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Providing celiac protocol training for all extraordinary ministers of holy Communion ensures safe reception of Communion.

Eucharistic Hospitality for Those with Celiac Disease

Mary Beth Jambor

Like most parishes, our parish is intentional about hospitality. There is a welcome desk where visitors and parishioners can find information. The goal is that each person be greeted four times before they are seated at Mass. We provide hearing assistance devices for persons with hearing loss, and our extraordinary ministers of holy Communion bring the Eucharist to those with limited mobility. Volunteers staff a nursery and supply activity

bags for young children. These acts of hospitality demonstrate that all are welcome.

In contrast, very little was being done by the parish to assist those with celiac disease. At the time I was hired in 2013, a mother with a daughter with celiac disease would bring a pyx with a low-gluten host to church and place it on the altar before Mass. The mother felt secure knowing that her daughter's health was protected, and her actions made it easy for us to accommodate her daughter. Since this was the practice in place, I went

along with it even though the procedure didn't feel quite right to me.

As the need grew, I began purchasing low-gluten hosts. Soon, it was typical for two or three people a weekend to request a low-gluten host. Each host would be placed in an individual pyx, then placed in the priest's paten. The person would approach the priest, and the priest would open the pyx, turn it over, dropping the host onto the recipient's hand. While this practice was better than having parishioners bring their own low-gluten hosts, it lacked reverence for both the Eucharist and the person receiving. It also lacked hospitality and an understanding of the circumstances of the person with celiac disease.

This past spring, the number of people with celiac disease tripled. Four children with celiac disease made their first holy Communion, and they each had a parent with celiac disease who had not been receiving Communion because they did not know who to ask about accommodations. In addition to attending Sunday Mass, all four children attended Catholic school where they would attend Mass without a parent present. The parents needed assurance that their children could safely receive Communion at school Masses.

It became clear that our process needed a complete overhaul. We needed a system that understood the needs and risks of someone living with celiac disease, provided a normalized experience for receiving, expressed hospitality, and treated both the person and the Eucharist with appropriate reverence. I am grateful to these four eight-year-olds and their parents for providing inspiration and guidance as we worked together to put a more suitable plan in place.

WHAT IS CELIAC DISEASE?

Celiac disease is also known as *coeliac disease*, *celiac sprue*, *non-tropical sprue*, and *gluten-sensitive enteropathy*. Celiac is not an allergy. It is a serious autoimmune disease that occurs in people who are genetically predisposed. When those with celiac disease ingest gluten, their bodies launch a response that attacks and damages the small intestine. Celiac disease can develop at any age and often leads to additional serious health issues, such as type 1 diabetes, multiple sclerosis (MS), dermatitis herpetiformis (an itchy skin rash), anemia, osteoporosis, infertility and miscarriage, neurological conditions like epilepsy and migraines, short stature, heart disease, and intestinal cancers. It is estimated that about one in one hundred people are affected worldwide, but only about thirty percent are properly diagnosed.



Communicants with celiac disease have the right to receive from the chalice.

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The only treatment for celiac disease is lifelong adherence to a strict gluten-free diet. Living gluten-free requires the avoidance of all foods containing wheat, rye, and barley. Ingesting even small amounts of gluten—like breadcrumbs left on a cutting board or in a toaster—can cause damage to the small intestine and days of feeling ill.

TAKE THIS, ALL OF YOU, AND EAT

Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the last supper, when he commanded his followers to repeat his actions and words: “Do this in memory of me” (Luke 22:19). Since the early Church, the faithful have kept his command. It is written in the Acts of the Apostles: “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42), and “Every day they devoted themselves to meeting in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes” (Acts 2:46).

During the Second Vatican Council, the Church affirmed the Eucharist as the source and summit of the Christian life. We believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, meaning that through the Eucharist, Christ makes himself wholly and entirely present.¹ Receiving holy Communion fosters our intimate union with Christ and nourishes our spiritual life. Therefore, the Church urges us to receive Communion at every Mass. Through our participation at Mass and reception of the Eucharist we are transformed into the Body of Christ and then sent into the world to bring Christ to others.

Given the seriousness of celiac disease and the importance of welcoming all Catholics to fully participate in the Mass through reception of the Eucharist, it is imperative that parishes develop a pastoral response that allows those with celiac disease to receive Communion in a safe, sensitive, reverent, hospitable, and communal manner.

VALID MATTER

At the last supper, Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, and gave it to the disciples. Then he took the chalice, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples. Jesus instituted the Eucharist under these species or elements: wheat bread and wine made from grapes. Each sacrament can be described in terms of matter and form. The matter of a sacrament refers to the physical element or action that is used. The form of a sacrament consists of the words and the intention by which the sacrament is effected. In the Eucharist, the matter is wheat bread and wine made from grapes. The form is the words of institution, “This is my Body . . .” “This is my Blood . . .”

