

Admission to Communion - Unbaptized

Two contemporary patterns are converging in a way that raises this issue with a new urgency.

On the one hand, the Church is learning to define itself more clearly within society; and the increasing centrality of the Eucharist in our pattern of Sunday gathering is one expression of this greater clarity. We are the Lord's People at the Lord's Table on the Lord's Day; our baptismal calling is confirmed and renewed as we share in the body and blood of the Lord.

On the other hand, members of our society who have not recently been active in the Church still tend to think of the Church in the old way: as an institution serving a more or less Christian society. And increasing numbers of these people are unbaptized.

So when unbaptized people decide to explore the Christian option, they are likely to appear on Sunday morning, expecting to do whatever people do when they 'go to church'. If that now includes lining up for communion, they may very well do that, too. What should be our response?

A number of issues are at stake. We wish to support and encourage seekers in their spiritual quest. We wish to communicate the gracious hospitality of the Lord. We wish to make clear the nature of the church as People of God, Body of Christ, Temple of the Spirit – a sacrament of God's coming kingdom. We wish to draw those whom the Spirit enlightens into a sacramental life that has integrity and depth. We do not wish to offer communion as magic, nor to trivialize the sacraments.

It is important to recognize that our dilemma is largely a product of this unique, transitional moment in the Church's history. As we strive to keep faith with the tradition we have received, we will need to be prepared for new manifestations of the spirit's movement among us. The one thing we can be clear about is that our responsibility to seekers is to enable them to become responsible disciples. We will not serve them well if we conceal from them the distinctive call of Christ, or encourage them to make do with sacramental consumerism. The development of a catechumenal ministry in our time is one sign of our commitment to follow Jesus' command to "make disciples".

For this reason, we continue to affirm as our normative ecclesiological and sacramental pattern that the Church is the community of the baptized, and that participation in the Eucharist presupposes baptism and a baptismal community. It is one thing to administer communion to visitors who come to the Table without challenging them; it is quite another thing to imply, by a more inclusive invitation, that we have abandoned this norm.

But those are not the only options we need to consider. At the very least we may ask ourselves whose problem we are trying to address: is it the visitor's sense of exclusion, or our own confusion about how to respond to the visitor's deeper needs? A hospitality that begins and ends with admission to communion is not enough. We are being called to listen to people in creative new ways so that we can discern with them their spiritual needs, and discover how the gospel may engage them and raise for them the option of discipleship.



As we learn to respond more faithfully and more creatively, the following guidelines will be important:

1. The present norm of qualified admission to all the sacraments and ceremonies of the Church should be maintained. The world has an unqualified claim on the Church's charity; it does not have such a claim on the sacraments.
2. The qualifications for admission to the sacraments should be revisited from time to time, especially so in the light of the rapidly changing circumstances in which the Church pursues its mission.
3. Any standing deviation from the norm of baptism as qualification for admission to communion requires special permission from the bishop.
4. Continuing education about the meaning and order of Baptism and Eucharist, and the commitment they imply, is important in the life of the church, and should be regularly re-examined.

If you are looking for a statement to put in your bulletin, or a form of announcement to assist your visitors, the following is offered as one suggestion:

“People of all ages and denomination who are baptized into Christ are invited and encouraged to share in communion. If you will not be receiving the bread and wine, we would be pleased if you would join us at the Lord’s Table for a blessing.”

