

Communion from the Chalice - Is It Safe?

Against the background of the recent outbreak of SARS and the fresh memories of the meningococcal infection of a few months ago, the National Liturgical Commission of the Australian Bishops Conference asked medical and legal experts to advise them on the practice of receiving Communion from the cup. This could be an appropriate moment to reflect again on the broader issues involved in the practice of drinking from the cup at Mass.

A Symbol Too Rich To Lose

1. Jesus expressly asks us to drink: “*Take this, all of you, and drink from it...*”

Jesus is as explicit in directing us to drink from the cup as he is to eat his body. He obviously wants us to do both.

He makes no exceptions; he is speaking to everyone: “*Take this, all of you...*”.

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Why is this so obviously important to him? What is the meaning of drinking from the cup? What is its symbolism?

Food and Drink. John’s Gospel, chapter 6, sees our drinking his blood as complementing our eating his flesh. They are together the sources of eternal life. Together they make one dynamic and starkly graphic symbol of eating and drinking. We eat his flesh and drink his blood – a symbolic activity that shocked some of his listeners.

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Sealing the Covenant. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, as well as Paul in his Epistle to the Corinthians (*1 Cor. 11:25*), however, see another meaning in our drinking his blood. For them there is no real need to fill out the complementary symbols of flesh and blood, because for them the bread of itself symbolises both. They do not refer to the bread simply as his flesh, but as his body. i.e., his living body, both his flesh and his blood, as well as his spiritual soul and personality.

For Matthew, Mark and Luke, as well as Paul, drinking his blood has another purpose: they refer to his blood as: “*the blood of the new and everlasting covenant...*”. For them, to drink his blood is to pledge our assent to this new covenant that God has entered into with us. This is something quite different from simply drawing life from his flesh and blood as from food and drink.

The mention of new covenant refers to a foundation moment in Israel’s history when God’s covenant with his people was sealed with blood, in that case, the blood of slaughtered bulls (*Exodus 24:8*). The prophet Jeremiah looked forward to a renewed covenant between God and us, since the original covenant had been dishonoured by an unfaithful Israel. According to this new covenant, God, among other things, would put his Spirit within us, forgive our sins and re-establish us as his people (*Jer. 31:31-34*).

Jesus saw his shedding his blood as ushering in the new Covenant. To drink the cup of Jesus’ blood is to publicly accept the new relationship God initiates with us, as individuals and as faith community. It is to give a definite “yes” to all God wants to be and do to us. It is also something that we obviously do together. We say a definite “yes” also to everyone else who drinks the cup of the covenant with us. We make this commitment together, very conscious of each other’s presence and support.

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Addressing Some Concerns

1. Tradition. *This is something new. We did not do this before.*

Reflection: The practice of the early Church was to drink from the cup. The custom changed at a much later time in the Church's history when a number of other eucharistic practices also got out of focus. For example, while the priests continued eat the bread and to drink from the cup whenever they celebrated Mass, the people stopped receiving communion regularly, both the bread and wine, and received under the symbol of the bread only once a year. In the early 1900's Pope Pius X re-established the custom of the people receiving the Eucharist frequently, but, due to its long historical neglect, he overlooked encouraging them to drink from the chalice, as had been the original practice. The Second Vatican Council opened the custom once more to the people.

2. Theology. *There is no need to drink from the cup because, when we receive Eucharist in the sign of the bread, it is the whole Jesus that we receive, his flesh and blood, his spiritual soul and his personality.*

It is virtually impossible to live in our present world without incurring some risks. Fears need not inhibit normal interaction. It seems reasonable and prudent to accept the considered advice of experts in their field.

Reflection: No doubt Jesus was aware of this at his last supper. Yet he still insisted that those present not only shared the bread but also drank the cup of the new covenant. This is because they symbolise different realities. Eating the bread together does not symbolise our entering into covenant with God, as does

drinking the cup of his blood. It would seem that Jesus wants us to have the covenant also in the forefront of our consciousness, or he would not have bothered.

3. Hygiene. *To drink from the one cup is to run the risk of infection. Therefore, since it is not absolutely necessary, it is more prudent to refrain.*

Reflection: In response to recent concerns, the National Liturgical Commission sought advice from a Senior Staff Specialist at the Centre for Infectious Diseases and Microbiology at Westmead Hospital in Sydney. This report was then forwarded to a respected Sydney legal firm for their opinion. Their advice is that, whilst there is a risk, the medical evidence suggests

that it would be almost impossible to prove that a person contracted an infectious disease by drinking from the cup.

It is common knowledge that infection can occur from a variety of sources. Simply breathing the same air as someone with a virus can be dangerous, but not dangerous enough to discourage our presence at mass with them. Similarly with drinking from the cup.

The risk is lessened by ensuring that the cloths used to wipe the rim of the cup are changed frequently, and that Eucharistic Ministers have been trained to use the cloth carefully.

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It would, of course, be a prudent and caring practice for persons who knew they carried an infection to refrain from drinking from the cup for the duration of their affliction.

4. Inadequate Alternative. *It would be more hygienic to dip the bread into the wine.*

Reflection: In fact it might not be more hygienic, depending on the degree of care that is taken. However, whatever about the hygiene issue, the practice is not appropriate.

If we want both the wine and the bread in order to be sure of receiving both the flesh and blood of Jesus (as John's Gospel directs), then, to do as Jesus explicitly insisted, we eat his flesh and drink his blood. The strength of the symbolism lies precisely in the actions of eating and drinking.

When we drink his blood as the blood of the new covenant, again in this case, the strength of the symbolism lies in our common drinking from the one cup. When we dip the bread into the wine, we eliminate the symbolism of drinking altogether.

For Jesus, the symbolism of sharing the one bread and drinking from the one cup were obviously very important or he would not have bothered with sacramental actions at -"