

Zbigniew Janczewski

THE EUCHARIST AS A SACRAMENT INTEGRATING
THE FAMILY (UNDER CANON LAW)

INTRODUCTION

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church¹ of Pope John Paul II puts it, “For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the who spiritual good of the Church.” Moreover, it is the sign and cause of communion of life with God and the unity of the People of God. By its celebration, God in Jesus Christ sanctifies the world and unites the liturgy on earth with the heavenly liturgy (CCE 1324-1326). The Eucharist uniting the Church must also foster the integration of her smallest community, i.e. the Christian family. The relevant declarations of this unification and integration can be found in the documents of the Holy See, including in the work of the supreme ecclesiastical legislator, canon law. This paper looks into whether in canon law, which lays down provisions concerning the Sacrament of the Eucharist, offers ways and means for building the unity of marriage and family.

The article comprises three parts. Part one discusses the Eucharist as a sacrament of unity. Part two addresses the partaking of families in holy communion. Part three looks at the role of the sacrament in the life of mixed marriages and ones where the parties are the representatives of different Catholic rites.

REV. PROF. DR. HABIL. ZBIGNIEW JANCZEWSKI – Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw; correspondence address: ul Dewajtis 5, 01-815 Warszawa, Poland; e-mail: z.janczewski@onet.eu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7395-2526>

¹ *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1997 [“CCE”].

1. THE EUCHARIST AS A SACRAMENT OF UNITY

The passage of the Code of Canon² concerning the Eucharist opens a canon that conveys what is the very essence of the Church's teaching on this sacrament. This is the most venerable of the sacraments because Jesus Christ himself is contained, offered, and received in it. By it, the Church lives and grows constantly. The Eucharist is the summit and source of all worship and Christian life. It signifies and brings about the unity of the People of God, and through it the body of Christ is built up (Can. 897).

Like all the sacraments, the Blessed Eucharist has its external, ceremonial side and is a sign (*signum*). This is the *demonetivum* sign because it makes people experience the gift of grace by participating in the work of redemption. The Eucharist is also a *signum exigitivum-obligatorium* as it obliges one to imitate Christ in daily life, and to die and resurrect morally. Though the Church is holy, she needs purification [Pastuszko 1997, 17-18].

So, does the Eucharist have an impact on the unity of families? The question seems rhetorical. The very moment of establishing a Catholic family, which is the celebration of the sacrament of marriage, occurs during Mass. Moreover, the new spouses receive holy communion and even under the form of bread and wine. So, at the outset of their new and shared way of life, they are nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Eucharist brings unity to the People of God by building up the Church. The Christian family is the smallest community of the Church. St John Chrysostom called it *ecclesiola*, i.e. the Little Church.³ In the Christian system of values, it has a central place. It is a setting in which society grows through human and spiritual development; it is the necessary stage of human and Christian maturation; a cradle where the gift of life may flourish [Skreczko 2007, 123]. The unity of the family, of all its members, manifest itself, but not only, in the participation in Mass and in partaking in holy communion together. Presence at the Eucharist, especially on Sundays, of only some of the family members, e.g. of only the mother, the parents, or the children, may indicate the lack of unity, at least in religious terms.

² *Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus* (25.01.1983), AAS 75 (1983), pars II, pp. 1-317 ["CIC/83"].

³ In Eph. 20, 6, PG 62, 143.

Thanks to the Eucharist, the Church continues to live and grow. According to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, “no Christian community, however, is built up unless it has its basis and centre in the celebration of the most Holy Eucharist.”⁴ The family community, as one of the smallest Christian communities, must also actively seek its foundations in this sacrament and rest its present and future upon the Eucharist.

