

# Commissioning Communion Ministers

*A vital role in the parish community*

By PAUL TURNER

Before new Communion ministers begin serving the local community, it is fitting for a priest to commission them in the presence of the assembled faithful whom they will serve. Chapter 63 of the Book of Blessings includes orders of commissioning both within Mass and within a celebration of the word of God.

Although many Communion ministers begin their ministry without a formal commissioning, the Vatican encourages a blessing for this purpose. In 1997, several Vatican offices coauthored a statement “On Certain Questions on Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest.” Section 1 of paragraph 8 states that a member of the faithful “may be deputed by the diocesan bishop, using the appropriate form of blessing for these situations, to act as an extraordinary minister to distribute Holy Communion.” The ceremony in the Book of Blessings unquestionably qualifies.

The blessing is most effective when it takes place within a regularly scheduled Sunday liturgy when the newly-commissioned ministers may then serve.

The Book of Blessings describes the role of those to be commissioned. Many Communion ministers enter this service thinking that they will just be assisting the priest and deacon at Mass. However, the purpose of their ministry is broader. When introducing the prayer of the faithful (universal prayer), the priest presents the candidates to the people. He explains that their ministry encompasses three areas:

- ❖ Administering the Eucharist
- ❖ Taking Communion to the sick
- ❖ Giving it as viaticum to the dying.

This may surprise some ministers — and some priests. In the view of the Book of Blessings, each Communion minister has all three responsibilities, not just one. A deacon also has three responsibilities: He assists in the liturgy, preaches and does charity. He is not ordained for one or two of these, but for all three. This composite constitutes his identity, expressed in his various ministries.

The same is true of extraordinary ministers of holy Communion. They are commissioned not only for Mass, but also for bringing Communion to the sick and to the dying.

Ministers, therefore, need basic training in all these areas. Some publishers release user-friendly booklets that lay out the ceremony for bringing Communion to the sick. These help a lay minister visiting a hospital or a home to lead the prayer service that includes Communion.

Bringing Communion to the dying is a more delicate ministry. “Last rites” is one of the most misunderstood expressions in the Catholic Church. Catholics requesting

confession or anointing need a priest, but any Communion minister may bring Communion to the dying. Viaticum is the most important of the last rites, and a priest need not be present.

Canon 921 §1 says that Christians in danger of death should receive holy Communion as viaticum. It does not use the expression “last rites.” It does not say that such Christians should receive anointing. Dying Christians need viaticum. The next canon says that viaticum should not be delayed but administered to the sick while they are fully conscious. Any priest can bear testimony of misinformed families who wait until the person they love is near death before contacting the priest for the first time. If the patient is unconscious, the priest probably cannot administer viaticum. Such families think that they are calling in the nick of time. But they are too late.

Communion ministers can help in this important ministry. If a priest is unavailable, they may bring the body and blood of Christ to the dying when the person is still able to renew baptismal promises and receive Communion in faith.

All of this is implied in the commissioning of ministers. The service includes an examination of the candidates. They express their resolve to undertake this new office and to administer the Eucharist with care and reverence. Then the priest offers a prayer of blessing. The intentions of the universal prayer follow, and these may include petitions for the new ministers. The priest concludes the intercessions with one more oration for the new ministers.

If convenient, the new ministers then assist in the distribution of Communion at the Mass of their commissioning. They immediately share this important ministry of the church.

The church needs Communion ministers to keep the distribution from becoming excessively long, or when a priest or deacon is impeded by sickness or old age. They may be designated for service indefinitely or for a period of time. In case of real necessity, a priest may bless new Communion ministers on the spot for a single Mass when the need is great and ministers are absent.

In general, Communion ministers help the smooth flow of the liturgy of the Mass and signal the diversity of ministries alive within the church. They help the church fittingly administer pastoral care and liturgical integrity.

Paul Turner is pastor of Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Kansas City, Missouri. A priest of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, he holds a doctorate in sacred theology from Sant’ Anselmo in Rome. His books, articles, talks and blog can be found at [www.PaulTurner.org](http://www.PaulTurner.org).