

INSTRUCTION CONCERNING CASES WHEN OTHER CHRISTIANS MAY BE ADMITTED TO EUCHARISTIC COMMUNION IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH*

I. THE QUESTION

We are often asked the question in what circumstances and on what conditions can members of other Churches and ecclesial communities be admitted to eucharistic communion in the Catholic Church?

The question is not a new one. The Second Vatican Council (in the decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*) and the Directorium Oecumenicum dealt with it.¹

The pastoral guidance offered here is not intended to change the existing rules but to explain them, bringing out the doctrinal principles on which rules rest and so making their application easier.

* *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 20, 1972.

¹ The Decree on Ecumenism "*Unitas Redintegratio*", n. 8. "Yet worship in common (*communicatio in sacris*) is not to be considered as a means to be used indiscriminately for the restoration of unity among Christians. There are two main principles upon which the practice of such common worship depends: first, that of the unity of the Church which ought to be expressed; and second, that of the sharing in means of grace. The expression of unity very generally forbids common worship. Grace to be obtained sometimes commend it. The concrete course to be adopted, when due regard has been given to all the circumstances of time, place and persons, is left to the prudent decision of the local episcopal authority, unless the Bishop's Conference according to its own statutes or the Holy See, has determined otherwise. Cf. also Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*), n. 27.

— Directorium ad ea quae a Concilio Vaticano de re oecumenica promulgata sunt exsequenda (Directorium oecumenicum, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 59 (1967) pp. 574-592).

1) Sharing in Liturgical Worship with our Separated Eastern Brothers.

"Besides cases of necessity there would be reasonable ground for encouraging sacramental sharing if special circumstances make it materially or morally impossible over a long period for one of the faithful to receive the sacraments in his own Church, so that in effect he would be deprived, without legitimate reason, of the spiritual fruit of the sacraments" (n. 44)

2. THE EUCHARIST AND THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

There is a close link between the mystery of the Church and the mystery of the Eucharist.

a) The Eucharist really contains what is the very foundation of the being and unity of the Church: the Body of Christ, offered in sacrifice and given to the faithful as the bread of eternal life. The sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, given to the Church so as to constitute the Church, of its nature carries with it:

— the ministerial power which Christ gave to his apostles and to their successors, the bishops, along with the priests, to make effective sacramentally His own priestly act — that act by which once and forever He offered Himself to the Father in the Holy Spirit, and gave Himself to His faithful that they might be one in Him;

— the unity of the ministry, which is to be exercised in the name of Christ, Head of the Church, and hence in the hierarchical communion of ministers;

— the faith of the Church, which is expressed in the eucharistic action itself — the faith by which she responds to Christ's gift in its true meaning.

2) Sharing in Liturgical Worship with Other Separated Brethren

"Celebration of the sacraments is an action of the celebrating Community, carried out within the Community, signifying the oneness in faith, worship and life of the Community. Where this unity of sacramental faith is deficient, the participation of the separated brethren with Catholics especially in the sacraments of the Eucharist, penance and anointing of the sick, is forbidden. Nevertheless, since the sacraments are both signs of unity and sources of grace (cf. Decree on Ecumenism, n. 8), the Church can for adequate reasons allow access to those sacraments to a separated brother. This may be permitted in danger of death or in urgent need (during persecution, in prisons) if the separated brother has no access to a minister of his own Communion, and spontaneously asks a Catholic priest for the sacraments — so long as he declares a faith in these sacraments in harmony with that of the Church, and is rightly disposed. In other cases the judge of this urgent necessity must be the diocesan bishop or the Episcopal Conference.

A Catholic in similar circumstances may not ask for these sacraments except from a minister who has been validly ordained" (n. 55).

— Cf. also *na dichiarazione del Segretario per l'unione dei cristiani. La posizione della Chiesa cattolica in materia di Eucaristia comune tra cristiani di diverse confessioni*, in *L'Osservatore Romano* of 12-13 January 1970 (in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 62 (1970) pp. 184-188).

The Sacrament of the Eucharist, understood in its entirety with these elements, signifies and existing unity brought about by Him, the unity of the visible Church of Christ which cannot be lost.²

b) "The celebration of Mass, the action of Christ and of the people of God hierarchically ordered is the centre of the whole Christian life for the universal Church as for the local Church and for each Christian."³ Celebrating the mystery of Christ in the Mass, the Church celebrates her own mystery and manifests concretely her unity.

The faithful assembled at the altar offer the sacrifice through the hands of the priest acting in the name of Christ, and they represent the community of the people of God united in the profession of one faith. Thus they constitute a sign and a kind of delegation of a wider assembly.

