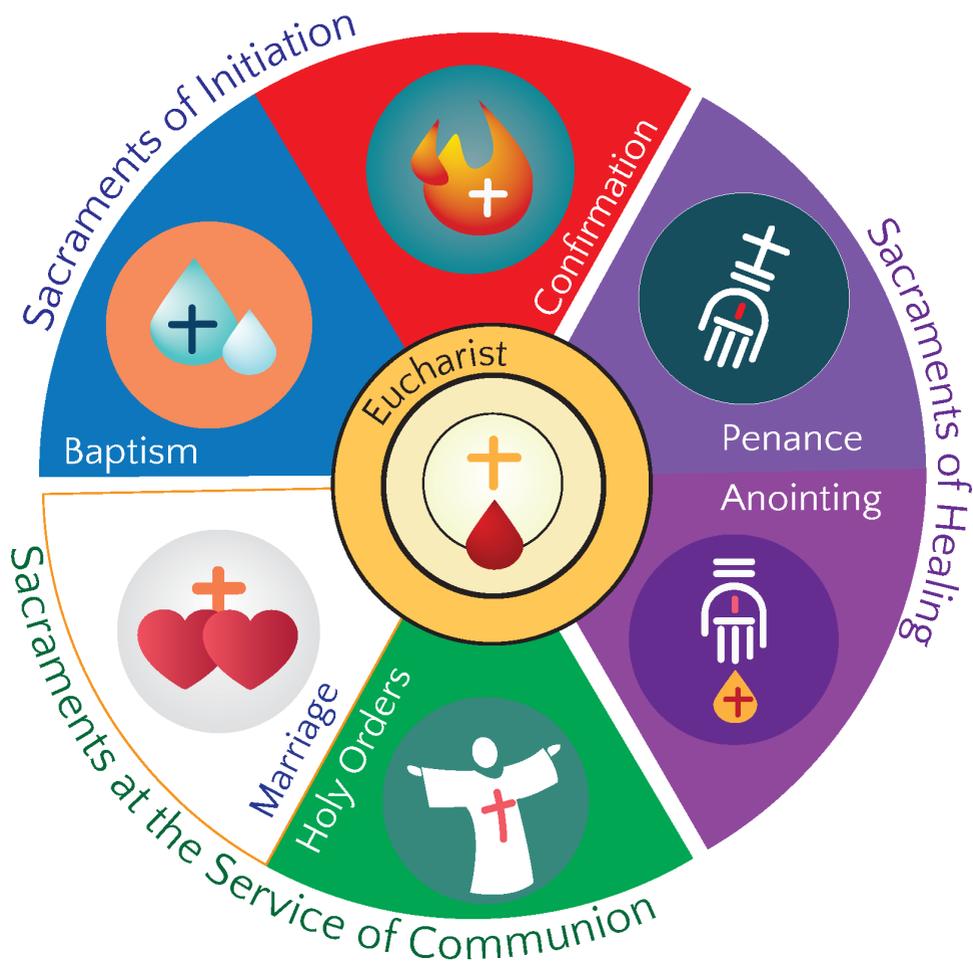


# Handbook for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

The place of the Eucharist  
in the 7 sacraments and Catholic life



## A note on names

You may know this ministry by a different name. Ministers in the past, *usually erroneously*, have been called Special Ministers, Eucharistic Ministers, or Communion Ministers. The official documents of the Church make clear that the proper title is “**Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion.**” The ordained minister, as the presider of the Eucharistic Assembly, is the **ordinary minister** of Holy Communion. But when a large number of people are to receive communion, so that the Communion rite is not unduly long, Extraordinary Ministers are commissioned to serve Christ present in the assembly by ministering his Body and Blood to their brothers and sisters.

*Why does the Eucharist have such an esteemed place in Catholic life?*

- The Eucharist, also known as the Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper, is the central sacrament of the Catholic Church. It is the sacrament in which bread and wine are consecrated by a priest and consumed by the faithful as the body and blood of Jesus Christ.
- Catholics believe that the Eucharist is not just a symbol of Jesus' sacrifice, but that it is the actual body and blood of Jesus, made present through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- The celebration of the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life, and it is the central act of worship in our Church.
- The Eucharist is also a sacrament of unity, as it brings the faithful together in a common act of worship and symbolises the unity of the Church.

