

A Study of the Effect on Parish Life of the Withdrawal of the Indult Permitting Purification of the Sacred Vessels by Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

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In the Spring of 2009, the Office of Divine Worship of the Archdiocese of Atlanta conducted a survey to determine the effect on parish life of the recent expiration of an indult which had formerly allowed extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to purify the sacred vessels. An extraordinarily high 63% response rate (61 responses from a total of 97 parishes and missions surveyed) allow the results to be taken as having a high degree of accuracy for the Archdiocese of Atlanta.

Use of Extraordinarily Ministers to Purify Vessels prior to the expiration of the Indult

92% of the parishes responding reported that extraordinarily ministers were used to purify the vessels prior to the expiration of the indult. The remaining 8% (5 churches) were mostly smaller churches, although they represented a variety of ethnic concentrations, and were distributed broadly across the Archdiocese in both urban and rural areas. In any case, the high percentage of parishes using extraordinarily ministers to purify vessels before the expiration of the indult indicates that the change was experienced across the Archdiocese in a broad-based way.

Minister of Purification

Of the 61 parishes responding, 42 reported that the priest is not the usual minister of purification. 46 listed the deacon, while 9 reported that instituted acolytes are the usual minister of purification. (As some parishes listed more than one usual minister, the numbers total more than 61.) This represents a relatively even split between the two ministers. Data are not available regarding the percentage of masses with a deacon in the Archdiocese of Atlanta, but as there are many masses without deacons, it would seem that the deacon is generally the minister of purification if he is present, and that the task otherwise falls to the priest. Instituted acolytes are relatively rare in the Archdiocese of Atlanta, consisting only of deacon candidates and seminarians.

Time of Purification

Prior to June of 2006, the time of purification was divided approximately evenly between immediately following communion (32 parishes) and immediately following mass (31 parishes.) Following the removal of the indult, it has become much more common for purification to take place immediately following communion (50 parishes vs. 15 parishes.) Here, the value for χ^2 is 8.2, indicating that the probability that this change is unconnected with the removal of the indult is less than 1%. It might be speculated that the desire to greet the people following the mass is responsible for this shift, but it cannot be doubted that one of its effects is to give greater prominence to the rite of

purification, and hence, to the idea of the sacrality of the consecrated species.

Use of Both Species

Only one responding parish did not distribute Holy Communion under both species prior to June of 2002. At the present, six parishes distribute under only one species. While it is tantalizing to suggest that this represents a significant change towards the use of only one species (with its correspondingly reduced need for purification,) the very small absolute numbers prevent one from saying that the change is statistically significant. It goes without saying that the distribution of communion under both species represents the norm in the vast percentage of parishes of the Archdiocese of Atlanta.

Comments

A number of comments were submitted by the respondents. Of the 28 comments received, 3 were positive, 15 were negative, and 10 were not of an evaluative nature. One of the negative responses was telling: "It has made the purifying of vessels a "part of the Mass"- too much attention drawn to something that is purely functional." It perhaps draws attention to the key point, whether the purification rite is simply something functional, or is in fact a "part of the Mass." Four of the comments requested the expansion of the use of instituted acolytes in the parishes, perhaps as a way of minimizing the impact of the indult on the priest and the deacon.

Conclusions

It can hardly be doubted that the decision not to extend the indult permitting purification of vessels by Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion represented a significant change in liturgical practice in the Archdiocese of Atlanta. Judging by the comments received, the change was negatively received much more frequently than it was positively. In roughly 92% of the responding parishes in the Archdiocese, it meant a change in the procedures for purifying vessels, as priests and deacons assumed a function previously carried out at least in part by the laity. In addition to the extremely broad change in the minister of purification, in roughly a third of parishes, the revocation of the indult resulted in a change in the moment in which vessels were purified, with it becoming much more frequent to purify vessels immediately following Holy Communion. It seems likely that the effect of these two changes has been to raise the profile of the purification rite in the liturgy as experienced by the faithful in the Archdiocese of Atlanta. Without empirical evidence, one would have to speculate as to how this higher profile would affect the faith of mass-goers, but it seems that it might serve to elevate the estimation of the Blessed Sacrament, as the care given to purifying the vessels reflects the sacred value of their contents. Of course, the exact effect might be contingent on the way in which the purification is carried out in an individual parish. It is possible that the change led to some parishes choosing to distribute communion under only one species, but further research would be needed to measure the extent of that change.

Statistics

The statistical results of the survey are indicated below. Percentages are percentages of total responses, and may total more or less than 100% due to multiple responses or no responses on the individual surveys.

