

Post-print of final edit for the article published in Liturgy 31:3 (April 2016): 37-45. Placed on the author's departmental webpage with the permission of the publisher, Taylor & Francis Group.

Good Table Manners?

The Presence and Participation of Fellow Christians at Roman Catholic Mass

by Bruce T. Morrill

Now well into the second decade of a new century and, indeed, a new millennium, North American Christians broadly find themselves accustomed to a positive ecumenical environment radically different from the polarization and mutual exclusivity characteristic across churches and denominations just 100 years ago. Given the power of public worship to shape the basic theological and social imagination of members in local church communities, liturgy has proven to be a key site (along with personal relationships, friendships, and marriages) where the results of ecumenical dialogues and agreement-statements at “higher levels” take practical hold—or not—among the faithful.

Myself, a Roman Catholic baby boomer, I can vividly remember an early-1970s exchange with a childhood friend who'd come seeking me on a Saturday afternoon in the choir loft of my neighborhood church where I was practicing the organ. Visibly nervous, my Protestant pal explained, “My mother would kill me if she knew I was in here.” I recall myself bemusedly shrugging that off as I shut down the instrument and lights and headed off to hang out with my friend. Having grown up with a devout Russian Orthodox mother and equally devout Roman Catholic father, inter-church attendance was not at all foreign to me, even as I was well aware of the fact that my Mom could not receive Holy Communion in our church, nor we, in hers. I was

also well aware, on the other hand, of how Roman Catholics (in those initial post-Vatican-II years) were turning more positively toward Protestant traditions (not least through the rapid embrace of Wesleyan, Lutheran, and other hymnody in the new order of Mass), even as Catholicism's sense of superiority in the papacy and power of the sacraments (including various perceptions about the "real presence" in the Eucharist) set boundaries.

Some two decades later, while pursuing my PhD in the thoroughly ecumenical theological studies program at Emory University, I accepted the request of a fellow-graduate student coordinating the Candler School of Theology's nascent summer Youth Theology Institute to provide a "demonstration Mass" for the students. My colleague, a Presbyterian minister, explained that with only one among the several dozen high-school juniors enrolled being a Roman Catholic, the group as a whole expressed interest in witnessing a Roman Catholic Mass. I readily agreed but cautioned that we would need to make explicit that I could not minister Holy Communion to the Protestant students. True to my colleague's prediction, the students proved indifferent to my announcing the prohibition prior to the start of the celebration. What did prove surprising to them, I discovered in the discussion that followed the Mass, was how familiar the Mass seemed to them, how utterly similar to their own churches' services of word and table. One Methodist young man remarked on his disappointment in the Mass's not meeting his expectations of a ritual far more exotically distancing. I, on the other hand, was thrilled to find the next generation so nourished by the fruits of the liturgical movement, out of which the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1963) had emerged as the charter document of liturgical reform for not only Catholicism but also mainstream Protestantism. Now another two decades later, those Gen-X teenagers are themselves leaders in their respective churches, raising their own children in an

even more porous American Christianity. Numerous Protestant and Anglican bodies have adopted inter-communion and even open-communion policies, even as advances in ecumenical reunion proceed haltingly on the part of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

For Roman Catholicism, nonetheless, equally momentous to the change in official ecumenical attitude and efforts (notably Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism, several bilateral dialogues with Protestants, the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law) is the change in the church's official understanding and practice of its sacramental rites—most powerfully, the Mass. The very language of “table” with reference to the Mass would have been unthinkable for polemical, pre-1960s, Counter-Reformation Catholicism. And yet the worldwide bishops at Vatican II overwhelmingly voted to approve a Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy characterizing the primary symbolism in terms of tables: “Christ’s faithful . . . should be instructed by God’s word, and be nourished at the table of the Lord’s body” (no. 48), and “treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word “ (no. 51).¹ More contentious was debate over the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei verbum*, 1965), which reached approval at the council’s final session. Setting aside any textual positivism, the constitution theologically locates divine revelation in the historical process of the Holy Spirit’s work among humanity, of which “the most intimate truth . . . shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation” (no. 2).² Foremost in the *practical* way revelation occurs is the liturgy, whereby the church “never ceases . . . to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ” (no. 21).³

