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# CELIAC DISEASE AND EUCHARISTIC COMMUNION

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Celiac disease is an intolerance to gluten which can only be treated by means of a strict gluten-free diet. Since gluten is one of the components of bread made from wheat and hence of eucharistic bread, celiac disease inevitably has an impact on religious practice. By drawing the attention of the clergy to this disease, presenting recent directives and comparing them with the various norms applied in the Roman Catholic Church, this article should help prevent celiac-sufferers from being excluded from sacraments.

## CELIAC DISEASE - INTOLERANCE TO GLUTEN

Celiac sprue or cœliac<sup>1</sup> disease is also known as gluten-sensitive enteropathy. It is difficult to diagnose and often goes unrecognised. It cannot really be considered a rare disease and moreover there is no doubt that it is under-diagnosed. Its frequency varies from place to place and so numbers are difficult to gauge but it seems to affect around 1 in 300 of the population in France and a similar number in other European countries and North America<sup>2</sup>. It stems from poor absorption of nutrients through the intestine which is often detected in children because of diarrhea and slow growth. Contrary to generally accepted ideas it can also occur in adults; in fact it is possible for it to develop at all ages. Eating certain cereals containing gluten causes this serious illness which destroys the cells of the intestinal lining, potentially leading to

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It could be interesting to read also my article *Maladie alcoolique et eucharistie. Veiller au bonheur de rendre grâce*, in *Prêtres diocésains*, 1395, mai 2002, p. 200-209; cf. HAL-SHS < [http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/10/94/43/PDF/Maladie\\_alcoolique\\_et\\_eucharistie.pdf](http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/10/94/43/PDF/Maladie_alcoolique_et_eucharistie.pdf) >.

<sup>1</sup> From the Greek κοιλιακός meaning someone who is “suffering in the bowels.” See Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexikon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 967. A first description of the disease in Cappadocia in the second century B.C. was taken up in the mid-nineteenth century, but it is only with the development of digestive endoscopy that it has been possible to identify celiac disease precisely.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Richard J. Farrell, Ciarán P. Kelly, “Current Concepts. Celiac Sprue,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 346 (2002) 180-188 or at [www.celiac.com](http://www.celiac.com) and, for France, at [www.maladiecoeliaque.com](http://www.maladiecoeliaque.com) run by the celiac disease study and research group in Paris, GERMC, or at [www.afdiag.com](http://www.afdiag.com) run by the French association of gluten intolerants, and also at [www.fqmc.org](http://www.fqmc.org) run by the Quebec celiac disease foundation...

malignant complications and a risk of intestinal lymphoma.<sup>3</sup> Apart from diarrhea and frailty there are very few typical symptoms, making this a silent not to say deceptive illness with extra-intestinal, neurological, dermatological and other associated manifestations. There is currently no other way of treating celiac disease than a gluten-free diet. In short, celiac disease can only be dealt with by eliminating all gluten from food, meaning that people diagnosed with the illness have to be wary when they eat for the rest of their lives.<sup>4</sup>

The problem actually stems from the fact that gluten contains prolamines - forms of protein that are toxic to sufferers. Gluten serves as the binding substance in dough and is found in a number of the cereals from which bread is made such as wheat. The prolamine found in wheat is a form called  $\alpha$ -gliadin which is found in a very high proportion compared to the overall mass of proteins. Other toxic cereals are rye, which contains secalin, and barley, which contains hordein. In recent studies it has been attempted to show that oats are not toxic. At any rate there is no doubt that rice and maize are safe. And it is for this reason that they form part of various products that are specially made for people with celiac disease, including bread, pasta and desserts. Many products can be made from cereals from which gluten has been extracted, with the binding substance derived from other basic foodstuffs such as rice or maize.

So people with celiac disease can eat bread, but only a special form of bread from which the gluten has been removed. It is easy to imagine the kind of problems that this can cause in people's daily lives - it rules out eating bread and jam like anybody else can, quick sandwich breaks, pizzas, and hamburgers. And, as if that weren't enough, sufferers have to be on a constant lookout for any traces of gluten hidden in other food products such as salad dressing, sauces, diet products containing thickeners, and dried fruit processed using flour to prevent it from sticking together.

There are obvious repercussions for religious practice whenever leavened or unleavened bread is used in rituals. A sociological and psychological study carried out in the United States in the mid-1980s shows that most celiac-sufferers change their approach to religious practices.<sup>5</sup> Some, to their own great disappointment, decide to give up taking communion. Others simulate communion but replace the host with gluten-free bread and give it to someone else. It would seem that celiac-sufferers do not always get the pastoral response they would hope for from the

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<sup>3</sup> It is because of this form of cancer that gastro-enterologists have taken a special interest in the disease but medical experts have also detected links between celiac and psychological disorders ranging from depression to autism.

