

Guidelines

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney



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Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. WHO ARE EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION?	1
3. WHO CAN SERVE AS AN EXTRAORDINARY MINISTER OF HOLY COMMUNION?	2
4. HOW ARE EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION APPOINTED AND COMMISSIONED?	3
5. WHAT SHOULD EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION DO WHEN DISTRIBUTING HOLY COMMUNION?	4
6. WHAT SHOULD EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION NOT DO WHEN DISTRIBUTING HOLY COMMUNION?	5
7. HOLY COMMUNION FOR THE SICK	6
8. SOME SPECIFIC QUESTIONS AND MATTERS.....	8
9. CONCLUDING THANKS	10
10. CLASSIFICATION.....	10



1. INTRODUCTION

The Church draws her life from the Eucharist (John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, par. 1) because “in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 1324). The Eucharist is the culmination both of God's action sanctifying the world in Christ, and of the worship the People of God offer to the Father through Him, in the Holy Spirit (cf. CCC 1325). Therefore, the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (CCC 1324) and “the sum and summary of our faith” (CCC 1327).

Being able to partake sacramentally of the Supper of the Lamb is a great gift and privilege, and the community of the Church always receives this gift with humility and gratitude. The Church knows that regular reception of Holy Communion is necessary for her spiritual growth and for the building up the Body of Christ.

In order to facilitate access to Holy Communion to members of Catholic communities in an orderly fashion, the liturgical role of Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion was established in the years following the Second Vatican Council. Distributing Holy Communion to the People of God, both during the Eucharistic celebration, as well as outside of it, is an important and noble service and it should never be taken lightly. It is a ‘holy’ ministry because it brings us into the presence of the Sacrament and builds up the Body of Christ. Liturgical service impels us to a deeper commitment to the Christian life, a richer faith and a more profound urgency to do what is right and good. As selfless, mature service, it requires proper disposition, ongoing training and continual conversion.

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide some theoretical and practical principles that are to be observed when distributing Holy Communion in the Archdiocese of Sydney. These guidelines should be read and understood in light of the official Church documents issued by the Holy See and by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

2. WHO ARE EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION?

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion are lay members of the faithful who help the ordinary ministers of Holy Communion, that is, Bishops, Priests and Deacons, to distribute Holy Communion in situations when there is an insufficient number of ordinary ministers to do this in an orderly fashion. In the context of the celebration of the Mass this would be the case when, due to the lack of sufficient number ordinary ministers the distribution of Holy Communion would be ‘unduly prolonged’ (*Instruction Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 2004, 158). Not every prolongation of the celebration is necessarily ‘undue’, so Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should only exercise their role



when there is an evident risk of the celebration being excessively long, or because of some other need (e.g., the ordinary minister(s) being disabled at that time).

Outside of the Mass, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion exercise their service when there is an insufficient number of ordinary ministers to administer Holy Communion to people who cannot be present at the celebration of the Eucharist due to sickness or some other reasons (e.g. imprisonment).

In the absence of sufficient number of ordinary ministers, acolytes should be the first to carry out this ministry of distributing Holy Communion, both during Mass and outside of it (General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM], 162).

The nature of the service of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion is different to that of ordinary liturgical ministers, both ordained and lay. It is not a service that by its nature and definition belongs to the liturgical celebration, like the office of the presider, deacon, acolyte or reader. It should not be understood as a role that helps the person to ‘actively participate’ in the liturgy, or as a means of getting people involved in the liturgical life of the Church. It should also not be understood as a recognition or a reward for some other service. This ministry is extraordinary (‘outside of the ordinary’), and therefore should be understood as temporary and provisional. At the same time, this service is very valuable and in many cases indispensable, therefore the community of the Church is always grateful to those who are willing to invest their time and effort to help in making the Holy Eucharist available to others.

3. WHO CAN SERVE AS AN EXTRAORDINARY MINISTER OF HOLY COMMUNION?

Every instituted acolyte is, by definition, an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion. Apart from that, other lay members of the faithful may also be appointed to serve in this role. To serve as Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion, a person must:

- Be fully initiated into the life of the Church (baptised, confirmed, regularly attending Mass, validly married [if applicable]).
- Be of strong faith and have a devotion to the Eucharist.
- Be of good moral character and reputation in the community.
- Be at least 18 years old. By way of exception, it is possible for suitable Year 11 and Year 12 students to assist with distributing Holy Communion at school Masses. However, this should happen only in cases where there is an insufficient number of adult ministers.



