

The Fundamentals of Canon 915

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 10 March 2019

Scripture is one of the sources, or more accurately, depositories (*fontes cognoscendi*) of canon law. It is one of the channels through which the rivers (the laws themselves) flow; as such, it is not surprising that the doctrinal and historical basis of many ecclesiastical laws may be found in Scripture, primarily in the New Testament. The laws which govern the reception of Holy Communion are no different. The emphasis placed in Scripture on examining one's own worthiness to receive, lest one be guilty of committing a serious sacrilege and thereby condemn oneself (1 Cor. 11:27-29), forms the basis of legislation on the reception of Holy Communion, throughout the entirety of canonical tradition up until the present day. Given that this principle is frequently denigrated and ignored during this crisis in the Church, it is worth repeating the fundamentals.

The obligation to examine one's own conscience deals with the *invisible* dimension of the reception of Holy Communion. One who is not in state of grace cannot receive, and this is a non-negotiable teaching of the holy Catholic Church. Regarding the *visible* dimension of the reception of Holy Communion, the Church must also address in her legislation situations involving a person's public worthiness, or lack thereof, to receive. Therefore, not only is a person who wishes to receive Holy Communion obligated to examine his own conscience and refrain from receiving if he is interiorly unworthy, the minister of the sacrament also has the obligation to refuse Holy Communion to those who have proven themselves to be publicly unworthy. The two cases are distinct and must not be conflated, as Pope John Paul II wrote:

The judgment of one's state of grace obviously belongs only to the person involved, since it is a question of examining one's conscience. However, in cases of outward conduct which is seriously, clearly and steadfastly contrary to the moral norm, the Church, in her pastoral concern for the good order of the community and out of respect for the sacrament, cannot fail to feel directly involved. The Code of Canon Law refers to this situation of a manifest lack of proper moral disposition when it states that those who "obstinately persist in manifest grave sin" are not to be admitted to Eucharistic communion.¹

As a general rule, Catholics may not be denied the sacraments if they ask for them opportunely, are properly disposed, and are not prohibited by law from receiving them (c. 843 §1). Any baptized Catholic "not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to Holy Communion" (c. 912). However, supreme care must be taken to avoid profanation, and it is not permissible to administer Holy Communion if a person has publicly and clearly demonstrated himself to be unworthy. Canon 915 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law currently in effect in the Latin Church deals with this particular issue, namely, that ministers of Holy Communion have the

¹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 37.

right—indeed, the moral and legal obligation—to deny reception of the sacrament to those who are publicly unworthy.

Because laws such as canon 915 restrict the free exercise of rights, they are subject to strict interpretation (c. 18); hence, many conditions must be met before this canon can be cited to justify the denial of Holy Communion in a particular case. Although the canon makes mention of persons who have been declared excommunicated or interdicted or who have had such a penalty imposed upon them, the denial of Holy Communion is not necessarily indicative of the existence of an ecclesiastical censure. Nor is denial in itself a penalty, as canon 915 is not found in Book VI of the Code (which deals with sanctions), but rather in Book IV, “The Sanctifying Function of the Church.”

The text of canon 915 forms the basis of three conditions which must be met before a person can be denied Holy Communion: the sin must be objectively grave, the grave sin must be manifest and public, and the sin must extend over a period of time after the person has been informed about the severity of his actions and does nothing to rectify the situation. The term “grave sin” must be understood *objectively* here because no one can judge the state of another person’s soul in the external forum. As the Angelic Doctor teaches: “...man can make laws in those matters of which he is competent to judge, and he “is not competent to judge of interior movements...but only of exterior acts which appear.”²

While one’s personal sins, including those not perceived by others, do in fact affect the entire Body of Christ in a negative way (1 Cor. 12:26), it is only one’s *manifest* sins which have the potential to give public scandal to others. By admitting a person who is habitually persisting in manifest grave sin to Holy Communion, there is a risk of sending the message that one can persist in such a sin and still be worthy to receive Our Lord. While the 1917 Code is no longer in effect, the canon of that code which is parallel to canon 915 of the 1983 Code gives insight into the Church’s thinking regarding scandal: if a person was previously excommunicated, interdicted, or persisting in manifest grave sin, he is first to show his penitence and make satisfaction for the scandal he has caused before being allowed to receive again (1917 CIC, c. 855 §1).

Canonical tradition also explains why the sin must be manifest: under the 1917 Code, occult sinners should only be denied communion if they ask privately, and the minister knows that they are not repentant. This cannot be done publicly because unnecessarily depriving someone of his good name is a scandal in itself (c. 855 §2), and the Church in her generosity wishes to avoid taking drastic, public actions unless absolutely necessary. This also explains the final condition that must be met before the denial of Holy Communion may take place: if the sinner refuses to do anything to rectify the situation after being informed of the grave nature of his sin, only then may he be denied Holy Communion, once the Church’s abundant generosity has been exhausted.

Woe be to those wolves in sheep’s clothing who refuse to apply proper ecclesiastical discipline when it is warranted! Having recourse to canon 915 when appropriate is neither harsh nor uncharitable; on the contrary, it is a great act of charity which helps to bring an obstinate sinner to repentance, avoids scandalizing the rest of the faithful, and protects the dignity of the Eucharist.

2 *Summa Theologiae I-II*, q. 91, art. 4, co.