



WHY NOT TO GIVE BLESSINGS IN THE COMMUNION LINE BUT SOMETHING YOU CAN SAY

What exactly is the policy of the Church regarding the blessing of non-communicants at Mass? Since this practice is not provided for in liturgical books, and canon and liturgical law prohibits anyone from introducing new elements, it is a sticky subject to address.

The beginning of this custom is a bit hard to pin down; it seems to have started in the late 1980s out of a desire to help those who cannot receive Holy Communion feel included. It is a well-intentioned gesture and is growing rapidly, especially as a way of avoiding or lowering sacrilegious communions. And while some priests encourage it, especially at the time of a funeral or wedding, and among children, there are many good reasons why others do not follow this trend.

In some churches, children and non-Catholics are instructed to come with arms crossed to receive a blessing from the minister of Communion, whereas in other parishes, they might be asked to remain seated.

Parents often bring very young children with them on the Communion procession because it would be unwise to leave them behind. Over the years, it has become a custom for these children to receive a blessing. Children have been carried or walked in the Communion procession for centuries without feeling neglected because a blessing was not given. But today, children in line will look up expectantly at the person distributing holy Communion.

The blessing given to both children and adults varies greatly from place to place. Some ministers respond by speaking or making the gesture of the sign of the cross, patting or touching the individual's head in a sign of blessing, marking the forehead with a sign of the cross, or even blessing them with the Eucharistic host. As well intentioned as these practices may be, in the context of the liturgy, is the Communion procession really the time for a blessing of children or adults who are unable to receive? Is there a need to hallow only some members with a special blessing when the entire congregation is blessed by the priest moments later at the end of Mass?

Another consideration is that touching people's hair, faces and garments while serving Communion (or any other food for that matter) has to be a violation of health and safety regulations somewhere, not to mention poor manners. This practice could be off-putting to the next person in line who may wish to receive on the tongue.

Furthermore, is it appropriate to substitute the reception of Communion for the laying on of a hand or hands – which has its own sacramental significance?

One last consideration is that, over time, the practice of giving blessings to non-communicants could create a new perception or mentality regarding Communion itself that makes it somehow equivalent to a blessing, thus weakening the special value that Communion should have for Catholics. This danger could be especially present in a school environment with a high proportion of non-Catholics who receive only a blessing. These ritual gestures might cause confusion, especially to the Catholics present.

For all these reasons, it is a best practice to reserve the Communion procession for the distribution of Holy Communion as much as possible and not to invite others forward for a blessing with a general announcement.

Even when this step is taken, some adults and children will still present themselves for a blessing in the Communion line. Since the alternative is sending someone away disappointed and possibly angry and disaffected, here is a suggestion offered from various places around the country as a resolution to the issue of blessings in lieu of Communion while avoiding the appearance of being unwelcoming.

Without making a gesture with the hand, the priest or deacon may simply bow his head slightly and say quietly but audibly, *“Receive Christ spiritually in your mind and heart.”* This is not a blessing, but an invitation to worship, so no actions are taken. And since children and babies do not understand the concept, it is not necessary to do anything more.

Regarding Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (EMHC), they are deputed to assist the priest with the distribution of the Eucharist in moments of necessity. They should not give blessings to anyone in the Communion procession. They have no liturgical duties besides the distribution of Communion. There are other times in the liturgical year when the laity assist in specific acts such as the blessing of throats or the distribution of ashes, and these are clearly indicated in the *Book of Blessings*.

It goes without saying that priests and deacons should be available to give individual blessings happily and readily to anyone who wishes after Mass while shaking hands and greeting people exiting the church. This kind of warm spiritual hospitality is always appreciated by parishioners and guests alike.