- Possess the necessary maturity, confidence and other personal traits needed to minister to other people in a kind and welcoming way. The role may include distributing Holy Communion to children, elderly members of the community, people who are disabled, housebound, or imprisoned. Therefore, it is necessary that Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion act in ways that are prayerful, sensitive, and compassionate towards everyone that they serve.
- Maintain a valid and up to date Working with Children Check.

Candidates for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion need to complete a formation course run by the Liturgy Office of the Archdiocese of Sydney as well as any required Professional Standards training. A suitable equivalent of this course may be accepted: the Liturgy Office can be contacted about this for more details.

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should take part in ongoing formation. This includes participating in initiatives organised by their parish and by the Archdiocese. They should also regularly refresh their skills by taking part in training sessions organised by the Liturgy Office. At these sessions they can update their own knowledge and share their experience with others. It is recommended that every active Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion takes a 'refresher course' at least every five years.

The service of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion is not limited to the distribution of Holy Communion at the altar. It also extends to the fostering and promotion of Eucharistic piety among fellow parishioners and people more broadly.

4. HOW ARE EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION APPOINTED AND COMMISSIONED?

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion are appointed by the Parish Priest after a process of discernment. Normally Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion can serve only in the parish for which they are appointed. They might also be asked to assist at certain larger Archdiocesan events.

In the Archdiocese of Sydney, the Archbishop's authority to commission Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion is delegated to Parish Priests.

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion are normally commissioned on Corpus Christi Sunday. The term of their appointment is normally three years and it can be renewed. The rite of blessing and delegation of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion can be found in the Book of Blessings and should be used as the liturgical expression of this delegation. If for some reason it is not possible to carry out the commissioning of Extraordinary



Ministers of Holy Communion on Corpus Christi Sunday, this ceremony should be moved to another Sunday to allow the assembly to witness the candidates taking on this responsibility and privilege.

If the person's appointment is not renewed, they should not serve as Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion.

In exceptional circumstances, a priest may delegate a person to serve as Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion on a one-off basis. This should not be the norm, however if it does happen, the blessing found in the Roman Missal should be used (Appendix III in the Roman Missal).

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion cannot depute anyone else to carry out their duties.

5. WHAT SHOULD EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION DO WHEN DISTRIBUTING HOLY COMMUNION?

- Dress appropriately for the occasion – “Sunday best” is usually sufficient. The clothing should not be extravagant or distracting.
- Follow the parish schedule of service. On the day of their service, they should arrive in advance and indicate their availability to the priest or another person responsible for the service.
- Generally follow the guidelines of the celebrant priest.
- Make sure that their hands are clean.
- Approach the altar at the time when the celebrant is consuming the Eucharist. They should stand at the side of the altar, receive Holy Communion from the celebrant, and then wait to be handed a vessel by him.
- When carrying the vessel, they should cover it with a palm of their hand. They should always have a confident grip of the vessel and make sure that it does not tilt.
- Distribute Holy Communion using the liturgical formulas prescribed by the Church: “The Body of Christ”, “The Blood of Christ”.
- Carry a purificator. When distributing the Precious Blood, the purificator is used to wipe the rim of the chalice before the chalice is turned and offered to the next recipient. Access to a purificator may also be helpful when distributing the Host, especially when it is received on the tongue.
- Be ready to render additional assistance to children, the elderly and the disabled, if required (e.g. to take Holy Communion to a disabled person's seat in the church).



- Remember that the choice of whether to receive the Host on the hand or on the tongue belongs to the person receiving Communion, not to the minister.
- Make sure that Holy Communion is consumed in their presence. Usually the response “Amen” after “The Body of Christ” indicates that the recipient knows the purpose of this rite and will consume the Host. However, at times, a person may attempt to walk away with the Host. In such cases, it is the responsibility of the minister of Holy Communion, ordinary or extraordinary, to make sure that the Host is either consumed or returned. This should always happen in a way that would be respectful towards the Blessed Sacrament, but also towards the person in question who may not be a Catholic and simply not know what to do during the Rite of Communion.

