

Hygiene at Mass: Concern for All, Genuine Hospitality

From time to time, concerns are raised by parishioners regarding the spread of illness through the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ at Communion and by sharing the Sign of Peace with a handshake. In 2009 the New Zealand Bishops reminded us:

'We Catholics have a deep love of the Mass. It is at the heart of our Catholic life, identity and practice.'

When we gather in our churches each Sunday, we do so not as individuals, but as the Body of Christ, God's holy Church. It is as the sisters and brothers of Christ that we attune our ear to the Word of God that gives us life. It is as the sisters and brothers of Christ that we draw near to the Altar of the Lord to be nourished by his Body and Blood. It is as the sisters and brothers of Christ that we go forth to live what we proclaim. This is what we do as Catholics. This is who we are as Church.¹

It is also as a people that we care for the wellbeing of one another and are reminded of the call to implement hygienic practices to safeguard the health of all, especially when colds, viruses and infections abound in the winter season.

Minimising the Spread of Illnesses

As a faith community, let our best practice aim at incorporating the very best hygiene procedures to ensure that any risk of the spread of illnesses is kept to minimum.

There are several measures we can take during the season of flu viruses, colds and cold sores to safeguard the health of one another.

However, when suffering from infections that can quickly pass from one to another, it is advisable to stay at home.

Priests

- when "bowing slightly" (rubrics) to pray the prayers of consecration take care not to lean over and breathe on the Host and chalice
- place the elements out of direct line of the possibility of breath or spittle accidentally reaching them during the praying and singing of the Eucharistic prayer
- endeavour not to touch the tongues or mouths of people receiving communion in that manner
- bless non-communicants in a manner that does not include signing them on the forehead or touching their hair to ensure any oil or bacteria is not transferred to Hosts that the following people will receive
- during outbreaks of flu and infections in the community, it can ease concerns within the congregation for them to see the priest cleanse his hands after blowing his nose and/or after giving the Sign of Peace prior to distributing Holy Communion

If you have any level of unwellness

- try to arrange for another priest to preside at Mass or invite trained members of the congregation to lead the parish in the Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion
- drink from a chalice that is not then shared with others
- use your own purificator

¹ On Actions in Relation to the Spread of Influenza A, NZCCB 2009.

People

- wash your hands prior to Mass
- use a handkerchief or tissue for sneezing and blowing your nose

If you have any level of unwellness:

- cough into the crook of your arm or sleeve to minimise the spread of germs to others
- if you usually receive on the tongue please receive on the hand if you have a cold
- refrain from receiving from the chalice

Sacristans

- use vessels of impermeable material, preferably metal or metal lined
- thoroughly cleanse chalices and patens *before* Mass using hot water and detergent or Milton solution (as for babies' bottles) - cold water rinsing is not adequate
- put out freshly laundered and ironed purificators (heat and sunlight assist in sterilisation)

Ministers of the Eucharist

- prior to entering the sanctuary rub an alcoholic cleanser on hands – preferably in the sacristy prior to Mass or following the Sign of Peace, so that dispensers and hand cleansing do not become a 'ritual' carried out in the sanctuary
- unfold the purificator so you may use it all
- carefully and firmly wipe *inside and outside* the rim of the chalice
- turn the chalice slightly after each communicant
- use a fresh part of the purificator after each communicant
- refrain from allowing purificators to touch anyone's lips

If you have any level of unwellness, try to find a replacement minister

Exchanging a Sign of Christ's Peace

- as a parish, discuss a variety of ways that the Sign of Peace may be exchanged – looking directly at each person and extending the greeting verbally, using a slight bow of the head as extending the greeting verbally...

Spiritual Communion

If unwell, remain at home and *make a spiritual Communion*. St Thomas Aquinas has defined this as "an ardent desire to receive Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament [in Communion at Mass] and in lovingly embracing Him as if we had actually received Him." Compose yourself as you would at Mass, desire the Lord's presence in spirit, pray in thanksgiving for the gift of the Lamb of God, and receive the graces as if you had been able to partake in Holy Communion.

Summary

Implementing good hygiene is an act of love and hospitality to our sisters and brothers.

If a serious outbreak of illness occurs, the Bishops of Aotearoa New Zealand will introduce necessary liturgical adaptations for such an occasion.

Acknowledgment: This article has drawn extensively on "Communion from the Cup and Hygiene – A policy statement from the Auckland Diocesan Liturgy Commission" in Liturgy Vol 22: Nos 3 & 4, 1997 (a publication of the Auckland Diocesan Liturgy Centre)