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Jesus calls us outside of the temple

by Melissa Musick Nussbaum

My Table Is Spread

The Phoenix diocese announced plans to restrict the distribution of Communion under both species. The cup will be offered to the laity on feast days and other special moments. The first reason the diocese offers is this: to protect the sacred species from profanation.

The word profane comes from the Latin words *pro* and *fanum*, that is, outside the temple. The unholy, or profane, has the quality of something outside the temple. There is a suggestion of will here, of choosing to remove oneself from the temple and its precincts. I don't believe this is what Bishop Thomas Olmsted of Phoenix means when he authorizes use of the word "profanation." If there was an epidemic of deliberate evil being done with the sacred cup, we would know about it.

I'm guessing that by profanation he means the danger that, in passing the cup from the ordinary or extraordinary minister to the communicant, the blood of Christ might be spilled. Indeed, it is moving for me, Sunday after Sunday, to watch the care with which our ministers, both ordained and lay, handle Christ's body and blood. Their movements are slow and measured, deliberate and focused. In our downtown parish, where an eclectic assembly gathers for Mass, ministers of the cup offer the precious blood to children and to the elderly, to the blind and to mothers juggling babies and toddlers. There are the infirm, who use crutches or canes or walkers to come forward and be fed.

From my familiar place in the second pew to the west of the altar, I have clear lines of sight. I have seen ministers wait until the communicant puts down the toddler or shifts from leaning on his walker to sitting on it so that his hands are free. I have seen ministers walk over to those for whom even this short journey is too long and offer them the body and blood there in the pews where they sit. I have never seen an accident.

Perhaps my parish is the exception, and these accidents are routine enough to warrant restricting the reception of Christ's blood. But restricting its distribution to a feast day or other special occasion multiplies the possibilities for all sorts of irregularities. Think of midnight on Christmas Eve when the church is filled with visitors, many not Catholic. Think of weddings, which are almost always one-time assemblies, brought together solely by ties to the bride and groom. Sunday Mass, in contrast, has a more stable assembly, people who have been worshipping together for a long time and who are well-acquainted with the needs of individual members.

In my parish, those who serve the altar know most of the folks to whom Communion must be carried and they know many of the mentally ill who are likely to behave inappropriately. They know which children are new to Communion and need more help learning the gestures.

Let me tell you what I do see in my parish. What I see is a holy mirroring. People who have been running all week, all morning, slow down and match their movements to those of the ministers holding the patens and the chalices. They take the time to wait: for the girl in the cast, for the father with the sleeping babies, for the woman who must untangle her oxygen tube before she can rise from the pew and walk out into the aisle. They take the time to bow before the offered riches of Christ's very body and blood. The minister takes the time to offer -- not shove -- what God has given and human hands have made. The minister speaks. And his brothers and sisters take the time to receive -- not grab -- slowly and with care. The communicant answers in word and gesture, making the sign of the cross. She is fed, sustained and blessed. He has food for the journey.

I do know that the precious body offers far greater challenges to the ordinary and extraordinary ministers of Communion. My husband has served as an extraordinary minister of holy Communion for decades. He has watched as people have put the consecrated host in a pocket or carried it off like a cookie, to be consumed -- or not -- at their leisure. I have watched him walk quietly after a person and ask that he or she remove the host from the pocket and consume it. He is measured in his action, calm and hospitable, aware, always, that he is serving the body of Christ, both in the body broken and shared and in the ones who receive it.

It would be interesting to survey priests, deacons and extraordinary ministers to find which is most difficult, in terms of accidents and misunderstandings (I'm taking this home for later, for instance). Is it in the distribution of the body or the offering of the blood of Christ?

Whatever the answer to that question, it does not address the dilemma of those who desire (and I believe sincerely so) to protect Christ's precious blood from profanation. The difficulty, of course, is that the only way to protect Christ from profanation is to keep Christ away from us. And that Christ will not do.

The mystery of the Incarnation means that God shares our life, our flesh, our journeys, our sorrows, our fears, our living and our dying. In the course of this Christ gets taken to the very worst places, the very deepest pits.

I often think of this as we are sent out of the church on Sunday mornings. I know that, once baptized, I have become the temple where Christ may dwell. So I suppose one could make the observation that no baptized Christian then is ever truly *pro fanum*, outside the temple. Perhaps. But I know that I have taken my temple and dragged it through all kinds of dirt.

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I watch trash and read trash and talk trash.

I tend grudges and angers and desires for revenge like rare tropical orchids. I nurture envy like a mother her child. I embrace sloth, and gluttony -- well, gluttony is a way of life for me and most everyone I know. A native Texan, I was raised to believe that pride was probably a typo on the list of the seven deadly sins. And I have avoided the sin of murder mostly because I have been protected from the circumstances that lead men and women to grab a weapon and strike. I have not given too much thought to those who do kill, even those who kill on my behalf and in my name.

I will never grasp the terrible beauty of the Incarnation. I will never understand the wild love that drives Christ's desire to be in me and with me in every moment and in every place. I would understand if Christ left in disgust and abandoned me to the mean precincts in which I choose, again and again, to place my temple.

But the dreadful truth, the glorious truth is that God is with us. Not, we are with God. Look at Israel to see how far we wander; look at the church. Still, God is with us.

Christ feeds me. I am fed on Christ. I am fed by Christ. I carry Christ in my flesh. Because that is what Christ wills.

After the Resurrection, Christ meets Simon Peter, the very first bishop, on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias. Christ asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

Simon Peter replies, "Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus tells him, "Feed my sheep." Three times, he tells him, "Feed my sheep."

Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep.

[Melissa Musick Nussbaum is an *NCR* columnist and contributor to *Celebration*, *NCR*'s sister publication for liturgy planners and preachers.]

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