## What does the Eucharist mean?

- What we believe about the Eucharist is: that the **bread becomes the Body of Christ** and the **wine becomes the Blood of Christ**
- The word Eucharist means thanksgiving  
- thanksgiving to God for loving us always

- thanksgiving to God for giving us Jesus
- thanksgiving that by dying on the cross and rising again, Jesus took away our sins
- We are told by Jesus that “*God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that all who believe in him may not perish but may have the life of the age to come.*” – John 3:16

Jesus loved us so much he could not stand to be away from us, so in the Eucharist he provides a way to be with us always.

## “Transubstantiation”

A change in the substance of the bread into the body of Jesus with only the accidents of the bread remaining (eg colour, look, taste, smell, feel of bread) – see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1376

*This is okay – but it is based on a philosophical system of thought that no one understands (or really accepts) anymore.*

Perhaps all that we need to know about the Eucharist is what we pray in the Eucharistic Prayer:

May these gifts become **for us**, the body and blood of Christ.

## Beginning in the early church

Those who distribute communion need to know the place of communion in the Sunday Mass.

We begin our reflections on the Eucharist by visiting one era of our rich Christian tradition. There we find that the structure of the celebration of the Eucharist was formed very early in our history. St Justin Martyr around the year 150 AD describes a gathering of Christians on the Lord’s day. He tells us that:

‘On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place. The memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president addresses us and exhorts us to the

imitation of these good things. Then we all stand together and offer prayers'. *First Apology 67*

We notice aspects of this description that are familiar to us today:

– Gathering, Reading, Homily and Prayers.

St Justin continues: 'when we have finished praying, bread, wine, and water are brought up,' and the president then prays and gives thanks according to his ability, and the people give their assent with an 'Amen!' Next the gifts over which the thanksgiving has been spoken are distributed, and everyone shares in them, while they are also sent via the deacons to the absent brothers and sisters'. *First Apology 67*

Again, we can recognise similarities between St Justin's account and our Eucharist today. We notice the Procession of Gifts, the priest celebrant leading the Eucharistic Prayer and the distribution of Holy Communion. Justin also tells us that the consecrated bread was taken from the celebration to those who are sick or absent.

We summarise Justin's outline:

- The Sunday assembly
- Readings, discourse, prayer
- Bread and wine processed, thanksgiving
- Communion is distributed
- Sick visited

Compare this to the structure of our Mass today:

- We gather from far and wide on Sunday
- We hear the Word proclaimed by the readers, listen to the homily and pray for the needs of the local community and the world
- We bring bread, wine and gifts for the poor to the altar and join in offering the sacrifice of thanksgiving
- We come as one body to the table of communion
- We go forth to take communion to the sick and to respect and love one another as Christ.

St Justin's description of the structure of the Eucharist is more familiar to us than it is to those who lived prior to the Second Vatican Council. In many ways we have returned to a more ancient tradition of celebrating Mass.

## People of God

When we come to Mass we gather at God's invitation to exercise our priestly responsibilities as God's people.

The Church reminds us that 'For this people is the People of God, purchased by Christ's Blood, gathered together by the Lord, nourished by his word, the people called to present to God the prayers of the entire human family, a people that gives thanks in Christ for the mystery of salvation by offering his Sacrifice, a people, finally, that is brought together in unity by Communion in the Body and Blood of Christ.'

*General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM] 5*

We are God's people, not through any effort of our own, but through God's gift. We remember that liturgy is Christ's work. We gather in Christ's name to praise and thank God for the gift of salvation won for us by Christ's death and resurrection.

We remember in faith that: "This people, though holy in its origin, nevertheless grows constantly in holiness by conscious, active, and fruitful participation in the mystery of the Eucharist." GIRM 5

Questions to ponder quietly:

- Do I recognise that I am holy?
- Do I recognise that when I arrive at Mass I join with others to form Christ's Body?

Our parish community takes on a special character when it assembles on Sunday as the Church.

## The presence of Christ

GIRM 27. At Mass *or the Lord's Supper* the People of God is called together, with a Priest presiding and acting in the person of Christ, to

celebrate the memorial of the Lord *or Eucharistic Sacrifice*. In an outstanding way there applies to such a local gathering of the holy Church the promise of Christ: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst” (Mt 18:20).

- Question: how is Christ present in the Mass? There are four ways...

For in the celebration of Mass, in which the Sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated, Christ is *really present* in the **very assembly gathered in his name**, in the **person of the minister**, in **his word**, and indeed *substantially and uninterruptedly* **under the Eucharistic species**. GIRM 27

ABCD ~ Altar/Eucharist, Book (Word proclaimed), Chair/Celebrant, Disciples (Da People)

## Structure of the Mass

28. The Mass consists in some sense of two parts, namely the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, these being so closely interconnected that they form but one single act of worship. For in the Mass is spread the table both of God’s Word and of the Body of Christ, and from it the faithful are to be instructed and refreshed. There are also certain rites that open and conclude the celebration.

