



Healthcare Concerns and Liturgical Practices

This document is a revision of advice distributed to Ministry Units in 2013 which itself made use of information from the Diocese of New York during the H1N1 (Swine Flu) Epidemic of 2009.

IN GENERAL

If the celebrant or any of those assisting in the service feel ill, they should excuse themselves from worship that Sunday. The same holds true for members of the congregation who do not feel well; they should excuse themselves from attending church that Sunday.

THE PEACE

The common practice in most congregations is that members of the congregation greet each other with a handshake, or even an embrace. This is a prime opportunity for the spread of germs.

This should be reviewed by each congregation. Graceful provision should be made for those who do not wish to have direct physical contact with their fellow worshippers either because of their vulnerability to infection or their concern about their own state of health.

THE COMMON CUP

The common cup is an essential symbol of our Christian life and identity. It is important, however, to conduct eucharistic worship responsibly, so that we do not expose anyone to danger and contagion. We ask you to recall the theological justification for a common cup and we recommend some specific steps that can preserve our custom and ensure our safety.

First – we offer some reflections on the cup of blessing. In addition to the symbolic weight borne by the contents of the chalice, the chalice itself is a powerful, indeed essential, symbol of our communion with one another. Just as there is “one bread” so too there is “one cup of blessing which we bless.” This symbolism remains powerful even if we do not use one physical loaf of bread (as some liturgists encourage) and even if large parishes and cathedrals often have more than one chalice for the distribution of Communion.

The cup of blessing has been a major focal point of symbolic reflection; and we recall the fact that the return to its common usage was a hard-won victory for the reformers. We believe the sacramental significance of a common cup receives even more emphasis in our time because we do not normally drink from common vessels; this is a potent and robust reminder that this is no ordinary meal, but is, in fact, an anticipation of the heavenly banquet. We are unwilling to surrender the sacrificial quality of this tradition because drinking from a common cup is a sign of trust, fellowship and commitment.

Second – we do, nevertheless, respect the knowledge of medical experts, who advise the consistent employment of rational measures to secure communal safety. Here are some important recommendations for usage in our diocese:

- Receiving the sacrament “in one kind” has always been, and continues to be, an acceptable alternative for communicants. While we promote the use of the common cup, we also want to offer this option for those who prefer it since it too has ancient precedent in our spiritual life. Indeed, this entire message is designed to retain our inclusive community with its rich heritage of commonality.

- Risks associated by the use of a common cup are mitigated by use of a clean purificator, used appropriately. This means wiping both the outside and the inside of the lip of the cup with a clean part of the purificator each time the cup is administered. It is suggested that more than one purificator be readily available for the chalice bearers in larger congregations.
- It is imperative that eucharistic ministers have clean hands when administering the bread. It is suggested that the lavabo be of an adequate size to accommodate some soapy water in which the hands can be truly cleansed and then rinsed by the pouring of additional water. The use of an alcohol hand sanitiser is also recommended.
- Intinction by the communicant is strongly discouraged. If communicants have a personal preference for this manner of receiving the sacrament, it should be only the clergy, who have used the lavabo, who intinct the host. When intinction is the preferred method of receiving Communion, the priest or deacon should take the wafer directly from the ciborium, not the communicant's hand, to avoid introducing that person's germs into the chalice.
- Silver has a mildly antimicrobial effect which is beneficial, but it is not sufficient without the above-mentioned precautions.

We strongly recommend that all those responsible for congregational life and worship use this occasion as an opportunity to:

- re-enforce sound eucharistic teaching, with a special focus on the unifying symbol of the chalice.
- reassure the faithful that there are options, and prudent measures are taken to reduce the risk of infection.
- offer refresher instructions on the basics of receiving Communion (with special emphasis on guiding the cup to one's lips by holding the base of the chalice – not by placing one's hands on the bowl of the chalice itself). There should be special emphasis on the protocols around intinction: ideally the consecrated host should be taken directly from the ciborium by the minister administering Communion, intincted and then presented to the communicant.
- review and amend altar guild procedures (especially as they have to do with ablutions and the provision of hand cleansers for the celebrant and those administering Communion).
- review and amend instructions for the ministers of Communion especially as regards the cleansing of their own hands, the proper use of a purificator and the practice of intinction.

THE SHARING/PASSING OF THE CONSECRATED HOST

On special occasions in some congregations, and more commonly in others, the custom exists of passing bread from one communicant to the next. This practice is extremely unsanitary and is discouraged.