

Communion Minister Training Guidelines

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Most Communion ministers want to do a good job, and they put a lot of effort into doing their ministry well. These suggestions will help pastors, liturgy directors, and Communion ministry coordinators assist Communion ministers—both ordinary and extraordinary—who strive for excellence to refine their skills and become even better ministers.

For more information, see: <http://www.nccbuscc.org/liturgy/girm/lit4.shtml>

The Basics

Focus on the right things. The focus of the Communion minister's attention is always on the two aspects of the Body and Blood of Christ:

- a. that is, the consecrated bread and wine, and
- b. the People of God who stand before them.

Communion ministers should try to minimize all other distractions and focus on the interaction of the Holy Spirit, through the minister, with each person who comes forward for Communion.

Take enough time. Communion is a moment of profound sharing. Communion ministers should let that moment linger with each person, sharing as much of themselves as possible in that brief moment. If there are a great number of communicants and time is usually short, the solution is to add more ministers and not hurry past this important moment in the liturgy.

There should be enough Communion ministers available so that Communion can be distributed in a reverent and orderly way (*Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds in the Diocese of the United States of America*, 27). Good equations to use are one Communion minister of the host per 100 communicants, and two Communion ministers of the cup per one Communion minister of the host.

The Communion Rite. The best time for extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to come forward from the assembly is at the beginning of the Communion Rite. The Communion Rite begins at the conclusion of the Great Amen. Communion ministers would come forward just before the Lord's Prayer is prayed. Alternatively, they may also come forward during the Sign of Peace.

When they come forward, they come to a convenient place in the sanctuary. They would not approach the altar at this time. However, they may approach the altar after the priest has taken Communion (*Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds in the Diocese of the United States of America*, 38).

Communion ministers ordinarily share in Communion after the presider and before the assembly. This should be facilitated in such a way that the full and active participation of the assembly is neither diminished nor delayed. Therefore, this portion of the Communion Rite (the taking of Communion by the celebrant and concelebrants, the giving of Communion to the deacons and any extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion by the celebrant and concelebrants, and the giving of vessels by the priest or deacon) must be well-choreographed and rehearsed. In addition, the Communion song must begin immediately as the presider receives Communion (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 86).

Sharing the Body and Blood of Christ. The Communion minister follows these procedures:

1. Make good eye contact with each communicant.
2. Smile.
3. Hold up the host or Communion cup.
4. Say in a strong, clear voice, “The Body [Blood] of Christ!” Do not add any other words.
5. Wait for the communicant to say, “Amen.”
6. Reverently place the host or Communion cup in the communicant’s hands.
7. If ministering the cup, unfold your purificator fully, wipe the rim inside and out with it, and give the cup a quarter turn before sharing it with the next person.

Purifying vessels. After all have shared in Communion, any hosts that are not consumed are reserved in the tabernacle, and Ministers of the cup consume any of the consecrated wine that remains. So as not to unduly delay the Mass or highlight the purification of vessels, cleaning the vessels is best done after the Mass. Therefore, once all remaining elements have been reserved or consumed, the empty vessels may be brought to a side table and suitably covered and placed on a corporal.

Right after Mass, these vessels are purified by ensuring that any small particles from the consecrated host or any residual consecrated wine are consumed. This is done by using a corporal or one’s fingers to wipe any particles from the plates (patens) into one of the Communion cups. Make sure any particles left on purificators or your fingers are also placed into the cup. Then put water in the plate to gather any remaining particles, and pour that water into one of the cups. Swish the water in the cup to gather all the particles and residual wine, and then drink it. Do the same with all the vessels. Once this is done, rinse the vessels with water over the sacrarium, then wash them with soap and water over a different sink. Dry them well with a clean towel. Rinse used purificators with water over the sacrarium. These are then laundered.

Never pour consecrated wine directly into the sacrarium or onto the ground. Consecrated wine should be consumed. Never bury consecrated hosts into the ground or drop them into the sacrarium. Hosts or wine that cannot be eaten or drunk because of decay or contamination by inedible particles should be completely dissolved in water and that water poured into the sacrarium.

The tabernacle. Communion is not to be distributed from the tabernacle. “The reason for which the Church reserves the eucharist outside Mass is, primarily, the administration of viaticum to the dying and, secondarily, communion of the sick, communion outside Mass, and adoration of Christ present in the sacrament” (see *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist outside Mass*, 5; see also [General Instruction of the Roman Missal](#), 85). Only under rare circumstances of necessity should the assembly at Mass receive Communion from the reserved sacrament in the tabernacle.

Dress. Standards will vary. Therefore it would be wise for each parish to discuss what is appropriate dress for their ministers. Generally, Communion ministers “should show the greatest reverence for the Most Holy Eucharist by their demeanor, their attire, and the manner in which they handle the consecrated bread or wine” ([Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds in the Diocese of the United States of America](#), 29). Their attire should convey a sense of reverence, dignity, and importance of the ministry they do. Liturgical ministry is a sacred action, and our dress should reflect that.

“In the dioceses of the United States of America, acolytes, altar servers, lectors, and other lay ministers may wear the alb or other suitable vesture or other appropriate and dignified clothing” ([General Instruction of the Roman Missal](#), 339).

Frequently-Asked Questions

Is it OK for Communion ministers to not drink from the cup?

