

Diocese of San Bernardino

Guidelines for Parish Visitors to the Sick

OFFICE OF WORSHIP • 1201 E. Highland Avenue • San Bernardino, CA 92404 *Revised 5-7-15*
(909) 475-5335 • Fax (909) 475-5334 • worship@sbdioocese.org • website: sites.google.com/site/sbdworship



“...and when we have finished the prayers, bread is brought and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayer and thanksgiving to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents saying the Amen. The distribution and the reception of the consecrated [elements] by each one takes place, and the deacons take them to the absent...”
Justin Martyr, First Apology, c. 155 AD

Many thanks to Rita Thiron and the Diocese of Lansing, for permission granted to reprint within this document excerpts from their Diocesan Guidelines for Visitors to the Sick.

A. Documentation

“Christ has given us this memorial of his passion to bring us its saving power until the end of time. In this great sacrament you feed your people and strengthen them in holiness, so that the family of mankind may come to walk in the light of one faith, in one communion of love. We come to this wonderful sacrament to be fed at your table and grow into the likeness of the risen Christ.” Preface: Holy Eucharist II 1974 Sacramentary

The Guidelines for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (EMHC) state that every EMHC [whether they routinely distribute at Mass or to the sick] “... should receive sufficient spiritual, theological, and practical preparation to fulfill their role with knowledge and reverence...In all matters, such Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should follow the guidance of the diocesan bishop.” Norms for Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the USA (USA Norms) §28

“The faithful who are special ministers of communion must be persons whose good qualities of Christian life, faith and morals recommend them. Let them strive to be worthy of this great office, foster their own devotion to the Eucharist, and show an example to the rest of the faithful by their own devotion and reverence toward the most august sacrament of the altar.” *Immensae caritatis*: Paul VI 1973

“When the Church cares for the sick, it serves Christ himself in the suffering members of his Mystical Body.” Decree on Pastoral Care of the Sick (PCS) 1972

The faithful who are ill are deprived of their rightful and accustomed place in the Eucharistic community. In bringing Communion to them, the minister of Communion represents Christ and manifests faith and charity on behalf of the whole community toward those who cannot be present at the Eucharist. For the sick, the reception of Communion is not only a privilege, but also a sign of support and concern shown by the Christian community for its members who are ill. The links between the community's Eucharistic celebration, especially on the Lord's Day, and the communion of the sick are intimate and manifold... The obligation to visit and comfort those who cannot take part in the Eucharistic assembly may be clearly demonstrated by taking communion to them from the community's Eucharistic celebration. This symbol of unity between the community and its sick members has the deepest significance on the Lord's Day, the special day of the Eucharistic assembly.
Pastoral Care of the Sick (PCS) #73

B. The Distribution of Holy Communion to the Sick and Homebound

The concern that Christ showed for the bodily and spiritual welfare of those burdened by illness is continued by the Church in its ministry to the sick. This ministry is the common responsibility of all Christians, who should visit the sick and hold them in prayer. Priests, deacons, medical professionals, friends, and family members have a particular share in this ministry of comfort. Through words of encouragement and faith, they help the sick to unite themselves with the suffering of Christ for the good of God's people (PCS #43).

Remembrance of the sick is always appropriate at common worship, especially on the Lord's Day, during the Universal Prayer at Mass, at Morning Prayer, and at Evening Prayer. Family members and caregivers should also be remembered on these occasions.

The Ministry

1. The persons invited to serve as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (EMHC) to the Sick are to be mature (usually at least 18 years of age), fully initiated Catholics, who participate fully and regularly in the Sunday celebration of Eucharist. Ordinarily, commissioned EMHC take Communion to the sick, with the permission of the Pastor, parochial administrator, pastoral coordinator, or priest minister. There may also be certain persons who serve in ministry to the sick on a regular basis. All who serve in this ministry are expected to receive specialized training and formation in the theology and liturgy of Pastoral Care of the Sick as well as in the practical aspects of this ministry.

