

Question: What is required for a Protestant Christian to receive the Sacraments from a Priest?

Answer: In its September 2, 2005 issue, The Tidings, the weekly paper of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, reproduced this photo in black-and-white, and printed the following caption:



SHARED COMMUNION - Brother Roger Schutz, a minister of the Swiss Reformed Church and founder of the Taizé community, receives Communion from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at Pope John Paul II's funeral in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican April 8.¹

The above photo demonstrates that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger judges a Protestant minister worthy of receiving the Most Holy Eucharist, and it calls our attention to the following two points.

1) Protestant Christians do not need to convert to belief in Jesus Christ, as they have been baptized with water and with the invocation of the names of the three divine Persons that renders their Baptism valid.

Let us recall that the Catholic Catechism relates: *“Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (vitae spiritualis ianua), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments”* (CCC, 1213).

The Code of Canon Law, 844 §2 further states: *“Whenever necessity requires it or true spiritual advantage suggests it, and provided that danger of error or of indifferentism is avoided,*

¹ Some have falsely asserted that Brother Roger's reception of Communion was not foreseen and was the result of Brother Roger being seated in a group receiving Communion from Cardinal Ratzinger.

the Christian faithful for whom it is physically or morally impossible to approach a Catholic minister are permitted to receive the sacraments of penance, Eucharist, and anointing of the sick from non-Catholic ministers in whose Churches these sacraments are valid.”

This Canon 844 §2 opens the ecumenical doors of Eucharistic intercommunion between the eastern and western churches, both of whom have the seven valid sacraments.

The Code of Canon Law 844 §3 also states: *“Catholic ministers administer the sacraments of penance, Eucharist, and anointing of the sick licitly to members of Eastern Churches which do not have full communion with the Catholic Church if they seek such on their own accord and are properly disposed. This is also valid for members of other Churches which in the judgment of the Apostolic See are in the same condition in regard to the sacraments as these Eastern Churches.”*

This Canon 844 §3 opens the ecumenical doors of Eucharistic intercommunion between the western and eastern churches, both of whom have the seven valid sacraments, in particular to the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Coptic Church, the Abyssinian Church, the Armenian Church, etc., and states that they can receive confession, anointing, and the Eucharist if they ask for them and have the proper dispositions - which is also required of Catholics. Other communions may also share this if they are considered by the Vatican to have the same status concerning these sacraments as the Eastern churches.

The Code of Canon Law 844 §4 states: *“If the danger of death is present or if, in the judgment of the diocesan bishop or conference of bishops, some other grave necessity urges it,² Catholic ministers administer these same sacraments licitly also to other Christians not having full communion with the Catholic Church, who cannot approach a minister of their own community and who seek such on their own accord, provided that they manifest Catholic faith in respect to these sacraments and are properly disposed.”³*

This Canon 844 §4 applies principally to Protestants Christians and adds several conditions because they do not have the same sacramental status as the Eastern churches. Most notably, *“they manifest Catholic faith in these sacraments,”* meaning they are to believe in the Sacraments as abiding Catholics do (e.g., that confession forgives sins; that anointing conveys grace to the spiritual and physical aid of the recipient; that Christ is Really Present in the

² *Nota bene:* In the 1983 Code of Canon Law the phrase *“urgat gravis necessitas”* has been translated by the Canon Law Society of America as *“grave necessity”*, and by the canon law societies of Great Britain and Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, and Canada as *“grave and pressing need”*. The official French text of the Directory, as well as its English translation, favors the second rendering (situations *“de grave et pressante necessite”*).

³ Cf. also Catechism of the Catholic Church, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, St. Paul Books & Media, 1994, n. 1401: *“When, in the Ordinary's judgment, a grave necessity arises, Catholic ministers may give the sacraments of Eucharist, Penance, and Anointing of the Sick to other Christians not in full communion with the Catholic Church, who ask for them of their own will, provided they give evidence of holding the Catholic faith regarding these sacraments and possess the required dispositions.”*