2. PARTAKING IN HOLY COMMUNION

One of the ways of fostering unity in the Christian family is receiving holy communion. CIC/83 encourages frequent partaking in holy communion. It says that the faithful should take an active part in the celebration of Mass, and they should receive the sacrament with great devotion and frequently. On the other hand, pastors of souls should instruct them about this obligation (Can. 898). The Catechism of the Catholic Church of Pope John Paul II even recommends that the faithful receive the holy Eucharist on Sundays and feast days, or even daily (CCE 1389). By giving thanks to God, together with the priest, they should also learn to offer themselves in sacrifice through Christ, thus building an even more perfect union with God and with one another.⁵

This obligation imposed by the Church on the faithful who are a family should lead them indirectly, both spouses and their offspring, to living in a state of sanctifying grace. For holy communion may be received without grave sin. CIC/83 also notes that anyone who is conscious of grave sin may not celebrate receive holy communion without previously having been to sacramental confession (Can. 916). As Pastuszko points out, authors do not agree as to whether this prohibition is a declaration of God’s law or ecclesiastical law. If a sinner has gone to confession, his or her spiritual condition returns to normal, and they are able to lawfully receive the Body of Christ [Pastuszko 1997, 157-58]. The provision of Can 916 additionally strengthens and broadens the community aspect [Górecki 2011, 101]. If ei-

⁴ Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, *Decretum de presbyterorum ministerio et vita Presbyterorum ordinis* (07.12.1965), AAS 58 (1966), pp. 991-1024, no. 6.

⁵ *Idem*, *Constitutio de sacra liturgia Sacrosanctum Concilium* (04.12.1963), AAS 56 (1964), pp. 97-134, no. 48.

ther of the spouses persist in grave sin, it will affect their relationship, while immediate conversion opens the door to the Eucharist and to the repairing of severed family ties. Thus, apparently, owing to the above-mentioned legal requirement, the family community is encouraged to avoid infidelity, all forms of physical and psychological violence, and disrespect for the other members of the family. In other words, the Eucharist strengthens *communio familiaris* and the communion of the spouses. Being the beneficiaries of the graces flowing from the sacrament of marriage, they also receive additional support through the encounter and reception of Christ in the Eucharist.

Husband and wife are not the only family members to benefit from the source of the Eucharist. They should also lead their offspring to it [Wierchowski 2015, 86]. Hence, another provision of CIC/83 reads that it is primarily the duty of parents and of those who take their place to ensure that children who are able to use of reason are properly prepared and nourished by the divine food (Can. 914). Biological parents are primarily responsible for this as they hold “first right” and “most serious duty” to care for the religious upbringing of their offspring [Górecki 2011, 99]. Mother’s and father’s compatibility in terms of educational matters usually cements their bond and relationships with the educated child. This applies not only to social, cultural, etc. education, but also to religious education, to which the parents committed themselves when requesting the Church to baptise it lawfully (cf. Can. 868 § 1, 2^o). Responsibility for preparing a child for the so-called “first communion” should not be shifted to parish, religion teacher, or one of the parents, e.g. the mother. This is the duty of both the mother and the father. Catechesis is only intended to support them, hence the need to ensure that the child attends the sessions.

However, the family should initiate the process of getting ready for the first reception of the Eucharist much earlier. This may be due to the risk of death. As CIC/83 provides, the Eucharist may be administered to a child if they can distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food and can receive communion with reverence (Can. 913 § 2). Therefore, parents, even before the catechesis starts, should teach their children the basics of the Christian faith. As M. Pastuszko notes, there is no point in talking about the Eucharist if they have not heard of the Trinity and the incarnation of the Son of God beforehand. It is enough for a child to learn even some

basic concept of these truths of faith [Pastuszko 1997, 146-47]. Next, they will be able to tell the difference between the Body of Christ and a piece of bread as food. Moreover, it is not possible for a child to learn all this without mastering the basic prayers, which can be easily achieved if they say it every day with their parents. All in all, the period of preparation for the reception of the “first communion” is an opportunity for the entire family to strengthen its unity on a daily basis.