Up-to-date certification of recent completion of the Safe Environment and Mandated Reporter training from the Diocese of San Bernardino is required by the Office of Child and Youth Protection. Parishes may also have their own guidelines/requirements. This formation is offered by the Diocese.

The Parish/Institution

2. These ministers will be offered at least once a year formation to remind them to see their role as sharing in the Church's total ministry to the sick and poor as Jesus did.

3. Pastors, parochial administrators, pastoral coordinators or priest ministers will also periodically catechize the assembly in its role of ministry to the sick and how their partnership with those who visit the sick is most fully realized.

4. Pastors, parochial administrators, pastoral coordinators or priest ministers will assure that those who will take Communion to the sick and homebound, and to patients in hospitals, are given proper instruction with regard to reverence in receiving at Mass and carrying the consecrated host and to performing the ritual prescribed for distribution of Communion to the Sick. Additional guidelines and rubrics for the individual parish or institution are essential.

The sick and homebound persons and their caretakers, will also be assured of appropriate catechesis in the meaning and value of this ministry.

5. Normally, the parish or institution provides each minister with appropriate containers. A pyx with lid is used for carrying the consecrated host. When (in unique and rare circumstances) the precious blood is to be distributed, a suitable container for transporting it is necessary, such as a small bottle with a dropper specifically designated for this use. (Please see #20) The Host should not be carried in a handkerchief, envelope or other unsuitable container.

6. The EMHC who brings communion to the sick in hospitals must be trained and fully aware of the basic procedures the institution has for hospital visitors. This ministry in the hospital context will normally be simplified to respect the more serious nature of a hospital stay. Counseling, for example, is not envisioned as a duty of this ministry. Other suggestions and cautions in this regard will be made throughout these guidelines.

7. It is the responsibility of the Parish Leadership in a given context - usually the Pastor/Pastoral Coordinator/Priest Minister - to encourage EMHC/Visitors to the Sick to discern the continuing call to this ministry, about once every three years. Together, they can prayerfully determine whether or not a recommitment to another term of service is appropriate.

8. Pastors and Pastoral Coordinators normally keep a record of those they appoint as EMHC/Visitor to the Sick. Recording the names and dates of those visited is also helpful.

The Consecrated Hosts and (in rare and unique circumstances,) The Consecrated Wine for the Sick and Homebound

9. It is recommended that hosts for the sick and homebound be consecrated in the Mass from which they will be taken and in which the EMHC have fully participated. Ideally, ministers are sent forth by the parish or other community from a Sunday or daily celebration of Eucharist. At Sunday Eucharistic Celebrations a predetermined procedure is required which assures that the EMHC to the Sick and homebound has brought a PYX to the church, with their name and number of hosts indicated on the outside bottom of the PYX. The EMHC will also need to communicate with a person (designated by the Pastor) who will see to it that the Pyx is filled with the requested number of hosts. This procedure will also indicate where the Pyx is placed prior to Mass and who will place it there, to be sure that it is filled with the designated numbers of consecrated hosts. No longer will it be permitted for the EMHC who is communicating to bring his/her empty pyx and ask for sacred hosts. Once all present have received Holy Communion, the ministers are called forward, and are ritually blessed and sent forth from the community to serve the sick and homebound.

10. If the EMHC cannot be present at the Mass in which the hosts have been consecrated, the consecrated hosts may be put into an appropriate Eucharistic container (normally by a Priest or Deacon or one whom they designate) which is then placed in the tabernacle until after Mass or a day later in the week. When it becomes known that someone can only receive the Precious Blood, it has to be taken to the person on the day it was consecrated.

The pyx is taken from the church only on the day in which Communion is to be distributed. It is important to assure that any sacred container used must be closed firmly.

Celebration of the Communion Service

11. If the service is to take place in a hospital, the shorter rite is the norm. Enhancements such as singing or even candles are often not suitable for the hospital context where the communicant may be quite ill. A cloth on which to place the Blessed Sacrament, a purificator (if offering the Precious Blood) and perhaps a cross and simple Bible are desirable although not always required.

