

INTERVIEW

## Burke: «Eucharist is food for sinners, but only if repentant»

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*Respecting the Body and Blood of the Lord. When Holy Communion should be denied* is the title of Cardinal Raymond Burke's new book, on the contentious topic of the duty to deny Holy Communion in situations foreseen by Canon Law (can. 915). The text explains

the solid, universal and uninterrupted teachings of the Church's Tradition on the matter; teachings that have always aimed at defending the Body of Christ in the Sacrament from sacrilege and the Mystical Body from scandal. With the *Daily Compass*, Cardinal Burke touches on some of the topics dealt with in the book.

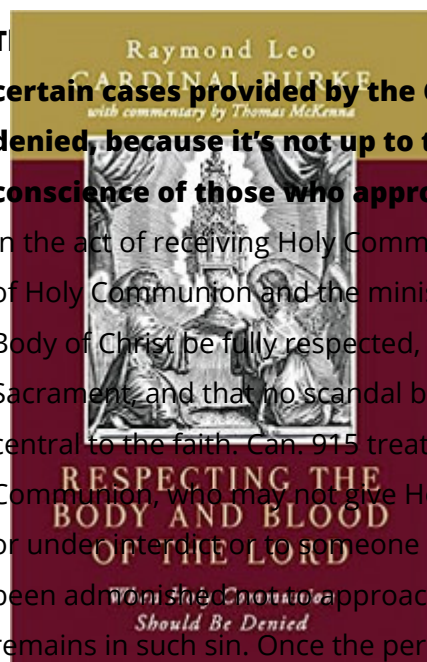
**In one of his 1978 publications (now present in the Opera Omnia, vol. II, with the title *Eucharist - Heart of the Church*), J. Ratzinger clarified that the Eucharist is not the sacrament of reconciliation, but of those who are reconciled. This is the sense of St. Paul's admonition to "discern" the Body of the Lord (1 Cor. 11, 29). Today, however, the idea prevails that the Eucharist is the food of sinners, without distinction.**

The Holy Eucharist, as Saint Thomas Aquinas explained, is Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, "the whole good of our salvation." To receive Holy Communion worthily we must recognise the reality we are approaching and, at the same time, recognise our own unworthiness to approach so great a mystery. In other words, we must be reconciled with God through sorrow for our sins, confession of our sins, and engagement in reparation for the offence which our sins give to God and for the harm which our sins cause to others. Yes, the Holy Eucharist is the food of sinners but of sinners who have repented, have been reconciled, and are making reparation. If we are openly and unrepentantly rebelling against God's law, written upon the human heart and proclaimed in the Church's teaching, then we are clearly not disposed to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion. Only when we have desisted from our rebellion, sought reconciliation, and are engaged in reparation, are we properly disposed to receive Holy Communion.

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In the act of receiving Holy Communion, there are two responsible parties: the recipient of Holy Communion and the minister of Holy Communion. Both must take care that the Body of Christ be fully respected, that no sin be committed against the Blessed Sacrament, and that no scandal be given to the faithful in a matter so fundamental and central to the faith. Can. 915 treats the responsibility of the minister of Holy Communion, who may not give Holy Communion to a person who is excommunicated or under interdiction or to someone who persists in grave and manifest sin, after having been admonished not to approach to receive Holy Communion as long as he or she remains in such sin. Once the person has been admonished, it is no longer a question of



a possible false judgment of his conscience, as would be the case of a person who receives Holy Communion in the state of mortal sin without realising that he is in the state of grave sin, for his conscience has been properly informed regarding his gravely sinful condition.

Can. 916 treats the responsibility of the recipient to make certain that he is properly disposed before approaching to receive Holy Communion.

**Another problem is avoiding scandal. It is believed that this problem does not exist, because the faithful have no problem accepting Communion is given to all, and, on the contrary, they would be scandalised if it wasn't. What does the Church mean by "scandal"?**

When we lead someone into error or sin by an action, we give scandal, whether the person who has been led into error or sin recognises it or not. Scandal is an objective reality, that is, it does not depend upon subjective sentiments or feelings. Thus, for example, a person who supports the "right" to procured abortion is confirmed in his grievous error by Catholic legislators who seek to guarantee the exercise of the so-called right by law. Some years ago, toward the end of the pontificate of Pope Saint John Paul II, a highly placed non-Catholic government official asked me whether a new pope might change the Church's teaching on abortion. I explained that the Pope cannot change the precepts of the natural law and asked what had prompted his question. He responded that he knew a great number of Catholic members of the legislature who regularly support laws to make procured abortion more accessible to the population and had, therefore, concluded that the teaching of the Church on abortion must not be very firm. The Catholic legislators in question had scandalised the non-Catholic legislator by leading him to believe that the moral law regarding the intrinsic evil of procured abortion is not firm.

**In the memorandum from Cardinal Ratzinger to Cardinal McCarrick (2004), the then-Prefect of the CDF defined the practice of denying Communion to notorious sinners as "perennial teaching of the Church". Which it is as you make this clear in your book. But it is mostly believed to be merely ecclesiastical discipline, which the Church can choose to change. What do you think about this?**

Can. 915 is an articulation of the Church's unchanging and unchangeable teaching on the Holy Eucharist, on mortal sin, and on scandal. It is not a question of a disciplinary practice but of living the truth of the faith. Therefore, it is false to assert that the denial of Holy Communion to a person who persists in manifest grave sin is the imposition of a penalty. It is not. It is simply the recognition of the truth about the Holy Eucharist and

about grave sin. If denial of Holy Communion to a person in manifest grave sin were a mere disciplinary practice, it would be subject to change, but, in fact, it cannot change, as the consistent teaching of the Church in matter demonstrates.

**When one thinks of this issue, the reference is to politicians in favour of abortion. In reality, what is the extension of can. 915?**

Can. 915 extends to any person who persists in manifest, grave sin. For example, a person who persists in manifest adultery or manifest fraud or other forms of manifest criminal activity or injustice must also be denied Holy Communion, after having been duly admonished.

**Who is charged to deny Communion according to the norm of can. 915? And who has the duty to admonish the sinner?**

The minister of Holy Communion has the responsibility to deny Holy Communion. The admonition is the responsibility of the pastor of the soul in question, the parish priest or the Diocesan Bishop. Normally speaking, it is the pastor who admonishes the member of the faithful in manifest grave sin, lest he commit sacrilege and give grave scandal.

**Can a bishop, according to the legislation of the Church, in the territory of his own diocese, give an order for Holy Communion to be refused for other reasons, which are not provided by can. 915?**

Holy Communion may only be denied to those who are under the sanction of excommunication and interdict or who persist in manifest grave sin. Apart from those two situations, Holy Communion may not be denied to a person who approaches and demonstrates the correct disposition to receive Holy Communion, that is, shows the usual signs of recognition of the Body of Christ and of due reverence. For example, if someone approaches to receive Holy Communion in a manner which calls into question his or her Eucharistic faith, then the minister of Holy Communion may rightly deny the Sacrament, until the matter is clarified. In my experience, it has happened that someone presented himself for Holy Communion without showing the usual signs of reverence. When I asked the person whether he was Catholic, he answered that he was not Catholic and just wanted to do what the other people were doing. In that case, I gave him a blessing but clearly could not give him Holy Communion.