Elsewhere in Scripture, Jesus likens himself to bread and the vine, strengthening the symbolism of bread and wine as the matter for the sacrament of the Eucharist. In John’s Gospel, Christ told a parable to help the disciples understand what was to come. He compared himself to a grain of wheat to symbolize the fruit that would be born from his own suffering and death: “Amen, amen I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” (John 12:24) He also called himself the vine:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit. You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit in its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. (John 15:1–5)

Since the matter of the Eucharist is wheat bread and wine made from grapes, eventually the question arose of whether the bread used for the Eucharist must contain at least some gluten to be considered valid matter for the sacrament. In July 2003, a letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, citing documents from the 1980s and 1990s, reiterated that “Hosts that are completely gluten-free are invalid matter for the celebration of the Eucharist.”²² It added that “low-gluten hosts (partially gluten-free) are valid matter, provided they contain a sufficient amount of gluten to obtain the confection of bread without the addition of foreign materials and without the use of procedures



The fractioning of the host takes place in such a way as to avoid cross-contamination.

that would alter the nature of bread.”²³ Then in 2004, the Congregation for Divine Worship wrote in its instruction *Redemptionis sacramentum* that “the bread used in the celebration of the most holy eucharistic sacrifice must be unleavened, purely of wheat, and recently made so that there is no danger of decomposition. It follows therefore that bread made from another substance, even if it is grain, or if it is mixed with another substance different from wheat to such an extent that it would not commonly be considered wheat bread, does not constitute valid matter for confecting the sacrifice and the eucharistic sacrament.”²⁴

LOW-GLUTEN HOSTS

Given that the matter of the Eucharist is wheat bread and wine made from grapes, the Church has made accommodations so that those with celiac diseases are not excluded from receiving Communion. Those affected by celiac disease may receive a low-gluten host or receive Communion under the species of wine.

According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), foods labeled gluten-free must have fewer than twenty parts per million (ppm) of gluten. Keep this in mind when purchasing low-gluten hosts. While the Church requires gluten for the altar bread to be valid matter, the amount of gluten in a host may be considered gluten-free by the FDA. In the United States, there are four distributors of low-gluten hosts approved by the

Secretariat of Divine Worship. Be sure to check with each for the specific amount of gluten in their product.
Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration
Altar Breads Department
31970 State Highway P
Clyde, MO 64432-8100
Phone: (800) 223-2772
www.BenedictineSisters.org

Cavanagh Company
610 Putnam Pike
Greenville, RI 02828
Phone: (800) 635-0568
www.CavanaghCo.com

GlutenFreeHosts.com Inc.
100 Buckley Road
Liverpool, NY 13088
Phone: (800) 668-7324 ext. 1
www.GlutenFreeHosts.com

Parish Crossroads
P.O. Box 2413
Kokomo, IN 46904
Phone: (800) 510-8842
www.ParishCrossroads.com

SAFE HANDLING OF HOSTS

For those members of the parish with celiac disease, even trace amounts of gluten can be damaging. Therefore, it is essential to eliminate any risk of cross-contamination in the storage and handling of low-gluten hosts.

Storage

- Store low-gluten hosts in a cabinet separate from the regular hosts, in a sealed container.
- Use a pyx designated for low-gluten hosts, and store the pyx with the low-gluten hosts.
- Some low-gluten hosts have a short shelf life and may need to be stored in the freezer.

Before Mass

- Include an announcement before Mass so that visitors know that low-gluten hosts are available. It may be helpful to include the announcement in the parish bulletin.
- Invite those who receive a low-gluten host to check in with the sacristan before Mass so that enough low-gluten hosts are consecrated.
- The sacristan or minister who prepares the hosts must wash their hands before handling the low-gluten hosts.
- Place low-gluten hosts in the designated pyx and keep the lid closed.

- Do not place the pyx in a ciborium or paten with wheat hosts. Even with the lid closed, there could be enough cross-contamination to make someone ill. Similarly, any crumbs on the outside of the pyx will contaminate the hands of the minister.
- If possible, arrange to have the pyx of low-gluten hosts brought forward during the offertory procession so that the sacristan has time to prepare the hosts regardless of when people arrive.

During Mass

- The priest places the pyx on a corporal, leaving it sealed.
- To avoid contamination of the pyx, designate a specific extraordinary minister for the low-gluten Eucharist. The minister will distribute the low-gluten hosts before joining the Communion procession.
- If a priest distributes the low-gluten host after self-communicating, he will cleanse his hands before handling the low-gluten hosts. Then he may distribute holy Communion to the rest of the assembly.
- The extraordinary minister distributes from a fixed location that allows those with celiac disease to join the Communion procession.
- The minister distributes the low-gluten hosts just as they would a wheat host, with their hands.
- If more low-gluten hosts are consecrated than needed, the closed pyx may be stored in the tabernacle.
- Do not purify the low-gluten pyx along with the other vessels.