Another of the canonical norms to be discussed is that of abstaining from food and drink before holy communion. Whoever intends to receive the Eucharist should not eat or drink for at least one hour before holy communion, the only exception being water and medicine. The elderly, the sick, and those who care for them may receive holy communion without such limitations (Can. 919 § 1, § 3). These provisions come from the earlier instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Immensae Caritatis*, dated 29 January 1973. Back then, the congregation allowed families and relatives of the sick or elderly to limit the abstention period to about 15 minutes if it cannot be kept for an hour.⁶

The rationale behind the relaxation of the abstention requirement was the fact that care for the elderly and the sick is a manifestation of Christian love and deserves special recognition. In addition, carers may find it challenging to abstain from food and drink when assisting the needy. The ecclesiastical legislator wished to address these difficulties, hence the fact of providing care produces a legal effect in the area of abstention [Pastuszko 1997, 187]. It should be noted that the family does not disintegrate after one of the spouses’ death or the children leaving home as grown-ups. By facilitating the reception of holy communion to the elderly or the sick, but also to their children or grandchildren who are assisting them, their ties are cemented, and the young receive extra spiritual strength to help their infirm parents and grandparents.

Another CIC/83 provision linked to the problem in question is the obligation to receive holy communion at least once a year (Can. 920 § 1). Continuous partaking in holy communion after receiving it for the first time is an expression of living fully with the Church. It is part of the rights and

⁶ Cf. Sacra Congregatio de Disciplina Sacramentorum, *Instructio de Communionem Sacramentali quibusdam in adiunctis faciliore reddenda Immensae caritatis* (29.01.1973), AAS 65 (1973), pp. 264-71.

obligations of the faithful. The minimum frequency is regulated by canon law, and the obligation must be observed at least once a year [Górecki 2011, 104-105]. Still, it is the absolute minimum. When a family member persists in grave sin, he or she is given a canon law norm that encourages reconciliation with God through confession and to receive the Eucharist, thus being equipped to resume the work on the nurturing of family love for all its members: spouse, children, parents, or grandparents.

3. THE EUCHARIST IN MIXED MARRIAGES AND MARRIAGES OF DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN RITES

The Eucharist is the expression of the personal relationship of the faithful and of union with Jesus Christ [Müller 2014, 49]. It also reveals the relationships within the family. When all its members receive the Eucharist, it is a sign of love in this community. However, it may be challenging when the spouses are members of different Christian Churches or follow different Catholic rites. Joint participation in Mass and the reception of the Body of Christ is regulated by canon law. It allows Christ's faithful to participate in the Eucharist (Can. 923). The ecclesiastical legislator offers the faithful freedom of choice in respect of partaking in the Eucharist in any Catholic rite [Górecki 2011, 107]. It can be both Eastern and Western. It should be kept in mind, however, that any Catholic rite does not mean any Christian denomination [Pastuszko 1997, 222].

The question of family participation in the sacrament is particularly relevant in the current situation in Europe and the Russo-Ukrainian war. A few million refugees from assaulted Ukraine have left their homeland. Some of them are likely to remain in exile in various countries of Europe, America, etc. for good. Many of them are members of the Greek-Catholic Church of the Byzantine-Ukrainian rite. It should be expected that some of them will prospectively marry Roman Catholic residents of their host countries. This is why the question of joint participation in the Eucharist is so important, despite the rite differences. Joint celebration of Mass can reduce, among other things, other differences between spouses, such as nationality, language, culture, etc.

Another question is the partaking in holy communion by families whose members are the faithful of different Christian religions. In the

case of the followers of non-Catholic Eastern Churches, and other churches that, in the opinion of the Holy See, are in the same situations as the Eastern Churches in terms of the sacraments, they may be lawfully administered the Eucharist if they spontaneously ask for it and are properly disposed (Can. 844 § 3). The first of the requirements is not particularly difficult to meet because it can be assumed that a faithful of an Eastern Church, having contracted a sacramental marriage with a Catholic and ready to receive the Body of the Lord, will be willing to do so together with the Catholic spouse during the Eucharist. The other requirement referring to proper disposition concerns the state of sanctifying grace after the absolution of grave sins.

