

# Eucharistic Hospitality

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B .

**T**HE *CODE OF CANON LAW* governs the practical aspects of Catholic life. One interesting canon (i.e., law) is number 844, §4, which describes the conditions under which a Protestant may receive sacramental ministry from a Catholic priest. The conditions are stringent:

If the danger of death is present or if, in the judgment of the diocesan bishop or conference of bishops, some other grave necessity urges it, Catholic ministers administer these sacraments [Reconciliation, Holy Communion, and the Anointing of the Sick] licitly also to other Christians not having full communion with the Catholic Church, who cannot approach a minister of their own community and who seek such on their own accord, provided that they manifest Catholic faith in respect to these sacraments and are properly disposed.<sup>1</sup>

My first concern is with the ambiguity of the requirement that the non-Catholic Christian must “manifest Catholic faith” in the Eucharist. (In practice, that non-Catholic would be Protestant since the Orthodox Church does not allow intercommunion.) Faith in the Eucharist is the very essence of Catholicism. It involves the power of the Bishop by the words of consecration to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. But there is more. Our understanding of Communion includes the Bishop’s power both to admit people to the Holy Communion (through baptism or confession) and to exclude them (by excommunication or because of mortal sin), and also authoritatively to proclaim the Gospel in Scripture and in his preaching. All of these instance the doctrine of apostolic succession<sup>2</sup> with immediate implications regarding a visible Church and the role of the papacy in assuring the unity of the Church throughout the world. These truths, and many others, are so bound up in the “Catholic faith” about the Eucharist that anyone who denies any one of them cannot claim to “manifest” that faith. To what extent must the full range of these elements of Catholic belief be

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<sup>1</sup> The *Code* may be consulted at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_INDEX.HTM)

<sup>2</sup> “Apostolic succession” is the teaching that the bishops are the successors of the Apostles by an unbroken chain of ordinations.

manifested by a Protestant who, on his deathbed and far from the ministrations of his own clergy, asks for viaticum?

Another issue raised by this canon is the effect of intercommunion on the sacramental life of Catholics. Our belief is that baptism empowers its recipient to keep the commandments; “Help us by the prayers of the Virgin Mary to live in your presence without sin.”<sup>3</sup> There is thus built into Catholicism the requirement that a Catholic be without sin when he comes to Holy Communion. The history of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is an eloquent witness to this fact, as is the reluctance of devout Catholics in the past to receive Communion without sacramental absolution, even when no mortal sin had been committed. The Eucharistic liturgy itself confirms my statement about baptismal empowerment for, from the opening penitential rite to the recitation of the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,” the Mass is studded with effective appeals for forgiveness. One striking, if unremarked, instance is the prayer the priest says as he kisses the lectionary after reading the Gospel: “May our sins be blotted out by the words of the Gospel.” Canon 844 seems to allow a Protestant in the state of serious sin to receive Communion when a Catholic similarly burdened could not. Consider, as a specific case, a divorced and remarried Protestant, who is allowed to participate fully in worship when he goes to his own church. What is to prevent him, whose conscience is clear, from receiving the Eucharistic as long as he gives an affirmative answer to a general question about Catholic Eucharistic teaching while a Catholic in the same state could not receive?

Similarly, the canon would on occasion admit non-Catholics to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Again, a theological conundrum presents itself: to what body of believers will the Protestant be reconciled? For we can hardly require him to accept our belief that sin separates him from “the” Church even as it separates him from God. Furthermore, should the priest, to be logical, have every Protestant who wants to receive Communion go to confession?

One phrase in the canon—“or some other grave necessity”—has encouraged the odd bishop to be accommodating to non-Catholics whenever they might feel a need for Holy Communion at a wedding, say, or a funeral. A casualness with regard to the Eucharist is inevitable, especially as Catholics themselves can give the impression that they come to Communion routinely, as they move forward row after row. Furthermore, in such dioceses little attention will be given to the absolute ban on Catholics’ partaking of the Lord’s Supper at Protestant services. I see another danger here, too. A readiness to assume that Protestants can have a

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<sup>3</sup> Opening prayer, feast of the Immaculate Conception,

Catholic understanding of the Eucharist without accepting the necessity of a hierarchical Church could well lead a Catholic to look for a valid Eucharist in Protestant celebrations of the Lord's Supper.

Rereading what I have written, I see that I have made a case for the Orthodox approach rather than the Catholic. And it is in fact much easier to argue for a complete ban on intercommunion than to justify an occasional exception. But, since the Church does allow it, we know that there must be occasions when it is legitimate. The conditions, however, that govern such reception can be lax or strict; and they will be one or the other according to the liturgical sensitivity and theological acumen of the bishop and his clergy. The theologian, too, has his contribution to make. He must reflect on the matter in its full historical context and address the real difficulties represented by this departure from the traditional Catholic understanding of significance of the Eucharist.☛