The great teacher, St Augustine (354-430), in an Easter sermon to the newly baptised taught them about the significance of their participation in the Eucharist. Augustine spoke of the elements that are used:

‘Many grains (that) are gathered into one...’ and ‘...Many grapes hang in the cluster, but the liquid of the grapes is mixed in unity’.

The one loaf of bread and the one cup of wine are a strong reminder of the unity that each element represents. Grains of wheat can only become bread if they are first of all ground. Individual grapes are crushed to become wine.

Christians come to the one table as one Body, the Church. Our lives are joined to Christ's sacrifice symbolised before us in the consecrated bread and wine.

Augustine then comes to the key teaching of his homily:

'If, therefore, you are the body of Christ and His members, your mystery has been placed on the Lord's table, you receive your mystery. You reply 'Amen' to that which you are, and by replying you consent. For you hear 'The Body of Christ', and you reply 'Amen.' Be a member of the body of Christ so that your 'Amen' may be true.'

Sermon 272

We have placed our lives on the table of sacrifice. The sacrifice of the Church gathered in this place, has become Christ's sacrifice. So the mystery of Christ's Body is our Body. We receive the sacrifice we have presented. In the act of eating and drinking we who receive Christ into our hearts become the Body of Christ.

Discussion question:

Our Church teaches that we serve the Body of Christ to the Body of Christ.

What does this ask of us who minister communion?

## Receiving Communion

Receiving communion in the hand is an ancient practice. In 384 AD St Cyril of Jerusalem who was addressing newly baptised Christians at an Easter homily explained: 'When you approach (communion) do not come with your hands outstretched or with your fingers open, but make your left hand a throne for your right one, which is to receive the King. With your left hand hollowed, receive the Body of Christ and answer 'Amen.' *Mystagogic Catechesis V*, 21, 1-22

- Communion on the tongue is a relatively recent practice.

St Cyril continues '... After receiving the Body of Christ, approach the chalice of his blood. Do not stretch out your hands, but bow in an

attitude of adoration and reverence, and say ‘Amen.’ *Mystagogic Catechesis V*, *ibid.*

Communion from the cup was always the normal practice of the early Church in obedience to the command of Christ, ‘Take and eat, take and drink’.

### Distributing Communion – the host

‘The priest (or minister) raises the host slightly and shows it to each, saying, **The Body of Christ**.

The communicant replies, **Amen**, and receives the Sacrament either on the tongue... or in the hand.

As soon as the communicant receives the host, he or she consumes it entirely.’ GIRM 161

### Communion under both kinds

*At this time, the sharing of the cup is not permitted in our Diocese, but we hope that this will change soon.* The sign of sharing from the cup reminds us that we participate in Christ’s sacrifice. The GIRM stresses the importance of Communion from the chalice. It says that:

- Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it takes place under both kinds.
- For in this form the sign of the Eucharistic banquet is more clearly evident and
- Clearer expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal Covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord, as also
- The connection between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Kingdom of the Father. GIRM 281

The minister of communion serves the chalice:

- ‘Communicants raise the chalice to their mouths themselves... the minister wipes the rim of the chalice with the purifier.’ GIRM 286
- “If Communion of the Blood of Christ is carried out by communicants’ drinking from the chalice, each communicant, after receiving the Body of Christ, moves to the minister of the chalice and stands facing

him. The minister says, **The Blood of Christ**, the communicant replies, **Amen**, and the minister hands over the chalice, which the communicant raises to his or her mouth.

Each communicant drinks a little from the chalice, hands it back to the minister, and then withdraws; the minister wipes the rim of the chalice with the purificator.” GIRM 286

### Distributing the Cup: the five-fold movement

Drinking from the cup/chalice reminds us more clearly of our share in Christ’s sacrifice. It also reminds us of joyous celebrations where wine is shared – celebrations that remind us of the promise of eternal life in the kingdom. While individuals have the choice of receiving under both species it is obviously essential that ministers themselves are an example to the community by drinking from the cup.

1. **Give the cup** to the communicant with your dominant hand. While they are drinking from it...
2. **Move** the purifier along so that you use a different part of it to wipe from the part you used for the previous person. Hold the purifier between the thumb and first two fingers of your other hand.
3. **Take back** the chalice from the communicant.
4. **Wipe thoroughly**, both **inside** and **outside** the rim that the communicant has drunk from.
5. **Turn the cup** a sixth turn, to present a new part of the rim to the next communicant.

