

A ZENIT DAILY DISPATCH

Treatment of Partially Consumed Hosts

Dissolution in Water a First Step

Rome, 24 July 2018 (ZENIT)

Answered by Legionary of Christ Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy and dean of theology at the Regina Apostolorum university.

Q: I recently asked [my pastor] if I could set aside (designate) a glass bowl for use by extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to dissolve consecrated hosts that were only partially consumed by residents in a local senior care center for which we are responsible. The contents could then be poured into the sacrarium. He flat out rejected the idea, and when I asked him what he wants done instead, he said he buries the host in the dirt outside the church building. He apparently expects our ministers to do likewise. Your comments or recommendations? — J.P., New Jersey

The Diocese of Salt Lake City has the following sensible guidelines which reflect universal norms and common practice:

“Proper way of Disposing of a Consecrated Host or Precious Blood

“A. ‘If a host or any particle should fall, it is to be picked up reverently. If any of the Precious Blood is spilled, the area where the spill occurred should be washed with water, and this water should then be poured into the sacrarium in the sacristy.’ (GIRM No. 280)

“B. If the host is dropped on the floor when receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion, it should pick it up by the communicant or minister and consumed immediately.

“C. During the distribution to the elderly or infirm, if the communicant is unable to swallow (host is spat out or dropped from the mouth), the Host should be collected in a piece of linen and returned to the parish for proper disposal as described below.

“D. The process of dissolving the host in water may be used in special conditions such as a partially consumed host that may have fallen from a communicant’s mouth or a host that was unintentionally dropped to a less than clean floor.

“E. To dispose of a host, the priest, deacon or eucharistic minister must dissolve it in water to the point where the host no longer has the appearance of bread. This may require that the host be broken up in small pieces prior to placing it in water. It is necessary to wait for the host to be fully soaked in water, out of respect for what once contained the presence of Christ and in order to avoid any danger or appearance of a host being discarded or profaned. However, once the host is saturated (within an hour) it must then be disposed of immediately in the sacrarium or in the earth as described in paragraph F.

“F. The liquid should be poured down the sacrarium (a special sink with a drain going directly into the ground, not the sewer). It should not be poured down a common sink. If such is not available, the liquid should be poured on the ground in a location that would not be walked over, such as behind a flower bed that is along a wall, at the foot of a statue or similar places.

“G. With respect to the presence of Christ, most theologians would hold that, although the host externally remains intact, the real presence would cease as soon as the host is fully soaked with water since from that moment the species is no longer exclusively that of bread.”

This would appear to cover most cases. However, it could be that our reader is also considering a somewhat different case. Many elderly people have difficulty swallowing and the minister must break a small host into half or even a quarter so as to administer Communion to the person. Thus we would not be dealing with a host which has fallen or touched the mouth of an elderly or infirm person but of a large fragment of a broken host.

In such cases, simply dissolving the host is not a legitimate option, and some other solution should be found in which the host is properly consumed.

For example, If the minister is to receive Communion he or she can consume the partial hosts at this moment.

Likewise, if some of the staff also receive Communion, it could be explained to them that the minister might give them any parted hosts. In such a case Communion on the tongue would be preferred to avoid further fragmentation.

If the remaining fragments are very small, they could be consumed in the context of the purification of the sacred vessel used to distribute Communion.

While burial and burning are among the possible ways of disposing of blessed or otherwise sacred objects such as old missals, vestments, and the like, this would not be a valid option for fragments of the Blessed Sacrament and under no circumstances should a host be buried.

Church law is very strict on this point. As the instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* states:

“107. In accordance with what is laid down by the canons, ‘one who throws away the consecrated species or takes them away or keeps them for a sacrilegious purpose, incurs a *latae sententiae* excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See; a cleric, moreover, may be punished by another penalty, not excluding dismissal from the clerical state.’ To be regarded as pertaining to this case is any action that is voluntarily and gravely disrespectful of the sacred species. Anyone, therefore, who acts contrary to these norms, for example casting the sacred species into the sacrarium or in an unworthy place or on the ground, incurs the penalties laid down. Furthermore all will remember that once the distribution of Holy Communion during the celebration of Mass has been completed, the prescriptions of the Roman Missal are to be observed, and in particular, whatever may remain of the Blood of Christ must be entirely and immediately consumed by the Priest or by another minister, according to the norms, while the consecrated hosts that are left are to be consumed by the Priest at the altar or carried to the place for the reservation of the Eucharist.”

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