Eucharist) and they are “*properly disposed*” (‘properly disposed’ is understood as the same disposition required of Catholics, e.g., not conscious of serious sin: cf. Canon 916.). It is interesting to note that what constitutes “*some other grave necessity*” for Protestant Christians to receive these three Sacraments was articulated in the official document of November 28, 1999 issued by the Diocese of Rockville Center, New York entitled, “*Special Circumstances for the Admission of Other Christians to Communion at Catholic Celebrations of the Eucharist in the Diocese of Rockville Centre*”, formally approved by the Most Reverend John R. McGann, D.D., September 14, 1999. The norms took effect on the First Sunday of Advent, November 28, 1999. This document states as follows:

“Grave necessity is understood to mean a condition in which being deprived of the Eucharist would, in the judgment of a reasonable person, cause someone to experience a significant sense of deprivation. This obviously means more than casually wanting to receive the Eucharist. Manifesting Catholic faith in the sacrament means that approximately the same knowledge and faith should be required of the person in these exceptional circumstances as would be required of a Catholic in similar circumstances. As mentioned above, there are occasions when sacramental sharing with other Christians is possible. Indeed, Pope John Paul II remarks that it is a source of joy that Catholic ministers,⁴ in particular cases, can administer sacraments to Christians with whom Catholics do not share full ecclesial communion...”⁵

“In certain circumstances, by way of exception and under certain conditions, access to these sacraments (Eucharist, Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick) may be permitted or even commended for Christians of other churches and ecclesial communities... just as it is inappropriate to issue a general invitation to Christians who are not Catholic to share in Holy Communion, it is equally inappropriate to make a general statement indiscriminately barring all other Christians from sharing in the sacrament. Such a total prohibition would be more limiting than the norms of the Directory and the 1996 statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops now published in all participation materials... Episcopal and Protestant Christians may receive the sacraments of Eucharist, Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick from a Catholic minister when in danger of death, or in situations of grave necessity or grave and pressing need, as interpreted and explained in section III above. In such cases the five conditions of canon 844, 4 must be met:

⁴ The norms of the Directory and the 1996 statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops now published recommend that *diocesan bishops* establish general norms for judging situations of “grave necessity”, taking into account any norms that may have been established by the episcopal conference or synod of Eastern Catholic churches. In the United States, no national norms have been established; the Directory states that where this is the case, Catholic ministers are to judge the cases individually according to the norms established by the diocesan bishop for judging situations of grave necessity.

⁵ Cf. the official document of November 28, 1999 issued by the Diocese of Rockville Center, New York entitled, “*Special Circumstances for the Admission of Other Christians to Communion at Catholic Celebrations of the Eucharist in the Diocese of Rockville Centre*”. These diocesan norms were recommended for approval by the Senate of Priests, June 24, 1999, and formally approved by the Most Reverend John R. McGann, D.D., September 14, 1999. The norms took effect on the First Sunday of Advent, November 28, 1999.

1) The person requesting the sacrament must be validly baptized. Baptism is valid when water is poured or the person is immersed and the Trinitarian formula is used. For example, valid baptism is presumed for Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Methodists.

2) The person must manifest the faith which the Catholic Church professes in the sacrament. As a minimum for Eucharistic sharing, the person must believe that in receiving the Eucharist we receive the body and blood of Christ. In some communions this is standard dogma; for example, Episcopalians and Lutherans can be presumed to believe in the real presence. For members of other communions there may be need for some further discussion concerning their belief in the Eucharist.

3) The person must ask for the sacrament freely. The request must have been initiated by the person seeking Eucharistic communion.

4) The person must be unable to have recourse for the sacrament to a minister of his or her own community. This condition is met when gaining access to ones own minister poses a reasonable physical, moral or psychological difficulty, or causes serious inconvenience for the minister or recipient.

5) The person must be properly disposed to receive the sacrament. As noted above proper disposition is the same as required for Catholics, i.e., not conscious of serious sin (see canon 916). Being properly disposed means being in a good relationship with God, or if not, taking whatever steps are necessary to return to a good relationship with God.

In light of the above canonical norms and pastoral reflections, the following situations are examples, not an exhaustive list, of occasions, other than danger of death, when a grave necessity may be discerned and Eucharist may be shared with Episcopal or Protestant Christians if all the conditions are met:

Catholic Eucharist in Institutional Settings

Catholic ministers who visit hospitals, nursing homes or prisons frequently encounter other Christians who request the Eucharist. People who out of necessity are confined to institutions – willingly or unwillingly, temporarily or permanently – are often in a state of heightened spiritual crisis, questioning, searching and receptivity. They may seek out the comfort and healing of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, from a minister and with a community with whom they share a spiritual kinship... Their situation may indeed be judged by Catholic ministers as constituting a grave spiritual need. When in the prudent pastoral judgment of the local pastor all five conditions of canon 844 §4 are met, no further permission is needed.