The celebration of Mass is of itself a profession of faith in which the whole Church recognizes and expresses itself. If we consider the marvellous meaning of the eucharistic prayers as well as the riches contained in the other parts of the Mass, whether they are fixed or vary with the liturgical cycle; if at the same time we bear in mind that the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy make up a single act of worship,⁴ then we can see here a striking illustration of the principle *lex orandi lex credendi*.⁵ Thus the Mass has a catechetical power which the recent liturgical renewal has emphasized. Again, the Church has in the course of history been careful to introduce into liturgical celebration the main themes of the common faith, the chief fruits of the experience of that faith. This she has done either by means of new texts or by creating new feasts.

c) The relation between local celebration of the Eucharist and universal ecclesial communion is stressed also by the special mention in the eucharistic prayers of the pope, the local bishop and the other members of the episcopal college.

What has been said here of the Eucharist as centre and summit of the Christian life holds for the whole Church and

² Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 3; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4.

³ *Instructio generalis missalis romani*, chap. I, n. 1.

⁴ Cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

⁵ Cf. Pius XI, Enc. *Quas primas* 28 December 1925: A.A.S. 17 (1925), p. 598; Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2, 6.

for each of its members, but particularly for those who receive the Body of Christ. Communion during Mass is indeed the most perfect way of participating in the Eucharist, for it fulfills the Lord's command, "take and eat".⁶

3. THE EUCHARIST AS SPIRITUAL FOOD

The effect of the Eucharist is also to nourish spiritually those who receive it as what the faith of the Church says it truly is — the body and blood of the Lord given as the food of eternal life (cf. John VI, 54-58). For the baptised, the Eucharist is spiritual food, a means by which they are brought to live the life of Christ himself, are incorporated more profoundly in Him and share more intensely in the whole economy of his saving mystery. "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him" (John VI, 56).

a) As the sacrament of full union with Christ⁷ and of the perfection of spiritual life, the Eucharist is necessary to every Christian: in our Lord's words, "... unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (John VI, 53). Those who live intensely the life of grace feel a compelling need for this spiritual sustenance, and the Church herself encourages daily communion.

b) Yet though it is a spiritual food whose effect is to unite the Christian man to Jesus Christ, the Eucharist is far from being simply a means of satisfying exclusively personal aspirations, however lofty these may be. The union of the faithful with Christ, the head of the mystical body, brings about the union of the faithful themselves with each other. It is on their sharing of the Eucharistic bread that St. Paul bases the union

⁶ "Perfectior Missae participatio" (Const. de Sacra Liturgia: Sacrosanctum Consilium, n. 55). Cf. *Instructio de cultu mysterii eucharistici: Eucharisticum mysterium*, of 25 May 1967, n. 12 (A.A.S. 59 (1967), p. 549).

The fact of having received the same baptism does not of itself afford a title of admission to Holy Communion. Eucharistic sharing expresses an integral profession of faith and full insertion in the Church towards which baptism leads. This sacrament "constitute the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn. But a point of departure, for it is wholly directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ. Baptism is thus ordained toward a complete profession of faith, a complete incorporation into the system of salvation such as Christ Himself willed it to be, and finally, toward a complete integration into eucharistic communion." (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 22).

⁷ Cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5.

of all the faithful, "Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same loaf" (1 Cor. X, 17). By this sacrament "man is incorporated in Christ and united with His members."⁸ By frequently receiving the Eucharist the faithful are incorporated more and more in the body of Christ and share increasingly in the mystery of the Church.

c) Spiritual need of the Eucharist is not therefore merely a matter of personal spiritual growth: simultaneously, and inseparably, it concerns our entering more deeply into Christ's Church, "which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. I, 23).

4. GENERAL PRINCIPLES GOVERNING ADMISSION TO COMMUNION

Where members of the Catholic Church are concerned, there is a perfect parallel between regarding the Eucharist as the celebration of the entire ecclesial community united in one faith and regarding it as sustenance, as a response to the spiritual needs, personal and ecclesial, of each member. It will be the same when, in the Lord's good time, all the followers of Christ are reunited in one and the same Church. But what are we to say today, when Christians are divided? Any baptized person has a spiritual need for the Eucharist. Those who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church have recourse to the ministers of their own communities, as their conscience dictates. But what about those who cannot do this, and who for that or other reasons come and ask for communion from a Catholic priest?

The Directorium Oecumenicum has already shown how we must safeguard simultaneously the integrity of ecclesial communion and the good of souls. Behind the Directorium lie two main governing ideas:

a) The strict relationship between the mystery of the Church and the mystery of the Eucharist can never be altered, whatever pastoral measures we may be led to take in given

⁸ Concilium Florentinum, Decretum pro Armenis, DE 698; DS 1322).

— In the work of St. Thomas Aquinas we often come across the expression *sacramentum ecclesiasticae unitatis* (e.i.: *Summa Teol.*, p. 73, a. 2. sed c.). The Eucharist effects the unity of the Church, or more strictly it effects the mystical body because it contains the real body of Christ.

cases. Of its very nature celebration of the Eucharist signifies the fullness of profession of faith and the fullness of ecclesial communion. This principle must not be obscured and must remain our guide in this field.

b) The principle will not be obscured if admission to Catholic eucharistic communion is confined to particular cases of those Christians who have a faith in the sacrament in conformity with that of the Church, who experience a serious spiritual need for the eucharistic sustenance, who for a prolonged period are unable to have recourse to a minister of their own community and who ask for the sacrament of their own accord; all this provided that they have proper dispositions and lead lives worthy of a Christian. This spiritual need should be understood in the sense defined above (No. 3, *b* and *c*); a need for an increase in spiritual life and a need for a deeper involvement in the mystery of the Church and of its unity.

