

Ministering Communion

We've all encountered curt switchboard operators now and then. No matter how cordially you ask for the person you want, their "One moment" is cold and impersonal. It's understandably. They handle one call after another and it can get monotonous.

But what a difference when you have a switchboard operator who sounds more personal. The phrase may be the same—"One Moment"—but it is a little less hurried and there is some warmth in it.

The same difference can exist among ministers of the Eucharist. The exchange is very brief, but the contrast can be like night and day.

Actually, the brevity of the exchange can be deceptive. A great deal of interpersonal contact takes place at the moment of Holy Communion. There is eye contact, a statement of deep faith, a response, the giving and receiving of a precious gift. All in about four seconds.

We tend to think that any good practicing Catholic can distribute Communion properly. Not so! It takes skill to minister the Eucharist. That may sound overstated, but it's true.

An Experiment

I would like you to stop right now and try something. Imagine you are a minister of the Eucharist. Pretend that you are giving bread to one person. It seems simple – but let's see how many steps are involved and, more importantly, how much happens between you and the one receiving Communion.

Take the host and hold it before the person. This should be expressive in itself, not hurried or routine. You are holding something precious.

Look this person in the eye. This is important. You don't have to look intently, but you want to convey reverence and warmth.

Say aloud, "The Body of Christ." This is the very heart of our faith, probably the biggest single reason why we are Catholic. Say it very slowly and quietly, with as much meaning as you can pour into it. "[This is] the Body of Christ."

Now you must receive the person's "Amen." (This is a very important part of the Eucharistic ministry and it is often left out.) Look carefully and with full attention at this imaginary person as you await the word.

Amen is not simply a password. It is a statement that he or she believes everything you believe about this bread. The *Amen* is addressed to you. You are joined together in profound mutual understanding of what is before you, each summoning in that moment the very deepest faith – as a bride and groom summon great meaning when they say, “I do.”

You place the bread in the other’s hand—not as though you were handing change across the counter, but with the realization that you are giving something very precious. Pretend that you are handing the person a treasured object, perhaps a jewel given to you by your great-grandmother. Your hand moves deliberately, not quickly, and you set the host on the outstretched hand with a care that cannot be described or prescribed. It comes from within you.

Now look at him or her once more, a very knowing look that nonverbally speaks volumes in mutual faith and gratitude. This is another of the actions that is overlooked (the minister usually is already looking down and reaching for the next host), but it truly adds a great deal.

All of the above ministerial actions take place when giving Communion to one person. Then you begin all over with the next person, and the next—and you do it a hundred times,

That takes a lot of skill. It takes concentration. It takes verbal and nonverbal expressiveness. It takes practice. And it takes much love.

I am not saying it should be dramatic or overdone. It should simply be real and expressive.

The person who truly ministers the Eucharist to a hundred people should be tired at the end. It takes a lot out of one.

If all the ministers of Communion (priest too) did this, it would have long range effects. Their role is not to “get the hosts to people.” You could have automatic dispensers do that. Their role is to *draw faith* from the people. It is really a share in the ministry of preaching, teaching, leading.

Some Suggestions

If I were a pastor, I would meet periodically with the ministers of the Eucharist. I would teach them some history and theology of the Eucharist. I would schedule time for us to practice with one another and discuss ways of doing it better. What, for instance, do you do with youngsters who are beginning to move away before you’ve even given them the host? Or adults who snatch it from you? Or teenagers who feel awkward about any display of religion? If, in a given parish, we talked these things over and made a concentrated effort, it would have its effects in the course of time.

The moment of communion, it seems to me, is not the time to try to “correct” some of these things or, worse yet, to scold people directly or indirectly. But we could help by the way in which we minister the Eucharist.

For instance, when a youngster is hurried or careless, I make a very special effort to look him (kindly) in the eye as I hold the host in front of him. And I say, as expressively as I can, “*This is the Body of Christ.*” Then, with as much care as I can convey, I set the host gently and reverently in his hand.

Doing this once won’t change his carelessness, but doing it repeatedly will have its effects. Example is still the best way to teach.

Besides the actual distribution of Communion, Eucharistic ministers convey their faith publicly by the way in which they approach the altar, carry the hosts, take care of the sacred vessels, genuflect, and so forth.

When it comes to reverence, little things mean the most. Small gestures often speak more powerfully than grand ones. My mother has a watch that my father (now deceased) gave her when they were married in 1921. It is not surrounded by grand display. But if you ever saw her handle it, you would know that it is cherished. I couldn’t tell you exactly what she does. They are little things. But no one would miss the message.

Some fear that the use of lay ministers will lessen our reverence for the Eucharist. The use of more ministers of the Eucharist actually provides an opportunity for much *more* reverence. We can now take the time needed to be reverent; no one need feel rushed at tis sacred moment. We should never be reluctant to have a large number of special ministers. No one should ever be the least bit rushed in giving out or receiving Communion.

A word should be said here about logistics. It is frustrating when people are stepping all over one another or crowded together for Communion. If we put our heads to work and experiment, we could come up with a comfortable system of giving Communion in just about any church. This is even more necessary now that we are able to receive under the form of both bread and wine.

This pragmatic aspect of the Communion rite should not be overlooked. Priests, ministers of the Eucharist, ushers, members of the worship commission should get together and work very hard to find a way for Communion distribution to go as smoothly as possible.

Perhaps this could be summarized by saying that people should not feel as though they were dining in a strange place. This is their home, their supper table. We who minister to them are table-waiters. And waiters, as you know, have to take the practical aspects very seriously if they are going to do their job well.

I disagree with those who would simply choose volunteers at each Mass to give out Communion (except in emergencies). True, one person is just as worthy as the next to do this. But it is not a question of who is worthy or not worthy. It is a question of *ministry*. I've said it before: Ministry requires skill, practice and aptitude.