
POLICY OF THE DIOCESE OF RICHMOND LAY MINISTERS AND THE PURIFICATION OF VESSELS

You may be aware that the 2002 edition of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) stipulated that the purification of vessels at mass be done by the priest, deacon, or an instituted acolyte. (No. 278) Because of the common practice in this country of giving communion under both species at large masses with many extraordinary ministers, the bishops of the United States at that time requested permission for lay extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to assist in purifying vessels. In response, that same year the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments granted an indult permitting bishops “to grant celebrants the faculty to permit extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to assist with the purification of sacred vessels after the distribution of Communion at mass.” (Prot. 1382/01/L) That indult was granted for a period of three years. When the indult expired in 2005, the American bishops requested that it be extended or made permanent. However, after consultation with Pope Benedict XVI, it seemed advisable for the Congregation of Divine Worship not to extend the indult, and thus to have the universal law apply also to the United States of America.

For that reason, beginning with the First Sunday of Advent in 2006, parishes in the Diocese of Richmond are requested to see that all sacred vessels are purified by a priest, deacon, or instituted acolyte. The vessels should then be washed in the usual manner in the sacristy. Hopefully this change will bring some benefit by better illustrating the servant nature of the ordained ministry as well as the dignity of the blessed sacrament. I am aware that this may cause some hardship in parishes with large congregations, especially when there is no deacon or instituted acolyte present. Several pastoral measures are available to make this transition easier. The GIRM permits that vessels be purified either after communion or after mass, and parishes with large numbers of vessels may find it more convenient to do so after mass. In any case, all of the precious blood that remains should be consumed at the end of communion. In the Diocese of Richmond, the permission for extraordinary ministers to consume any of the precious blood that remains after communion continues to be in effect.

Reception under both species as the more complete sign of the Eucharistic banquet continues to be the norm in this diocese. Each parish should work out the logistics so that compliance with this directive does not lead to the removal of the cup for the laity. While Cardinal Arinze, in his letter, mentions two additional pastoral approaches, the distribution of Holy Communion under only one species or the use of intinction, in the Diocese of Richmond every effort should be made so that both the Eucharistic bread and the wine are offered to all the faithful.