

HOLY COMMUNION AND CATHOLICISM:

Recently, the discussion of who can receive communion at a Catholic Church came up while I was having a meal with some pastors of non-Catholic churches in our area. Someone mentioned that one of the members of their parish had gone to a Catholic Church for mass and had “been denied communion” and was, afterwards, very upset.

I felt bad that this fellow Christian – from a Protestant congregation – felt bad. But I also thought that maybe they, and their pastor, needed a little bit of understanding as to why Catholics do what they do about communion.

SO, FIRST, JUST A BIT OF SPECIFIC INFO: The Catholic Church is officially in communion – that is, their members can go to the sacraments, including receiving holy communion at mass, with the following churches -- all the different varieties of the Orthodox Church -- Greek, Russian, etc., and a few other smaller churches like “The Church of the East” and the “Polish National Church.” This is because these other churches are **SO SIMILAR** in their beliefs about holy communion **AND OTHER BELIEFS**, that our church feels that their members can receive our communion. Not all these other churches, by the way, do encourage their own members to go to Catholic Churches (and vice versa) for the Eucharist, however.

Also, in some dioceses in certain parts of the world (for example, in southern Africa) some other churches which have a somewhat similar belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist (Anglican, Lutheran, etc.) are given official permission to receive communion at weddings, funerals, baptisms, etc.

Also, if people have no access to their own minister (an example might be a nursing home resident) there are times when the Church will allow non-Catholics to receive communion, though this is handled delicately.

It is a challenge, though, for a Catholic, who makes the main event of their faith be the one thing Christ asked his disciples to do the night before he died on the cross: To gather for the Lord’s Supper/the mass.

Because the beliefs of some about the Eucharist can be so different. Some

churches simply say that their use of bread and wine at Sunday service is just that: Bread and wine (or grape juice) used to REMEMBER that Jesus shared the same at the Last Supper with his disciples.

The beliefs of Lutherans and Anglicans are much closer to the Catholic/Orthodox/Coptic/Armenian, etc. position, but they also are different: And it is good to make sure we understand that Catholic/Greek (and other) Orthodox beliefs about the Eucharist do differ from those of the Anglicans and Lutherans.

The Catholic and the belief of the other older churches (various Orthodox, the Copts, Armenians, etc.) is TRANSUBSTANTIATION: That the host/bread is CHANGED INTO THE BODY OF JESUS in a permanent fashion at the mass.

Lutherans, though, stress the PRESENCE OF JESUS IN THE HOST/BREAD during the church service itself, but not, necessarily, afterwards. I have a Catholic priest friend who recently was surprised to see some Lutherans putting a bunch of hosts that had been blessed at a Lutheran (ELCA) Eucharist, back into plastic bags and back in a storage box after the service was over. This belief (adhered to by Martin Luther) is called CONSUBSTANTIATION – which means that Christ is present DURING THE SERVICE but not afterwards.

Some “High Church” Anglicans adhere to the idea of TRANSUBSTANTIATION. But one of the most recognized/accepted summations of Anglican belief on “The Real Presence” can be found in “The Thirty-Nine Articles” from a few hundred years ago in England, in which the ancient Anglican community stated that Christ was present in the Eucharistic meal, in a real way, but which rejected the notion of TRANSUBSTANTIATION. This teaching of Christ’s presence at the mass was left a little open-ended and talked about Christ being present in each person, etc. The teaching has been open to much interpretation over the years because it is, indeed, a bit open-ended. But what it specifically did state is that Anglicans do not believe in transubstantiation.

So, for Catholics, taking communion in a Catholic church is a little bit complicated because, in the end, each person who comes forward to receive is shown the HOST or the CHALICE, and the person being given

communion is told, by the priest or deacon or lay minister, that this is "THE BODY OF CHRIST" or "THE BLOOD OF CHRIST" and they are asked to then respond, publicly and for all to hear, "AMEN" which means "I BELIEVE IT." So, this is a PUBLIC ACT OF FAITH for Catholics.

However, the Catholic mindset is not to ever embarrass anyone while in the communion line and I have never seen a bishop ever stop someone in the communion line to ask them if they were of the right denomination to receive communion before they gave them communion: Not once in my life. Even Pope John Paul II once gave communion to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair (at the time, an Anglican) while he was at the Vatican. Though maybe he knew that Tony was thinking of becoming a Catholic (which he did a few years later.) Still, I am sure that the Pope knew that Tony Blair, at the time, was not a Catholic, and he did not deny him communion in a public or embarrassing way. So, I am not espousing that priests, deacons or lay people start asking for "I.D." before they give people communion!!!!

In the end, I would liken the Catholic stance on Communion to be akin to how a Protestant church, which believed in the Bible as God's word, would not want anyone who didn't believe in the Bible the way they did (let's say, someone thought the Bible was "just a nice book but not really inspired by God") to publicly preach from their pulpit or to teach their children at Sunday School.

I think that's the same mind-set Catholics are using with regard to people taking communion at mass. It's a public statement where the person receiving is shown the host and the cup and is told "The Body of Christ" and "The Blood of Christ" and they respond "Amen" (I believe it) each time.

So Catholics would expect someone taking communion in a Catholic Church share our faith in the same way a Protestant Church would expect someone preaching from the pulpit or teaching Sunday school would need to share their faith.

Peace to all!!! Fr. Andy