

# CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

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## EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION

On January 25, 1973, Pope Paul VI issued *Immensae Caritatis*, "Instruction on Facilitating Sacramental Eucharistic Communion in Particular Circumstances." This ponderously titled document was to have a major impact on the Church in the United States.

"Christ the Lord has left to the Church, his spouse, a testament of his immense love," the Instruction began. "This wonderful gift of the Eucharist, which is the greatest gift of all, demands that such an important mystery should be increasingly better known and its saving power more fully shared."

In the instruction, Pope Paul VI allowed for this fuller sharing in the Eucharist in several ways. He extended permission for the faithful to receive communion twice in one day under certain circumstances; for example, when attending a funeral, or on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi. He permitted a return to the practice of the early Church, when it was the norm for the faithful to receive communion not on the tongue, but in the hand. And, most dramatically of all, he allowed for the institution of lay ministers—both men and women—as "extraordinary ministers of holy communion" (the "ordinary" minister of communion being, of course, the priest). This meant that specially commissioned lay people could bring communion to the homebound, lead communion services in prisons, hospitals, and other institutions, and assist with the distribution of communion during Mass.

For Pope Paul VI, the institution of lay ministers was a gift to the people of God, to help them come closer to the Eucharist by giving them increased access to the sacrament. But the people of God encountered the change with some hesitation. In commenting on the new document in April of 1973, the Progress reported that the "New Vatican regulations... will have little impact on current practices in the United States." And the first lay ministers sometimes encountered prejudice



Above, Commissioning of lay ministers, 1970s; below, a new group of Extraordinary Ministers ("E.M.s") commissioned September 2007.

and hostility from their fellow parishioners, who did not hesitate to let them know that they were not worthy to touch and distribute the body of Christ. In some cases, people would move into the priest's line at communion time, stubbornly refusing to approach a lay minister to receive the sacrament. It would be some years before lay people were widely accepted in this role.

At St. James Cathedral, it was the Sisters of the Holy Names who blazed the way. On November 4, 1973, just a few days before he died, Bishop Thomas Gill, the Cathedral's Pastor, installed Sister Margaret Jane Downey and Sister Maureen Maloney as the parish's first Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. Sister Margaret Jane's own account of her ministry in the parish gives a clear indication not only of the astonishing amount of work she was able to accomplish, but of how many

people were able to receive the Eucharist through her ministry. Sister Margaret Jane—and others like her—helped to realize Pope Paul VI's vision of a Church reaching out with the "immense love" of Christ not only through the ministry of priests, but through lay ministers as well. "I visit, encourage, help the elderly—individually and collectively—in the apartments, convalescent centers and hospitals. This is a parish of many apartment houses of various income brackets, for the most part elderly, lonely, and the poor; a number of shut-ins unable to go to Mass, some are sick. I visit patients in three convalescent centers each week where I write letters, contact relatives, and do shopping. I set up for Mass twice a month in each center and bring Holy Communion to patients the weeks we do not have Mass. Two days a week I visit all Catholic patients in one of the area hospitals, where I bring Communion to the patients who wish to receive that same day or the next morning."

Today, ninety Cathedral parishioners follow in the footsteps of these pioneering sisters, distributing communion during Mass and carrying communion to the sick and homebound of our parish.

—Corinna Laughlin