



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Worship Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How do we bless Roman Catholic or other ecumenical guests who feel they cannot come to communion?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

As congregations, synods and other bodies in the ELCA live into *Declaration on the Way* and other such ecumenical statements, we may see an increasing presence of Roman Catholic Christians visiting our congregations and thereby joining Lutherans in worship. The visiting may also go the other way. Since the primary liturgy in both churches is the Holy Communion or Mass, we may find ourselves together facing the question of coming to communion. In fact, *Declaration on the Way* envisions the two churches providing more occasions for occasional eucharistic hospitality when bishops and pastors encourage and welcome to communion especially “those in Catholic-Lutheran marriages who attend church regularly, those who make retreats in Catholic retreat houses and similar venues, those gathered for ecumenical meetings, and so forth” (*Declaration on the Way*, 118-119).

In congregations of the ELCA, the *Use of the Means of Grace* already urges us to practice such hospitality (UMG 49: “All baptized persons are welcomed to communion when they are visiting in the congregations of this church”). But that welcoming practice also needs to be aware and careful of the discipline and communal life of our visitors (UMG 49b: “In the exercise of this hospitality, it is wise for our congregations to be sensitive to the eucharistic practices of the churches from which our visitors may come”). The *Use of the Means of Grace* also encourages our congregation members to commune in other churches where they are welcome to do so and where they find the gospel of Jesus Christ being preached and the sacraments being administered as Christ’s gift (UMG 50: “Because of the universal nature of the church, Lutherans may participate in the eucharistic services of other Christian churches. . . . When visiting other churches Lutherans should respect the practices of the host congregation. A conscientious decision whether or not to commune in another church is informed by the Lutheran understanding of the gospel preached and the sacraments administered as Christ’s gift”).

Baptized Roman Catholics, thus, are welcome to commune in our congregations. And Lutheran Christians can feel free to commune in Roman Catholic situations where they are welcomed and where they find the gospel proclaimed and celebrated.

But that is not yet a sufficient answer to the question. In most situations, even the occasional eucharistic hospitality urged by *Declaration on the Way* will not yet obtain. And the great majority of Roman Catholic visitors to our congregations, if they know the current discipline of their own church, will not feel that they are free to commune. Nor will Lutheran visitors in Roman Catholic churches ordinarily be welcome to commune.

What shall we do?

Many of our visitors would like to express their participation in the liturgy they are attending and make manifest their prayer for unity in Christ by coming forward not to receive communion but to receive a blessing. They do this, usually, by coming to the altar rail or by coming to a minister of the Bread—among us, usually the presiding minister—with their arms crossed upon their chest. Our pastors and other communion ministers need to know what to do when they encounter this gesture.

Indeed, when such visitors are present, it may be most hospitable to say—in announcements before the liturgy begins or just before communion or in the bulletin—something like this: “All baptized Christians are welcome to receive the Body and Blood of Christ at this table. If, however, your own church’s discipline or your own conscience do not make that possible, please know that you are also most welcome to receive a blessing as a sign of prayer for our unity in Christ. To signal your desire for such a blessing, simply come to the person distributing the Bread [or simply come to the communion rail] with your arms crossed on your chest.”

When a person making this gesture comes to the communion station or to the rail, the communion minister/presider/pastor then continues to hold the paten or basket (the vessel containing the Bread) in one hand and extends the other, laying this hand upon the head or shoulder of the person asking for a blessing. In a gracious and unhurried way, looking at the person asking for a blessing and thinking of that person with respect and prayer, the minister of communion then says something like this, “Almighty God bless you, hold you in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit bring us at last together to the table of unity.” If the minister wishes, a cross could then be traced on the forehead of the person being blessed, but this is not at all necessary.

The person who has received this blessing then does not go the communion station of the Cup or, if communion is at a rail, the person with the Cup does not need to add a second blessing.

Other visitors than Roman Catholics may also respond to such an invitation. The church discipline of the Eastern Orthodox churches also does not permit these Christians to commune across the lines of church division. Others, too, who are not prepared to commune may be grateful to be prayed for as they nonetheless participate in this active and bodily way.

We are not able to decide for Roman Catholic congregations about making such a blessing available in this time when regular eucharistic hospitality to Lutherans is not officially allowed in the Roman Catholic Church. But Lutherans visiting in Roman Catholic congregations may observe that such a blessing is indeed available and they

should then feel free to go forward themselves, arms crossed across their chest. This gesture is coming to be widely recognized.

It is to be hoped that our own pastors will prepare to respond to this request for a blessing by themselves continuing to pray and work for Christian unity, by having thought of and memorized a spoken blessing they are prepared to use, and by deeply honoring and respecting all the people who come to a service of Holy Communion, including the ecumenical visitors.

The Rev. Dr. Gordon W. Lathrop
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RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ☪ How do we worship and pray with other Christians and non-Christians?
- ☪ What does Full Communion mean for Lutheran worship?
- ☪ What is the sacrament for Lutherans?
- ☪ How do we distribute Holy Communion?
- ☪ At what age do congregation members receive communion?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- ☪ *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- ☪ *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

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