

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we make the transition to public celebrations of Mass this week, we may face a few challenges, including the limit on how many can be admitted to our churches. I know the present limits might be awkward, but I thank God we can gather for Mass once again.

Some have questioned the present requirement of Holy Communion in the hand. The Church allows us to receive Holy Communion either on the tongue or in the hand. But just as public safety indicates the wisdom of social distancing and wearing a mask, so too does it indicate that hand to mouth contact should be avoided. This is an act of charity for the sake of our fellow parishioners who follow us in line to receive Communion, and for the priests too, many of whom are in a vulnerable situation because of age or a health condition.

The USCCB Committee on Divine Worship, which I serve on as a member, has published guidance from a working group in Washington D.C. This resource, which is not a normative document, discusses the possibility of Communion on the tongue, but certainly doesn't require it. The resource document also admits there is a difference of opinion on the level of risk involved in receiving Communion on the tongue. Based on the most recent information, I believe it is necessary to follow the safer course.

The Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments stipulates that the faithful have the right to receive Communion on the tongue (*Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 92). But this does not supersede the authority that canon law gives the bishop regarding the administration of the sacraments in his diocese. As the moderator of the liturgy in the Diocese of Fargo, and constrained by the needs of our present situation, I judge that this step is necessary to protect the health of the faithful and the community. A very large number of bishops in this country and around the world, including Rome, have enacted similar requirements, and the Holy See has raised no objection in the context of this global pandemic.

This requirement is temporary, and is not made from a theological motivation but out of concern for the common good and public safety, the same motivation that led us to suspend Masses during the previous weeks. It is this same concern for public safety and the well-being of others that leads us to suspend receiving the Precious Blood, or the exchange of the sign of peace, or the use of holy water fonts in our churches, or to limit the number of the faithful at Mass.

Some have said that in conscience they cannot receive Communion in the hand, and so will not receive the Eucharist at all if they cannot receive it on the tongue. This seems to elevate a personal preference or stance to a higher level than the value of Holy Communion itself. There is nothing inherently irreverent in receiving Communion in the hand; the highest authority of the Church allows it. If one's conscience places a higher value on a physical posture or manner of receiving than on the Sacrament itself, then I would conclude that the conscience is erroneous and has been improperly formed. It would make no sense to deprive oneself of the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ, merely because Communion cannot be received on the tongue.

The context of this health crisis is extraordinary, and it has required extraordinary and undesirable measures. But I would rather take these measures and have the possibility of celebrating Mass with the faithful than having no Masses at all. I reiterate that these measures are temporary and will be lifted as soon as possible. Charity – a concern for others - cannot be set aside in our desire to give due reverence to our Lord in the context of our public worship. I will be praying for all of you, and entrust you to the maternal care of Mary, our Mother.

Sincerely yours in Christ,
+John T. Folda
Bishop of Fargo