

# ETHICS & MEDICS

A Commentary of The National Catholic Bioethics Center on Health Care and the Life Sciences

## CELIAC DISEASE AND HOLY COMMUNION

Although celiac disease has been more accurately diagnosed during the last ten years, many people still ask, "What is that?" Its symptoms were observed and described as early as the second century; however, its causative factors were not discovered until the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I hope to inform as many people as possible, especially priests and pastoral care workers, about the damaging spiritual and physical effects of celiac disease and provide resources and pastoral recommendations for caring for individuals who are unable to receive the Holy Eucharist in the sacred Host because they are suffering from celiac disease.

Celiac disease is often referred to as celiac sprue or, in technical language, gluten-sensitive enteropathy. It was originally thought that only children contracted this disease, but studies show that it is a common genetic disorder affecting people of all ages throughout the world. The *World Journal of Gastroenterology* recently stated that celiac disease "now affects about one in 100 people in Europe and North America."<sup>2</sup> According to the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse, a service of the National Institutes of Health, "Among people who have a first-degree relative—a parent, sibling, or child—diagnosed with celiac disease, as many as 1 in 22 people may have the disease."<sup>3</sup>

There are many symptoms common to the disease, including but not limited to mild to severe abdominal pain, vitamin deficiency, and fatigue. "Celiac disease can be very serious," the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse notes. "It often causes long-lasting digestive problems and keeps your body from getting all the nutrition it needs. Over time, celiac disease can cause anemia, infertility, weak and brittle bones, an itchy skin rash, and other health problems."<sup>4</sup> In explaining the mechanism of celiac disease, the Celiac Sprue Association states, "In people with [celiac disease], eating certain types of grain-based products sets off an immune response that causes damage to the small intestine. This, in turn, interferes with the small intestine's ability to absorb nutrients found in food, leading to malnutrition and a variety of other complications. The offending amino acid sequences are collectively called 'gluten' and are found in wheat, barley,

rye, and to a lesser extent, oats."<sup>5</sup> The only way to manage celiac disease is to remove as much gluten as possible from one's daily regimen in life.

### Gluten Altar Bread

The Holy Eucharist, one of the seven sacraments of the Church, is the "source and summit" of the Catholic Faith.<sup>6</sup> The Holy Eucharist contains the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ. Catholics celebrate this belief in the Holy Eucharist by attending Mass each Sunday, a holy day of obligation. Catholics who are in the state of grace are bound to receive the Holy Eucharist at least once a year. Canon law states that this precept is not binding for those unable to receive because of a medical condition or illness; nonetheless, it is unusual and a great sacrifice for Catholics not to receive the Eucharist, especially for those who suffer from celiac disease.

St. Thomas Aquinas described clearly what is valid matter for the Eucharist: "Now among other breads wheaten bread is more commonly used by men; since other breads seem to be employed when this fails. And consequently Christ is believed to have instituted this sacrament under this species of bread. Moreover this bread strengthens man, and so it denotes more suitably the effect of this sacrament. Consequently, the proper matter for this sacrament is wheaten bread."<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, canon law specifies the use of wheat bread, stating that the Eucharistic species must include unleavened wheat.<sup>8</sup> We can see the particular danger that celiac disease poses to the physical life and, maybe more importantly, to the spiritual health of a Catholic because of the presence of wheat gluten in the Holy Eucharist.