<sup>4</sup> Even infinitely small doses may be toxic. Hence the need to ensure that the excipients in any medicines prescribed do not contain gluten. Doctors have observed intolerance levels as low as 0.1g of gluten per day.

<sup>5</sup> Annette C. Bentley, "A Survey of Celiac-Sprue Patients: Effect of Dietary Restrictions on Religious Practices," *The Journal of General Psychology* 115 (1988) 7-14.

religious authorities, that they are largely left to their own devices and that the only satisfactory solution is for them to use special, gluten-free bread.

### COMMUNION UNDER THE FORM OF BREAD OR WINE

Within the Catholic Church the question has been raised as to whether it is acceptable to use a specially-made gluten-free form of eucharistic bread. The debate began in the 1970s when a whole barrage of questions came out of Ireland and Great Britain where numbers of celiac-sufferers are particularly high.<sup>6</sup> When bread does not contain gluten, the practical consequence is that the bread-making process depends on the introduction of a substance other than wheat. And wheat - which contains the gluten and hence the  $\alpha$ -gliadin which is toxic to celiac-sufferers - is still the only substance which is authorised by the Catholic Church to make eucharistic bread. Canon 924, §2 of the Code of Canon Law, which reproduces the terms of canon 815, §1 of the 1917 code,<sup>7</sup> states that: “The bread must be made of wheat alone and recently so that there is no danger of corruption.” The fact that the bread must be wheaten only (*mere triticeus*) makes it quite clear that no other ingredient can be added.<sup>8</sup>

#### Questions and Answers in the Early 1980s

This canon law provision based on a five-century-old tradition explains the negative reply that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith gave twenty years ago<sup>9</sup> to the question: May the local ordinary (diocesan bishop, vicar general, episcopal vicar) allow the priest to consecrate special gluten-free hosts for the faithful suffering from celiac disease? This reply, which was approved by the pope, was entirely logical. If eucharistic bread has to be made from pure wheat, bread from which gluten has been removed and hence cannot be made without adding some other form of agglutinate cannot be authorized.

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<sup>6</sup> Sources show that the rates are 1 in 125 in Ireland and 1 in 80 in Great Britain. On the web at [www.celiac.com/misc.html](http://www.celiac.com/misc.html) we learn that Msgr. Derek Worlock, Archbishop of Liverpool, who was diagnosed with celiac disease in 1980, did a great deal to advance the cause of people with gluten intolerance.

<sup>7</sup> The legislation in force is drawn from sources based on the decrees of the Council of Florence in 1439. As other crops and other cereals were discovered, the question of the eucharistic matter came up again and again. The doctrinal issues could not be overlooked. Among recent discussions on the subject see for example René Jaouen's *L'Eucharistie du mil. Langages d'un peuple, expressions de la foi* (Paris: Karthala, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Shortly before the adoption of the Code of Canon Law this was pointed out by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in its instruction *Inaestimabile donum* of April 3, 1980, n° 8.

<sup>9</sup> Sacra Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei, “Responsa ad proposita dubia,” October 29, 1982: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 74 (1982) 1298-1299. Question 2) on p. 1298 reads “D. 2) Utrum Ordinarius loci permittere possit, ut pro supradictis fidelibus sacerdos speciales hostias, quibus glutinum ablatum est, consecret. R. *Negative*”.

Logic also dictated the affirmative reply to the first question that was put,<sup>10</sup> namely: May the local ordinary allow communion to be taken in the sole form of wine for faithful suffering from celiac disease whose condition requires that they avoid the gluten contained in wheat flour and hence must refrain from eating eucharistic bread? If there is gluten in the host and the patient must avoid gluten, then he (she) must not receive communion under the form of wheat bread containing gluten. But since wine does not contain gluten, communion may, with the consent of the local ordinary, be received in this form alone. This position is part of church tradition. Even if the Catholic faithful usually receive communion under the form of eucharistic bread alone, the Church also allows communion to be received under the sole form of wine when circumstances require for a sick or dying person who cannot eat solids. Immediately after the Second Vatican Council, the Sacred Congregation of Rites issued the instruction *Eucharisticum mysterium* in which it confirmed that sick or elderly people who cannot come to Church may receive communion under the form of wine alone.<sup>11</sup> This rule was taken up in the code which currently applies in the Western or Latin Church. Contrary to canon 852 of the Pio-Benedictine Code, canon 925 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law states that “Holy Communion is to be given under the form of bread alone or under both kinds in accord with the norm of the liturgical laws or even under the form of wine alone in case of necessity”.

In itself, the question seemed to have been resolved in 1982. There is no cause to receive communion under the form of hosts containing gluten but communion may be received under the form of wine. However, hosts from which the gluten has been removed are not authorized because, as a result of various additions, they are no longer made of pure wheat.

