



The Question of Communion

Five hundred years after it began, the Protestant Reformation made its presence felt this spring in the land of its birth when the Catholic bishops of Germany proposed to admit Protestant spouses in mixed marriages to receive Holy Communion at Mass.

The significance of their decision did not go unnoticed. “Who can receive the Eucharist, and when, and why, are not merely German questions,” Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia pointed out. “If, as Vatican II said, the Eucharist is the . . . seal of our Catholic unity, then the answers to these questions . . . concern all of us.” Pope Francis agreed and declined to approve the proposal.

The debate the German bishops provoked reminded me of a respectful letter I received ten years ago from a Protestant disappointed at not being invited to come forward for Communion at a funeral Mass for his friend. I wrote back as follows.

“I take it from your letter, Frank, that you are not Catholic; so I certainly do not expect you to believe as Catholics do. Therefore, out of respect for your right to believe differently, I did not ask you to come forward for Communion—that is, I did not invite you to profess yourself in public to be a Catholic.”

“For we Catholics consider the reception of Holy Communion to be *the* public profession of Catholic faith. When the Body and Blood of Christ is handed to us, we say ‘Amen.’ That’s shorthand for ‘I believe Jesus Christ is really

present here as the Catholic Church says He is.’ Pry our ‘Amen’ open a bit further and you find an even fuller confession: ‘I believe in the Catholic Church, which makes this intimate Communion with Jesus possible. I accept the Christ-given authority of the pope and of the bishops, who send us priests to forgive our sins in Confession and gather us into Communion at Mass. I believe what the Catholic Church teaches about the Virgin Mary and the saints (whom we always remember in the Eucharistic prayer) and about the need to pray for the dead (which we do at every Mass).’ In short, the simple public action of receiving Communion at Mass ‘speaks’ this confession: ‘I am a Catholic.’”

In sharp contrast, intercommunion with Protestants would quickly blur these Church-defining differences, because, in the words of Archbishop Chaput, the German proposal envisions “a sharing in Holy Communion even when there is not true Church unity.”

The German bishops would open the Communion line to centuries-old, mutually contradictory Protestant understandings of the Eucharist on an equal footing with millennia-old Catholic reverence for the Bread of Life really present. But such a change would, in Archbishop Chaput’s phrase, “insert a falsehood” into the heart of the Sacrament of Unity: “to say by one’s actions, ‘I am in communion with this community,’ when one is demonstrably *not* in communion with that community.” The Way to the fullness of Life in Christ passes through the Truth of His promise to be with His Church to the end of time.

Thinking through these clearly foreseeable consequences of intercommunion takes me back to the closing words of my ten-year-old letter. They have not gone out of date. “Frank, you and I find ourselves caught up in the sad legacy of

Protestant-Catholic separation. The best way I know to overcome the distance between us is to recognize differences where they exist and respect each other's right to maintain them as we think we must. That's what I meant to do at Jack's funeral Mass."