

# Overflowing: Communion from the Tabernacle at the Roman Catholic Mass

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## What is happening

The people are singing the Lamb of God. The priest is preparing to receive communion. Everything is still with anticipation, but then movement begins. Someone - it may be a communion minister, it may be a deacon, it may be a priest - but someone goes to the tabernacle, genuflects, opens the door, reaches inside, grasps a ciborium, pulls it out, turns, advances toward the altar, locates the corporal where the other vessels have been sitting, and places the tabernacle's ciborium there. After the priest receives communion, someone - it may be one or more communion ministers, the deacon, the priest, some or all of them - but someone, goes to a station and begins distributing communion from the tabernacle at the Roman Catholic Mass. Provision for this action can be found neither in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal nor in the Order of Mass (the script we follow for the unvarying actions and words of the eucharist), yet it happens at nearly every parish mass worldwide. Nobody pays much attention, but this common practice demonstrates how some of the dreams of the Second Vatican Council have failed to take root - not just in liturgy but in eucharistic theology. It schools the most faithful Catholics to remain complacent when they are not engaging in full, conscious, active participation in the central action of the mass: receiving communion directly from the altar of sacrifice.

Many Catholics think, what's the big deal? The body of Christ is the body of Christ. What difference does it make whether it comes from the altar or the tabernacle? Well, the distribution of communion is integral to the sacrifice of the mass. Catholics who are fed from the tabernacle at mass are receiving communion, but they are not fully celebrating the eucharist.

The indifference surrounding this question is underscored by the way that many Catholics regard communion under both forms. It's optional. Drinking from the same vessel with other people is icky. So they walk by. Yet, the contents of that chalice is wine consecrated at that mass. Communicants who receive communion from the tabernacle and bypass the chalice dismiss their clearest opportunity to complete their participation in the eucharistic sacrifice.

In the hispanic community and perhaps in some other cultures the challenge is even greater because the percentage of people who receive communion at all is noticeably small. Attendance at Sunday mass is strong. But the number of hosts needed for an anglo congregation is often larger by half than those needed by the same number of people in a hispanic congregation. The

reasons are mixed: Some have irregular marriages and are ineligible for communion. But many hispanics possess a more sensitive conscience than many anglos have. If they get angry, if they entertain an immoral thought, if they miss Sunday mass because they were taking care of a sick spouse, they may feel that their sin is so grave that it prohibits them from receiving communion until they go to confession. They'll come to mass, but not to communion. They derive spiritual benefit from being present at the consecration when the priest shows them the host and the chalice, and for many of them, that is enough. They may go years, decades without receiving communion because they lack a *matrimonio por la iglesia*. But they go to mass because adoring the Blessed Sacrament feels spiritually sufficient. But those not receiving communion, like those receiving from the tabernacle, are not fully participating in the sacrifice of the mass.

### What is expected

Here is what the General Instruction on the Roman Missal says: "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, so that even by means of the signs Communion may stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated" (85).

Not just the priest himself, but concelebrants too must receive communion consecrated at the same mass. The General Instruction is not clear on this. It says during its presentation of concelebration that "the principal celebrant takes a host consecrated in the same Mass" (243). This repeats the instruction from a mass with one priest celebrant (157). Then it says that concelebrants take the Body of Christ "from the altar" (242). But if hosts from the tabernacle have been placed on the altar during the Lamb of God, may the concelebrants receive from them? In 2004 the Vatican clarified this in *Redemptionis sacramentum*, which says that the communion of the concelebrants proceeds "always using hosts consecrated at the same Mass" (98).

The reason is that the priest who is offering the sacrifice consumes the fruits of the same sacrifice, and thus completes it. But all the faithful belong to the common priesthood of Jesus Christ by reason of their baptism. A biblical verse much loved by the fathers of the Second Vatican Council made this clear: "you are 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises' of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says, "Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the nature of the liturgy itself, and to which the Christian people, 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people' (1 Peter 2:9; cf. 4-5) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism." That obligation includes their priestly participation at mass, offering sacrifice with the ordained priest, and, according to the General Instruction, ideally, sharing communion from that sacrifice along with him as well.

