

Holy Communion: Dealing pastorally with those who have allergies to gluten and/or alcohol

In the words of institution, the church learns from Christ himself what Holy Communion is and how it should be administered. Jesus took bread and wine, said 'this is my body' and 'this is my blood', and gave them to his disciples to eat and drink 'for the forgiveness of sins'. The church has always understood these words to mean that we should use both bread and wine and not merely one element or the other. It has also understood these words to mean that we are not free to substitute the bread or the wine with alternative elements.

Given this understanding, the question arises as to what the church should do if a communicant is found to be allergic to one or the other element used in communion. If we can only use the elements Jesus used, namely, wheaten bread and fermented grape wine, does that mean that whoever has an allergy to one of these substances must either suffer the physical reaction or else do without communion altogether?

This question is an old one. Lutheran theologians over the centuries have always emphasised the pastoral concern that, for the sake of faith and a good conscience (1 Tim 1:19), we should abide by the clear command and institution of Christ. We should beware of easy solutions invented by human reason that, wittingly or unwittingly, call the certain word of Christ into question and dissolve the sure foundation for faith.

If we follow this principle, it means that we are not at liberty to replace bread and wine with alternative elements. The point of using bread and wine is not to use something that represents or signifies Christ's body and blood. In that case, alternative symbols would do. Rather, they serve the purpose of communicating Christ's body and blood. Their use is determined not by their symbolic value or representative likeness, but by the command of Christ.

However, when it comes to the kind of bread or wine to be used, here there is freedom. There is no divine command as to what kind of bread and wine one should actually use in the Lord's Supper. Wine may be white or red, of any kind of vintage, as long as it is made from fermented, crushed grapes. And although it is likely Jesus used unleavened bread, the church is not bound to use the same kind of bread. It may be leavened or unleavened, brown or white, as long as it is baked from flour. Today we have flour made not only from wheat, oats and barley, but also gluten free seeds such as corn, soy, or even rice. Likewise today we have fermented, but subsequently de-alcoholised, wine.

We suggest the following pastoral approach and practice:

- Receiving the Bread of Holy Communion:

- Due to the increasing numbers of communicants presenting with gluten intolerance, consider using soy or rice-based ('gluten free') wafers, for those particular communicants.
- Receiving the Wine of Holy Communion:
 - Avoid using grape juice as a substitute for wine;
 - Considering using fortified wines with lower alcohol levels, including dealcoholized wine;
 - Encourage intinction.
- Receiving under One Kind:
 - Consideration may be given to inviting allergy affected people to commune under one kind only (to take only the bread or only the wine), while also acknowledging that according to Christ's word, he intended that both elements should be used; not one or the other.
- Informing Members and Guests of Holy Communion practice in a particular location ('advertising'). We suggest using the statement – RESPONSIBLE COMMUNION PRACTICE (DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO), VOLUME 2 E. THE SACRAMENTS, Some pastoral guidelines for responsible communion practice, adopted by the General Pastors Conference, 1990, edited August 2001), as follows:

St N Lutheran Church welcomes to Holy Communion those who:

 - i. Are baptised and believe in the Triune God;
 - ii. Confess Christ as their only Saviour;
 - iii. Repent of sin and seek to live in accordance with their confession of faith in Christ; and
 - iv. Confess the real presence in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins (1 Corinthians 10:16,17; 11:17-28).
- You might also inform members and guests of the alternatives available in your congregation (e.g. gluten-free wafers, reduced and dealcoholized wine).
- It is inevitable that there will be pastoral exceptions with respect to these matters. Pastoral exceptions are not to be considered the norm.

Adopted by the LCA College of Bishops
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APPENDIX

SHOULD GRAPE JUICE BE USED INSTEAD OF WINE IN HOLY COMMUNION

1. Some Protestant churches use grape juice instead of wine for Holy Communion. This practice has been adopted by some Lutheran congregations without much question. They seem to assume that it is better to use non-alcoholic grape juice rather than alcoholic wine.
2. Until modern methods of preserving grape juice without fermentation were invented, it was not possible to use anything except wine in the Lord's Supper. Grape juice would not keep unless it was fermented and contained some alcohol. So only wine was used. Alcoholics and people who were allergic to alcohol were permitted to receive the bread by itself without the wine. But since various ways were discovered to preserve grape juice without any alcohol, some churches, and that includes some Lutheran churches, have offered grape juice as an alternative to wine for people who were alcoholics or allergic to wine. The use of grape juice has always been regarded as a pastoral exception rather than normal practice. However, in such cases the best practice is still to commune in one kind, the bread, those who are alcoholic or allergic to wine. This is a valid and effective communion.
3. Under the influence of Pietism, some Protestant churches have, over the last hundred years, used grape juice rather than wine in the Lord's Supper. They did this because they wanted to promote temperance in the use of alcohol, or because they believed that Christians should not use alcohol or any other drug. Some Christian groups even went so far as to claim that it was a sin to drink alcohol.
4. The rejection of wine also came to be associated in some Protestant churches with rejection of the real presence of Christ's blood in the sacrament. So even now, some churches refuse to use wine because they identify its use with the Roman Catholic teaching on the presence of Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion. Their use of grape juice is therefore an anti-Catholic statement of their rejection of the real presence. Since they believe that the purpose of the Lord's Supper is to remember Christ's death, it does not matter whether wine is used or not. For them the teaching that we actually drink Christ's blood is so offensive and abhorrent that it must be avoided at all costs.
5. The Lutheran Church uses wine rather than grape juice or other forms of non-alcoholic wine for the following reasons.
 - Jesus instituted the Lord's supper within the framework of a Passover meal. Four cups of wine belong to the Passover seder (liturgy). The drinking of wine, not unfermented grape juice, was prescribed for this meal (and for Purim). Otherwise Jesus' contemporaries in the Holy Land used wine only for medicinal purposes (see Luke 10:34; 1 Tim 5:23) or on special festive occasions like weddings (John 2:1-11). According to a rabbinic tradition the Passover wine was red. The association of

blood and wine at the Last Supper suggests that Jesus used red wine. That the early church used wine, not juice, is supported by 1 Corinthians 11:21.

- In the ancient world all wine had to be fermented. It therefore contained alcohol. Otherwise it could not have been kept. The winemakers in ancient Israel did not have our modern methods of sterilisation, or refrigeration. So Jesus must have used alcoholic wine. Since he used wine, we too celebrate the sacrament with wine. We thereby obey his command that we do the same things that he did in remembrance of him. By his word he attaches the gift of his blood for the forgiveness of sins to the use of wine.
- If we don't use wine, some people may doubt whether the sacrament is valid or not. So for the sake of conscience we insist that wine be used. In the case of individuals who are allergic to wine or are alcoholics, intinction or communion in one kind is a better option than grape juice.
- In our situation here in Australia and New Zealand the use of grape juice could easily be taken as a rejection of the real presence of Christ's blood. Churches that teach that we do not receive and drink Christ's blood in the sacrament also use grape juice to reinforce their teaching. Thus the use of grape juice instead of wine could be taken as a rejection of our confession that we drink Christ's life-giving blood in the sacrament.
- The use of wine makes clear that we affirm the ancient practice of the church catholic, both in the east and west. It is a practice with ecumenical significance. We confirm that we belong together with those churches that hold to the real presence of the Lord in the sacrament.
- Practically speaking, the use of alcoholic wine minimises the possibility of cross-infection, because alcohol is such an efficient sterilising agent. It therefore also makes it possible for us to use the common cup, which we prefer to use for important symbolic reasons (1 Cor 10:16-17).

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