

CANONS 213, 843 AND 912

RECEPTION OF HOLY COMMUNION BY ONE UNABLE TO SWALLOW

I followed the news reports of the little boy who cannot swallow the Sacred Host, and who therefore would receive the Eucharist into his mouth, chew it a bit, and then spit it out into the hands of his father, who consumed the rest. While I frankly found the practice unbecoming, the boy apparently engaged in it with a sense of reverence and it seemed to be the only way he could receive the Eucharist. I don't want to see him denied Holy Communion because of something he has no control over, but isn't that what the bishop did when he ordered the practice to cease?

OPINION

Church law presents a formidable complex of canons protecting the faithful's fundamental right to receive the sacraments. Canon 213 declares the right of the faithful "to receive assistance from the sacred pastors out of the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the word of God and the sacraments," while canon 843, §1 forbids ministers to withhold sacraments from those "who seek them at appropriate times, are properly disposed, and are not prohibited by law from receiving them." Specifically with regard to the Eucharist, canon 912 states that, "Any baptized person not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to holy communion." These and other norms (for example, c. 18) are weighty factors in favor of sacramental reception. At the same time, however, the reasonable assertion of a right is not an insurmountable bar to regulating the exercise thereof (c. 223). As steward of the sacraments, the Church is bound to see to their proper celebration (c. 841).¹ Here, the nature of the Eucharist as food has implications for the manner in which it can be received, implications which the Church is not free to disregard.

The boy in this case suffers from a deglutitional disorder arising from autism; he is unable to swallow a food object (bolus) with the texture of the eucharistic Host. Setting aside questions about whether desensitizing therapies which might have enabled him to swallow the Sacred Host were tried and failed, and leaving aside the possibility that some persons in this unfortunate state might yet receive the Eucharist under the form of the Precious Blood, there was no doubt about the boy's interior disposition and desire to receive

¹ See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana-USCCB, 2000), nos. 1113, 1117.

the Eucharist; in every pastorally relevant way he is eligible to receive Holy Communion. The question in this case is not, "May the boy receive Holy Communion in this admittedly unusual manner?" It is, rather, "Does taking the Host into one's mouth, chewing it, and then spitting it out, constitute a reception of the Eucharist at all?" To that question, the answer of the approved canonical authors has been, "No."

It is the more common opinion that the grace of Holy Communion is received when the sacred species is received into the stomach. It is thus necessary to beware that the sacred species does not melt or corrupt in the mouth but is swallowed as soon as possible in order for it to reach the stomach since the sacrament is received in the manner of eating and drinking.²

Now, if even the complete disintegration of an unswallowed Host within the mouth would not constitute "reception" of the Eucharist, expectoration of a partially intact Host is hardly more likely to accomplish the act of sacramental communication.

Hieronymus Noldin and Albert Schmitt, among others, expressly considered the case of one who receives the Eucharist only to spit it out again:

For the Eucharist to produce its effect[s], there is required by the will of Christ the consumption of the sacrament.... But one is not said to eat who only takes food into the mouth, but rather, he who takes food in by the mouth and sends it through the throat to the stomach. Thus the grace of the sacrament is not conferred when the sacred species are in the mouth, but when they are received into the stomach. Consequently, whoever receives the species and spits them out without swallowing them ... does not receive the grace of the sacrament, for he has not truly and completely eaten Christ.³

As one might surmise from Nicholas Halligan and Noldin-Schmitt, the authors based their insistence that the sacred species be swallowed for sacra-

² Nicholas Halligan, *The Administration of the Sacraments* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1963), 109; Cf. Eduardus Regatillo, *Ius Sacramentarium*, 4th ed. (Santander, Spain: Sal Terrae, 1964), no. 319; and Heribert Jone, *Moral Theology*, 8th ed., trans. Urban Adelman (Westminster, MD: Newman Bookshop, 1948), no. 497.

