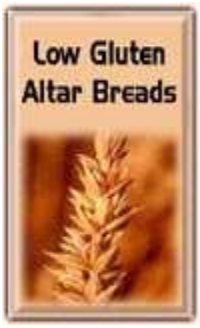
The Celiac & The Eucharist



The first consideration requires an understanding of celiac disease. Celiac disease is a medical condition in which the absorptive surface of the small intestine is damaged by gluten. This condition can cause a variety of symptoms including but not limited to abdominal pain. While not minimizing the seriousness of the long term effects of the condition or the suffering of the person with celiac disease, one must put the condition in perspective with respect to the reception of the Eucharist, remembering that the severity of the immediate effects of the celiac are generally not immediately life threatening. In comparison, anaphylactic medical allergies to nuts (which may also be of concern to some in the reception of the Eucharist) may necessitate the use of an epipen on an emergency basis to prevent death.

A second consideration is an understanding of the Eucharist. During the consecration of a Catholic mass, the bread and wine is ***substantially changed*** by Christ Himself acting through the ministerial priest who acts in "persona Christi" (in the person of Christ). The bread and wine no longer are bread and wine but are ***changed in substance*** and become the Body and Blood of Christ under the ***appearances*** of bread and wine. This process is called transubstantiation and is dogma of the Church.

A third consideration must make the distinction between ***gluten-free*** and ***low-gluten*** altar breads. Gluten free breads contain no gluten whatsoever while low gluten breads contain trace amounts of gluten. The distinction is an important one as Canon Law requires the use of breads made of wheat (i.e. with gluten) in order to ensure valid matter for the consecration of the Eucharist. The process of transubstantiation (the changing in substance of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ) requires proper form and matter. The form are the words of consecration said by the ministerial priest. The matter is the bread and wine offered as the sacrifice. If either is lacking then no consecration takes place and the Eucharist remains bread and wine and ***not*** the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Authority of the Church

Christ gave a unique power to Peter. Matt 16:19 "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." It is this power that the Church uses to establish laws governing the Church, Canon Laws, laws that require obedience by all Catholics because they reflect the will of Christ through His Church. The Code of Canon Law is very specific with respect to the requirements for the matter and form of the Eucharistic Sacrament.

Canon Law

Canons 924, 925 & 926 address the issue of matter as it pertains to the bread and wine.

Can. 924 §1 The most holy Sacrifice of the Eucharist ***must*** be celebrated in bread, and in wine to which a small quantity of water is to be added.

§2 The bread ***must*** be wheaten ***only*** and recently made, so that there is no danger of corruption.

Can. 925 Holy communion is to be given under the species of bread alone or, in accordance with the liturgical laws, under both species or, ***in case of necessity***, even under the species of wine alone.

Can. 926 In the Eucharistic celebration, in accordance with the ancient tradition of the Latin Church, the priest is to use ***unleavened*** bread wherever he celebrates Mass.

<u>The Implications of Canon Law</u>

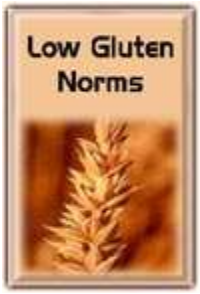
The language of Can 924 makes it clear that the breads ***'must be wheaten only'***. The word 'must' makes the canonical requirement mandatory. The words 'wheaten only' **exclude any and all non-wheat products [rice, barley etc.]**

The language of Can 926 requires that ***'the priest is to use unleavened bread'***. The requirement for unleavened bread consequently excludes all 'loaf' type breads made with yeast.

The two requirements together necessitate the use of pure flour and water **ONLY,** in the making of altar breads. The addition of any other ingredient[s] is a clear violation of The Code of Canon Law.

Those who suffer from severe food allergies ***'in case of necessity'*** [such as gluten intolerance] are accorded the option of receiving communion 'under the species of wine alone' by virtue of Can 925. There are also provisions for the use of low-gluten breads.

Furthermore, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith further clarified the Norms for the use of Low-Gluten Breads in 1994 and again in 2003, in part for those suffering from celiac disease. The pertinent sections are cited.



Norms for the Use of Low-Gluten Bread and Mustum [Prot. 0]

August 22, 1994
Author : Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

I. Concerning permission to use low-gluten altar breads:

A. This may be granted by ordinaries to priests and lay persons affected by celiac disease, after presentation of a medical certificate.

B. Conditions for the validity of the matter:

- Special hosts quibus glutinum ablatum est ***(gluten-free) are invalid matter*** for the celebration of the Eucharist

- ***Low-gluten hosts are valid matter***, *provided* that they contain the amount of gluten sufficient to obtain the confection of bread, that there is no addition of foreign materials and that the procedure for making such hosts is not such as to alter the nature of the substance of the bread.

III. Common Norms

A. The matter (the low-gluten breads) must have ecclesiastical approval.

B. Permissions are to be given only for as long as the situation continues which motivated the request.

C. Scandal is to be avoided.

What All of This Means

1. ***Gluten-free breads are invalid matter and not permitted***. The use of gluten-free breads results in the recipient receiving a wafer which is ***not*** the Body and Blood of Christ. If knowingly received this constitutes an act of idolatry as one would be giving the same importance to a simple wafer as they would be to Christ Himself.

2. By virtue of "common norms" established by Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the ***low-gluten wafers must have ecclesiastical approval***. This in essence is a "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" to ensure that the wafers being used actually contain minimal amounts of gluten to satisfy the requirements for valid matter. While there are well meaning individuals who attempt to make their own "low gluten" breads, never-the-less the requirement for ecclesiastical approval ensures that the wafer constitutes valid matter and that a valid consecration actually takes place.

3. Note that the Church permits the use of low-gluten wafers but does not encourage their use since their use requires ecclesiastical approval and even then only while the celiac condition is present.

Options For the Celiac

1. One must remember that one is receiving the Body and Blood of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine, not actually bread itself. There are documented cases of celiac suffers who, while maintaining a strict gluten free diet, never-the-less receive the Eucharist under normal conditions with absolutely no ill effects what-so-ever. This is not surprising given the nature, essence and substance of the Eucharist Itself that it is the Body and Blood of Christ under the ***appearances*** of bread and wine.

2. One must also remember that the consecrated Host is the true Body and Blood of Christ. So too are any fragments, however small. [Small fragments will help minimize the amount of gluten

content]. There is no distinction between a small fragment and the entire Host. Each is in its entirety is the Body and Blood of Christ. The celiac may then receive a very small fragment with the assurance that they are still receiving Christ in His entirety.

3. In like manner, the consecrated wine is the true Body and Blood of Christ. The Church permits one to receive Holy Communion from the chalice with the same assurances.

4. One is also permitted to receive communion using officially approved low-gluten breads. Low-gluten breads tend to be expensive given the small quantities required to serve the needs of the celiac. Low-gluten Breads are permitted when both the breads and their use conforms to the "The Norms for Use of Low-Gluten Altar Breads". Low-gluten breads can be purchased from parish Crossroads. However, it is not uncommon for a celiac to choose one of the first three options.

For further information, contact us at

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