Imagine how difficult and spiritually challenging it is for faithful Catholics who desire to receive Holy Communion weekly or even daily but are unable to ingest wheat bread because of the grave physical harm it will cause them. The Church, in her loving wisdom

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and concern for the welfare of her faithful, has provided spiritual remedies for those who find themselves in situations of this kind; for example, a local ordinary being able to grant a priest affected by alcoholism permission to use mustum, a type of grape juice, for the celebration of the Eucharist. Similarly, the Church has issued several documents that offer the clergy uniform and clear direction concerning celiac disease and wheat allergies and the reception of Holy Communion<sup>9</sup> and in 1995, specifically addressed the use of low-gluten hosts. In a circular letter to all presidents of the episcopal conferences, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) specified the conditions for validity of matter of low-gluten altar bread: "1. Special hosts '*quibus glutinum ablatum est*' [that are gluten-free] are invalid matter for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. 2. Low-gluten hosts are valid matter, provided that they contain the amount of gluten sufficient to obtain the confection of bread, that there is no addition of foreign materials and that the procedure for making such hosts is not such as to alter the nature of the substance of the bread."<sup>10</sup>

In July 2003, the CDF issued another circular letter to address this issue, acknowledging the increasing medical and spiritual dilemma of the faithful: "The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has been for many years studying how to resolve the difficulties that some of the faithful encounter in receiving Holy Communion when for various serious reasons they are unable to consume normal bread or wine."<sup>11</sup> The letter reiterated the conditions for use of low-gluten altar breads: "1. Hosts that are *completely* gluten-free are invalid matter for the celebration of the Eucharist. 2. Low-gluten hosts (*partially* gluten-free) are valid matter, provided they contain a sufficient amount of gluten to obtain the confection of bread without the addition of foreign materials and without the use of procedures that would alter the nature of bread" (original emphases).

Under a section of the letter titled "Communion under one species or with a minimal amount of wine," the CDF stated,

1. A layperson affected by celiac disease, who is not able to receive Communion under the species of bread, including low-gluten hosts, may receive Communion under the species of wine only.
2. A priest unable to receive Communion under the species of bread, including low-gluten hosts, when taking part in a concelebration, may with the permission of the Ordinary receive Communion under the species of wine only.

Last, some common norms were issued for the use of low-gluten hosts for the Eucharist, especially in those situations where the priest may suffer from celiac disease:

1. The Ordinary is competent to give permission for an individual priest or layperson to use low-gluten hosts or mustum for the celebration of the Eucharist. Permission can be granted habitually, for as long as the situation continues which occasioned the granting of permission. . . . 3. A priest unable to receive Communion

under the species of bread, including low-gluten hosts, may not celebrate the Eucharist individually, nor may he preside at a concelebration. . . . 5. Attention should be paid to medical advances in the area of celiac disease . . . and encouragement given to the production of hosts with a minimal amount of gluten. . . . 6. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith enjoys competence over the doctrinal aspects of this question, while disciplinary matters are the competence of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. 7. Concerned Episcopal Conferences shall report to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, at the time of their *ad Limina* visit, regarding the application of these norms as well as any new developments in this area.

In the above statements, article 3 may seem to contradict the preceding article 2, but it does not. The CDF letter clarifies that a priest who cannot receive both the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist may not be the celebrant of an individual Mass or the main celebrant of a concelebrated Mass. He may, however, celebrate a Mass with the faithful and may participate as a concelebrant in a Mass.

When permission was given by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith to use low-gluten matter for Holy Communion, as long as it contained sufficient matter for bread, the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde, Missouri, developed a true low-gluten host.<sup>12</sup> The total gluten content of this product is 0.01 percent. Its contents are unleavened wheat and water, and it is free of additives, conforming to the requirements set forth in canon law. This low-gluten content is still enough for the bread to be valid matter for the Eucharist, and many people who are gluten-intolerant are able to consume it, or at least some portion of it. However, individuals suffering from celiac disease are strongly advised to consult with their physician before receiving a low-gluten host. Even with this reduced amount of gluten, some individuals are still unable to receive the Body of Christ in the form of the consecrated host.

