



## Questions regarding the Reception of Holy Communion

(In the months leading up to the 2004 presidential election, there was much attention given to the issue of how the Catholic Church should handle the reception of Holy Communion by pro-abortion Catholic politicians. This also led to some questions about whether young people who struggle with being pro-life should be receiving Holy Communion. We posed these questions to Fr. David Whitestone, the Judicial Vicar for the Diocese of Arlington. He provides the following...)

Following are some relevant canons:

**912-**Any baptized person who is not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to Holy Communion.

**913.1-**For the administration of the Most Holy Eucharist to children, it is required that they have a sufficient knowledge and careful preparation so as to understand the mystery of Christ according to their capacity, and can receive the Body of the Lord with faith and devotion.

**913.2-**The Most Holy Eucharist may be given to children who are in danger of death, however, if they are able to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food and to receive Communion reverently.

**915-**Those who are excommunicated or interdicted after the imposition or declaration of the penalty and others who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to Holy Communion.

**916-**A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to celebrate Mass or to receive the Body of the Lord without prior sacramental confession unless a grave reason is present and there is no opportunity of confessing; in this case the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible.

### Some thoughts on how these canons might be relevant to teens:

**Concerning 913** - The canon speaks of "sufficient knowledge" and "understanding the mystery of Christ according to their capacity". The understanding that what is received is not "ordinary food" is the minimum required for young children in danger of death. A teen ( according to their capacity - perhaps there are situations of "special needs") is required to have a more developed faith, i.e. there must be a Catholic understanding on the part of the recipient that what is being received is truly Christ and not merely a sign or symbol of Christ.

**Concerning 915** - It is not possible, according to the law, for a teen under the age of 18 to incur any automatic excommunication prohibiting reception of the Eucharist. It is possible for a teen who is at least 16 years old to be excommunicated but this is only after a trial and judgment of the Bishop. I don't think this is very likely. The second part of this canon could be relevant - "those who persist in manifest grave sin". Manifest means public or observable. It is not simply a thought or an opinion held in one's heart or mind. It must be "obstinate" - held AFTER repeated efforts on the part of the Church to correct and reconcile. It must be "grave sin" and not simply "sin".

A principle of canon law is that any law that restricts the rights of the faithful MUST be interpreted strictly meaning that for a right to be restricted the offense must fit the definition provided in the law exactly. Canon 1323 clearly states that a person is not subject to penalties EVEN if they have broken the law if they are unaware that they broke the law, the person who acted out of physical force or fear, the person lacked the use of reason, or again, is not yet 16 years old.

**Concerning 916**-What is required for a "mortal" or grave sin? Grave matter AND sufficient reflection AND full consent of the will. If all these are present, the teen must receive sacramental confession. See canon 913.1 for the "exception".

### **Another Question...**

*"What if a teen states that he believes that abortion is sometimes OK or if he says he doesn't have a problem with "Gay marriage" or the ordination of women or some other definitive Church teaching?"*

The context is all important here. Most likely the teen is struggling and seeking for truth. He or she is in the process of internalizing the faith and is actually in the process of formation. There might be any other number of reasons the young person is expressing these "opinions". This is not a canonical offense punishable by the imposition of a penalty that prohibits Communion. It is also likely that the young person has not committed a "mortal sin". What is being expressed is not in accord with the faith but the proper response on the part of parent and minister is to engage gently and honestly in discussion. In these circumstances the grace of the sacrament is exactly what is needed.

HOWEVER, it is certainly possible that the views are held with such ferocity, all openness to the Church is absent, and the teen possesses contempt for the Church and her teachings. In this case communion should not be received. One of St. Augustine's great quotes: "Lord I believe, help my disbelief". I believe that most of the "dissent" from teens is simply part of this process of coming to deeper and hopefully Catholic faith. Another quote from St. Augustine: "Lord grant me chastity, but not now." The Eucharist is a gift to and for a sinful Church on the road to Christ. It certainly requires faith but it also is meant to bring faith to fullness.

*Fr. David Whitestone is the Pastor of St. Leo the Great Catholic Church in Fairfax. Since his ordination, he has been parochial vicar at the Cathedral of St. Thomas More in Arlington, St. Mary Parish in Alexandria, St. Louis Parish in Alexandria and St. Philip Parish in Falls Church. He was first assigned to the Tribunal in 1993 as advocate and defender of the bond and was appointed judge in 1998. He has a great love for youth ministry and attends the Diocesan WorkCamp each summer to be with the young people.*