6. WHAT SHOULD EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION NOT DO WHEN DISTRIBUTING HOLY COMMUNION?

- They should not enter the church with the entrance procession, unless they serve as acolytes. They should be sitting with the rest of the congregation, preferably near the altar, for ease of movement.
- They should not approach the altar before the Communion of the celebrant (GIRM, 162).
- They should not ‘self-serve’ at the altar, but need to be administered Holy Communion by an ordinary minister.
- They should not distribute Holy Communion to other Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion – all Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should be served by the celebrant priest.
- They should not be bringing the Hosts from the tabernacle or deposit them back there, unless the ordinary minister is unable to do it himself due to the distance of the tabernacle from the sanctuary, his advanced age, etc.
- They should not take the vessels with Holy Communion from the altar themselves – they must receive it from the priest. After they have finished distributing Communion, they should return the vessel to the priest.
- Generally they should receive Communion under both kinds only when the whole congregation receives under both kinds.
- They should not assist with the purification of vessels since this rite is reserved for ordained ministers and acolytes (GIRM, 279).
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should generally not refuse Holy Communion to anyone who approaches them, unless they have legitimate doubts about the person’s intentions or the level of understanding of the sacrament. This could happen when a non-Catholic person approaches them during the Communion Rite and appears to be confused and unsure about what to do. In such cases, it is



acceptable to politely ask the person whether they are Catholic, or whether they have received their First Communion. If they have not, Holy Communion should not be given to them, and a simple formula such as “May God be with you”, without any hand gesture, may be used (more on this in section 8).

7. HOLY COMMUNION FOR THE SICK

It is necessary that Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion possess the necessary maturity and sensitivity that are needed to serve the members of the community who are sick. If they are taking Holy Communion to a hospital, nursing home or other location outside their parish, this should also be with the permission of the local clergy or chaplain.

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should always administer Holy Communion to the sick in consultation with the pastor.

When administering Holy Communion to the sick at home, the proper ritual should be followed. It can be found in *Pastoral Care for the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum* (St Paul’s Publications) or *A Ritual for Laypersons: Rites for Holy Communion and the Pastoral Care of the Sick and Dying* (Liturgical Press).

Administering Holy Communion to the sick at home or in an aged care facility involves more than a social visit. The atmosphere of this visit should always be prayerful and respectful towards the liturgical act that is taking place. In some cases, in order to foster this prayerful atmosphere it may be useful to recite some prayers with the sick person after receiving Holy Communion.

At the same time, sick people who are visited by Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion may be lonely and in need of some company and conversation. If possible, the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should always be ready to talk to the person that they visit, and to spend some time with them. However, to avoid confusion regarding the liturgical character of the visit with the Blessed Sacrament, social interactions such as these should take place outside of the ritual of administering Holy Communion.

In this context, it is appropriate to bring to the sick person a parish bulletin and/or *The Catholic Weekly* and share with them some news from the parish.

The sick person should know in advance that Holy Communion will be administered to them. The person’s family, or the personnel of the facility where they live should also know this and make the necessary preparations to make the visit worthy and dignified.



The following items should be prepared in advance of the visit:

- A white cloth on the table where the pyx with the Holy Eucharist will be placed.
- A crucifix. If no crucifix is available, a holy picture of Our Lady or of a Saint may be used.
- A lit candle.
- A glass of water for the communicant to drink to help to consume the Eucharist.
- The Eucharist should never be placed on a table already prepared for lunch or dinner or for any other purpose.

The Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion needs to ascertain whether the visited person requires the Sacrament of Penance or the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. If so, the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion should inform the priest about this. Some important practical principles that need to be observed include:

- Holy Communion needs to be carried in a pyx that is dedicated exclusively for the Eucharist. No other container can be used.
- At the first visit to the sick person, a new Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion should be accompanied either by the priest or by an experienced Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion who would help them to get to know the layout of the place, the recipient of the sacrament, the family of the person or the personnel working for them, etc.
- Unnecessary conversations or other diversions on the way to the sick person should be avoided.
- The Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion should be able to present a document which demonstrates that they are authorised to administer Holy Communion to the sick in the given aged care facility. Such a document should be issued to them by their parish priest or relevant migrant chaplain.
- If driving to the sick person, listening to secular music or phone conversations should generally be avoided.
- Holy Communion should normally be brought to the sick directly from the church. Bringing Holy Communion home and storing it either there or in any place other than the church is not permitted, except for a serious reason (e.g. the sick person has a medical appointment at the time the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion would otherwise attend).



