

Clarification of Roles in the Liturgy

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One of the foundational goals of the revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) and *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (RS) is a clarification of roles undertaken in the liturgy. The responsibility of those who are ordained is one of service. Bishops, priests and deacons are the primary servants and leaders of prayer in the liturgy of the Roman Rite Church. Throughout the published documents on the liturgy they are consistently referred to as “ordinary” ministers. Through ordination, these servants have been elected and charged with the task of serving the faithful. The lay faithful, sharing in the priesthood of the baptized, are called forth to assist the bishops, priests and deacons. And while there are service roles in the liturgy specific to baptized members such as lector, cantor, usher, server, musician; there are also times when they are deputed by the ordinary minister to assist with a specific task.

Those members of the lay faithful who distribute Holy Communion at Mass do so because of present day circumstances requiring their assistance, such as large numbers of people attending Mass and fewer numbers of available priests and deacons to distribute Holy Communion adequately under both species. Do you remember the days when the associate pastors or pastor came from the rectory to distribute Holy Communion at all the Sunday Masses? They did this because they are the ordinary ministers of Holy Communion. This is the reason why, in our liturgical planning in the diocese and local parishes, when it is known that concelebrating priests or several deacons may be in attendance at a given Mass, they are to distribute Holy Communion. It is due to these extraordinary circumstances that lay members of the Church are “commissioned” by the diocesan bishop (the “Ordinary”) under the supervision of their local pastor to be Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion.

The reason why the GIRM and RS articulate the protocol that priests or deacons in our local parishes are to handle the vessels prior to and after the Communion Rite is due to their role as ordinary ministers of the Eucharist. This is the ordinary servant’s role. Certainly the health and mobility of a priest or deacon may necessitate some alteration in the protocol where the assistance of an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion may be needed. For instance, a priest or deacon may have difficulty walking to the tabernacle after the Communion Rite, or in the absence of an assisting deacon, the priest after giving the host and cup to one of the Extraordinary Ministers invites them to follow him with the Precious Blood to the remaining ministers. In these instances, pastoral sensitivity must prevail.

The important ritual protocol during the Communion Rite is the gesture of giving the Lord's Body and Blood to all who are to partake in this most sacred act. As a commissioned Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion this is why the liturgical norms specify that giving one's self Holy Communion and taking the paten and chalice from the altar on one's own are not permissible. This protocol is also applicable to the faithful who attempt to dip the consecrated host in the Precious Blood themselves. The gesture of giving or being handed a vessel containing the Body or Blood of Christ allows the sign of service to be seen and witnessed. This exchange expresses still the much deeper meaning happening in our worship – God's interaction with us.