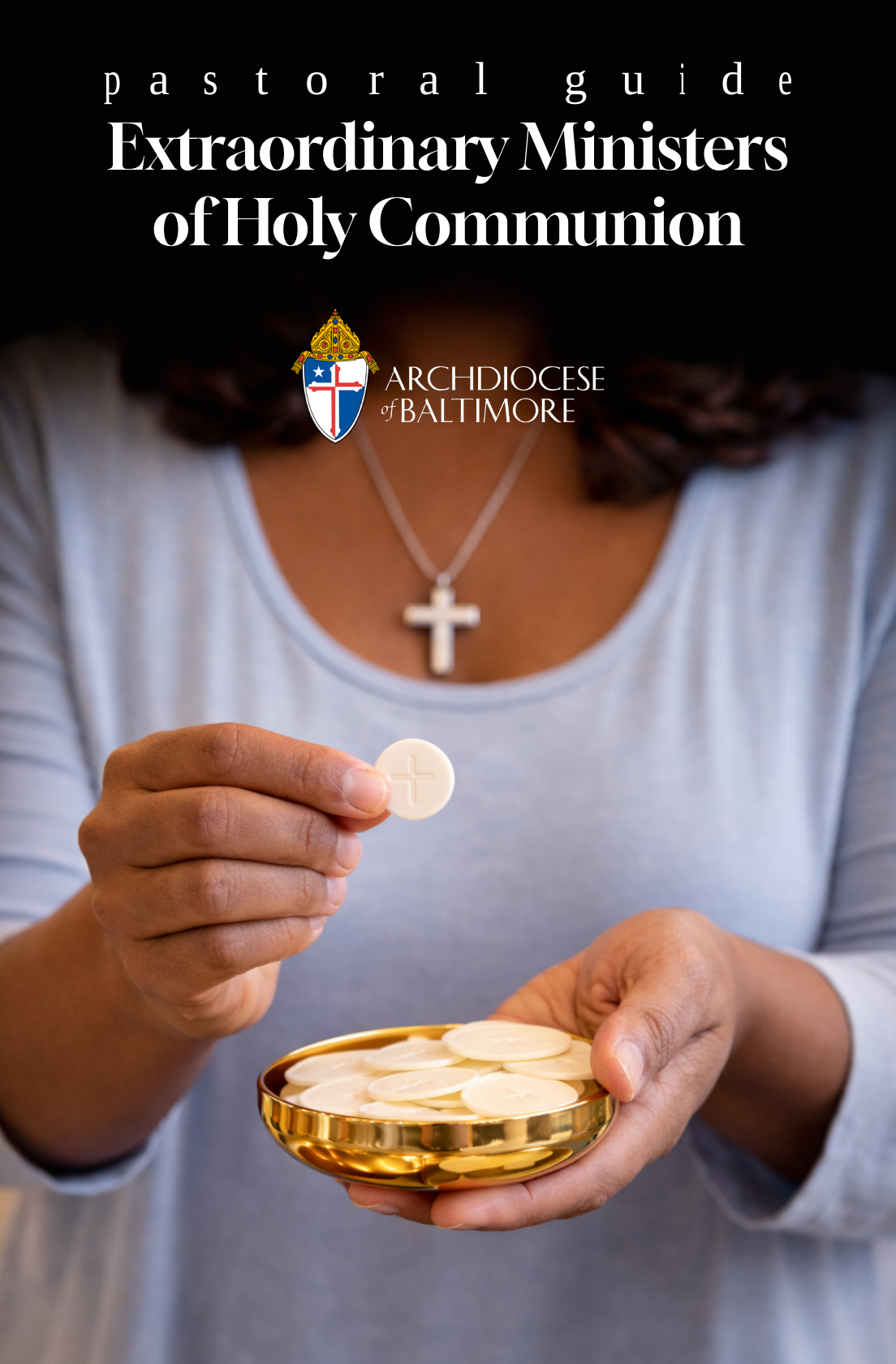
pastoral guide

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

ARCHDIOCESE of BALTIMORE

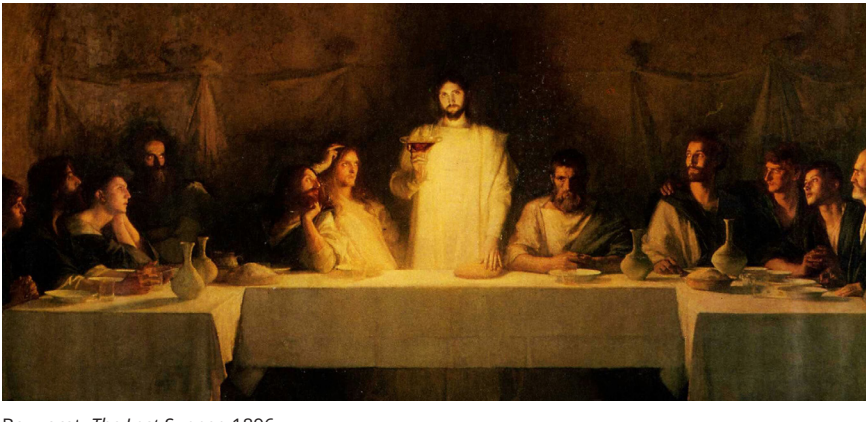


Archdiocese of Baltimore 2026

Introduction

On the night before he was handed over to suffering and death, Jesus entrusted himself to his followers in the sacrament of the Eucharist, in fulfillment of his words, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him" (John 6:56). As Catholic Christians, the Eucharist is the "source and summit" of our life (*Lumen Gentium* n. 11), for we believe that the Eucharist is Christ's own sacrifice, to which his people unite themselves through the words and actions of the priest. We share most fully in his sacrifice through receiving Holy Communion, for when we eat the Eucharistic Bread and drink the Cup we proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes again (see *Roman Missal* n. 91; 1 Cor 11:26).

Traditionally, Holy Communion has been distributed to the people by the ordained ministers of the Church. In recent years, however, the Church has permitted lay ministers to assist in the distribution of Communion at Mass in situations where there are not enough ordained ministers to allow for "the orderly and reverent distribution of the Body and Blood of the Lord" ("*Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America*" n. 28). Similarly, when there are not enough ordained ministers available to do so, the Church allows lay ministers to assist in visiting the sick and homebound to offer them Communion, so that they might not be deprived of the Lord's



Bouveret. *The Last Supper*. 1896.

gift of himself. Lay people who minister in these settings are called Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (EMHC).

The Church provides norms and guidance for situations in which lay ministers assist in the distribution of Communion. In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the specific details for lay ministers who assist in the distribution of Communion are given in the *Norms for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion in the Archdiocese of Baltimore*. This *Pastoral Guide*, based on the *Norms*, is a resource for lay ministers and those who form them. It is intended to help them appreciate the awesome task that is entrusted to them by the Church's pastors — to help these shepherds in feeding God's flock with the food of eternal life.



Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

The ministers who distribute Holy Communion in ordinary situations are bishops, priests, and deacons. Thus, bishops, priests, and deacons are called "*ordinary"* ministers of Holy Communion, for they minister in *ordinary* circumstances.

A situation *outside* of the ordinary—an *extra*ordinary situation—occurs in the context of Mass when there are not enough bishops, priests, and deacons to distribute Communion in a reasonable manner to all who are able to receive. Likewise, in the context of wider pastoral care, an extraordinary situation arises when there are not enough bishops, priests, or deacons to bring Communion to the sick and homebound. In some places, such "*extraordinary*" situations might occur on a regular basis. When either or both of these extraordinary situations occur, lay ministers may assist the ordained ministers. These lay ministers are called Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion, because they minister in *extraordinary* circumstances.

If extraordinary ministers serve only in extraordinary situations, who, then, decides what makes a situation "ordinary" or "extraordinary" in concrete local settings? For the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the archbishop and a pastor or chaplain discern the situation of a specific parish or chaplaincy. If they decide that the situation is an *extraordinary* one, the pastor or chaplain then submits the names of lay ministers who may be able to assist. Next, those who are approved by the archbishop receive a "mandate" (delegation) from him to assist the pastor or chaplain with the distribution of Communion on a regular basis. In a truly unforeseen circumstance related to a specific Mass, the Priest who presides at that Mass may "depute" a qualified lay person to distribute Holy Communion for that single occasion (*Roman Missal; Appendix III*).



Becoming an EMHC

Women and men who are interested in becoming an EMHC must meet certain requirements. Some of these requirements can be readily determined from relevant documentation, while others are matters of discernment, which is made by the individual who wishes to become an EMHC together with his or her pastor or chaplain.