Non-Catholic Christians may be administered the Eucharist under the following conditions: 1) if there is a danger of death or 2) if, in the judgement of the diocesan bishop or of the Episcopal Conference, there is some other grave and pressing need, and they a) cannot approach a minister of their own community, b) ask for it spontaneously, c) demonstrate the Catholic faith in respect of the sacrament, d) are properly disposed (Can. 844 § 4).

Failure to be able to receive holy communion from one's own minister can have both a physical and a moral dimension, as the sacrament can be viewed as exceptional help to obtain needed grace [Górecki 2019, 451]. As regards the first two conditions, one of them should be met, while for the others, failure to meet one prevents the administration of the sacrament. It seems that the condition of grave and pressing need, if no specific criteria thereto have been defined by the diocesan bishop or by the Episcopal Conference, is met when the spouses wish to participate in the Eucharist together in a Catholic temple and the occasion is an extremely important and solemn family event, such as the baptism or wedding of their child, the burial ceremony of a close relative, etc.

The Catholic faithful may also receive the Eucharist from non-Catholic ministers subject to the following conditions: 1) it is physically or morally impossible to approach a Catholic minister, 2) the Eucharist is celebrated validly in the Church when it is received, 3) there is a necessity or genuine spiritual advantage of it, 4) there is no danger of error or indifferentism (Can. 844 § 2).

If someone resides in a place where there is no option of accessing a Catholic minister, the person should seek advice as for the validity of the

Eucharist in the spouse's Church. Such advice can usually be obtained from the Episcopal Conference of that or neighbouring country. The risk of error occurs when there is a false opinion, in this case, of the partaking in holy communion licitly in any circumstances, in the communicant or in others witnessing the situation. The risk of indifferentism may lead to indifference with regard to important religious matters. In this case, it may be the way of understanding of ecclesial *communio*. A Catholic receiving the sacrament or witnesses thereof may develop a conviction that it is not important which Church offers the Eucharist because, for example "God is the same everywhere."

In summation, the flexible approach of the ecclesiastical legislator to spouses' joint participation in the Eucharist certainly helps alleviate other differences between family members: national, cultural, etc., which can be a community-forming factor.

CONCLUSIONS

Does the Eucharist have an impact on the unity of families? The question seems rhetorical. The very moment of establishing a Catholic family is the celebration of the sacrament of marriage during Mass. The new spouses receive holy communion. The Eucharist brings about the unity of the People of God; it builds the Church; the Christian family is the smallest community of the Church. The unity of the family, of all its members, manifest itself, but not only, in the participation in Mass and in partaking in holy communion together. Presence at the Eucharist, especially on Sundays, of only some of the family members, e.g. of only the mother, the parents, or the children, may indicate the lack of unity, at least in religious terms.

As pointed out earlier, a way to foster unity in the Christian family is receiving holy communion. The Code of Canon Law encourages its frequent reception. The Church encourages the faithful who are a family to do so, as it leads them indirectly, both spouses and their offspring, to living in a state of sanctifying grace. For holy communion may be received without grave sin. If either of the spouses persists in grave sin, it will affect their relationship, while immediate conversion opens the door to the Eucharist and to the repairing of severed family ties. Thus, apparently,

owing to the requirement under canon law, the family community is encouraged to avoid infidelity, all forms of physical and psychological violence, and disrespect for the other members of the family. The Eucharist strengthens *communio familiaris* and the communion of the spouses. Being the beneficiaries of the graces flowing from the sacrament of marriage, they also receive additional support through the encounter and reception of Christ in the Eucharist.