The fact that by the end of Vatican II the church’s dogmatic teaching treated the Mass in terms not of propitiatory sacrifice but of *table*—the one table of Christ, both Word and Body—

cannot be overestimated in relation to the reform of the Mass that followed. The popular, practical import over the ensuing half-century in the US is evident in the way the vast majority of the Catholic laity have developed a highly open, forgiving, and inclusive view of who is welcomed not only to take part as members of the liturgical assembly but also to join in Holy Communion. As I have argued elsewhere,⁴ it seems that the continuous lectionary proclamation of gospel stories of Jesus' table fellowship with the socially excluded, his compassion for sinners, and his challenging parables about the banquet of the kingdom of heaven has not been lost on the faithful. The "open commensality"⁵ of Jesus recounted at the table of the Word would seem to be nourishing among the majority of US Catholics an expectation that the Eucharistic table be open to each fellow believer approaching it on the basis of personal discernment in one's own and shared "faith journey." Not surprisingly, then, in my years of pastoral experience both in offering parish adult education classes and standing in church doorways after Mass, I have repeatedly heard a question along the lines of, "Father, why can't my Methodist wife receive communion with me at Mass, even though I'm invited to communion when I go to her church?"

Why indeed. Popular practice, and therein belief, among American Catholics has become increasingly at odds with the official pronouncements and legal system of Roman Catholicism, so unique among all Christian ecclesial bodies. Canon Law (including liturgical law) exerts a centralizing power, exercised through a hierarchical chain of command reaching from the Vatican down through local bishops to the priests vowed in obedience to carry out their superiors' directives. The thoughts, attitudes, and decisions of the people (laity), on the other hand, have in US Catholicism increasingly taken on the character of what sociologist Jerome Baggett calls a "tolerant traditionalism," an ongoing, highly individualized and constructive negotiation of the tenets and practices of the religion. Endorsing the analysis of church historian

Jay Dolan, Baggett describes a divergence between the “people’s church” and the “bureaucratic church” of a clerical hierarchy “ever more intent on imposing discipline and exerting control over the faithful.”⁶ The divide between official bureaucracy and popular practice, nonetheless, has not always been simply along clerical versus lay lines. Whereas from the start of the liturgical reform in the late 1960s many priests had made adaptations in their parochial practices of the Roman Missal (and related canonical stipulations), Pope John Paul II early in his pontificate declared the era of “liturgical experimentation” closed. That pronouncement came about at the very time the pontiff authorized the 1983 Code of Canon Law (the first complete revision of the code since 1917).

The ensuing decades have seen the rise of a new generation of far more clerically, religiously conservative priests (inspired by John Paul and his successor, Pope Benedict XVI), such that the divergence between US Catholic laity and clergy across moral, theological, and liturgical matters has only increased.⁷ Implications of that dissonance shall emerge in my description and analysis of the official and popular approaches to the presence of fellow Christians at Roman Catholic Mass at this point in American Catholicism.

Canon Law and Official U.S. Guidelines

Canon 844 in the Code of Canon Law (1983) addresses the question of inter-communion, both for Catholics assisting at non-Catholic churches and for non-Catholics presenting themselves at Catholic services. The canon stipulates that Catholics may legitimately receive the sacraments of penance, Eucharist, and anointing of the sick “from non-catholic ministers in whose Churches these sacraments are valid”⁸—basically, the Orthodox Churches. Similarly, Catholic ministers may lawfully administer those three sacraments to “members of the oriental

churches not in full communion with the Catholic Church (or ‘other churches, which in the judgment of the Apostolic See are in the same condition’), if they ask on their own for the sacraments and are properly disposed.”⁹ The official judgment of the Roman Catholic Church is that the eastern Orthodox churches exercise legitimate order (apostolic succession, priesthood) and belief in administration of the sacraments (hence the reference to them as “Churches”).

