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This is my blood, shed for a few: Phoenix faces living on bread alone

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

The last time I wrote about Bishop Thomas Olmsted of Phoenix, he had just evicted the body of Christ from the chapel of St. Joseph's Hospital.

Now, it seems, Olmsted is targeting his blood.

Late last week, the bishop announced that he would be placing serious restrictions on the distribution of the Eucharist under the form of wine. His decision isn't so much about germs, but rather the new GIRM (General Instruction of the Roman Missal), which is to be implemented at the start of the new liturgical year on the first Sunday of Advent.

Olmsted clarified his reasons in a handy FAQ posted on the diocesan Web site (<http://diocesephoenix.org/>). He is taking advantage of a new proviso that gives bishops the power to establish additional norms regarding the distribution of communion under both forms. If Olmsted has his way, the sacramental wine may only be offered at public Masses during the Feast of Corpus Christi.

He offers five reasons for limiting the practice of offering wine. Two of his reasons are particularly noteworthy.

Olmsted's first motivation in offering bread alone is to "protect the Sacred Species from profanation (careless treatment, spillage, swilling, etc.)."

Can a heart that truly desires to drink from the cup or offer the cup to the community really ever profane Christ's blood? Given all of the ways that we betray God on a daily basis, with wars, greed,

environmental destruction and spiritual violence, do we not think that God is strong enough to handle the clumsiness or eagerness of those who wish to give and receive the sacramental wine?

So many in church leadership easily forget that Jesus offered his final meal in the same way that he took most of his meals: under the most profane of circumstances. Every aspect of his ministry demonstrated that holiness was revealed in touching diseased bodies, or passing out bread and fish to hungry masses, or dining with society's most unsavory characters.

Given the nature of Jesus' ministry, what could harm the blood of Christ more than withholding it from God's people?

Jesus seems to have little to do with any of Olmsted's new norms. When the FAQ asks whether the new norms fail to honor Christ's command to "take and drink," the bishop explains that because of the church's Eucharistic faith, it "is not bound [by Christ's command] to offer both forms to the faithful."

That Eucharistic faith, Olmsted writes, is expressed in the documents of the Council of Trent, which insisted that Jesus "gave the Church the freedom and authority to determine how the Church administers the two forms." I must have missed that moment in the Gospels.

Olmsted's real agenda is to make a clear distinction between the sanctity of the clergy's hands and the laity's unconsecrated, and therefore potentially defiling, hands. The multitude of lay hands, it seems, is starting to make him feel uncomfortably outnumbered:

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"In normal circumstances, only priests and deacons are to distribute Holy Communion; when both forms of Communion are used frequently, "extraordinary" ministers of Holy Communion are disproportionately multiplied."

The "excessive use" of extraordinary ministers is "obscuring the role of the priest and the deacon." For Olmsted, this in itself constitutes a good reason for limiting the distribution of the wine.

The bishop's decision is another episode in a continually unfolding movement to ensure that priests feel like they are an elite caste, and to communicate to the laity that only ordained men are worthy to touch holy things.

The new norms also offer a good excuse to get women farther away from altar, the tabernacle, the chalices and the ciboria. Remember, this is the same bishop who, last month, remained silent as his rector banned altar girls from serving in the Phoenix cathedral.

Are these diocesan leaders afraid that by watching women function around the sacrament, the laity might let their imaginations run wildly into the world of women ordination? With more than 65 percent of U.S. Catholics supporting women priests, it's a little late to turn off that channel.

Some of the lay people who support the bishop's decision have remarked that this new rule will allow them to "look forward" to the special days that they can receive the Eucharist under the form of wine. This is the perfect expression of the lay-clergy power dynamic that Olmsted seeks to institute: a laity that will feel blessed on the days that the bishop decides they, too, can share the drink to which he is always entitled.

If Olmsted really wanted to imitate Christ in the distribution of the Eucharist, he would feed the community first and take whatever is left last.

In a great twist of irony, Olmsted argues that his move is an attempt at greater inclusiveness. "The norms invite us as U.S. Catholics to a more global and inclusive perspective, especially with those poor countries that cannot afford large amounts of wine for frequent usage." It's remarkable how the hierarchy picks and chooses when inclusivity is of value to the church.

What Olmsted doesn't seem to realize is that it is precisely the cup that is the greatest Christian symbol of unity in suffering.

In the Gospel, Jesus asks James and John (and, by implication, all of us), "Can you drink the cup that I will drink?"

Reflecting on this line, Margaret Farley has written that the cup represents not only Jesus' suffering, but, because Jesus took on all of our afflictions, the cup truly symbolizes the suffering of all persons. She writes,

"This cup signifies the relationship between God and Jesus Christ; and -- in Jesus -- the relationship between God and all human persons; and finally the relationships among human persons, held in the embrace of God. The meaning of the cup is that a relationship holds -- and this relationship makes it possible for other relationships to hold, no matter what the forces of evil try to do to break them."

If any success story emerges out of the bishop's new decree, it will be that he widened the growing chasms between the laity and the ordained and, even more tragically, between the laity and the sacraments.

As Olmsted concludes his argument, he reminds readers that we can receive Christ wholly in bread alone because Jesus' body and blood cannot be separated. "Jesus is not re-crucified." His body and blood are not ripped apart once again.

While this is true of the bread and wine placed on the altar, the ripping apart of the body of Christ gathered around the altar only seems to continue.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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