### *Cardinal Ratzinger’s Letter to the Presidents of the Conferences of Bishops*

The subject was taken up again in 1995 in a letter from Cardinal Ratzinger, the same prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to all the Presidents of the Conferences of Bishops.<sup>12</sup> There was still the problem of what to do about priests suffering from celiac disease; it was not a satisfactory solution for the celebrant to receive communion under the form of wine alone. Moreover some faithful felt stigmatized by the exception that was made for them when receiving communion

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<sup>10</sup> “D. 1) Utrum Ordinarius loci permittere possit communionem sub sola specie vini illis fidelibus, qui morbo sic dicto celiachia laborant, cuius ratio curandi exigit, ut a glutine, praesenti in farina frumenti ac proinde in pane eucharistico, abstineant. R. *Affirmative.*” *ibid.*, 1298.

<sup>11</sup> *Eucharisticum mysterium*, May 25, 1967, n° 40 allowing the Communion to be given in case of need and in the judgement of the bishop, under the form of wine alone to those who are unable to receive it under the form of bread.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the Presidents of the Conferences of Bishops, Prot. N. 89/78 of June 19, 1995. Italian text published in *Notitiae* 31 (1995) 608-610, in English in *Newsletter* 103 (1995) p. 7-8 and on the Internet at [www.celiac.com/misc.html](http://www.celiac.com/misc.html).

from the chalice and parents objected to their children receiving communion under the form of wine. In due course hosts were successfully made with very low levels of gluten in them. Gradually, on a case-by-case basis, permission was given for certain priests and then sick lay persons to use these hosts. It has now become quite easy to get hold of them. Indeed, some Internet support sites have no qualms about simply mentioning places where special hosts are sold.<sup>13</sup>

Cardinal Ratzinger's letter sets down guidelines and is aimed at standardizing practice.<sup>14</sup> It deals on the one hand with the authorization to use low-gluten bread and on the other with permission to use fresh grape juice in the event of intolerance to alcohol. The first part of the letter relates both to priests and to the laity while the second deals primarily with the issue from the angle of the priest celebrating Mass,<sup>15</sup> since lay persons requesting the permission to take communion under the form of grape juice must apply to the Holy See. The third part lists a series of "common norms" covering both eventualities.

What does this text imply for the day-to-day practice of celiac-sufferers? Gluten-free hosts<sup>16</sup> are not authorised whereas those that contain enough gluten to obtain the confection of bread without adding any other materials are. Permission to use this form of bread may be granted by ordinaries on presentation of a medical certificate. The directive applies both to priests and to lay persons and puts the ordinary under a duty to check whether the material being used complies with the established rules. According to the "common norms" the authorization applies for the duration of the circumstances which gave rise to the request. Since celiac disease can only be stabilized by a strict gluten-free diet, these circumstances can be considered to last for *life*.

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<sup>13</sup> This is the case with the German association, *Deutsche Zöliakie Gesellschaft*, at [www.dzg-online.de](http://www.dzg-online.de) presenting two types of hosts by *Hammermühle Diät GmbH* or by *Hoch GmbH*. The Italian Association of celiac-sufferers at [www.celiachia.it](http://www.celiachia.it) recommends the *Hoch GmbH* hosts containing 0,0374 mg of gluten and which have been approved by the Italian Conference of Bishops in a text issued on October 18, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Several commentaries have been published on the letter, the first of which appeared along with the text in the official organ of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments: Antonio Miralles, "Il pane e il vino per l'Eucaristia: sulla recente lettera della congregazione per la dottrina della fede," *Notitiae* 31 (1995) 616-626; Gordon F. Read, "The Use of Low-Gluten or Gluten-Free Bread and of Mustum instead of Wine for the Eucharist," *Newsletter* 103 (1995) 9-13; Giuseppe Terraneo, "La santa comunione per i fedeli affetti da celiachia", *Quaderni di diritto ecclesiale* 12 (1999) 123-128 and the outstanding article by Wanda Zemler-Cizewski, "The Eucharist and the Consequences of Celiac Disease. A Question of Access to Holy Communion," *Worship* 74 (2000) 237-247.

<sup>15</sup> Once more the question of eucharistic bread was addressed at the same time as that of priests suffering from alcoholism or other illnesses preventing them from consuming alcohol even in the smallest quantities.

<sup>16</sup> The Latin expression "quibus glutinum ablatum est," which has been retained in the official English translation, literally means hosts from which gluten has been extracted and hence corresponds to the more succinct term "gluten-free".

