

Gluten Sensitivity and Communion in the Catholic Church

Alex Catti (July 13, 2017)



Rumors have been circulating that the Catholic Church has decided to disregard the health of some of its parishioners. The subject of this chatter concerns those who have Celiac Disease or other types of gluten sensitivities. However, the Catholic Church is not inadvertently prohibiting its members with Celiac Disease from receiving communion. In fact, the Church even offers a couple of substitute options for those who are not able to consume gluten.

On Saturday, July 8th, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments [sent a circular letter](#) [2] to bishops with the goal of reminding clergy of the acceptable standards for the Eucharist. Despite some initial reports, this letter does not create any new criteria for a standard communion host. Various media outlets got ahold of the document and began inciting worry among churchgoers. Headlines were popping up that Pope Francis doesn't care about parishioners with Celiac Disease. However, these rumors turned out to be false.

The Letter



At the request of the Pope, the [Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments](#) [3] sent a letter to bishops. The [Catholic News Agency](#) [4] states that a reminder letter is usually issued “when someone, generally a bishop, has raised a question or has been alerted of a possible abuse of the norm.” Perhaps the motivation for this letter stemmed from the fact that there are now multiple sources for buying bread for the sacrament of communion, which wasn’t an option before. According to the letter, “Until recently it was certain religious communities who took care of baking the bread and making the wine for the celebration of the Eucharist. Today, however, these materials are also sold in supermarkets and other stores and even over the internet. In order to remove any doubt about the validity of the matter for the Eucharist, this Dicastery suggests that Ordinaries should give guidance in this regard by, for example, guaranteeing the Eucharistic matter through special certification.”

No mention of gluten so far. However, later on in the letter, the question of gluten arises: “Hosts that are completely gluten-free are invalid matter for the celebration of the Eucharist. Low-gluten hosts (partially gluten-free) are valid matter, provided they contain a sufficient amount of gluten to obtain the confection of bread without the addition of foreign materials and without the use of procedures that would alter the nature of bread (A. 1-2).” Although parishioners may not have been familiar with this standard before the publication of the recent letter, this is not a new addition to Catholic Church’s standards.

Why Gluten?

The answer to this lies in history. Wheat bread and wine are what Christ originally used when he instituted the sacrament. Therefore, the bread needed to be made with a certain amount of gluten in order to be considered wheat bread. If any other substance was added in place of gluten, the “nature of bread” would then be altered, which would render it unfit for the sacrament. More on the wine later.

What to Do in Case of Gluten Sensitivity

There are a couple of options if you suffer from Celiac Disease or other gluten-related sensitivities. Father Joseph Faulker is a priest living with Celiac Disease. As a priest who celebrates multiple masses in one day, Fr. Faulker understands this issue very well. He states that a potential alternative could be to use low-gluten hosts, some of which are made by the [Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration](#) [5] in Clyde, Missouri. These wafers contain a gluten concentration of 20 parts per million, which is low enough to be approved by the [Italian Celiac Association \(AiC\)](#) [6], an organization that places strict guidelines on acceptable foods for those with Gluten sensitivities. The AiC also states that individuals with Celiac Disease may consume a host with a gluten concentration of 100 parts per million without adverse health effects. The church’s official letter even states that a low-gluten host is acceptable: “The Ordinary is competent to give permission for an individual priest or layperson to use low-gluten hosts or mustum for the celebration of the Eucharist. Permission can be granted habitually, for as long as the situation continues which occasioned the granting of permission” (C. 1).”

However, if an individual still feels skeptical about consuming a wafer, it’s also possible to receive communion solely through wine. Fr. Faulkner states, “the safest and most certain thing a person could do would be to ask to receive (the Precious Blood) from a chalice other than the chalice that the priest uses.” Fr. Faulker specifies the stipulation regarding the priest’s chalice because a small piece of the host is dropped in that chalice, and therefore, the wine is contaminated.

No matter which way you choose to receive communion, be sure to communicate your needs to the pastor before the mass that way you ensure that your accommodations are met.

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