An EMHC …

- is at least sixteen years of age;
- has received the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist;
- is a practicing Catholic, distinguished in his or her Christian life, faith and morals;
- demonstrates reverence for and devotion to the holy Eucharist;
- is able to function with regularity with the requisite abilities and temperament;
- has his or her name submitted in a request that is written and signed by his or her pastor or chaplain;
- participates in a formation workshop, approved by the Office of Divine Worship, at the archdiocesan or parish level.

The Mandate for EMHCs

The permission or "mandate" for an EMHC is requested from the archbishop by the individual's pastor or chaplain. This mandate applies for a specific amount of time and for a specific community.

In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, an EMHC receives a mandate for a term of five years. At that time, the minister is recommissioned and their name must be recorded again with the ardiocese.

An EMHC ministers only for the parish or chaplaincy for which he or she has been mandated. This is because an EMHC has been invited to assist in response to the concrete situation of that specific community. Still, if a lay person is engaged in multiple communities, he or she may receive multiple mandates. For example, if an individual is involved in a parish and in a high school chaplaincy, he or she may be mandated for both the parish and the high school.



If an EMHC changes communities within the Archdiocese of Baltimore, his or her mandate may be "transferred" at the discretion of the new pastor or chaplain. The process for transferring mandates should be discussed with the pastors or chaplains of the former and new communities. Because Church law gives oversight of EMHCs to the diocesan bishop, an individual who moves from one diocese to another should speak with his or her new diocese about local requirements. Individuals moving into the Archdiocese of Baltimore must meet the requirements for this archdiocese.

The Ministry of EMHCs within Mass

What follows are general guidelines for EMHCs who minister during Mass. Pastors will provide more specific guidance for station assignments and specific logistics.

Preparation for Ministry

Preparation for Mass includes spiritual as well as practical preparation. On the practical side, EMHCs are to dress appropriately as determined by the pastor or chaplain. Even when an EMHC is not scheduled, they should be prepared to serve if needed.

In order to prepare spiritually, EMHCs should arrive at Mass early. After checking in with the presiding priest (or other designated minister or staff member) and performing any other preparatory tasks, EMHCs should spend some time in prayer before Mass begins.

EMHCs at Mass

Ordinarily, within a given Mass an EMHC serves only for Communion and does not serve in other ministries (e.g., reader) at the same Mass.

As a reminder, EMHCs minister only in cases in which there is not a sufficient number of ordinary ministers of Holy Communion. If an ordinary minister of Holy Communion (or instituted acolyte) is unexpectedly present for Mass, EMHCs, even if previously scheduled, should graciously recognize the changed conditions of the situation.

EMHCs are seated with the assembly until the time when they approach the altar to assist in the distribution of Communion. They do not process in the entrance procession or recessional.

During the Breaking of the Bread (Fraction Rite)

EMHCs do not assist in the breaking of the bread (Fraction Rite) or its distribution among the vessels.

Approaching the Altar and Receiving Communion

EMHCs approach the altar after the priest has received Communion. EMHCs should receive Communion from a priest or a deacon—a reminder that EMHCs are assisting the ordinary ministers. EMHCs are never permitted to self-communicate. EMHCs receive Communion at this time (before distributing Communion to others) and never after distributing Communion to others.

Preparing for Distribution

After receiving Communion, EMHCs should not take sacred vessels directly from the altar but receive them from a priest or a deacon. Having received the sacred vessels, EMHCs go reverently and without haste to their stations.

Regarding those receiving communion, "the norm established for the Dioceses of the United States of America is that Holy Communion is to be received standing, unless an individual member of the faithful wishes to receive Communion while kneeling" (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 160). Communion may never be denied to a communicant on the basis of posture so long as the posture accords with the norms of the Church, nor may Communion be denied on the basis of posture for those who have



a physical limitation. In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Communion is not ordinarily distributed by intinction. If a specific community has a serious reason for distributing Communion by intinction, all ordinary and extraordinary ministers are to follow the relevant sections of the archdiocesan *Norms*. EMHCs and lay communicants may never receive Communion by self-intinction.

Distributing the Precious Body

When distributing the Precious Body, the EMHC holds up the host before each communicant and says only, "The Body of Christ," to which the communicant responds, "Amen." The Precious Body may be received on the tongue or in the hand. EMHCs should ensure that communicants immediately consume the host. If the Precious Body falls, the EMHC should reverently pick it up and set it aside to be given to a priest or deacon after the distribution of Communion.



