

FIRST HOLY COMMUNION

Mary looked forward to receiving her First Holy Communion in the summer of 1993. In early spring Father, Mother and Mary herself wrote letters to their Catholic bishop asking him to allow Father (an Anglican) to join Mary and her Mother in receiving communion on that joyful family occasion. They received a handwritten reply.

The bishop's reply

"Please excuse me for writing one letter in answer to three such nice letters. I understand how you feel and I would like to agree to your request but I am sorry that I am not able to do so. You will realise that I do not make the rules about receiving Holy Communion.

"In our view to receive Holy Communion is to express full acceptance of the faith of our church and full belonging. So we see the sharing of Holy Communion as the celebration of full unity. This is the goal for which we are working and praying.

"I know this will be a great disappointment to you all. You will know that a Christian who is not a Roman Catholic can come up at communion time and receive a blessing. In this way you will be spiritually in communion with Our Lord Jesus Christ and each other. I hope you will feel able to accept this practice and so enhance Mary's happiness on her First Communion Day."

This reply was indeed a great disappointment. After much thought and prayer Mother wrote again to the Bishop.

Mother's second letter

"You have no doubt gathered from the letter my husband sent you that he shares the Catholic eucharistic faith. He has been receiving a blessing at the altar rails for about twelve years now. (We have been married for twenty years.) We understand that the Second Vatican Council did not rule out sacramental sharing, stating in the *Decree on Ecumenism* that two principles are involved in this while Christians are not yet fully united in one Church. It should be a sign of the unity of the Church and it should provide a sharing in the means of grace, so that while the first principle generally rules out sharing communion, the second principle sometimes commends it, and what is to be done in concrete cases depends on the local bishop. You do have all the episcopal powers necessary to make exceptions to the normal practice.

"We read in Canon Law that there are various conditions under which a bishop may admit other Christians to communion. There must be a serious need, there must be a spontaneous request, the Christian who asks must be unable to go to a minister of his or her own community, and must share the Catholic eucharistic faith.

"We believe that our case fits the conditions laid down. For the sake of our interchurch marriage we feel a great and urgent need to express our unity as one family in Christ on

Mary's First Holy Communion Day. We are fully aware of the facts why we are unable to share Communion together but we feel very strongly that this is a special needs case. We are a 'grave and pressing need'.

"We ask and pray that you reconsider our request as it is of the greatest importance to all concerned.... We know how difficult your position can be and pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to bless you...."

The reply was a brief typed note.

The bishop's second reply

"Thank you for your letter. In referring to the conditions for admission to Holy Communion you have expressed my difficulty, namely that a Christian who asks to be admitted to Holy Communion in our church must not have access to a Minister of his or her own church. This is a condition that is particularly difficult to fulfil in this country since other churches are easy to reach.

"I am sorry to disappoint you again, but the conditions are clearly laid down."

Another problem

Meanwhile a problem had come up at local level. The parish priest had at first agreed that Mary was ready for her First Communion, and that her mother (a trained RE teacher) could prepare her. Mother decided to use the "Here I Am" syllabus, because it is child-centred and uses the child's own religious and everyday experiences. Later the parish priest suggested that "Here I Am" was not really good enough, and he could openly allow Mary to make her First Communion if her parents promised to bring her to Mass every week. This was a problem, since on alternate Sundays the family worships with the local Anglican church.

Letters and discussions continued. In the end Mary made her First Communion elsewhere - a joyful celebration for all concerned, in spite of the agony beforehand.

But then came the question of Mary continuing to receive communion in her Catholic parish. Mother wrote again to the bishop. It was a very long letter; we give extracts below.

Mother's third letter

"The point about my husband receiving with me, is that we need to receive together as one family, so the availability of Anglican ministers is of little use.