As for other Christians (in various “ecclesial communities”¹⁰), the fourth paragraph of Canon 844 reads as follows:

If the danger of death is present or other grave necessity, in the judgment of the diocesan bishop or of the conference of bishops, Catholic ministers may licitly administer these same sacraments to other Christians who do not have full communion with the Catholic Church, who cannot approach a minister of their own community and on their own ask for it, provided they manifest Catholic faith in these sacraments and are properly disposed.¹¹

The provision of participating in Holy Communion for Protestants and Anglicans, then, is episodic and, basically, emergency in nature, pending the individual’s proper belief in Christ’s presence (full divinity and full humanity) in the Eucharistic elements. Christians under duress due to government repression of religion or living in rural or isolated areas with few churches or clergy would be the fitting sorts of subjects for this provision. In addition, the last paragraph of the canon exhibits ecumenical sensitivity by stipulating that local Catholic bishops are not to make the Eucharist or other sacramental ministry regularly available to such Christians “except after consultation with at least the local competent authority of the interested non-Catholic church or community.”¹²

The paragraphs of Canon 844 altogether seek to guard against any strictly personal

reasoning—by either laity or clergy—for practicing inter-communion. That is to say, for example in the anecdote I quoted above, the Roman Catholic husband, according to this canon, should not take it upon himself to decide he would like to receive communion in the Methodist Church, however much that might personally be meaningful to him. Nor should his wife receive at his parish Mass out of personal desire (unless she were to have no Methodist service available to her, and provided she believed in the Catholic doctrine of the sacrament). The restrictive nature of the canon reflects the extent to which the Apostolic See (the Vatican) considers the matter of inter-communion a serious ecclesiological one. The rite of Holy Communion signifies the unity of the church in its members under the leadership of bishops in apostolic succession and in union with the bishop of Rome.¹³ Attentive to the real-life needs of people in specific circumstances (as should all laws be), the canon allows for exceptions, but these should be practiced only upon careful discernment of the particular persons and circumstances in light of the law's general intent.

Ensuing Clarifications in the US Catholic Church

As with all laws, however, historically there may (and often does) exist a difference between “what’s on the books” and what occurs in practice. In the years surrounding the promulgation of the 1983 Code, a period when the sizeable majority of American Catholics were still attending Mass weekly, including with certain numbers of non-Catholics (spouses of Catholics and others), the practice of everyone joining the procession to Holy Communion became nearly universal. For Catholics, this was the result of a papal-initiated effort¹⁴ throughout the twentieth century to foster the laity’s frequent full-participation in the sacrament (as opposed to just assisting at Mass without receiving Holy Communion). In light of Canon 844, as well as

their awareness of the extent to which nearly all present at any given Mass were joining the communion line, the US Catholic bishops in 1986 issued guidelines clarifying that Roman Catholics must discern themselves to be free of mortal sin in order legitimately to receive Holy Communion. A decade later the Bishops Conference issued a revised and expanded *Guidelines for the Reception of Holy Communion* and mandated that the text be included in the front matter of all missalettes or other printed worship aids (bulletins, hymnals) used at Mass.¹⁵ Welcoming in tone yet delineating of boundaries, the current guidelines comprise specific sections addressing Catholics, other Christians, and non-Christians participating at Mass.

The opening section of the *Guidelines* reiterates the earlier version's basic instruction that Catholics approaching Holy Communion "should not be conscious of grave sin and normally should have fasted for one hour." Those prescriptions are framed by an opening explanation that full participation in the Eucharistic celebration entails receiving Holy Communion, plus a concluding exhortation to "frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance."¹⁶

The document then turns to "Our Fellow Christians," a section comprised of two paragraphs, beginning with the following:

We welcome our fellow Christians to this celebration of the Eucharist as our brothers and sisters. We pray that our common baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist will draw us closer to one another and begin to dispel the sad divisions which separate us. We pray that these will lessen and finally disappear, in keeping with Christ's prayer for us "that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21).

This statement reflects the Roman Catholic Church's recognition (in Canon Law) of baptisms performed in nearly all Christian churches and ecclesial communities, duly identifying baptism

in water and the Holy Spirit as the source of unity among all believers. Reference to the unifying “action of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist” may be taken to include an allusion to the epiclesis in the Eucharistic Prayer, an invocation of the Spirit upon both the gifts and the gathered assembly, Catholics and fellow Christians together. The non-Catholics, nonetheless, depending on their individual ecclesial memberships, may or may not be able to “fully participate” through reception of Holy Communion.