After the distribution of Communion, EMHCs should return their sacred vessels to a priest or deacon. The priest or deacon then consumes what remains or reserves it in the tabernacle.

Distributing the Precious Blood

When distributing the Precious Blood, the EMHC holds up the chalice before each communicant and says only, "The Blood of Christ," to which the communicant responds, "Amen." If any Precious Blood spills, the EMHC should use the purificator to wipe

up the spill. The area should later be washed with water, which is then poured into the sacrarium.

In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, EMHCs may consume immediately any Precious Blood that remains, either at the place of distribution or at the credence table or another suitable place, as determined by the pastor or chaplain. This is most suitably done at the place of distribution.

Welcoming Those Who Will Not Receive into the Communion Procession

According to the Church, lay ministers, including EMHCs, are not able to give blessings within the context of Mass, whether during Communion or some other moment within Mass. In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, they will offer this very brief prayer of spiritual Communion:

"Receive the Lord Jesus in your heart."

The Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion should not make the Sign of the Cross over the individual. Similarly, the EMHC should not touch the individual in any way for a number of reasons.

Purification

Vessels are ritually purified by the celebrant, deacon, or an instituted acolyte. Following Mass and after the vessels have been purified, they are cleaned with soap and then dried. EMHCs may assist in the cleaning that takes place after purification.

After the Distribution of Communion

Following Communion, the priest may give a pyx with the Precious Body to EMHCs who will visit the sick and homebound. A pyx – a small container with a lid – is a sacred vessel that should be blessed prior to its first use.

These ministers depart immediately or, if more appropriate, following the dismissal of Mass. EMHCs should go directly to distribute Communion to those they are to visit. If, for any reason, an EMHC cannot leave immediately, the pyx should not be received until the time of departure.

EMHCs who do not receive pyxes for distribution of Communion to the sick and homebound return to their places in the assembly.



The Ministry of EMHCs to the Sick and Homebound

In this section, we offer general instructions for EMHCs who minister to the sick and homebound. More specific guidelines as to when to receive the pyx, scheduling of visits, and the like will need to be clarified by parish or chaplaincy staff.

In distributing Holy Communion to the sick and homebound, EMHCs must use the rites approved by the Church. EMHCs should contact their local parish or chaplaincy staff about how to obtain the approved rites. The archdiocesan Office of Divine Worship can also assist.

EMHCs should only distribute Communion to the sick and homebound indicated by their pastor or chaplain, which also includes any family members or health attendants that may be with those individuals. As with ministry at Mass, EMHCs serve only in cases in which there is not a sufficient number of ordinary ministers of Holy Communion or when ordinary ministers are unable to serve.

EMHCs should go directly from the parish church or chapel to the place of the person who is sick or homebound. EMHCs should not stop for other matters while visiting the sick.

Communion with the Precious Body

The Precious Body is carried in a pyx, which if possible is placed in a burse (a small bag).

Normally, only the Precious Body is taken to the sick or homebound. Take only as many hosts as are needed for those receiving Communion. If an individual is unexpectedly not able to receive Communion, any hosts not consumed should be returned to the church or chapel as soon as possible. It is not permissible for EMHCs to reserve any of the Precious Body outside of the church or chapel (for example, reservation in a private home is never permitted).

Communion with the Precious Blood

In exceptional circumstances and as discerned by the pastor or chaplain, the Precious Blood may be taken to the sick or homebound. When a person who is sick requires the use of a feeding tube, EMHCs should consult their pastor or chaplain on best practices.

The Precious Blood is carried in a suitable vessel that is covered to guard against spilling. This vessel should be purified by a priest, deacon, or instituted acolyte after each use. In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, EMHCs may consume any Precious Blood that remains after the person who is sick or homebound has received Communion.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. May an EMHC go to the tabernacle?

For Mass: The Roman Missal presumes that communion is ordinarily given from the elements consecrated at that Mass. If, however, it is necessary to have recourse to the sacrament reserved in the tabernacle, this is fittingly done by an ordinary minister. But who goes to the tabernacle may depend on factors such as the specific layout of the church, when the sacrament is retrieved, etc. If the tabernacle is located outside of the sanctuary, and there is no deacon present, it may be more fitting for an EMHC to retrieve the sacrament from the tabernacle, rather than for the priest to leave the altar. Likewise, if the Eucharist must be retrieved from the tabernacle once communion has already begun, it may be better for an EMHC to do this than the celebrant. It is up to the pastor or chaplain to determine the best procedure.