One way the priest signifies this is to share the broken bread with others. The General Instruction says, "it is desirable that the Eucharistic bread... be fashioned in such a way that the Priest at Mass with the people is truly able to break it into parts and distribute these to at least some of the faithful." Yet we frequently see priests perform the rubrics of the preconciliar mass. They take the consecrated host and break it in two. Then they break off another small part and drop it into the chalice. Then they hold up the two remaining parts, concealing the broken piece and announce, "Behold the Lamb of God." It looks as though the Eucharistic bread hasn't been broken at all. Then they place one half of the host on top of the other half, eat them both, and consume the complete contents of the chalice. Such a priest has shared nothing of the broken bread with the faithful in spite of the directions of the missal. If he does not offer communion under both kinds, he's not sharing the common cup with them either. Even when receiving communion from the altar, it is hard for the faithful to see that they are sharing a common loaf when the priest eats all the broken parts by himself.

Many people pay scant attention to the corporal, the square cloth placed on the altar for the liturgy of the eucharist. Some servers, deacons and priests set the chalice and paten on the corporal as soon as they open it up, but the Order of Mass asks the priest to set the vessels there after the dialogue, "Blessed are you Lord God of all creation." The corporal is the area designated for the sacrifice of the mass. Yet some parishes leave the corporal on the altar 24/7, as though its function is decorative. Many parishes also use the corporal for exposition and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament as the resting place for the monstrance. But the liturgical books never call for it. The corporal is only used for the sacrifice of the mass. You may think that there is no difference between the body of Christ on the altar at mass and the body of Christ in the tabernacle, but the corporal thinks there is. If it is not the place for the monstrance, it is probably not the place for a ciborium from the tabernacle either.

The location of the tabernacle has provoked many opinions and arguments. Some people feel that the tabernacle belongs in the center of the back wall of the sanctuary, highly visible, because it is the most important part of a church. But the General Instruction says, "The altar should occupy a place where it is truly the center toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns" (300). The tabernacle, the same instruction says, may be located "either in the sanctuary, apart from the altar of celebration," or "in some chapel suitable for the private adoration and prayer of the faithful" (315). The tabernacle is not integral to the celebration of the mass. The missal never envisions that anyone is receiving communion from the tabernacle, never encourages it, seems to be aware that it's going on, and asks that it be avoided.

Musicians often choose for communion a song about the Body and Blood of Christ. The missal recommends communion antiphons for daily mass, but very few of them have anything to do with communion. A number of them pertain instead to the gospel, and in some cases, the communion antiphon quotes the gospel of the same mass. Thus the communion of the faithful is an expression of the gospel, a way that the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the eucharist

combine. The return of the gospel at communion implies that the good news proclaimed is now the good news received, and that those who intend to put the gospel into action do so first by receiving communion. Communion is not just a pious exercise; it is mission food.

At the end of communion, the priest may put the leftover hosts in the tabernacle. The communion song “is prolonged for as long as the Sacrament is being administered to the faithful” (86) - not until the hosts are put away. Yet in many of our parishes, the cue to change posture from kneeling to sitting is when the tabernacle door clangs shut. The General Instruction never uses the word “clang”. Communion is over when communion is over. Communion may be followed by a silent period of thanksgiving, but we have sandwiched between the reception of communion and the reposition of the leftover hosts a brief period of adoration, before the Blessed Sacrament is secured in the tabernacle.

The same paragraph of the General Instruction says that one purpose of the communion song is “to express the spiritual union of the communicants by means of the unity of their voices” (86). The prayer after communion also presumes that the communicants are praying for future benefits. The liturgy presumes that all present are receiving communion, that all the communicants are singing the communion song, and that all those answering “Amen” to the prayer after communion are doing so because they just received communion, consecrated at the mass, the fruit of the sacrifice that they have also made.

Most Catholics know that they are obliged to go to Sunday mass. They may not know that Canon Law obliges them not just to be there, but to “participate” at Sunday mass (1247). Being there isn’t enough. When Pope Pius X first coined the term “active participation” in his motu proprio *Tra le sollecitudini*, he said that the faithful assemble to participate actively “in the most holy mysteries,” meaning, “coming to communion.” No participation is fuller, more active, or more conscious than that.