"We do have another interchurch problem. Our parish priest is aware of the fact that we are a unified domestic church and support both churches on alternate Sundays. We made this decision twenty years ago before we were married. It was the personal view of the late Archbishop Beck that the interchurch child should be brought up in a loving and religious environment according to the dictates of the parents' consciences taking into regard all the aspects of a truly Christian marriage. He welcomed our marriage; it was 'the bright light of complete ecumenism'. He gave us full permission for my husband to receive Holy

Communion at our nuptial Mass - prayers and the blessing being given by my father-in-law [an Anglican priest].

"We fully realise the age, range of experience and lack of knowledge on current ecumenical matters of our parish priest. We understand that he thinks he is doing the best and it is what his conscience dictates. He told us that he would give Mary her First Communion only on condition that she must attend a Catholic Mass every Sunday. The Communion syllabus he was using stated this and she would be very confused if she didn't attend Mass every Sunday. He was also concerned about the religious facts that Mary might be taught at the Anglican church. (We can assure you that the instruction runs parallel to the RC Sunday School.) This would add to her confusion, he insisted. We pointed out that Mary enjoys the fellowship and love of both churches.

"Unfortunately he stated that Mary attending the Anglican church didn't have any real spiritual value, especially when it came to the Eucharist. The Church of England was 'going through the motions' and wasn't a proper Church at all as there was no direct Apostolic Succession, so the Holy Spirit couldn't work. This contradicts the 1993 *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* which states (n.107) 'Catholics ought to show a sincere respect for the liturgical and sacramental discipline of other Churches.' Our priest finished by saying that the Roman Catholic Church is the only way to salvation, no other way really counts. The 1993 *Directory* clearly states (n.104 a,b) 'The Churches not in full communion with the Catholic Church have by no means been deprived of significance and value in the mystery of salvation, for the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as a means of salvation.' He left us to think the matter over; we must promise to send Mary to Mass or no communion.

"We wrote back within 48 hours stating we were unable to make this promise and give a cast-iron guarantee that Mary attend Mass every Sunday as we are an interchurch family. We earnestly prayed about this painful situation. We consulted our clergy friends who offered to put an end to Mary's spiritual suffering by giving her First Communion earlier this month. A fortnight ago we told our parish priest that Mary had made her First Communion and asked him if he would give her communion. He was very unsure and told us it wasn't up to him but up to you. He would come round and give us his verdict. We are patiently awaiting his visit.

"We have brought up Mary in a good, Catholic, and ecumenical atmosphere, to the best of our ability and we do our utmost to be supportive and informative parents giving her an enriched and positive Christian upbringing. The demands our parish priest makes on us he doesn't impose on the average Catholic family. We feel it would be too much of a strain on Mary to see other children receiving their First Communion and not be allowed to communicate herself.

"We are praying for our parish priest and you, of course, are always remembered in our prayers, especially by our ecumenical prayer group..."

The bishop replied quickly, as the First Communion Mass would soon be taking place. He said that he had spoken to the parish priest on the telephone.

The bishop's third reply

"I understand that Mary has already made her First Communion before the rest of the children..."

"I believe that you receive Anglican communion on occasion and this is against our eucharistic discipline, which sees the reception of Holy Communion as an indication of full acceptance and full belonging. As you know we relate Holy Communion to being in full communion ecclesiastically. There is imperfect communion between our Churches as you mentioned in your letter.

"It is a difficult situation and I know you want to do what is right and what is best for Mary. If your parish priest agrees, I think Mary could go to Communion with the others and you could continue your discussions with him about the future."

Mother telephoned the parish priest who came round to talk. The parents asked if he had come to a decision. He seemed unhappy that the bishop had left the decision to him. There was long discussion about the Anglican Church and about Father's eucharistic faith. Finally he spoke of the "compassion that Christ had on the cross to forgive our sins" and "family commitment" and agreed that Mary should receive communion - a decision which left the parents "very joyful but totally exhausted". Mary continues to receive communion in the Catholic parish, and a special house mass was celebrated by a priest friend for godparents and others who could not get to Mary's First Communion.