In practice, the reaction to this document varied immensely. In some regions it aroused very little interest and was quickly forgotten. Some conferences of bishops, particularly that of Chile, recommended receiving communion under the sole form of wine. In other countries, such as the United Kingdom, hosts are made which contain only the slightest trace of gluten and it is claimed that these are unlikely to have any affect on celiac-sufferers. Moreover, since there is a high proportion of sufferers in Great Britain, the conference of bishops has approved a standard certificate with which sufferers are allowed to present themselves at the Eucharist with a special host.<sup>17</sup> There is no doubt that a certificate drawn up by the Church authorities on presentation of a medical certificate must make things much easier when the sufferer is not known in the parish. At any rate simplified access to the sacraments and a pastoral approach to the problem are perceived as factors which alleviate stress and help sufferers in their efforts to stabilize their condition. However, among the objections to Cardinal Ratzinger's letter, there is the serious problem of the medical consequences of using hosts which contain even the slightest trace of gluten. Knowing the dangers of even the minutest amounts of gluten, it is unacceptable to advise a celiac-sufferer to use hosts in which there is enough gluten to obtain the confection of bread. In view of the disastrous consequences of reintroducing gluten into the diet of celiac-sufferers, it is unthinkable for us not to reconsider the possibility of exceptionally consecrating some form of gluten-free bread. Faced with this acknowledged threat, it is not worthy of the Catholic Church to take refuge in the idea that the doctrinal questions in this area have now been decided and authorize the use of low-gluten hosts.

One of the "common norms" states that scandal is to be avoided. This is a general principle that governs all pastoral activities. In practice, it is a known fact that an effective way of avoiding scandal is to keep the community informed. If the faithful are aware that the host is toxic for people suffering from celiac disease, they will be less shocked when people take communion under the form of wine alone. If it really is unthinkable to use cereals other than wheat and make real gluten-free hosts, the Church has no other solution than to take all the necessary measures to facilitate access to eucharistic communion under the form of wine alone. Through a systematic campaign of information, in parish magazines for example, obstacles and scandals will be avoided and celiac-sufferers will have no cause to feel excluded from the community. In the worst-case scenario, when communion can be taken neither under the form of bread nor under the form of wine, the Church's communication tools can be used to spread understanding that even people who cannot take eucharistic communion still form part of the community and that they are not alone in this situation.

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<sup>17</sup> See the interesting website at [www.celiac.com](http://www.celiac.com) which includes links to information on the Catholic Church on its comprehensive page entitled "Miscellaneous information."

Another of the “common norms” would warrant a lengthy discussion but, since it only affects a few people, the comments here will be brief. The directive states that persons suffering from celiac disease may not be admitted to Holy Orders. Those who claim that this is in accordance with the universal laws of the Church refer to canon 1029 or canon 1051 which merely state that the physical and psychological qualities of candidates for ordination must be taken into account. But, however much deference we must show towards norms issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, it cannot be said that celiac disease constitutes an impediment barring them from the reception of orders. The Code of Canon Law clearly and conclusively sets out these impediments. Canon 1040 expressly states that: “the only impediments that can be contracted are contained in the following canons,” namely canons 1041 to 1049. Neither canon 1041, which comprises six sub-paragraphs describing persons who are irregular for the reception of orders, nor canon 1042, which describes those who are simply impeded, can possibly be interpreted to include the specific physical or psychological condition of a person suffering from celiac disease. One can of course understand the difficulties that such candidates would encounter but there is nothing to distinguish them from those encountered by priests or bishops diagnosed many years after their ordination. Attempting to bar access to Holy Orders to persons suffering from celiac disease fails to live up to the standards of a Church which, sometimes in spite of enormous difficulties, has always tried to seek out favourable solutions for sick or disabled persons. We can be glad therefore that Cardinal Ratzinger’s letter was not approved by the Supreme Pontiff and that, for this very reason, it cannot go against the established universal law.<sup>18</sup>

While the ideas on the subject are being fleshed out to take account of the latest medical research data, it is important to see to it that celiac-sufferers are not obliged to consume gluten and hence to rule out the use of hosts containing a so-called minimum amount of gluten since this minimum alone poses a threat. The main focus should be communication. Since, on the one hand, the solution does not lie in authorizing special hosts which do after all contain gluten and, on the other, the Roman Catholic Church does not deem it possible to authorize any other material for eucharistic bread, the way forward seems to be communion under the form of wine alone, which is fully authorised by universal law. In day-to-day practice, it will always be necessary for the Church to explain the circumstances of these persons bound by life-long dietary restrictions. If communion with eucharistic bread cannot be permitted, then proper communication is undoubtedly the key to enabling communion with the Church and hence with the Body of Christ.

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<sup>18</sup> For a further consideration of this canon law question readers may wish to consult James H. Provost, “Approval of Curial Documents **in forma specifica**,” *The Jurist* 58 (1998) 213-225.