

On Giving Blessings During the Communion Rite

WHAT ABOUT GIVING BLESSINGS to people who come forward in the Communion line but who are not receiving Communion? Should a priest, deacon or an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion give the person a blessing instead?

What if a person who is not receiving Communion presents himself with arms crossed over the chest, during the regular administration of Communion?

Two men wrote to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (CDW) asking about this practice. Their query asked if there are “particular guidelines or restrictions” concerning the practice of a minister or extraordinary minister giving the person a blessing.

The response from the CDW was in the form of a letter (Protocol No. 930/08/L), dated November 22, 2008, signed by Father Anthony Ward, SM, Under-secretary of the Congregation.

The letter said that “this matter is presently under the attentive study of the Congregation”, so “for the present, this dicastery wishes to limit itself to the following observations”:

The liturgical blessing of the Holy Mass is properly given to each and to all at the conclusion of the Mass, just a few moments subsequent to the distribution of Holy Communion.

Lay people, within the context of Holy Mass, are unable to confer blessings. These blessings, rather, are the competence of the priest (cf. *Ecclesia de Mystero, Notitiae* 34 (15 Aug. 1997), art. 6, § 2; Canon 1169, § 2; and Roman *Ritual De Benedictionibus* (1985), n. 18).

Furthermore, the laying on of a hand or hands — which has its own sacramental significance, inappropriate here — by those distributing Holy Communion, in substitution for its reception, is to be explicitly discouraged.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* n. 84, “forbids any pastor, for whatever reason to pretext even of a pastoral nature, to perform ceremonies of any kind for divorced people who remarry”. To be feared is that any form of blessing in substitution for communion would give the impression that the divorced and remarried have been returned, in some sense, to the status of Catholics in good standing.

In a similar way, for others who are not to be admitted to Holy Communion in accord with the norm of law, the Church’s discipline has already made clear that they should not approach Holy Communion nor receive a blessing. This would include non-Catholics and those envisaged in can. 915 (i.e., those under the penalty of excommunication or interdict, and others who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin).

The Congregation’s clarification that extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion (always laity), cannot give sacramental blessings within Mass is very helpful; and could be especially useful to pastors in parishes where inappropriate blessings during Communion have become common.

Although the CDW letter did not mention young children, we often see little children who have not yet received first Holy Communion accompanying their parents in the Communion line, with their arms crossed over their chests — both as a signal to the minister that they are not receiving Communion, and as an expression of the child’s reverence for the Blessed Sacrament.

This reverent gesture of a young child is laudable and appropriate. But sometimes a minister (or extraordinary minister) interprets the child’s gesture as an implicit request for a special blessing as a sort of “substitute” for Communion. While the *intention* of blessing the child may be good, it should be made clear to all that the priest’s blessing at the conclusion of Mass includes everyone, and that there should not be separate blessings for any person during the Communion rite. ☩