³ Hieronymus Noldin, *Summa Theologiae Moralis*, 33rd ed., rev. by Albert Schmitt (Innsbruck: Feliciani Rauch, 1960), vol. III, no. 101, trans. Edward N. Peters; see also Arthur Vermeersch, *Theologiae Moralis: Principia, Responsa, Consilia*, 4th ed. (Rome: Gregorian University, 1947), vol. III, no. 382.

mental effectiveness on Christ's decision to institute the Eucharist as food and drink.⁴

In short, it seems that what the bishop did here was not to prohibit the boy from receiving the Eucharist, but rather, to make clear that this activity did not constitute the reception of the Eucharist whereupon, in virtue of his responsibilities for common ecclesiastical discipline (c. 392), he directed that the futile practice be discontinued. The unseemliness of the subsequent paternal ingestion of chewed food could have added to the bishop's negative evaluation of the practice, but it was not necessary to do so in order to reach the decision he did.

But one may, I think, go on to ask a related question: in upholding a glutinational requirement for the effectiveness of Holy Communion, and in rejecting the dissolving of the sacred species in the mouth (prior to swallowing or otherwise), did the pre-conciliar authors inadvertently establish a criterion for reception of Holy Communion that cannot be honored in a post-conciliar liturgical environment where reception from the Cup is commonplace? Specifically, would the older authors have had to hold that the large number of faithful who today take but a tiny sip of the Precious Blood from the Cup at Mass, and who therefore are unlikely to take in a sufficient quantity of the Precious Blood so as to be able to swallow it intact, are engaged in an empty reception exercise? I think not.

It will come as no surprise to sacramental lawyers that the saintly Jesuit Felix Cappello (1879-1962), discussing how and when the grace of the Eucharist is conferred, offered what seems to be the key to upholding the requirement of swallowing the Eucharist against those who held that merely taking the Sacred Host into the mouth was sufficient for the conferral of grace, while at the same time recognizing the effectiveness of the reception of the sacrament by those who, for example, could be given but a barely recognizable speck of the Sacred Host or a tiny drop of Precious Blood to consume. Cappello wrote:

The disagreement among the authors can perhaps be resolved and the correct doctrine more accurately explained thus: if one takes the consecrated species in the manner of eating and drinking with the intention of truly consuming them, that is, of eating and drinking [them], one takes the sacrament and therefore receives grace by it and immediately upon consuming the sacred species, before he actually moves them to the stomach. If, on the other hand, the consecrated

species are not taken with the intention of truly eating and drinking [them], and they are not sent to the stomach, this is not considered a complete communion, and therefore the sacrament is not received.⁵

Under this analysis, one for whom illness, death, or minuteness of the quantity received prevents that one from completing the intended act of swallowing the Sacred Host or Precious Blood, is nevertheless held to have received the sacrament and its attendant graces. The boy in this case, however, brought a different intention to his act, namely, he intended to chew the Sacred Host and then to spit it out without swallowing it; consequently that action may be held as not constituting the reception of the Eucharist, without disturbing the consciences of those whom minuteness of quantity might prevent physically swallowing an intact amount of the sacred species. Moreover, the pious practice of letting the Sacred Host dissolve in the mouth before swallowing should still be discouraged, if only because such an action, when deliberately undertaken, confuses the intention with which one receives the Eucharist.

To this, one final point needs to be recalled: namely, that canon law can only go so far in answering what are at root pastoral questions. It belongs to canon law to preserve the authentic insights of earlier generations without precluding the theologians' search for deeper or wider understanding of these truths. As the Church continues to plumb the depths of the Eucharistic mystery, some theological discoveries yet to come might impact pastoral practice in this area. But it is not for canon law to get ahead of the theologians and to propose solutions to pastoral problems that cannot here and now be supported by the common and constant opinions of the learned persons (c. 19). I personally think that the implications of Christ's institution of the Eucharist as food are weighty, and that this thoroughly supports the results reached by the bishop in this emotionally difficult case; but I would not presume to say that this response precludes inquiries into other characteristics of the Eucharist that might in turn have repercussions for these cases in the future.

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⁴ Felix Cappello, *Tractatus canonico-moralis de sacramentis iuxta Codicem iuris canonici*, 7th ed., (Turin, Italy: Marietti, 1962), vol. I, no. 358; see more generally, Stanley B. Marrow, S.J., "Eucharist in Scripture," in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 393-398.

⁵ Felix Cappello, *Tractatus canonico-moralis de sacramentis iuxta Codicem iuris canonici*, 7th ed., (Turin, Italy: Marietti, 1962), vol. I, no. 358; trans. Edward N. Peters.