

Lessons from the Swine Flu

Occasionally, there are issues that provoke greater-than-normal amounts of correspondence to my office. One recent issue garnered such attention: the precautions we issued to prevent the further spread of the N1H1 Virus (Swine Flu).

While my sentiment on the matter is reflected in the recommendations we issued to our priests and extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, I thought I would share a sampling of the opinions I received about this emotionally charged issue and will, from time to time, give light to the views of others on various topics – as the occasion and (e)mail volume warrants.

Following the news that cases of the “Swine Flu” had been reported in Maryland, my office issued some suggested liturgical and housekeeping precautions (added emphasis on proper hygiene, sterilization of vessels, and suspension of Communion by cup and personal contact during the “sign of peace.” It was also recommended that Communion be given in the hand, alone.) These recommended measures prompted the following communications to my office.

From Mike L.:

Since moving to the Archdiocese of Baltimore ... I had always felt welcome to receive the Eucharist in the way that I have always received, on the tongue. ... I grew up in a very religious family, and this was one of the traditions instilled in me. ... I am writing because ... our priest stated immediately before the distribution of Communion that we refrain from receiving Communion on the tongue ... I was in shock. And then I became upset ... I received on the tongue. I have not touched the Body of Christ with my hands for over 10 years. I was not spiritually prepared to change the way I receive Communion in 30 seconds. ... Part of me was wondering if I was disobeying my priest. Another part wondered whether I was disobeying my bishop. I request in the future you be more sensitive and act with more pastoral concern.

Mike, we should have been more explicit in our instructions, advising the priest/Eucharistic Minister to give Communion to anyone asking for it by

tongue in spite of our recommendations. My apologies for the difficult position in which you found yourself at Mass.

From Mark M.:

Sanitizing holy water? ... refraining from the sign of peace? ... refraining from drinking the Blood of Jesus? ... so as not to get sick? ... If a thousand sick people dipped their fingers into holy water, I would drink it ... if a million sick people drank from the chalice of the Blood of the Lord, I would finish it. ... I guess Clorox trumps blessing and the avoidance of Communion with the Blood of the Risen Lord will ensure good physical health.

Mark, the Church teaches that with consecration the bread and wine is wholly and substantially changed into the Body of Christ. However, the “accidents” of bread and wine continue to exist along with their physical characteristics.

And the other side...

From Ellen Y.:

I am a retired medical social worker who worked in a hospital for 17 years. ... I have been outspoken on this issue for years asking my pastor to cease these rituals. ... I NEVER receive under both species, but people feel embarrassed NOT to hold hands. ... It should be announced LOUDLY that these are personal decisions and people should feel free to just wave, blow a kiss, give an “elbow bump” if they so choose.

From James D.:

I thank you very much for what you did to help stop the spread of the flu. Stopping the hand shaking to me was excellent. It truly does stop the spread of germs. What can we do to take its place? Our new peace sign could be “The Sign of the Cross...”

From James B.:

I wish to commend your office for the recent decision to refrain from taking the wine/blood from a common chalice. As a physician specializing in public health, I

have declined this aspect of the Mass for years. I hope that this ruling remains in place for the future.

Thanks to each for your affirming words. These precautions were meant only to be temporary efforts to address the immediate public health threat government officials thought the “Swine Flu” posed. It is hoped that we have all learned something valuable from the experience.