For Eucharistic Adoration: If Exposition is celebrated and a priest or deacon is truly not available, an EMHC may expose and repose the Blessed Sacrament. On the rare occasions that such a celebration occurs, EMHCs who lead Exposition must use the rites approved by the Church. The local pastor or chaplain, as well as the archdiocesan Office of Divine Worship, can assist EMHCs with how these rites are properly celebrated with a lay leader.

For Communion to the Sick and Homebound: An EMHC may only retrieve the Eucharist from the tabernacle for visits to the sick and homebound if this is permitted by the pastor or chaplain. Parishes and chaplaincies should have procedures in place that minimize the need for EMHCs to go to the tabernacle and that safeguard access to the tabernacle.

2. May extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion sanitize their hands before and after the distribution of Holy Communion?

EMHCs may always choose to sanitize their hands. Where local procedures exist, they should follow those procedures.

3. ***What should the EMHC do if there are not enough consecrated hosts to distribute to the entire assembly?***

   Though this rarely occurs, it is permissable to break a host into smaller parts if necessary.

4. ***If EMHCs may not give blessings during Communion, what do they do for those who approach in the Communion procession but indicate that they will not receive?***

   In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, they will offer this very brief prayer of spiritual Communion:

   "Receive the Lord Jesus in your heart."

   The Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion should not make the Sign of the Cross over the individual. Similarly, the EMHC should not touch the individual in any way for a number of reasons.

5. ***Why are EMHCs not able to purify the sacred vessels for Communion?***

   The purification of sacred vessels is a matter of Church law determined by the Holy See. Current Church law allows only bishops, priests, deacons, and instituted acolytes to purify vessels. The purification of the vessels is not simply a practical action, but a ritual that shows reverence for the consecrated elements.

6. ***May an EMHC bring the Blessed Sacrament home and reserve it until visiting a sick or homebound person?***

   It is never permissible for an EMHC to reserve the Blessed Sacrament in a private residence. Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament must take place in a tabernacle within a parish church or within a chapel approved by the diocesan bishop for reservation.

7. How long is the Eucharistic fast required for a sick person?

Fifteen minutes, if possible. If, for any reason, this is not possible, no fast is required for one who is sick. The fast of fifteen minutes also applies to family members or health attendants who are permitted to receive, who are properly disposed, and who wish to receive Holy Communion with the person to whom the sacrament is being brought.

8. What happens if a sick person is unable to consume a whole host?

A small piece of the host may be broken off, and water may be consumed along with the piece. The remainder of the host may be given to another person present who is able to receive. If no one else is able to receive, the remainder of the host is returned to the parish church or chapel and reserved in the tabernacle. EMHCs may not consume the remainder of the host. As stated previously, self-communication is not permitted for the laity. If a host has been placed in the mouth of a sick person but the person is then unable to consume it, the host should be wrapped in a purificator and brought to a priest or deacon at the parish or chaplaincy.

9. What happens if family members or others want to receive Communion and there are not enough hosts?

Hosts may be broken into smaller pieces to meet the needs of those present. Breaking the host into excessively small pieces should be avoided.

10. What happens if too many hosts were taken on a visit to the sick or homebound?

Hosts should be returned promptly to the church or chapel from which the EMHC was sent. Ideally, the correct number of hosts should be determined in advance, but occasions do arise in which someone who was expected to receive is not able or no longer wishes to receive.



Selected Resources for EMHCs

General Resources on Liturgy, Eucharist, and Holy Communion

- CDW, *Notitiae* [Journal of the Congregation]
- USCCB, *Committee on Divine Worship's Newsletter* [formerly, *Bishops' Committee on Liturgy Newsletter*]
- USCCB, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (rev. 2017)
- USCCB, *Celiac Disease, Alcohol Intolerance, and the Church's Pastoral Response* (rev. 2016)
- *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2010)
- USCCB, *Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States* (2002)
- USCCB, *The Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist: Basic Questions and Answers* (2001)
- USCCB, *Guidelines for the Reception of Communion* (1996)
- Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium,* 1963)

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

- USCCB, *Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion at Mass* (2010)
- Interdicasterial Instruction on Certain Questions regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of the Priest *Ecclesia de Mysterio* (1997)
- Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments, Instruction on Facilitating Reception of Communion in Certain Circumstances *Immensae Caritatis* (1973)

Abbreviations:

CDW – *Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments*

USCCB – *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