Further, even if those conditions are fulfilled, it will be a pastoral responsibility to see that the admission of these other Christians to communion does not endanger or disturb the faith of Catholics.⁹

5. DIFFERENCES, IN VIEW OF THESE PRINCIPLES, BETWEEN MEMBERS OF THE ORIENTAL CHURCHES AND OTHER CHRISTIANS

The Directorium Oecumenicum¹⁰ gives different directions for the admission to holy communion of separated Eastern Christians, and of others. The reason is that the Eastern Churches, though separated from us, have true sacraments, above all, because of the apostolic succession, the priesthood and the eucharist, which unite them to us by close ties, so that the risk of obscuring the relation between eucharistic communion and ecclesial communion is somewhat reduced.¹¹ Recently the

⁹ Cf. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 26.

¹⁰ Cf. *Directorium*, nn 44 and 55.

¹¹ Here are two important passages from the Directorium derived from Council documents:

39) "Although these (Eastern) Churches are separated from us, yet they possess true sacraments above all — by apostolic succession — the priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are still joined to us in closest intimacy. Therefore some sharing in liturgical worship (*communicatio in sacris*) given suitable circumstances and approval of Church authority, is not merely possible but is encouraged (*Decree on Ecumenism*, n. 15; cf. also the *Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches*, nn. 24-29).

Holy Father recalled that "between our Church and the venerable Orthodox Churches there exists already an almost total communion, though it is not yet perfect: it results from our join participation in the mystery of Christ and of His Church."¹²

With Christians who belong to communities whose eucharistic faith differs from that of the Church and which do not have the sacrament of Orders, admitting them to the Eucharist entails the risk of obscuring the essential relation between eucharistic communion and ecclesial communion. This is why the Directorium treats their case differently from that of the Eastern Christians and envisages admission only in exceptional cases of "urgent necessity." In cases of this kind the person concerned is asked to manifest a faith in the Eucharist in conformity with that of the Church, i.e. in the Eucharist as Christ instituted it and as the Catholic Church hands it on. This is not asked of an Orthodox person because he belongs to a Church whose faith in the Eucharist is conformable to our own. Which Authority decides particular cases? The meaning of No. 55 of the Directorium Oecumenicum.

No. 55 of the Directorium allows fairly wide discretionary power to the episcopal authority in judging whether the necessary conditions are present for these exceptional cases. If cases of the same pattern recur often in a given region, episcopal conferences can give general directions. More often however it falls to the bishop of the diocese to make a decision. He alone will know all the circumstances of particular cases.

Apart from danger of death the Directorium mentions two examples, people in prison and those suffering persecution, but it then speaks of "other cases of such urgent necessity". Such

40) "Between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Churches separated from us there is still a very close communion in matters of faith (cf. Decree on Ecumenism, n. 14); moreover, 'through the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these Churches, the Church of God is built up and grows in stature' and 'although separated from us yet these Churches possess true sacraments, above all —

¹² Letter to Patriarch Athenagoras, 8 February 1971. French text in *La Documentation catholique* of 21 March 1971, p. 255. This letter was published in *L'Osservatore Romano* of 7 March 1971. It had been given to Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon during his visit to the Holy Father on 8 February 1971.

cases are not confined to situations of suffering and danger. Christians may find themselves in grave spiritual necessity and with no chance of recourse to their own community. For example, in our time, which is one of large-scale movements of population, it can happen much more often than before that non-Catholic Christians are scattered in Catholic regions. They are often deprived of the help of their own communion and unable to get in touch with it except at great trouble and expense. If the conditions set out in the Directorium are verified, they can be admitted to eucharistic communion but it will be for the bishop to consider each case.

Hanc instructionem pastorem Summus Pontifex PAULUS VI, cum litteris Emmi. Cardinalis a Secretis Status die 25 mensis maii 1972 intrascripto Secretariatus Card. Praesidi missis, approbavit et publici iuris fieri iussit.

Datum Romae, ex aedibus Secretariatus ad Christianorum Unitatem fovendam, die 1 mensis Junii 1972.

FR. HIERONYMUS HAMER, O.P.
a Secretis

IOANNES CARD. WILLEBRANDS
Praeses

CONDITIONS FOR INTER-COMMUNION

In particular cases the conditions are:

- 1) Recipients must have the same faith in the Eucharist as is professed by Catholics;**
- 2) they must have a deep spiritual need for the Eucharist;**
- 3) they must have been unable, over a prolonged period, to communicate in their own Church;**
- 4) of their own accord they must request the sacrament of Communion.**