Some parishes require those with celiac disease to provide their own low-gluten host and pyx. There are a couple issues with this practice. First, those with celiac disease should experience the same hospitality and participation in the Eucharist as the rest of the assembly. Requiring that they provide their own host may make them feel marginalized or unwelcome. Second, having the parish provide the hosts ensures that the hosts meet the Church's guidelines for valid matter.

SAFE HANDLING OF WINE

Some Catholics with celiac disease may prefer to receive the consecrated wine because they are unable to receive even a low-gluten host, or a low-gluten host is not available. Remember, whether one receives under both species or only the bread or only the wine, the communicant receives the fullness of the sacrament, the real presence of Christ—Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. Even with the Precious Blood, priests need to take precautions against cross-contamination.

- The communicant must never receive from the priest's chalice. The priest's chalice contains the fermentum, the little bit of a wheat host dropped in during the Agnus Dei.
- The fractioning of the host must take place in such a way as to prevent wheat particles from dropping into any of the

other chalices.

- It is safest for someone with celiac disease to receive the Precious Blood first, eliminating the chance for cross-contamination from someone who has consumed a wheat host.

A ten-year-old boy in our parish has multiple severe digestive health issues. We have been able to accommodate him by providing him with a small chalice that only he uses. He sits in the front of the assembly, and the extraordinary minister distributes the chalice to him first. After his mother receives the Body of Christ, she consumes the remaining Blood of Christ in his chalice. Then the extraordinary minister begins distributing to the rest of the assembly with a separate chalice.

Even if a parish does not offer the Precious Blood to the assembly, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) protects this option of receiving the Precious Blood for those who are unable to receive holy Communion under the species of bread, even with a low-gluten host.

TRAINING

Celiac is a serious and permanent disease. Those with celiac disease need to be assured that every person involved in the process of providing the Eucharist—including purchasing, storing, preparing, consecrating, and distributing the Eucharist—follows the guidelines for safe handling. Those with celiac disease deserve to participate fully in the Eucharist without worrying about the safety of their health. Therefore, thorough training is critical. Ensure that everyone understands Church doctrine and teaching as well as the practical how-to.

COMPASSION, HOSPITALITY, AND REVERENCE

Unfortunately, not everyone is eager to make changes to accommodate those with celiac. One priest said, “I am sure ninety-five percent of the parishes in the diocese do not do this.” Another countered with, “I don’t want people choosing low-gluten hosts because they think it is healthier.” These priests lack compassion. Prepare to respond to any resistance by reiterating the need and by reminding others that the USCCB has stated that medical certification of a condition justifying the use of low-gluten hosts is not required for a person to request them.

The most perplexing question I’ve received is, “Why is there a need for low-gluten hosts if the bread at Mass changes into the Body of Christ?” This question comes from a misunderstanding of what the Church teaches about sacraments and the real presence. The matter of the Eucharist is wheat bread and wine made from grapes. The Catholic Church’s teaching on transubstantiation can be explained in terms of substance and accidents. The substance of the bread is replaced with Christ’s Body. But the accidents of the bread, how it tastes, smells, looks—and how it affects the person when consumed—remain the same.

Following the recommendations and guidelines above will ensure that safely providing the Eucharist to those with celiac

disease can be done within the norms of Church teaching. According to canon law, “Any baptized person not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to holy Communion” (can. 912). Therefore, it is essential that pastors and parish staff educate themselves and make every effort to accommodate and normalize the distribution of the Eucharist to all the faithful, including those who have celiac disease.

WE ARE ONE BODY

Our parish hospitality ministry aims to make people feel welcome and build community. The celebration of the Mass is designed to make us one with Jesus, with one another, and with the whole Church (on earth and in heaven). The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* explains that we come to Mass not merely as individuals, but as members of Christ’s Body. The purpose of the Communion chant and procession is “to express the spiritual union of the communicants by means of the unity of their voices, to show gladness of heart, and to bring out more clearly the ‘communitarian’ character of the procession to receive the Eucharist” (86). Reception of Communion is less about Jesus and me and more about how communion with Jesus makes all of us one Body. As ministers in the Church, we need to ensure that all communicants experience the communal nature of the Eucharist—we are all one body in Christ. ♦

Notes

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1374.
2. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Circular Letter to All Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences Concerning the Use of Low-Gluten Altar Breads and Mustum as Matter for the Celebration of the Eucharist*, July 24, 2003, 1.
3. *Circular Letter*, 1.
4. *Redemptionis sacramentum*, 48.

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At www.PastoralLiturgy.org

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