In his book *Called to Participate*, Mark Searle stressed that there were two liturgical movements in the last century. One brought the mass to the people, and the other brought the people to the mass. To bring the mass to the people, the words went into vernacular languages and the priest faced the people. To bring the people to the mass, the faithful put aside their devotional practices and focused on the eucharist. Rosaries, devotions to the saints and prayer books all have their place in Catholic piety, but not during the celebration of the mass. The liturgical movement encouraged people to get excited about the eucharist. Some Catholics have embraced these movements wholeheartedly, but others still cling to pieties. Who can blame them when their communion may come from the tabernacle? The tabernacle becomes in their minds the place from which they are fed, the place that deserves their reverence before, during and after the mass. The altar is right in front of them, but it appears to be the altar of the priest, not their own altar of sacrifice.

In some churches, the candles and cross stand on the altar between the priest and the people, as though the altar were the priest’s alone. The General

Instruction permits candles on it as long as they do not block the view of the faithful (307). The altar belongs to everyone.

### **What is influential**

The post-Vatican II liturgy strove to keep eucharistic piety and eucharistic celebration in proper balance, but some pious devotions have exercised more influence than eucharistic theology. The eucharistic prayer, for example, includes a moment of adoration during the consecration when the priest shows the host and chalice to the people. He genuflects in adoration each time, and then he resumes the prayer. Prior to the council the priest genuflected before and after showing each of the elements, and the ringing of bells was obligatory. When every mass was in Latin and the priest recited the eucharistic prayer in a low voice with his back to the people, a Catholic's primary moment of engagement in the prayer was this adoration of the host and the chalice. The prayer was called the canon. Now, it is more properly called the eucharistic prayer; that is, a prayer of thanksgiving. The whole prayer is important, not just the moment of consecration. The priest recites it in the vernacular in a loud voice facing the people. They are to pray the entire prayer of thanksgiving silently with him. It is not called the adoration prayer; it is the eucharistic prayer. The bells are optional; parishes that have discontinued their use are not denying the moment of consecration; they are emphasizing the importance of the entire prayer.

The bishops of the United States have made standing the posture for receiving communion, but they permit individual communicants to kneel. The bishops also ask that the sign of reverence before communion be a bow of the head. Some communicants do more: they bow from the waist or genuflect before receiving communion. Some priests have installed communion rails and require all communicants to kneel. These practices are not in keeping with the direction of our bishops, and they can focus overmuch on devotion to the real presence of Christ rather than to the sacrifice and communion of the mass. Such devotions can be equally satisfied by communion from the tabernacle.

At communion time, some of the faithful, including communion ministers, treat the tabernacle as though it were holier than the communion from the altar. Some ministers, upon receiving a ciborium or chalice from the priest turn to the tabernacle, make a bow, and then go to their station. Apparently they believe that what they are holding has less value than what remains in the tabernacle - even if the tabernacle is now empty. Some of the faithful, after receiving communion, immediately bow or genuflect to the tabernacle while still swallowing, or they go immediately to the Blessed Sacrament chapel in order to pray there. They have just received communion, but their actions indicate that they believe Christ is really present somewhere else. Somehow they have learned this false teaching at mass.

After I discontinued communion from the tabernacle at daily mass in one parish, a communion minister complained to me. The previous priest had asked him to bring communion from the tabernacle to the altar during the Lamb of God, and that short journey had become a prayerful moment of faith for him. When I

started serving everyone communion from the altar, I was denying him an important moment in his daily spiritual life. Carrying the Blessed Sacrament was more important than receiving communion.

Our practice of giving Catholics communion from the tabernacle at mass has had a devastating impact on some reforms of the council, creating confusion in the minds of the faithful over the meaning of communion in the sacrifice of the mass.

One of my parishioners once posted on social media a digitally altered photo of the parish church encouraging people to come to mass. The caption read, "Blessed are those called to the Supper of the Lamb," but the rays of light showing the source of communion came not from the altar but from the tabernacle. It showed clearly the understanding of the mass that many Catholics still have 50 years after the council: the altar belongs to the priest. The people get communion from the tabernacle.