Your service of hospitality may need you to adapt to children, people in wheelchairs and the infirm who cannot leave their seats. How much to turn the cup depends on how big the chalice is (a smaller chalice is turned a quarter; a larger one a sixth). Note where the person’s lips have touched the chalice rim, and thoroughly wipe that area.

## A ministry of hospitality

It is important that we receive hosts consecrated at that Mass. The Church says:

‘It is most desirable that the faithful, ***just as the priest is bound to do***, receive the Lord’s Body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass and that ... so that even by means of the signs Communion will stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated.’ GIRM 85

Receiving hosts consecrated at that Mass enables us to see the connection between our offering and the action of Christ’s sacrifice. When we receive communion from the tabernacle we receive communion consecrated at another Mass. The priest must always receive the Lord’s Body from hosts consecrated at that Mass and the Church says, so should the people. The Minister of Communion ensures that sufficient hosts will be consecrated at the Mass for everyone present. You would approach the tabernacle only after the hosts consecrated at this celebration have been consumed.

## Receiving as ministers

- Ministers approach the altar during the praying of the Lamb of God.
- They always sanitise their hands.
- They are always to receive from the Priest Celebrant the vessel containing the species of the Most Holy Eucharist for distribution to the faithful. GIRM 162

The Minister of Communion is responsible for the reverence and care of remaining hosts and consecrated wine. While unused consecrated hosts are usually placed in the tabernacle any remaining Precious Blood is always consumed by the ministers. See GIRM 163, 284

- If a considerable volume of Precious Blood remains, it is appropriate to distribute it to members of the assembly who are nearby unless the parish priest determines otherwise.

- Vessels may be cleansed after the distribution of communion or after the celebration, at a side table. See GIRM 163
- After each Mass vessels need to be scalded with hot soapy water as a matter of hygiene. This is especially true in this post-Covid world. The *Bishop's Commission for Liturgy* and the *National Liturgical Council* continue to monitor issues regarding infection from the common cup.
- Sacred vessels are always handled with care and respect. See GIRM 327

## Communion to the Sick

We have heard that liturgy entails worship, proclamation and service of charity. Taking communion to the sick is one element of this service.

- The sick and the infirm have been deprived of their rightful place in the Eucharistic assembly.  
It is therefore most appropriate that the sick are linked to our Sunday gathering.
- The Extraordinary Ministers who are to take communion from the celebration of the Eucharist to the sick are dismissed from the assembly at the end of the Communion Rite.

The Extraordinary Minister is dismissed with the words:

‘Dear friends in Christ, you are now to carry the Body of our Lord from this Eucharistic assembly to our brothers and sisters who are unable to be with us. Give them our greetings and our love, read today’s scriptures with them, pray with them and minister to them this most precious sacrament.’

Adapted from the *Book of Blessings*, p796.

From this prayer we learn that the sick are intimately connected to the Eucharist just celebrated through the Extraordinary Minister of Communion. The minister takes the greetings of the assembly to the sick person and also prays with them. There is a specific ritual form for those who take communion to the sick.

## Discussion question:

Are you looking forward to taking communion to the sick or housebound?

What challenges do you think you may face?

## Scriptures to reflect upon

**Feeding of the multitudes:** Feeding 5000 - Mark 6:30-44; Matthew 14:13-21  
Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15

Feeding 4000 - Mark 8:1-10; Matthew 15:32-39

**Last Supper story** of the 'Institution Narratives': Matthew 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:15–20

*In the story of the Last Supper, and the stories of the multiplication of the loaves and fish, Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks and shares. These 4 actions are central to the Eucharist.*

**Along the road to Emmaus:** Luke 24: 13-35

*Two disciples – going the wrong way (away from Jerusalem); Jesus joins them and begins to open the scriptures; But even though their hearts burned within them - it is only in the 'breaking of the bread' that they recognise him*

## Stewards of Holy Communion - Issues to Discuss

**If a consecrated host is dropped pick it up and consume it** – or place it in your hand under the vessel containing the hosts and consume it after communion.

280. If a host or any particle should fall, it is to be picked up reverently; and 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 sacarium in the sacristy.

- Kneeling to receive communion? (Not encouraged – the ACBC has mandated that the standard posture for receiving communion in Australia is standing. The standard gesture of reverence before receiving communion is a significant bow, not a genuflection.)