12. It is recommended, whenever possible, that these rites be celebrated communally, that is with a small gathering of the faithful. Those present may be invited to read the scriptures, state the intercessions or assist in other ways, even leading a simple song when appropriate. These possibilities will be determined in light of the needs and condition of the communicant. Careful planning will assure that the minister has sufficient consecrated hosts for all present who wish to receive.

13. Whether Communion is to be distributed in the home, a hospital or other facility, family members, doctors, nurses or other appropriate persons may be contacted prior to the visit to assure that the ritual options are safe and appropriate (i.e.) use of candles in the home, what readings (if used) would be most appropriate, time considerations, etc.)

14. The minister to the sick may celebrate the Communion Service in one of two ways—within a Liturgy of the Word or in a brief form for use in more restrictive circumstances (i.e. a hospital).

15. Normally, those who are with the sick (family and/or others) or homebound are asked to prepare a table with a linen cloth upon which the pyx is placed. Lighted candles, holy water, and a cross may also be used. Along with the Eucharist, one might bring other items or gestures that keep the sick person "connected" to their parish family - a bulletin, a tape of the homily, holy water, cards made by the parish school children, etc. The minister must also be sensitive to the needs of the family members and caregivers during this visit, assuring them of the love and support of the parish community.

16. A Communion fast is not necessary for the ill or their caregivers. If their health or medical regimen allows them to consume the consecrated bread, they may receive Communion at any time. If the sick wish to receive the sacrament of penance, it is preferable that the priest make himself available during a visit prior to the day when Communion is to be received. (PCS #75).

The Parish and the EMHC who visit the sick and/or homebound.

17. In addition to the training and formation offered by the Diocese, ministers can expect to receive instruction and spiritual and liturgical formation from their pastors or other parish or institution leadership, including the specific ways in which this ministry is practiced in the individual parish or institution. Clear parish/institution guidelines and expectations are essential. Most important is the formation of ministers in liturgical spirituality and the call to service through prayer and discernment.

Parishes will also provide for periodic Catechesis for the assembly regarding the ministry of EMHC/Visitor to the Sick, and theological, liturgical and practical considerations regarding the reception of communion.

Posture and Gesture

18. The posture for reception of Holy Communion to the Sick depends on the special circumstances of the communicant. In the Diocese of San Bernardino, communicants are encouraged to offer a Gesture of Reverence. Other appropriate options are a slight head bow, Sign of the Cross, offering of a simple prayer or, other appropriate gesture.

The Body of Christ

19. When the communicant is ready, the minister picks up the host, holds it up in front of the communicant and says the words "*The Body of the Christ*". After the communicant (if able) has responded "*Amen*", the consecrated bread is placed in the hand or on the tongue according to the manner indicated by the communicant.

Communicants are not permitted to take their own consecrated bread and communicate themselves.

If a consecrated host falls to the ground during the distribution of Holy Communion, the communion minister quickly and discreetly picks it up and places it in the purificator (the white cloth that serves as a liturgical napkin). It may be consumed later or appropriately taken care of in some other manner (as determined by the parish priest or priest chaplain) after distribution is over.

The Blood of Christ

20. The norm for the distribution of Communion to the Sick in the Diocese of San Bernardino is to receive a consecrated host. In the case of physical disability or weakness, the minister needs to be ready to assist. Breaking the host into smaller pieces is often helpful. Only in extremely rare and unique circumstances (i.e. inability to swallow even a small particle of the host) is a communicant permitted to receive some drops of the Precious Blood, and only with the permission of the Pastor/Pastoral Coordinator/Priest or Priest Minister.