At times a sacristan will speak to me before mass about the meager number of hosts in the paten. He or she has set out only a few for me to consecrate, and informs me that I should give communion to the rest of the faithful from previously consecrated hosts. The reason I have heard more than once is this articulation of eucharistic theology: "Father, the tabernacle is overflowing." Now, that may mean that a ciborium is now two-thirds full. Conversely, if the supply gets too low, the sacristan will panic and have me consecrate more than enough for mass, so that the supply can be restored. But the next day the number of hosts is overflowing, and they want me to consecrate only a few. It's as though the point of the mass is to manage the correct supply in the tabernacle.

### **What is at stake**

At stake is a misreading of the role of the people in the celebration of the mass. Many Catholics think the highlights of the mass are the consecration and communion. Whether they receive communion from the altar or from the tabernacle does not matter to them, as long as they are participating in the real presence of Christ. They are coming for an adoration service and a disconnected communion service. But the mass is designed to be neither one of these. It is a sacrifice. It is a participation in the self-offering of Jesus to the Father. We come to mass offering the sacrifice of our lives - our deeds of charity, our words of patience, our inconvenient kindnesses, our financial gifts - and we hope that God is pleased with these. We offer our sacrifice together with the sacramental offering of Jesus on the cross. We know that the Father is pleased with the sacrifice of his only-begotten Son; we don't know if the Father is pleased with the sacrifice of us his children by adoption. Still, we offer our sacrifices with the bread and wine; the bread and wine are consecrated on the altar, and they are returned to us, the fruit of the very sacrifice that we have offered this day, strength for the sacrifice of the week that is to come. A true celebration of the mass involves a participation in the eucharistic sacrifice. The priest is obliged to receive communion from it in order to make the point complete; the people



should be receiving the same communion from the same sacrifice for the same reason.

This weekend we are mindful of the sacrifice of two alumni of Conception Seminary. The Distinguished Service Award will go posthumously to Brian Bergkamp, who lost his life trying to save another person drowning. Another alumnus, Father Stanley Rother, will be beatified tomorrow in Oklahoma City because of his steadfast service to the people of Guatemala in times of greatest danger. Father Stanley was killed out of hatred for the faith. Both these alumni lived the spirit of sacrifice that the liturgy strives to imbue in each one of us. We all offer sacrifices every day of our lives, but we do not always connect them to the eucharistic prayer when we offer them to God in anticipation of receiving communion from the very altar of sacrifice.

### What to do

The solution to the problem of giving Catholics communion from the tabernacle is not so difficult once people have realized the meaning of the mass.

Sacristans can do a better job of counting heads and setting out an appropriate number of hosts and vessels of wine at the beginning of mass. They may adjust the quantities during the Liturgy of the Word as the size of the congregation settles. It may take a while, but good sacristans can learn this skill.

The priest can use a host large enough to break into several pieces in order to share it with others and strengthen the notion that not just he but all are receiving communion from the sacrifice being offered.

At communion time, the ciborium may remain in the tabernacle, and all receive communion from the bread consecrated at that mass. If a ciborium comes from there, savvy faithful could switch communion lines to avoid it.

Occasionally, the tabernacle will be overflowing. Perhaps once a month, the practical answer is to serve people communion from the tabernacle. But it should not be necessary at every mass, every day.

Musicians can choose communion music that focuses more on the gospel than on the eucharist. This may strengthen the notion that communion is not merely about quiet adoration; it leads to evangelization, mission and service.

Communion music may end when the last communicants have received. Then all may be seated in quiet thanksgiving as the remaining hosts are secured. The purification of vessels can take place at the credence table to preserve the focus on the purpose of the altar: not the search for crumbs and droplets, but the celebration of sacrifice and communion.

The placement of the corporal can be restricted to its proper usage - always during the liturgy of the eucharist, and never outside it. The corporal should help people realize that something special is taking place - the sacramental sacrifice of Christ and his people, and the communion of the people in the body and blood of Christ.

**All should come to mass ready to offer their sacrifice. They reflect on the sacrifices that they have offered in the week, and they place these metaphorically upon the altar together with the bread and wine.**

**A more careful management of bread and wine will keep the tabernacle from overflowing. Otherwise, parishes use the tabernacle in a way that was never intended: the source for communion during mass. Far better is to have hearts overflowing, so that they may serve as God intends: the source for charity and sacrifice. Those hearts are best fed with communion from the altar.**