The General Norms listed in the newly revised [*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*](#) say the following about Communion from the cup:

Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it is distributed under both kinds. For in this form the sign of the eucharistic banquet is more clearly evident and clear expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal Covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord, as also the relationship between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Father's Kingdom. (281)

...The faithful should be encouraged to seek to participate more eagerly in this sacred rite, by which the sign of the Eucharistic banquet is made more fully evident. (282)

No one is required to share Communion from the cup. However, since the faithful are to be encouraged to do so, part of the ministry of the Communion minister is to offer that encouragement by example. If a Communion minister is unable to drink from the cup on a regular basis, some discernment with the Communion minister, the pastor, and other parish leaders might be needed to determine if this is the best ministry for that person to exercise.

Should Communion ministers sing during Communion?

The obvious answer to this question is, "Yes, of course." However, Communion ministers have several duties to attend to, and singing while doing them is not always so simple. So how important is it that Communion ministers sing during Communion?

The [*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*](#) says this: "While the priest is receiving the Sacrament, the Communion chant is begun. Its purpose is to express the communicants' union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices, to show joy of heart, and to highlight more clearly the 'communitarian' nature of the procession to receive Communion" (86). It would seem that if the purpose of singing is to express the very unity Communion is meant to accomplish, then the *ministers* of Communion would regard singing as one of the highest priorities of their ministry. At the very least, Communion ministers would sing the Lamb of God, at the beginning and end of the Communion song, or whenever they are not attending to their ministerial duties. It would be best if Communion ministers sang the Communion song whenever they were not speaking as part of their ministry.

To sing well, however, requires the cooperation and assistance of the parish musicians. Obviously, the Communion ministers will not be able to hold song books during their ministry, so the musicians must choose music that is well known and can be sung by heart. If this isn't the case in your community, perhaps a gentle encouragement to those who are in charge of the music will help so the Communion ministers can participate as fully as possible in their ministry.

What is the minimum age to become a Communion minister?

There is no universal minimum age to become either a lector or a Communion minister. Some dioceses have a policy regarding age; the Diocese of San José does not. The overriding standards for all liturgical service are competency, maturity, and readiness. Those who are competent in the tasks of the ministry, who show the maturity required to perform the tasks with dignity and grace, and are properly formed in the duties and spirituality of the ministry should not ordinarily be excluded from serving in liturgical ministries because of age. In the Diocese of San José, Communion ministers must be fully initiated (through the celebration of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist). In some circumstances, pastors or designated pastoral ministers (e.g., school principals) may make pastoral exceptions for otherwise-qualified parishioners or students who have not yet celebrated confirmation, but are receiving Communion, to become a Communion minister for their community.

Can a lector also serve as a Communion minister?

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* says: “In liturgical celebrations each person, minister or layman, who has an office to perform, should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to his office by the nature of the rite and the principles of liturgy” (28). What that means is, if you hold the “office” of lector, you would not ordinarily also hold the “office” of Communion minister or any other liturgical ministry. Many parishes do not really think of the roles of liturgical ministers (other than the priest) as “offices,” and so many people serve in more than one ministry during a liturgy. However, a central goal of the Second Vatican Council was to distribute the liturgical roles as widely as possible among the assembly to create a more powerful symbol of the various members of the Body of Christ working together to do the action of the liturgy.

There is no strict prohibition against lectors serving as Communion ministers, but it goes against the spirit and intent of the liturgical norms. The ideal would be that lectors would only be lectors, and other persons would be Communion ministers. But, unlike a priest, you aren’t necessarily bound to your office for life. After serving as a lector for a few years (or a term of “office”), a lector could resign his or her role as lector and be trained to be a Communion minister, and vice versa.

What do I do if someone who is not Catholic comes to me for Communion?

In most cases, you should give them Communion. As Communion ministers, we are not responsible for judging who is worthy of sharing in Communion with us. We cannot know the heart or conscience of the person standing in front of us. Our primary obligation is to act as Jesus would and to be as hospitable and welcoming as possible. If you have serious concerns, speak to your pastor after Mass. But do not cause a disruption during the Mass by refusing Communion to anyone. If the person is unsure of what to do with the host after receiving it, kindly ask them to consume it.

What should I do if I drop a host or spill some wine?

First, don't panic. It's not the end of the world; everything will be fine. Simply pick up the dropped host. Be careful not to spill anymore hosts while you are retrieving the dropped one. You might have to stop the procession before you can pick it up. Do so courteously, remembering that Jesus is also present in the members of the assembly whom you are stopping.

If you spill some consecrated wine, and if you can manage the cup with only one hand, wipe the wine off the floor with your purificator. If your floor is carpeted, place the purificator on top of the spill and try to soak up as much of the wine as possible. If your cup is too full for you to manage this gracefully, ask another Communion minister, an acolyte, an usher, or the next person in line to hold your cup while you take care of the spill. After wiping or soaking up the spill, ask an acolyte or other assistant to get a clean purificator from the sacristy for you. If someone is unable to do this for you, you may need to kindly ask the next person in line to wait while you get a clean purificator. (It may be a good idea to have a few extra purificators on-hand at a nearby side table for these occasions.) Or you can direct those in your line to another nearby Communion minister. Make note of the place where the wine was spilled. After the Mass, this area should be washed with water and the water poured into the sacrarium.

Do I need to wash my hands?

Of course. The most appropriate time for washing your hands is before leaving your home for Mass or just before Mass begins. The usual practices of good hygiene should also be observed, such as washing your hands after using the restroom, avoiding touching your nose, mouth, or eyes with your fingers, and not coughing into your hands. Wash your hands well and often.

Some parishes use a liquid anti-bacterial gel, such as Purell. If your parish decides to have your Communion ministers use this, the washing must be done as discreetly as possible. The bottle of Purell should not be part of the liturgical space by placing it on a side-table or the altar. The most discrete way to use such kinds of cleansers would be to give all Communion ministers a small bottle of their own which they use at their place before they come forward to distribute Communion.