- Someone doesn't consume the host?  
*It is your responsibility as minister to ensure that the person you are serving consumes the host.*
- The priest presider is the referent for any concerns or questions that arise.
- Precious blood is spilled? *Don't panic! Cover the spill with your purifier, return to the altar to receive a new purifier, and continue to distribute communion. After Mass, attend to the spill.*
- Communion by intinction (dipping the host into the precious blood) is not allowed in this Diocese, except by concelebrating priests. *Yes, that is confusing.*

279. The sacred vessels are purified by the Priest, the Deacon, or an instituted acolyte after Communion or after Mass, in so far as possible at the credence table. The purification of the chalice is done with water alone or with wine and water, which is then consumed by whoever does the purification. The paten is wiped clean as usual with the purificator.

Care is to be taken that whatever may remain of the Blood of Christ after the distribution of Communion is consumed immediately and completely at the altar.

## Blessing of Children

- It may be a custom in your parish or diocese to ask God's blessing upon those who come in procession but for some reason are unable to communicate, eg. young children.

Many people seem to be confused about what is appropriate for a lay person; many priests are also confused about what is appropriate!

The GIRM is silent on this question, so we can't turn to this document for clarification.

**First – what is a blessing?** The pages of scripture contain many words of blessing; Jesus spoke blessings to the Father and to the people he encountered. It was standard Jewish practice to recite blessings

throughout the day, almost always with a prayer that began with ‘baruch’ – ‘blessed’ or ‘praised’ as part of the phrase: ‘Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of the universe...’ There are forms of this blessing prayer for almost every occasion in life including many of the ordinary events of daily life. Perhaps we have just the barest hint of this attitude in the ‘sneeze event’ – when the standard response is often still ‘[God] bless you.’

## Aaronic Blessing

Just as Jesus gave us the model prayer in the Our Father as a way to pray, so in the book of *Numbers* 6:22-27 we are given the model of the Aaronic (or Priestly) Blessing:

<sup>22</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>23</sup> “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

<sup>24</sup> The Lord bless you and keep you;

<sup>25</sup> the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

<sup>26</sup> the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

<sup>27</sup> “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” (ESV)

### What do we learn from this?

1. It is the Lord who imparts the blessing – we (priest or people) are only the instrument.
2. The Lord is the keeper and guardian of our lives: he asks us to bless others with his custodial care.
3. We have received the light of Christ in baptism and through prayer, so we have shared in the Lord’s holiness and are able to share this gift with others.
4. Just as a father delights to pick up a small child so that the child is closer to the father’s face (and heart), so the Lord wants us to bless others with his accessibility and intimacy.
5. God-given peace [shalom] is available to be shared.

We know from the ministry of Jesus that he laid his hands on small children and blessed them. This practice is adopted by the early church and St Paul encourages the Church to do the same (*not just the ordained ministers*).

Although we have this understanding of an innate connection between ordination and the ability to bless, we need to dig a little deeper to appreciate that it is not only an ordained minister who can ask the Lord's blessing upon a person.

In many of the church's rituals, there are the formal closing blessings which are often provided with two different forms – one for a priest or deacon, and one for a lay person. Often the only difference in the prayer is the change from 'May the Lord bless you' to 'May the Lord bless us' and the change in the rubrics from 'with hands outstretched' to 'with hands joined.'

We can also learn from other sacramental occasions. For example, at the beginning of the baptism ritual, parents and godparents are invited to sign their children with the sign of the cross. A sign is not a true sign unless it is clear and it is obvious to all what it is.

From all this, it should be clear that it is *appropriate* for lay ministers to offer a blessing from the Lord on anyone who asks for it. A simple way of doing this is to make a sign of the cross on the person's forehead, shoulders, or top of their head, or extend your hand towards their head.

This may be in SILENCE or with a SHORT PRAYER OF BLESSING, such as:

- God bless you
- The Lord bless you and keep you.
- May the Lord fill you with his love / grace / mercy / peace / favour / strength.
- May the Lord be gracious to you.
- May the Lord give you peace.
- May you know God's love for you today.

**DON'T** make the sign of the cross **with the host** over a person – that is an action that confuses the benediction with the Monstrance after Adoration. Don't make the sign of the cross in the air either (confuses the blessing an ordained person makes).

Discussion question:

- Are you comfortable offering a blessing to someone who is unable to receive Holy Communion?
- Why? Why not?
- Which form of blessing do you like? Why?

We conclude our time together with  
St Augustine's challenge to all of us,  
and especially those who serve the assembly as  
Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion:

**'Be a member of the body of Christ  
so that your "Amen" may be true.'**

*Sermon 272*

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