will still be betwixt and between the lens of Vatican II—which calls for the full, conscious, and active participation of the baptismal priesthood—and the lens of the previous era that relied on the clergy for celebrating the liturgy and carrying out the mission of the church.

What would happen if we used this current crisis as a teachable moment to help all our parishioners better grasp their baptismal dignity and vocation?

