

Letter to parishioners of St. Francis:

Should a Catholic receive communion at a protestant service?

August 28, 2008

Dear Parishioners,

I am sure many of you have been or will be in a situation where you will attend a wedding, funeral, ordination or even a Sunday service in a protestant church. There is a good chance you will be invited to share communion, the protestant practice is known as "open communion" or in some places "inter-communion". The simple answer to the question is "no", a Catholic should not receive communion while participating in a protestant celebration.

You should know that the [Roman Catholic Church](#) makes a distinction between full and partial communion. Where full communion exists, there is but one Church. Partial communion, on the other hand, exists where some elements of Christian faith are held in common, but complete unity on essentials is lacking. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church sees itself as in partial communion with Protestants, and as in much closer, but still incomplete, communion with the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Since our Protestant brothers and sisters in Christ are only in partial communion with the Church, all Catholics would wrongly receive communion at protestant communion services. If a Catholic receives communion in a protestant celebration, he or she always presents a false sense of unity, and causes harm to the process of continued ecumenical dialogue, while also failing to witness to the true meaning of communion and the Eucharist. Some Catholics may have diminished culpability because they do not know the Church's teaching or have yet to understand the full meaning of receiving communion in the Catholic Church.

Ecumenical dialogue on full communion revolves around [the Catholic Church's teaching](#) on the relationship between priestly ordained ministry and the Eucharist and her teaching on the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Since the full Catholic meaning and/or the valid participation of the ordained ministry is lacking from protestant communion, the Church rightly teaches that all Catholics should refrain from receiving communion distributed at protestant celebrations. The action of refraining and praying for full communion is an appropriate action, and if the availability of a blessing is presented that also would be an appropriate action.

From the earliest days of the Church many Catholics have willingly surrendered their lives to defend the teachings on the Eucharist, priesthood and unity of the Church. Every Catholic has a duty by virtue of his or her baptism and confirmation to defend the faith and to work toward true unity.

Even within our own Catholic community we refrain from receiving communion if we are not properly prepared in heart, mind and soul. When Catholics receive communion they profess a common belief in the real presence and are to be in the state of grace. At each communion we reaffirm our belief in all that the Catholic Church holds to be true. We also unite ourselves to the one Church visible in apostolic succession. We can continue to pray and work toward a day when full communion might be realized, but it can not be done by failing to address the real divisions and differences that presently exist.

I hope that when you get a chance to witness to the faith you would do so recognizing both what we hold in common with our separated brothers and sisters in Christ as well as what

still divides us. Pope John Paul II wrote this - "The Catholic faithful, therefore, while respecting the religious convictions of these separated brethren, must refrain from receiving the communion distributed in their celebrations, so as not to condone an ambiguity about the nature of the Eucharist and, consequently, to fail in their duty to bear clear witness to the truth. This would result in slowing the progress being made towards full visible unity."

So what should you do if you have received communion in a protestant celebration? As your pastor I would give you the following council; if you have received communion in a protestant church without knowing you were to refrain, I ask you to commit yourself to refraining in the future and to make an act of contrition for any possible scandal, harm, or misunderstanding you may have unintentionally caused.

If, however, you knew the teachings of the Church and have willfully received communion in protestant churches, you should make a formal confession before receiving communion in the Catholic Church. You should examine your conscience to see if the sin of pride - "I will do or believe what I will", the sin of cowardice – failure to witness to the truth of the Eucharist and full communion, or the sin of sloth – failure to develop a mature understanding of the teachings of the Church - have contributed to a willful disregard for this Church teaching of faith.

The issue of receiving communion at a protestant celebration is not an issue of hospitality or choice; it revolves around the essential elements of our Catholic faith and giving witness to the truth of the Eucharist, valid ordained priesthood, and all that makes for true full communion within the Catholic Church.

As a young college student I once received communion in a protestant church. At the time I had doubts as to whether I should receive, but I didn't have the courage or knowledge to refrain. Afterwards I thought about the opportunity I missed to witness to the Catholic faith because of my inadequate knowledge. I realized that my friends at that celebration were not Catholic and would have wanted to ask me questions. I simply was not prepared to fully witness to the Catholic faith. I hope this letter will help and encourage you to be better prepared to refrain from receiving communion at protestant celebrations and to be ready if called upon to witness to why you refrain from receiving communion outside of the Catholic Church.

Peace and prayers,

Fr. Mike