

**NATIONAL BOARD OF CATHOLIC WOMEN**  
A Consultative Body to the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales

**May my husband<sup>1</sup> (a Christian from another Church)  
ever receive Holy Communion with me? – How?**

*It is a source of joy that Catholic ministers are able, in certain particular cases, to administer the sacraments of Eucharist, Penance and Anointing of the Sick to Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church but who greatly desire to receive these sacraments, freely request them and manifest the faith which the Catholic Church professes with regard to these sacraments.*

Pope John Paul II (*Ut Unum Sint*, #46, 1995)

## **Introduction**

Most of us include, within our own family or among our friends, couples one of whom is a Roman Catholic and the other a practising Christian from another Church. Happily this is no longer a source of great anguish among Catholic families, as the hostility that has existed for centuries between the Churches is gradually disappearing.

This thaw in relationships, encouraged by Vatican II, has led Christians to pray and work together, and to understand each other better. It is inevitable, therefore, that the question of shared Communion will arise, especially with the increasing number of marriages between Roman Catholics and Christians from other Churches.

The Free Churches have admitted all Christians to Communion for many years and the Church of England has done the same since 1972 (on the condition that they are baptised members in good standing of other Churches which subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity).

The Roman Catholic Church has always maintained that eucharistic sharing is more a sign of unity achieved than a means of reaching unity. However exceptions can be made. For example, the *Decree on Ecumenism* of Vatican II states: 'The fact that it should signify unity generally rules out common worship. Yet the gaining of a needed grace sometimes commends it.' (#8).

The document went on to suggest that in practical terms, decisions should be left to the local bishop.

## **What does the Church say?**

The Ecumenical Directory of 1967, written at the request of the Vatican Council, was the first to lay down the norms for a Christian from another Church to be admitted to Holy Communion:

1. danger of death or urgent need – and
2. a spontaneous request for the sacrament – and
3. no access to it minister of his own communion – and
4. a faith in the sacraments in harmony with the Roman Catholic Church.

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<sup>1</sup> or my wife/parent/child

The 'urgent need' would be judged by the local bishop (situations such as persecution or prison were quoted as examples).

By 1993, in the latest edition of the Ecumenical Directory, the 'urgent need' had become a 'grave and pressing need'. Diocesan bishops and Bishops' Conferences were strongly recommended to establish general norms to guide Roman Catholic ministers locally in individual circumstances.

The fourth condition, 'a faith in the sacraments in harmony with the Roman Catholic Church', may need some explanation. The Church teaches that the Eucharist is a celebration of the communion which is the Church, when the sacrifice of Jesus and his Paschal meal are shared. A more detailed explanation is to be found in the first part of *One Bread, One Body*.

## **What is the situation in Britain and Ireland?**

*One Bread, One Body* (the teaching document of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, published in 1998) sets out the following norms:

*Admission to Holy Communion and to the sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick may be given to baptised Christians of other faith communities if there is danger of death or if there is some other grave and pressing need. This may at times include those who ask to receive them on a unique occasion for joy or for sorrow in the life of family or an individual.*

*It is for the diocesan bishop or his delegate to judge the gravity of the need and the exceptional nature of the situation. The conditions of Canon Law always must be fulfilled.*' ie the norms from the Ecumenical Directory quoted above.

***The exceptional nature and the purpose of the permission should be made clear, and appropriate preparation should be made for the reception of the sacrament.*** (#106)

(Other norms apply to Christians from Eastern Churches, #102/3.)

## **How does this affect us?**

The 'unique occasions' quoted above could refer to 'the most significant moments of a person's life, eg at:

- Christian initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion)
- Marriage
- Ordination
- Death'

Requests, for example, 'may come from:

- the parent of a child to be baptised during Mass or receiving First Holy Communion
- the parent or wife of someone being ordained
- the intimate family of the deceased at a Funeral Mass.'

(*One Bread, One Body*, #112)

There could be other circumstances. There are couples who, although they do not belong to the same Church, have achieved a spiritual unity by sharing the sacraments of Baptism and Marriage. For them the inability to receive communion regularly feels and does nothing to foster Christian harmony within their home ('the domestic church', to quote: *Lumen Gentium*). Their desire to receive communion together often constitutes a serious spiritual need.

There are times when a temporary community is formed: study weekends, conferences, pilgrimages, school celebrations. Under those circumstances the strong desire of some Christians from other Churches to share communion could be a serious need and a unique occasion.

Such examples of people and circumstances might be some of the cases where the exceptional sharing of the Eucharist could be allowed.

**However it is important to remember that each request will be judged individually according to the particular circumstances and does not constitute a precedent.**

## **How do I ask?**

The first approach should be made to the parish priest to whom your situation should be explained.

In most places he cannot give permission but may pass on your request to the local bishop or his delegate.

As each bishop can establish his own norms within the general framework, the decisions may not be consistent over the country. Some bishops are encouraging people to apply for permission and are asking their priests to make this known.

## **Comment**

It is clear that there are situations when my, husband (or a close family member) may be given permission to receive Holy Communion with me.

However it is important to remember that this does not close the door to asking for permission for other situations which have not been specifically mentioned. For example, although *One Bread, One Body* mentions 'unique occasions' when permission might be given, this does not exclude other occasions.

The comment by Pope John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* quoted at the beginning of this leaflet has been a cause of considerable encouragement since it was written in 1995.

Both the joy he expresses and the use of the words 'great desire' instead of 'grave and pressing need' have given new hope to many that permission is a real possibility. It is hoped that this will encourage many more to seek such permission.

'I would like to applaud the work of the National Board of Catholic Women in bringing to wider notice the opportunity for sacramental sharing in *One Bread, One Body*.'

*Fr Bernard Longley, Secretary to the Bishops' Conference Committee for Christian Unity*

This leaflet has been prepared for the National Board of Catholic Women by its Ecumenical Standing Committee.

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