The second paragraph of the section, thus, goes on to explain in detail:

Because Catholics believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life, and worship, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to Holy Communion. Eucharistic sharing in exceptional circumstances by other Christians requires permission according to the directions of the diocesan bishop and the provisions of canon law (canon 844 §4). Members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church are urged to respect the discipline of their own Churches. According to Roman Catholic discipline, the Code of Canon Law does not object to reception of Communion by Christians of these Churches (canon 844 §3).

The rub in this statement lies in the opening words, “Because Catholics believe....” The Apostolic See and its bishops throughout the world teach that normal prerequisites for full participation in the Eucharistic celebration through reception of Holy Communion include membership in a church recognized to be in Apostolic Succession and/or in unity with the bishop of Rome. On the other hand, it is safe to aver that a large percentage of US Catholics are either ignorant of, or puzzled by, or indifferent to the rules that follow therefrom. Sociological studies have demonstrated the extent to which Catholics see the decision to receive Holy Communion as

a personal matter “between the person and his/her God.” Still, the prohibition of communion-reception endures as a boundary-marker for many Catholics in relation to Protestants, perhaps in no small part because of its being a topic in mandatory pre-marriage preparation sessions in which couples of “mixed religion” are instructed on the matter. In any event, observation of the numbers of people processing in the communion line but not actually receiving the sacrament (see concluding section, below) indicates a tangible measure of success in the bishops’ efforts to enforce the discipline.

The final two short sections of the *Guidelines* present the bishops’ exhortation for what those not receiving may do during the Communion Rite, under two subheadings:

FOR THOSE NOT RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION

All who are not receiving Holy Communion are encouraged to express in their hearts a prayerful desire for unity with the Lord Jesus and with one another.

FOR NON-CHRISTIANS

We also welcome to this celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. While we cannot admit them to Holy Communion, we ask them to offer their prayers for the peace and the unity of the human family.

The theme of unity—of Christians and, then, all humanity—reflects the ultimate meaning and purpose of Holy Communion in Western Christian tradition, namely, the *res tantum* of the sacrament being the unity of the church as the mystical body of Christ. Although space limitations prohibit addressing the topic in detail, the encouragement to prayer here reflects the dogmatic ecclesiology of Vatican II, wherein the mystery of the church extends and is related to all humankind: “All men are called to this catholic unity which prefigures and promotes universal peace. And in different ways to it belong, or are related: the Catholic faithful, others

who believe in Christ, and finally all mankind, called by God's grace to salvation ... those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways."¹⁷ This is what so many of the American Catholic laity (and some clergy) "get" today—God's Spirit guiding human unity in diversity—as opposed to an exclusivism, triumphalism, or even chauvinism that sadly characterizes arch-conservative, so-called "traditional" Catholics.

Current Customary Practices

The official Catholic Church policy for non-Catholics at Mass seeks to foster hospitality toward all attending, to acknowledge the desire for full unity among Christians, and to encourage greater unity and peace among all peoples. The as yet unrealized character of Christian unity, as the Catholic Church understands it, requires distinguishing degrees of participation in the celebration of Mass. Among the Catholic faithful, however, many find the general prohibition from Holy Communion for Catholics in certain "states of life"—plus most non-Catholics—contradictory to any expressions of good will, welcome, and desired unity. American society has come to view the exclusion of people from roles or activities within public events disrespectful of individuals' human dignity. The attitude is widespread among Christians, not least among the younger generations of Roman Catholics.

Popular resolution of this conflict between the officially guarded integrity of "full communion" and the popular valorization of dignity-in-inclusivity has taken practical shape in a modification to the people's procession in the Communion Rite.¹⁸ Just a few decades ago the only people joining in the procession would have been those actually about to receive the sacrament. Today, any individual remaining alone in one's seat while the rest of the assembly process forward for Holy Communion has in popular perception become untenable. In early

twenty-first-century US Catholicism a custom is now widely established whereby people participate in the communion procession whether intending to receive the sacrament or not. Those unable or unwilling to receive cross their arms over their chest as they approach the minister to signal that they do not wish to receive. The origin of the practice lies in parents' reluctance (or inability) to leave their toddlers (children who'd not yet received first Holy Communion) in the pew while parents and older children "go to communion." US Catholic parents now all but universally arrive at the priest, deacon, or communion minister with kids in tow, expecting a word and/or gesture be conferred on the child. The custom gradually translated to non-Catholic spouses, friends, or family accompanying in procession their Catholic loved ones, who obviously must now consider this standard protocol in inviting them along.

