

South Wisconsin District President Request for an Opinion Concerning Shut-in Communion by a Commissioned Minister

The Request of the District President

In correspondence dated March 10, 2015, the president of the South Wisconsin District submitted three questions to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) concerning the propriety of a commissioned minister consecrating the Lord's Supper or distributing reserved elements to shut-ins. The text of the request is as follows:

“While it is true that ‘the regularly called and ordained pastors of the church are to officiate at the administration of Holy Communion’ (TPLS, 17–18), it is only ‘through Christ’s word and its power’ — not through the mere ‘sound’ or ‘recording’ of the voice of the pastor — ‘that Christ’s body and blood are present in the bread and wine’ (TPLS, 14).” (From the CTCR opinion “DVD Consecration,” 2)

- 1.) *In light of that, Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions (especially Augsburg XIV) is it appropriate for a commissioned worker (in this case a rostered teacher who serves as a pastoral care assistant) to consecrate the elements for the Lord’s Supper when making shut-in visits?*
 - *Is such an action a violation of Augsburg XIV?*
- 2.) *In light of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions would it be appropriate for a commissioned worker (non-ordained) or a lay person to take properly consecrated elements from the Sunday worship to the homes of shut-ins for distribution during the week?*
 - *Clarification: I know that this question has been asked and answered previously. However, the words of Hermann Sasse ring in my ears: “Extra institutionem Christi (‘outside of Christ’s institution’) the Sacrament is not there; consequently, the real presence ceases when the celebration is over” (Sasse, Hermann. Letters to Lutheran Pastors — Volume 2. [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014], 155).*
 - *How are the two positions reconciled?*
- 3.) *Are there Scriptural reasons and/or spiritual benefits for the consecration to be closely connected (either in time or location) to the distribution of the consecrated elements during the administration of the Sacrament in the Divine Service?*
 - *How do SD VII 75, 83–86 apply to usage of consecrated elements being distributed by laity apart from the Divine Service where they were properly consecrated?*
 - *Part of my concern and the reason for the question lies in the following: when the consecrated elements are distributed apart from the Divine Service where the institution took place, is the communicant deprived thereby of a critical aspect of the Gospel which ought to be connected with the distribution of the Sacrament, viz., the Words of Institution?*

The Response of the CTCR

The basic theological issues involved in these questions have been addressed (at least in principle) in previous CTCR documents, including two reports — *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature* (1981) and *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper* (1984) — and multiple opinions, such as “DVD Consecration” (2006), “Communion and COVID-19” (2020), and “One Little Word Can Fell Him: Addendum to ‘Communion and COVID-19’” (2020). For the sake of greater clarity and precision, however, the Commission shall respond directly and succinctly to the questions presented in the request.

Question 1. In light of that, Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions (especially Augsburg XIV) is it appropriate for a commissioned worker (in this case a rostered teacher who serves as a pastoral care assistant) to consecrate the elements for the Lord's Supper when making shut-in visits?

AC 14 states that public preaching and the administration of the Sacraments is the responsibility of the ordained minister of the Gospel called for that purpose. Auxiliary offices, such as commissioned ministers, are established in the church to help the pastor in the discharge of his office, yet those occupying these offices are not authorized to perform the “distinctive functions” that belong to the pastoral office.¹ As the Commission said in its 1981 report, *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature*:

Functions that are essentially exercises of the ministry of Word and sacrament should be performed by those who hold the office of the public ministry. Thus, preaching in the worship service, leading in public prayer, celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar, baptisms, wedding and funeral services should be carried out by those who hold the office of public ministry. (35)

Since the pastor is given responsibility for the administration of the Sacraments, and since consecration belongs to the proper administration of the Sacraments, only the pastor should consecrate the elements for the Lord's Supper. It is the opinion of the Commission, then, that a layperson — commissioned minister or otherwise — should not consecrate the elements for the Lord's Supper during shut-in visits.

Question 2. In light of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions would it be appropriate for a commissioned worker (non-ordained) or a lay person to take properly consecrated elements from the Sunday worship to the homes of shut-ins for distribution during the week?

For the same reason as above, the CTCR cautioned against the practice of laypersons bringing the reserved Sacrament to shut-ins in *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper*: “The chief consideration regarding such a practice is that the role of the pastor in the sacramental life of the church should not be displaced” (26). This is especially important because shut-in Communion

¹ On the historical understanding of auxiliary offices in the LCMS cf. Cameron Mackenzie, “Helping Offices in the Church,” *The Office of the Holy Ministry. Papers Presented at the Congress on the Lutheran Confessions Itasca, Illinois, April 10–13, 1996* (Crestwood, Mo.: Luther Academy; Minneapolis: Association of Confessional Lutherans, 1996), 65–82, available at <http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/MacKenzie-HelpingOfficesChurch.pdf>.

provides the pastor an opportunity to offer confession and absolution, invite the participation of family members in Communion, and offer pastoral care to his flock.