### Pastoral Solutions

To assist those facing this medical-moral dilemma, pastors should provide approved low-gluten hosts and the precious blood at each Mass so that the Holy Eucharist, a sign of unity, is able to be received by those Catholics who are properly disposed. St. Paul tells us, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

Canon 925 states, "Holy Communion is to be given under the form of bread alone, or under both species according to the norm of the liturgical laws, or even under the form of wine alone in a case of necessity." In a 2002 document addressed to the United States Bishops, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of

the Sacraments stated, "The dogmatic principles which were laid down by the Council of Trent remaining intact, Communion under both kinds may be granted when the bishops think fit, not only to clerics and religious, but also the laity, in cases to be determined by the Holy See." The document goes on to say that "Holy Communion has a more complete form as a sign when it is received under both kinds. For in this manner of reception a fuller sign of the Eucharistic banquet shines forth."<sup>13</sup> How providential it was that Pope John Paul II approved in the United States, through the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the extension of offering the blood of Our Lord in Holy Communion with more regularity. The clarifications in these Church documents, including the CDF's 1995 and 2003 circular letters, have helped those suffering from celiac disease to receive more readily and easily the body and blood of Christ.

When a Catholic with celiac disease comes to a new parish, it is helpful for the individual to present himself to the main celebrant before Mass to explain his condition and to ask if the parish provides low-gluten hosts or offers the Precious Blood. This prevents those suffering from celiac disease from having to bring a low-gluten unconsecrated host with them to Mass to be consecrated or, worse yet, from bringing a totally gluten-free host to a priest and asking him to consecrate it.

A priest should keep a pyx that is used solely for low-gluten hosts. It should be clearly marked and kept in the tabernacle for those bringing Holy Communion to celiac sufferers in a hospital or long-term care facility. It is also necessary to purify one's fingers before distributing the low-gluten hosts to avoid any cross-contamination. Another pastoral solution is to provide the precious blood on a regular basis at each Mass in a chalice separate from the celebrant's chalice, since the celebrant's chalice contains a particle of the sacred host. It is also important to offer the other chalice first to those with celiac disease at communion so that particles of the gluten host do not get introduced into the chalice in any way.

Unfortunately, even a small trace of gluten can have debilitating effects on a person with celiac disease. In instances where no alternative communion options are available, the Church recommends that those with celiac disease make a spiritual communion. Archbishop Dennis Schnurr offers these consoling words: "In cases where a person cannot ingest the smallest amount of wheat or alcohol, I have reminded them of the great consolation that St. Thérèse of Lisieux experienced in spiritual communion. . . . In the terminal stages of her illness, she was unable to ingest any nutrition, including the Holy Eucharist. Still, she expressed consolation, in that she knew that her desire alone was enough to bring Jesus to her."<sup>14</sup>

### Publicizing Availability

With an increasing number of people being diagnosed with and suffering from celiac disease, it is essential for the Church to respond with pastoral care and love. Many

Catholics do not know that the Catholic Church provides low-gluten hosts, which many can receive without difficulty or severe side effects. However, there are still those of God's faithful who cannot receive the Eucharistic presence of Our Lord in His sacred body. How regrettable it is when Catholics choose not to come to Mass or not to receive Holy Communion because they believe celiac disease leaves them very few options.

Parishes that offer these pastoral solutions should regularly mention the availability in the parish bulletin and on their parish Web site. This notice could also be made available on a diocesan Web site so that sufferers of celiac disease can easily find the options available to them. The Church must continue to reach out and provide these necessary and essential accommodations to those suffering the harmful spiritual and physical effects of celiac disease.

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<sup>1</sup> Celiac Sprue Association, "History of Celiac Disease," 2012, [http://www.csaceliacs.info/history\\_of\\_celiac\\_disease.jsp](http://www.csaceliacs.info/history_of_celiac_disease.jsp).

<sup>2</sup> Hugh J. Freeman et al., "Recent Advances in Celiac Disease," *World Journal of Gastroenterology* 17.18 (2011): 2259–2271.

<sup>3</sup> National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC), "Celiac Disease," January 27, 2012, <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/celiac/#2>.

<sup>4</sup> NDDIC, "What I Need to Know about Celiac Disease: Is Celiac Disease Serious?" May 10, 2012, [http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/celiac\\_ez/#serious](http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/celiac_ez/#serious).