Catholic Funeral Mass

Another example of a pastoral situation that might constitute a case of grave necessity and therefore qualify as an exceptional circumstance is the funeral Mass. At a funeral, a Christian spouse, family member, relative or friend of a deceased Catholic might be drawn to Eucharistic communion as a source of strength and consolation in his or her sorrow. This might well be judged as a moment of grace and fulfill the condition of a grave and pressing need.

The principles and norms of canon law and the Directory can be applied by priests, deacons and pastoral ministers in particular cases for individuals who request Eucharist on the occasion of funerals. There may be an opportunity to explain the principles of sacramental sharing with persons who are not Catholic at the wake or at a meeting with family members to plan the funeral liturgy. Because of the complexity of conditions, it is permitted neither to offer a general invitation to all people at the funeral Mass to share in the Eucharist, nor to forbid them by public announcement. When all five conditions of canon 844 §4 are met, the pastor may give them permission to receive Holy Communion at the funeral liturgy.

Catholic Nuptial Mass

When a Catholic marries a validly baptized person who is not Catholic, the sacrament of marriage should normally be celebrated within a Service of the Word. Such a celebration allows all those present to participate in the liturgy and to celebrate marriage as a sign of unity and love. For example, at a Service of the Word, Christians of any denomination may read the Scriptures.

In the Diocese of Rockville Centre, priests are granted the pastoral faculty to determine where there exists a just cause... A decision as to whether the spouse who is not Catholic may be admitted to the Eucharist is to be made according to applicable general norms, taking into account the particular situation of the sacrament of Christian marriage by two baptized Christians. The spouse who is not Catholic already shares with the Catholic spouse the sacraments of baptism and marriage. There may be an occasion where the spouse who is not Catholic desires to receive the Eucharist at the nuptial Mass. A spiritual need constituting a grave necessity may indeed be present on such an important occasion...

Because of the very public nature of the wedding ceremony, the diocese requires that in such cases the following process be followed:

- *Submit the mixed religion petition. The mixed religion petition is submitted to the Chancellors Office when a Catholic marries a validly baptized Christian who is not Catholic. A notation is to be made that the spouse who is not Catholic has requested to receive the Eucharist.*
- *With the petition, attach a statement explaining the request of the spouse to receive the Eucharist.*
- *Along with the mixed religion petition, the pastor or the priest who will be presiding at the nuptial Mass should include a written statement explaining how the conditions have been met. That is, the spouse is validly baptized and believes that in receiving the Eucharist, we*

receive the body and blood of Christ; the person has asked to receive the Eucharist freely and is properly disposed; this is an occasion of grave necessity to receive the Eucharist. The rescript stating that the permission to marry has been granted will also state that the spouse who is not Catholic may receive the Eucharist at the nuptial Mass.

Situations may arise where a person who is not Catholic requests to receive Eucharist on occasions other than those discussed in this document. In such instances, the same general principles of church law and pastoral practice apply: the minister must determine to the best of his or her ability if the person shares Catholic faith in the Eucharist, and if a situation of grave necessity is present.

The above document from issued by the Diocese of Rockville Center, New York, ought to serve as an example to all priests when approached by Protestant Christians requesting Holy Communion. When the aforesaid conditions are met, a Catholic minister may admit a Protestant Christian to any one of the three Sacraments. With regard to the Eucharist, I here recall Jesus' words in Jn. 6:53-54: *"Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day."*

2) In preparation for Holy Communion, Protestant Christians may make an "act of perfect contrition."

The necessity of preparation for Holy Communion is noted by St. Paul who relates: *"Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor. 11.29).* Let us recall that Jesus instituted the Sacrament of Confession as the only "ordinary means" for the forgiveness of "grave sin", but it is not the only means of forgiveness. The Code of Canon law, 960 states:

"Individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary means by which a member of the faithful conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God and the Church. Only physical or moral impossibility excuses from confession of this type; in such a case reconciliation can be obtained by other means."