While this consideration applies to laity performing the distinctive functions of the pastoral office, another consideration regarding reserving the consecrated Sacrament applies to clergy as well. Scripturally and confessionally speaking, the administration of the Sacrament of the Altar is a single action involving three constitutive features: consecration, distribution and reception. When Christ instituted this Sacrament, He intended that all three features — consecration of the elements with our Lord’s words (“given thanks”), distribution to the communicant (“gave”), reception by the communicant (“take, eat”; “drink of it”) — be done in accordance with this Word (Matt. 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:17–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26). When the consecrated Sacrament is reserved and later distributed and received, it severs the single unified action which Christ instituted.

The Formula of Concord repeatedly opposes the reservation of the Sacrament as an abuse because the severing of the single action which Christ instituted raises serious questions about whether the reserved Sacrament is in fact the Lord’s Supper. The Formula states that the Sacrament is not rightly administered when “the consecrated bread is not distributed, received or eaten, but is instead locked up [in the tabernacle], made into a sacrifice, or carried around in a procession.”² It also says: “Apart from this practice, it is not to be regarded as a sacrament — for example, when in the papistic Mass the bread is not distributed but is made into a sacrifice, or enclosed [in the tabernacle], or carried about in a procession, or displayed for adoration.”³

When consecrated elements are set aside in a tabernacle, or any other receptacle, after the end of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, doubts are raised precisely because there is no longer a direct relation for the recipient between their consecration, distribution and reception. To do so is to move outside of the parameters of the Sacrament as it was instituted by Christ. Outside of these parameters, there is no certainty. As the Commission said of digital consecration in “Addendum to ‘Communion and COVID-19’”:

We are not able to say with certainty that this would be an invalid Sacrament, but that is precisely the problem: we cannot be confident of it either. We would instead be troubled with the question whether this manner of communing is according to Christ’s institution We seriously and sincerely wonder whether (in the language of the Formula) “the entire external, visible administration of the Supper” is indeed “as Christ established the administration of the Supper” (FC SD VII, §86, KW 608). (12–13)

The practice of reserving the consecrated Sacrament for distribution and reception to those who did not witness its consecration unnecessarily raises doubts regarding its validity as a Sacrament or the benefits it may offer. For these reasons, the Commission urges against the practice of laypersons (or clergy) communing shut-ins with elements consecrated apart from that distribution and reception.

² SD FC VII 83; Kolb/Wengert, 607.

³ SD FC VII 87; Kolb/Wengert, 608.

Question 3. Are there Scriptural reasons and/or spiritual benefits for the consecration to be closely connected (either in time or location) to the distribution of the consecrated elements during the administration of the Sacrament in the Divine Service?

Scripturally speaking, as noted above, the Sacrament of the Altar as instituted by our Lord is understood as a single action of consecration, distribution and reception. To sever consecration from distribution and reception is to — intentionally or unintentionally — disregard the clear words of Christ when instituting this Sacrament. The Commission has addressed this issue repeatedly, but to cite one example, the 2006 opinion on “DVD Consecration” says this:

The Lord’s Supper was instituted by Jesus with words and actions spoken and carried out by him *in the direct presence* of his disciples (Matt. 26:26–28). Throughout history, the church has sought to be faithful to Christ’s practice in this regard. Pastors speak the words of institution *in the presence* of the assembled congregation, thereby giving assurance that we are “doing this” as our Lord has instructed us to do (Luke 22:19). Whenever the actual words and actions of the celebrant in consecrating the elements are intentionally separated (by time, distance, or technological means) from the distribution and reception, no assurance can be given that our Lord’s instructions are being heeded and that the body and blood of Christ are actually being given and received for the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of faith.

Any separation of consecration from distribution and reception raises doubts about fidelity to the clear command of Christ in the words of institution and, thus, the validity of the Sacrament.

Spiritually speaking, the same argument applies. Where the consecration is separated from distribution and reception, the certainty of Christ’s body and blood present in the Sacrament and, by extension, the certainty of His promise of forgiveness through the Sacrament, are called into question. Yet it is for this very reason that Christ has given this Sacrament — to strengthen faith and forgive sins through His presence and His promise. The separation of consecration from distribution and reception — again, whether by time, space or technological innovation, such as DVD or digital consecration — detracts from the purpose for which it is instituted, namely, the strengthening of faith and the forgiveness of sins.

Adopted (unanimously) by the CTCR
December 9, 2022