<sup>5</sup> Celiac Sprue Association, "What Is Celiac Disease?" 2012, [http://www.csaceliacs.info/what\\_is\\_celiac\\_disease.jsp](http://www.csaceliacs.info/what_is_celiac_disease.jsp).

<sup>6</sup> Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), n. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 74, a. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition*, new English translation (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1999), 924 §2.

<sup>9</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), "Rescriptum," December 15, 1980, in *Leges Ecclesiae* 6.4819 (1980): 8095–8096; "De celebrantis communione," October 29, 1982, in *AAS* 74 (1982): 1298–1299; and "Circular Letter to All Presidents of Episcopal Conferences concerning the Use of Low-Gluten Altar Breads and Mustum as Matter for the Celebration of the Eucharist" (June 19, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> CDF, 1995 circular letter.

<sup>11</sup> CDF, "Circular Letter to All Presidents of Episcopal Conferences concerning the Use of Low-Gluten Altar Breads and Mustum as Matter for the Celebration of the Eucharist" (July 24, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, "Low Gluten Altar Breads," [www.altarbreadsbpa.com/lowgluten.php](http://www.altarbreadsbpa.com/lowgluten.php).

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion," indult of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, March 28, 2002, part 1, nn.19 and 20, <http://old.usccb.org/romanmissal/girm-norms-en.shtml>.

<sup>14</sup> Annamarie Adkins, "When Wheat Won't Work," *National Catholic Reporter* 85.17 (April 26–May 2, 2009), 1–12.



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VOLUME 37, NUMBER 11

NOVEMBER 2012

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## REFLECTIONS ON NOVEMBER 6TH

The Catholic Church finds itself in peril as the November election approaches. The government of the United States, through its legislative and executive branches, has asserted that it has the authority to contravene the religious convictions of its citizens, including, of course, Catholics. Under the Affordable Care Act, religious believers are now obliged to provide insurance coverage for practices that they consider immoral.

The government of the United States has always respected the rights of conscience, but that long-standing and respected principle is no longer being honored. For the first time in our nation's history, the federal government has demanded that religious believers, religious employers, and religious organizations submit to a secular view of citizenship that stands in direct conflict with the demands of conscience. The U.S. Congress and the administration have decided that religiously affiliated institutions must conform to a government standard or pay fines of \$100 per person per day, which are clearly designed to drive them out of business.

The rule appears to be the following: If you, the religious citizens of the United States, want to serve your community through education, charitable work, and health care, then you must do so on terms set by those who do not share your faith. If a majority of those whom you serve disagree with your moral convictions, then you must either submit to their will and abandon those convictions or cease to carry out your work.

No one should suppose that the current infringement will be the end of the matter. The Health and Human Services mandate is but a first step in the process of transforming our private religious institutions into those that conform to secular standards. Yes, there will be temporary concessions from time to time as required by the political exigencies of the day, but once the general pattern of government oversight of our institutions has been fixed in law, we can expect that further "adjustments" will be necessary in order to ensure that all difference between our charitable work and that of secular agents disappears.

As much as Catholics, above all others, had hoped for a reformation of our health care system that would be of benefit to all, especially the most vulnerable, we have been made painfully aware that the current situation subjects our institutions to political coercion. Those who work in our nation's hospitals have lost the freedom to follow their own moral convictions and must now obey government edicts that are sure to undergo further unwholesome developments over time.

Those who favor unlimited access to contraceptives, sterilization, and abortion do not want people of conscience working with them in health care. As part of the NCBC's consultation service, I regularly receive calls from young men and women who are suffering discouragement at the hands of those who want to eliminate the right of conscience from the health care profession. The influence of our moral outlook has already been largely diminished in the nation's secular hospitals. With the Affordable Care Act, there is now a new and very effective tool for diminishing that influence within our own institutions.

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