

# How do I explain receiving Communion to my non-Catholic relatives?

**D**ear Father Kerper: My family is coming over for Christmas Eve and we traditionally go to Mass that evening. How do I explain to family members who are not Catholic that they can't receive Holy Communion? I also have some Catholic family members who I think are not properly prepared for Holy Communion. Should I speak to them? And what can I say?



Your concern about your Christmas Eve situation involves two considerations: social etiquette and theology. By keeping these distinct from one another, perhaps you can avoid hurting anyone's feelings while affirming Catholic teaching and practice.

Let's begin with social etiquette. People who have good manners usually understand the mutual rights and obligations of hosts and guests. Following the norms of Christian hospitality, especially as promoted by St. Benedict, hosts should always welcome, honor, serve and accommodate the special needs of guests. In response, guests should always respect the host and follow the household rules. Some rules are obvious: no smoking at meals, no feet on the coffee table, no speaking about the embarrassing subjects and so on.

Today, one cannot presume that everyone knows or accepts the household rules. Hence, the host may need to review the rules in a gentle and discreet way. You may reasonably expect – or at least hope – that guests will honor the host's generous hospitality by following the most important household rules. This certainly applies to "church etiquette," especially the norms pertaining to reception of Holy Communion.

Since almost all Christian denominations practice "open

communion," which means that everyone partakes of communion regardless of their beliefs or religious affiliations, many people assume that Catholics do the same. This happens because many Christians regard their "communion services" primarily as "fellowship meals" that somehow manifest shared friendship among the participants, including those who may have no settled religious beliefs. As such, many Christians view the Catholic policy about "intercommunion" as a grievous violation of hospitality in that Catholics do not share their "food," thereby apparently judging others as unworthy of Holy Communion. While this response is understandable, it misses the well-founded and biblically-based theological reasons for long-standing Catholic – and Orthodox – practice.

A delicate conversation with your guests could proceed in the following way:

Begin with a preview of the parts and the flow of the Mass. You could show them a Missalette or hymnal, mention the possibility of singing, making the responses and so on. When you get to the Communion Rite, you may acknowledge the common practice of "intercommunion" among most other Christians. Next, mention that Christians have learned to pray and work together while tolerating doctrinal and liturgical differences,

including very different understandings about the Eucharist. Then mention that Catholics reasonably assume that other Christians will respect long-standing Catholic practice without feeling hurt.

Stating Catholic practice, which many Christians reject, is never sufficient. It must be explained in a careful, sensitive and theologically correct way. Here's what you could say: "Catholics see the reception of Holy Communion as the clearest way of identifying themselves publicly as people who fully accept and live according to Catholic beliefs. I know that you have some sincere beliefs that differ from ours, and that you would not want to be identified as a Catholic. We're very happy that you will worship with us at Christmas, but we don't want you to violate your own religious identity by doing something that only Catholics will do."

This explanation moves the discussion beyond social etiquette to theology. It stresses the genuine Catholic desire to protect the religious integrity of Christians who do not accept Catholic teaching about the Eucharist, Church authority, marriage and a vast range of other issues. Most important, it doesn't propose our Catholic practice as an arbitrary penalty imposed upon "outsiders" for being grave sinners, heretics or schismatics.

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If a visitor is genuinely respectful and open-minded toward the position of the Catholic Church, there should be no anger or hurt feelings. After all, polite guests respect the peculiar practices and customs of other people when they visit their homes and places of worship. Why should anyone who visits a Catholic church feel hurt or angry if Catholics follow their long-standing beliefs at Christmas Eve Mass?

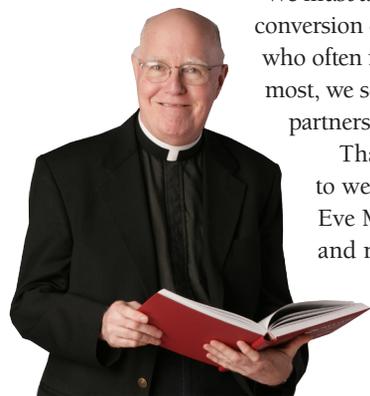
Now let's consider baptized Catholics who rarely worship, who were never fully instructed or who have wandered into confusing spiritual territory. We all know such people. What should we do if they intend to receive Holy Communion? Here we must recognize our own severe limitations regarding knowledge and authority.

As to knowledge, no one can fully and accurately grasp the spiritual situation of another person. For example, we may consider someone “lapsed” or “irregular” when in fact he or she may have gone to confession, been fully reconciled with the Church, or embarked on a slow and complex spiritual journey that remains unfinished. In such cases, an untimely rigoristic or overzealous “instruction” may do more harm than good.

While bishops have the authority to declare that a specific Catholic should not receive Holy Communion, we do not. As faithful Catholics, we have the duty to speak prudently to people about Church teachings and practice, always hoping that they will respond properly. But we have no authority whatsoever to insist that people follow our personal judgments about their readiness to receive Holy Communion.

We must always remember that the work of conversion of hearts ultimately belongs to God, who often moves slowly and mysteriously. At most, we serve only as His humble and trusting partners. All success comes from Him.

Thanks for preparing well in advance to welcome your guests to Christmas Eve Mass. I trust that your kindness and reflection about these complicated matters will produce some small “fruits of unity” rather than division. ■



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