Notable is the fact that this now widespread custom seems to have been still unfamiliar or, perhaps, ignored by the US Catholic bishops when they revised their guidelines concerning reception of Holy Communion in the mid 1990s. Clearly, the exhortation to those not receiving communion presumed their staying in place to pray in silence. Some bishops have, however, issued local policies concerning the now common practice of non-communicants coming forward to ministers of the sacrament, instigated most often, it seems, by the question of whether lay ministers of Holy Communion should impart a "blessing" to the non-communicant and, if so, by what word or gesture. The overall concern in such directives is the distinction between the power of the ordained to raise a hand or make the sign of the cross in blessing over a person's head versus the laity's lack of authority to do so. The directives or otherwise variable customary practices in parishes tend at this point in time to amount to restricting lay ministers of Holy Communion to speaking a word of blessing (such as, "May you know the Lord's peace") and, in some cases, placing a hand on the person's shoulder. As ever, ritual—including highly scripted,

institutionally sanctioned liturgy—exists only in practice. Whether and how these popular local or regional customs might yet realize ecclesial sanction—positive or negative—is a matter for time to tell.

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¹ Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), 17.

² *Ibid.*, 751.

³ *Ibid.*, 762.

⁴ See Bruce T. Morrill, “Holy Communion as Public Act: Ethics and Liturgical Participation,” *Studia Liturgica* 41, no. 1 (2011): 30-46, esp. 44-46.

⁵ See John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993), 259-264, 330-333.

⁶ Jerome P. Baggett, *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 235-238. See also, Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 253-256.

⁷ Results of a Pew research survey of US Catholics in advance of Pope Francis’s visit to the country in 2015 demonstrate the divergence in views on family life, sexuality, and degrees of commitment to church membership, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/09/02/u-s-catholics-open-to-non-traditional-families/>.

⁸ *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition*, trans. Canon Law Society of America (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), 319.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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- ¹⁰ The Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith succinct explanation of this terminology reads: “According to Catholic doctrine, these Communities [‘born out of the Reformation’] do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element of the Church. These ecclesial Communities which, specifically because of the absence of the sacramental priesthood, have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery cannot, according to Catholic doctrine, be called ‘Churches’ in the proper sense.” *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church* (June 29, 2007), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_responsa-quaestiones_en.html.
- ¹¹ *Code of Canon Law*, 321.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ For discussion of reasons for the restrictions concerning Eucharistic sharing—including Eucharistic doctrine, church unity, apostolic succession, and indiscriminate reception of Holy Communion—see Jeffrey T. VanderWilt, *Communion with Non-Catholic Christians: Risks, Challenges, and Opportunities* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 51-122.
- ¹⁴ In 1910 Pope Pius X issued a decree lowering the childhood age of first communion and promoting frequent communion by all the faithful. For a detailed history leading up to and following from Pius’s initiative throughout the twentieth century, see Joseph Dougherty, *From Altar-Throne to Table: The Campaign for Frequent Holy Communion in the Catholic Church* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010).
- ¹⁵ In the paragraphs that follow, quotations are from: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Guidelines for the Reception of Communion* (November 14, 1996), <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/order-of-mass/liturgy-of-the-eucharist/guidelines-for-the-reception-of-communion.cfm>.
- ¹⁶ For a description and analysis of the steep decline in US Catholics’ regular practice of the sacrament of penance (confession), including historical and theological reflection, see Bruce T. Morrill, “Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion? Differing Views of Power—

Ecclesial, Sacramental, and Anthropological—Among Hierarchy and Laity,” *Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (September 2014): 585-612.

¹⁷ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 13, 16, in Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 365, 367.

¹⁸ For my inquiry into the state of this newly evolved custom, along with numerous comments from readers, on the blog site “Pray Tell,” see <http://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2015/09/03/blessing-non-communicants-during-holy-communion/>.