Because many Protestant Christians, due to no fault of their own, have not been brought up with the sacramentology of the Catholic faith, nor do they have at their disposal the Sacraments as the Catholics and Orthodox do, they are not to be imputed (Lk. 12:47; Jn. 9:41). It is within this context that one may consider Protestant Christians in a situation that is *"morally impossible"* for them to receive the Sacraments, as articulated in the above Canon 960, whereby

God provides for them “*by other means*”, e.g., “an act of perfect contrition” (cf. Canon 916 and CCC, 1452).⁶

To better illustrate this point, consider that for Catholics the “ordinary means” of forgiving “grave sins” is the Sacrament of Confession that confers *sacramental grace* upon the recipient; when sacramental Confession is not available the extraordinary means of forgiving grave sins is “an act of perfect contrition” that confers *actual grace* upon the recipient. The fact that the Catholic Church permits the baptized, “for a grave reason and with no opportunity to confess,” to be forgiven of grave sin without the Sacrament of Confession, suggests that actual grace is an efficacious means for the forgiveness of even grave sin when sacramental grace is not available.⁷

If the Church acknowledges that God can extend to Catholics the forgiveness of grave sin through ‘an act of perfect contrition’ when ‘no sacramental confession is available’ and there is a ‘grave reason’ to receive him, might not the same be said of those Protestant Christians to whom, as noted above, it is ‘morally impossible’ to receive the Sacraments, and there is a ‘grave necessity’ to receive him? Indeed, the Church teaches that *any* Christian that is validly *baptized, properly disposed* and in *grave necessity* may receive Jesus in Holy Communion.

Let us recall that a ‘grave necessity’ for any baptized non-Catholic to receive Jesus is understood to mean “*a condition in which being deprived of the Eucharist would, in the judgment of a reasonable person, cause someone to experience a significant sense of deprivation...*” Among the various situations discussed in the above document, noteworthy are those in which baptized non-Catholics “*in hospitals, nursing homes, prisons and institutions*”, “*a funeral Mass*”, “*a nuptial wedding*”, etc., request the Sacrament.⁸

⁶ “*A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to celebrate Mass or receive the body of the Lord without previous sacramental confession unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess; in this case the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition which includes the resolution of confessing as soon as possible*” (Code of Canon Law, 916).

⁷ Apropos sacramental confession that confers *sacramental grace*, and non-sacramental confession that confers *actual grace*, both derive from the *sanctifying grace* one receives at Baptism. *Sanctifying grace* is a permanent disposition (*habitus*) that heals the soul of original and personal sin and sanctifies it (CCC, 1999). It is distinguished from *actual grace* which refers to God’s interventions, whether at the beginning of conversion or in the course of the work of sanctification, and from *sacramental grace* which refers to an efficacious effect upon the soul. Although with ‘an act of perfect contrition’ one is forgiven of grave sin, the *sacramental grace* that derives from the Sacrament has primacy over the *actual grace* received without the Sacrament. For in the Sacrament Christ himself is at work who acts in his Sacrament, which acts ‘*ex opere operato*’, and the Sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of the recipient, but by the power of the Holy Spirit who establishes in the recipient a “living union” with Jesus Christ (cf. CCC, op. cit., 1127; 1128; 1129). Also each Sacrament imparts a distinctive sacramental grace based on its particular purpose in the supernatural life of the soul.

⁸ See footnote 4.

As to what constitutes the “contrition” the baptized non-Catholic observes before receiving Jesus in Holy Communion, the Catechism emphasizes “*sorrow*”, “*love of God above all else [more than the fear of hell⁹]*” and a “*firm resolution*” not to sin again.¹⁰

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⁹ “*The contrition called ‘imperfect’ (or ‘attrition’) is also a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit. It is born of the consideration of sin’s ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation and the other penalties threatening the sinner (contrition of fear)... By itself however, imperfect contrition cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance” (CCC, op. cit., 1453).*

¹⁰ “*Among the penitent’s acts contrition occupies first place. Contrition is ‘sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again’” (CCC, op. cit., 1451).*

“When it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called ‘perfect’ (contrition of charity). Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible” (CCC, op. cit., 1452).