

Before you go to ‘communion’ at another church ...

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June 1, 2023



Q: I recently attended a wedding in a non-Catholic church. The minister invited everyone there forward to be united at this wedding to receive Communion. I didn’t know what to do, so I went up to receive. Did I do something wrong?

A: Thanks for the question. It is a very good one. Believe it or not, your situation is common for many people. Since this particular congregation or pastor explicitly invited all visitors up to receive, how could it be wrong? I made an attempt to address the issue of “inter-communion” a number of years ago, but I think you bring up a new context: What do we do when other Christians invite us to Communion?

I would look at it in at least two ways, personally and communally.

Personally, we never want to lie. Now, I am not exactly sure of the “formula” that was used when you went up to receive, but chances are pretty good that they said something along the lines of “body of Christ,” to which one is expected to respond, “Amen.” And yet, is that truly the Body of Christ? You and I do not believe that the minister has the same ability as the priest to “confect” the Eucharist.

I know that I am assuming something here; I am assuming that you profess the teachings of the Catholic Church. I don't mean to be offensive in that assumption, but it is kind of a prerequisite for receiving the Eucharist in the Catholic Church.

But if that is the case, in responding "Amen," I am saying, "I stake my life on the belief that this is the Body of Christ." But what happens if I actually don't believe that? I have, in a sense, "told a lie." Now, keeping in mind that not all falsehoods are lies (lying involves both knowing the truth and a conscious rejection of the truth, and in this case, you weren't even considering that this would be a misrepresentation of the truth), your culpability is greatly reduced. But does that initial part make sense?

It seems like they are being hospitable. I am certain that is the intention behind the invitation to come forward. But no one wants to lie in the name of "hospitality." For good reason, we have to endure the discomfort of the felt division.

There is also a "communal" dimension to "Communion" (ha!). This communion means that we are united as the original church was described in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. Acts 2:42-47). But if I am not united with this group of Christians because of the divisions that we (as Lutherans or Catholics or whatever) have chosen, then you see how quickly this external "sign" of unity is also a false sign. We pretend that we are united during this wedding or that funeral, but that isn't true.

Isn't it interesting how painful it can be to be in those situations? In those moments when we most want to be united (weddings, funerals, etc.), it is hard to not be able to extend the offer of Communion to our separated brothers and sisters in the Lord. But I would say that this makes it all the more important that we retain this.

Why?

If we were to be honest with ourselves, I think that most of us see the divisions between Christians and don't really care all that much. It doesn't bother many of us – until it is time for Communion in each other's churches. At that moment it stings a bit, and we don't like it. Good! We shouldn't like it! We should actually work to overcome our divisions. In fact, in the great prayer during the Last Supper, Jesus explicitly prayed that "all may be one" (John 17). We can easily overlook how much of an obstacle to Christianity our divisions are for non-Christians. We need to preserve the fact that we cannot receive Communion in each other's churches at the very least so that we might have a fire lit underneath us and work toward real unity rather than "comfortable and complacent division."

Again, let me console any nervous part of you: If there was no intentional disregard for the church's teaching (which there wasn't, because it sounds like you hadn't even heard of that), then you can be at peace. While you may have committed the act, there was no malevolence or intended rebellion.