Before and After Communion

21. Any remaining consecrated bread and wine is to be consumed by the EMHC. The small vial for the precious blood is properly purified. Under no circumstance may the extraordinary minister or deacon take extra Consecrated Hosts to their home or any place other than the Parish Tabernacle. If they cannot be consumed immediately because of the amount remaining, the EMHC must carry them immediately after the Communion Service back to the Parish or Hospital Tabernacle where the hospital has a functioning Catholic Chapel. Careful planning must allow for the possibility that extra time may be needed to do this.

A consecrated host may not be kept on one's person or carried on a long journey unless there is urgent pastoral need (Canon 935), and the minister has the permission of the Bishop. Nor may the Blessed Sacrament be stored overnight or for a longer period of time in a place that is not a tabernacle (Canon 934). Finally, keeping several hosts to avoid visits to the parish church is strictly prohibited. If Communion is desired daily, parish ministers are assigned to visit the sick person and his/her family, obtaining the consecrated sacrament from the parish or hospital tabernacle in the usual way.

22. Since the tabernacle is the designated place of reservation for the Blessed Sacrament to be available to the sick and dying, care must be taken to assure that it is always locked after removing, placing or replacing the consecrated bread. Canon 938 states the "*The person in charge of the church or oratory safeguards the tabernacle key.*" It is strongly suggested that access to the key require a signing out and signing in as well as a brief accounting of who is being visited. Safety of the Blessed Sacrament and assurance that it is always being removed, received and returned by the appropriate people in a timely and reverent manner are essential considerations. The Parish Secretary may be one helpful choice for this role as "key keeper".

Sending forth the EMHC to the Sick and Homebound

23. Just as the community of Justin Martyr (166 AD) cared for absent members, we too bring Communion to the those who cannot join us in the Sunday assembly. This may be done on Sunday by "sending out" EMHC to the sick and homebound. Following is one suggested way of doing this.

All ministers to the sick bring their pyxes (with the EMHC name underneath) to the sacristy before Mass. Please see revised norm #9 for the corrected instructions about how are the EMHC required to proceed. After the Communion procession, but before the Prayer after Communion, the pyxes are held by the Presider and the EMHC are called forward. After they have assembled in the sanctuary, the Presider may say the following or similar words:

My brothers and sisters, the Lord has nourished us with his Body and his Blood. Now we send you to take this Eucharistic banquet to our absent brothers and sisters who are homebound or too ill to join us today. Tell them of our constant love and concern and our continuing prayers for healing and strength.

The extraordinary ministers depart from the sanctuary and resume their place within the assembly.

This ritual sending forth will help the assembly to be more aware of the community's absent members. It serves to avoid individual special requests in the Communion procession. Additionally, it reflects our understanding of sacraments – as instruments of the Church, celebrated in a public manner, in the midst of the community or their representatives. Finally, this allows due care over who receives the pyx. It is prohibited to request additional hosts during the Eucharistic Procession.

It is important for visitors to the sick to understand they are normally expected to exercise their duties immediately after Mass. The visit to the sick by a Eucharistic minister has priority over any other activities after Mass as possible. One should avoid doing errands, dining out, or engaging in long conversations until after the visit (s) to the sick are completed. Always be aware that the Blessed Sacrament is being carried.

C. Frequently Asked Questions

Several of the responses have been taken directly from *Guide for Ministers of Communion* (GMC) from Liturgy Training Publications. They are noted.

Our parish already has current guidelines for Visitors to the Sick. May we continue using what we already have? Current Parish Guidelines for this ministry, which are in keeping with the principles and spirit of these Diocesan Guidelines, may continue to be used. The Worship Office will be happy to review your guidelines.

What do I do when someone asks to receive a blessing, not Holy Communion? What do I say? The new rules regarding EMHC not being allowed to offer blessings only applies to the reception of Communion during a Eucharistic Celebration/Holy Mass. A Visitor to the Sick and Homebound may simply hold the right hand slightly elevated over the person and say the following or similar words: *“May God bless you now and always.”* A priest or Deacon, though not a lay person, may make the Sign of the Cross over the person or on their forehead.