One of the provisions of CIC/83 reads that it is primarily the duty of parents and of those who take their place to ensure that children who are able to use of reason are properly prepared and nourished by the divine food. The cooperation of mother and father in terms of educational matters usually cements their bond and relationships with the educated child. This applies not only to social, cultural, education, etc. but also to religious education. The family should initiate the process of getting ready for the first reception of the Eucharist earlier. This may be due to the risk of the child's death. As canon law provides, the Eucharist may be administered to a child if they can distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary food and can receive communion with reverence. Therefore, both parents, even before the catechesis starts, should teach their children the basics of the Christian faith. The period of preparation for the reception of the "first communion" is an opportunity for the entire family to strengthen its unity on a daily basis.

The Church legislator, with regard to abstention from food and drink before the Eucharist, allows the elderly and the sick, as well as their carers, not to take part in this practice. This is to facilitate the reception of holy communion to the elderly or the sick, but also to their children or grandchildren who are assisting them, thus cementing their ties; and the young receive extra spiritual strength to help their infirm parents and grandparents.

Another provision of canon law linked to the problem in question is the obligation to receive holy communion at least once a year. When a family member persists in grave sin, he or she is given a canon law norm that encourages reconciliation with God through confession and to receive the Eucharist, thus being equipped to resume the work on the nurturing of family love for all its members. When all the family members receive the Eucharist, it is a sign of love in this community.

However, when each spouse belongs to different Christian Church or Catholic rite, it may create a challenge. Joint participation in Mass and the partaking in the Body of Christ are also governed by canon law. The ecclesiastical legislator offers the faithful freedom of choice in respect of partaking in the Eucharist in any Catholic rite. The partaking in holy communion by families whose members are the faithful of different Christian religions is yet another question. The regulations of canon law permit the joint reception of the Body of Christ, however, after meeting some strict conditions. All in all, the ecclesiastical legislator allows spouses to participate in the Eucharist together, which certainly helps alleviate other differences between family members: national, cultural, etc., and work as a community-forming factor.

The Eucharist can therefore be considered as one of the means of integrating the Christian family. It helps them grow and function properly, whether crises, and overcome various hurdles, both spiritual and existential.

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The Eucharist as a Sacrament Integrating the Family (Under Canon Law)

Abstract

The Eucharist is the source and top of the Christian life. This article analyzes the regulations of canon law related to participation in the Eucharist and receiving holy

communion by the family. The author aims to show how such activities affect the unification of the entire family community, spouses, their children, and even grandparents. The first part discusses the Eucharist as the sacrament of unity. The next one discusses the family's partaking in holy communion. The last one shows the role of the sacrament in the life of mixed marriages and marriages between individuals of different Catholic rites.

Keywords: canon law; family; communion; Eucharist; holy communion; integration

**Eucharystia jako sakrament integrujący rodzinę
(w ujęciu prawa kanonicznego)**

Abstrakt

Eucharystia jest źródłem i szczytem życia chrześcijańskiego. Niniejszy artykuł zajmuje się analizą przepisów prawa kanonicznego związanych z uczestnictwem w Eucharystii i przyjmowaniem Komunii św. przez rodzinę. Jego cel to ukazanie, w jaki sposób takie działania wpływają na integrowanie się całej wspólnoty rodzinnej, małżonków, ich dzieci, a nawet dziadków. W części pierwszej omówiono Eucharystię, jako sakrament jedności. Następna dotyczy przystępowania rodziny do Komunii św. Ostatnia ukazuje rolę tego sakramentu w życiu małżeństw mieszanych oraz o różnej przynależności obrządkowej.

Słowa kluczowe: prawo kanoniczne; rodzina; wspólnota; Eucharystia; Komunia św.; integracja

Informacje o Autorze: KS. PROF. DR HAB. ZBIGNIEW JANCZEWSKI – Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie; adres do korespondencji: ul. Dewajtis 5, 01-815 Warszawa, Polska; e-mail: z.janczewski@onet.eu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7395-2526>