Prior to June of 2006, did extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion purify vessels in your parish?

Yes: 56 (90%) No: 5 (8%)

Today, who usually purifies the vessels at Sunday Mass?

Priest: 42 (68%) Deacon: 46 (74%) Instituted Acolyte: 9 (15%)

Prior to June of 2006, when were the vessels usually purified at Sunday Mass?

After Communion: 32 (52%) Immediately After Mass: 31 (50%)

Today, when are the vessels usually purified at Sunday Mass?

After Communion: 50 (81%) Immediately After Mass: 15 (24%)

Prior to June of 2006, was communion generally offered under both species at Sunday Mass?

Yes: 60 (97%) No: 1 (2%)

Today, is communion generally offered under both species at Sunday Mass?

Yes: 56 (90%) No: 6 (10%)

Comments:

The comments received with the surveys are below:

Our Parish is small, never over 2 cups

We have no extraordinary ministers of the Holy Communion at the mission

We only have 2 cups at every Mass so the change did not affect us very much. If I were assigned to a larger parish that used 10+ cups and I had to purify them by myself, then I would either offer 2 cups or no cups.

I think that Communion should be offered under just one species - bread.

It makes Mass longer - highly regulating the minutiae. I have wondered why the rule of subsidiarity isn't used in this instance. In the great scheme of parish life, extraordinary ministers who no longer are allowed to purify vessels wonder why they are no longer qualified for this simple task and what the big deal is. But we follow the rules and go on about our lives.

This change is ludicrous. With 9 weekend Masses, we don't have time to purify vessels at Mass, so a priest or deacon must do so after Mass, instead of greeting the Body of Christ at the Church doors.

In regards to receiving from the chalice, I wonder if certain germs or bacteria can be communicated from one to another. For example, I picked up a bacteria C-slift from someone in the hospital and the doctor told me alcohol would not kill it.

Can we institute permanent acolytes?

It has had no major effect.

We would NEVER consider denying the Precious Blood to our parishioners. The former indult made all kinds of practical sense. I would ask that the NCCB continue to pursue it as a new and future option.

I am new to the parish, but I think I have the history right.

We have faithfully complied with the Vatican directive on the Purification of Vessels. However, we disagree with the policy and find the present system contradictory.

I suggest the bishop gives a special permission for the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to help with purification, especially to those parishes that have not instituted acolytes

It is terrible logic that an extraordinary minister can give the Body of Christ but cannot clean the vessels. Is there not a message then that the vessels are more important than the Body of Christ? It certainly seems that way to me.

It has caused an unnecessary delay in the conclusion of the communion rite.

Loss of Parishioners

There is need for an indult to permit extraordinary ministers to purify the sacred vessels after mass

I think the changes are wonderful. I believe we need to allow for more instituted acolytes.

I think this is a lot of nonsense. We had a modern operandi for 40 years, hardly an experiment. I feel the change was to reduce the ability to have communion under both species, truly sad.

The extra-ordinary ministers do a better job than the deacons or priests. It is not very inconvenient.

It has made the purifying of vessels a "part of the Mass"- too much attention drawn to something that is purely functional.

Mine is a small parish with few logistical problems surrounding communion

I had come to the conclusion I was going to exclude the EM's from the process at about the time the changes came from the Holy See. The EM's were too sloppy and careless.

We need to have a wider use of formally instituted Acolytes in our parish, included those not in formation for permanent diaconate

We do not have a deacon at St. Helena's and sometimes it takes too long to purify the vessels. The Eucharistic Ministers should be allowed to purify the sacred vessels.

The removal of the indult was unnecessary and does not take into account the fact of one-priest parishes serving at multiple Masses each Sunday. This is a functionary element of Holy Communion and can be perfectly dealt with by the extraordinary ministers and with all due reverence. Please seek its return as soon as possible.

The effects have been mostly positive in that the extraordinary ministers understand the reason for the change and became ambassadors for it. At present we have five deacons and two instituted acolytes so the task selection presents difficulties.

It is more difficult in a parish with only 1 priest and until recently, one deacon. Especially for occasions such as funeral with direct burial as the clergy leave immediately with the funeral procession - no one is left to purify vessels. After Mass on Sundays, generally priest is out greeting parishioners - not

practical to leave and go purify vessels at that time. Several occasions we have had visiting clergy who leave after Mass and left vessels unpurified- no one who was "authorized" was here and lay EM's/sacristans have had to purify them. Puts us in a quandry.