What should I wear when I serve? Because the preference is for EMHC to bring Communion after Sunday Mass, when aware that you will be serving as an EMHC/Visitor to the Sick, it is expected that you will wear your “Sunday best.”-clothing expressive of an attitude of service and reverence and which conveys the importance of this ministry. For male older teens and men this is normally long pants, a collared shirt and clean shoes. For female older teens and women this is normally a modest dress, skirt or slacks and blouse, sweater or knit top, and comfortable, clean shoes. Ministers never wear anything that draws attention to themselves (such as excessive or noisy jewelry or cologne or perfume that is overpowering (which may actually be harmful to someone who is ill). It will be helpful for the parish coordinator of EMHC/Visitors to the Sick to initiate a discussion about this at a parish formation meeting or training session. Everyone can help to respectfully determine what “Sunday best” is for the particular community, and particular ministry, and what to wear in other circumstances.

Should I wash my hands before distributing communion? *“If the minister has blown his or her nose or helped a child do so, picked things up from the floor, or in some way soiled his or her hands since they were last washed, it is advisable that the minister go discreetly to wash his or her hands or have hand wipes readily available. Otherwise it is probably not necessary.”* GMC p. 36 EMHC can carry hand sanitizers when visiting the sick and homebound.

If I am an EMHC to the sick and homebound, and the person receiving the host spits it out unexpectedly and is not able to consume it, what do I do with the host? *Place the host in the container in which you brought it when it is empty and return to the sacristy at the church as soon as is possible. Dissolve the host as much as is possible in a large container of water and pour all in the container into the sacrarium. In the appropriate manner, purify both the container for the host and the container that held the water and dissolved host.*

What do I do to appropriately dispose of the water used to purify the pyx, including the one with a dissolved host (as mentioned above) when the church does not have a sacrarium? *The Pastor should designate an appropriate place outside, in the ground near the sacristy, where the liquid may be poured or even buried as needed. This ground may contain plants and should not be located in a place where people are likely to step on it.*

How are EMHC/Visitors to the Sick Commissioned? *“The commissioning service for ministers of communion (EMHC)/ Visitors to the Sick is a brief and simple order of prayer. It may take place during the Mass or at a special Liturgy of the Word. In either case, the candidates for this ministry come forward after the homily and are asked if they wish to undertake this ministry and if they promise to carry it out with care and reverence. A prayer of blessing is then prayed... Intercessions for the ministers are included in the Universal Prayers. If the commissioning takes place at Mass, the liturgy continues as usual; some of the new ministers may serve at communion time. If the commissioning takes place outside of Mass, the service concludes with the Lord’s Prayer and a blessing.”* GMC p.38

D. Bibliography

Several book publishers offer the *Rites for Pastoral Care of the Sick*, which may or may not include the Rites of Anointing and Viaticum. Others have the rites for Communion to the Sick; some of these are bilingual. Other examples are: *Pastoral Care of the Sick/Cuidado Pastoral de los Enfermos* from Liturgy Training Publications or the Mexican American Cultural Center; *Administration of Communion & Viaticum to the Sick*, Bilingual Edition from the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy USCCB. All vary in size and content.

Guide for Ministers of Communion Fr. Paul Turner & Kenneth A. Riley Liturgy Training Publications (LTP).

Handbook for Ministers of Care by Genevieve Glen, OSB, Marilyn Kofler, SP and Kevin O’Connor (LTP)

Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Book Service.

And you Visited Me Revised by Charles Gusmer Liturgical Press

Catholic Handbook for Visiting the Sick and Homebound 2013 English and Spanish LTP

Booklets: *Prayers of the Sick*, *Prayers Out of the Depths* LTP

Excerpts from the “Guidelines for Visitors to the Sick” from the Diocese of Lansing, the author Rita Thiron, Office of Worship Director, have been copied with permission.

Other catechetical materials I.E. *“Preparing the Parish for Communion Under Both Kinds”*, and *“New Practices for the Diocese of San Bernardino.”* are available upon request from the diocesan worship office.