- Unconsumed Hosts should be immediately returned to the tabernacle in the church. If this is not possible, the remaining Hosts should be consumed by the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion.
- If a Host becomes contaminated, for example when the sick person receives the Eucharist but is unable to swallow it, it needs to be returned to the priest who will place the Host in a suitable container with water. Once the Host is dissolved and loses the appearance of bread, the water will be poured down into the sacrarium or in some other appropriate place.
- If all Hosts from the pyx are consumed, the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion should return the pyx to the church and the pyx should be purified by a priest, a deacon, or an instituted acolyte. If this is not possible, the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion should purify the pyx using water and a small purificator. This water should not be thrown out but should be consumed by the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion.

8. SOME SPECIFIC QUESTIONS AND MATTERS

Mishaps during the administration of Holy Communion

Greatest care should be taken to avoid instances of dropping or mishandling the Sacred Host, or of any particles of it. The same care should be taken to minimise the risk of spilling the Precious Blood.

“If a host or any particle should fall, it is to be picked up reverently. If any of the Precious Blood is spilled, the area where the spill occurred should be washed with water, and this water should then be poured into the sacrarium in the sacristy” (GIRM, 280).

‘Blessings’ during the Rite of Communion

In general terms, the time of reception of Holy Communion is not a time for receiving or imparting blessings. The blessing of the whole congregation takes place shortly after the Rite of Communion at the conclusion of the Mass.

In many parishes a custom has developed where (nearly) all members of the congregation line up in the Communion procession, either to receive Holy Communion, or to receive a blessing. This practice often causes confusion both for those members of the congregation who line up for a blessing, and for the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion themselves who often do not what to do in such cases. This confusion is understandable given that lay people cannot impart liturgical blessings, such a rite is not envisaged by the liturgy, and there is no prescribed formula to follow.



When approached by a person who is looking for a blessing instead of Holy Communion, the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion should not attempt to bless the person by using hand gestures or words that would imply a liturgical blessing. They should simply pray that the person be blessed by God. Given that there is no prescribed rite to be followed in such cases (due to reasons outlined above), a simple statement “May God be with you” or the like may be a possible way to go. Such a statement should not be accompanied by any gesture, but it should be said with a warm and gentle smile. This solution on the one hand avoids giving a false impression of a lay person imparting a liturgical blessing during Mass, but on the other it also does not send away the person in the Communion line “empty handed”.

Communion-plate

Communion-plates are liturgical instruments that were introduced into the Catholic liturgy to minimise the danger of the Sacred Host, or any of its particles, falling to the ground during the distribution of Holy Communion. Communion-plates are held under the chin of the communicant, either by an altar server or by the communicant himself/herself when Communion is received on the tongue.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, par. 118 mentions the Communion-plate among other items that need to be prepared for the celebration of the Eucharist. At the same time, the only other paragraph of the GIRM that mentions the Communion-plate is paragraph 287 which talks about its use in the context of Communion under both kinds distributed by intinction. This has led many liturgists to believe that Communion-plate should be used only for distributing Communion by intinction.

On the other hand, the *Instruction Redemptionis Sacramentum* (2004), 93 simply states that Communion-plate “should be retained, so as to avoid the danger of the sacred host or some fragment of it falling.” The general nature of this statement (the simple “should be retained”), combined with the explanation of the reason for using Communion-plate (protection of fragments) suggests that this recommendation refers not only to distributing Communion by intinction, but to all other cases as well.

Parishes in the Archdiocese of Sydney should carry out their own discernment regarding the most suitable course of action in relation to the use Communion-plate for the distribution of Holy Communion to the faithful.



Intinction

Self-intinction, that is, the practice where the communicant himself/herself dips the Sacred Host into the Precious Blood, is not permitted for the faithful. Only priests concelebrating Mass can receive Communion this way.

The only way that Holy Communion can be distributed by intinction to the faithful is by the ordinary minister dipping the Sacred Host in the Precious Blood and placing it on the tongue of the communicant.

Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament

On certain occasions, in the absence of the priest, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion may assist with the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. This should always take place in consultation with the priest.

The Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion needs to be well trained in the rite of exposition and should carefully follow the prescribed rites found in the book *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass*.

The Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion assisting with the Exposition must make sure that there is always someone present in the church/chapel when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion never impart benediction.

9. CONCLUDING THANKS

The Archdiocese of Sydney expresses its gratitude to those who offer their time and commitment to serve as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. Through their ministry they provide their brothers and sisters in faith with access to the most precious gift that the Lord has left to his Church: the gift of the Eucharist.

10. CLASSIFICATION

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