

Ordinary vs. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

The words ordinary and extraordinary have several shades of meaning in our culture and in our Church. In our cultural context, the word “ordinary” can mean “normal, standard or commonplace; having no special or significant features.” Sometimes we even associate the word “ordinary” with “plain” or “unimpressive” — *It is just an ordinary day.* On the other hand, our cultural use of the word “extraordinary” can mean something “remarkable, special or grand” — *She is an extraordinary musician!*

In the Church, we use the word “ordinary” most frequently when referring to the liturgical season, “Ordinary Time.” In this context, “ordinary” comes from the Latin term *ordinalis*, which means “numbered” or “ruled.” It can also be “ordered.” This is the origin of our word for “ordination.” Likewise, when the Church refers to something as “extraordinary” it simply means it is “extra,” or “outside” of the ordinary.

Every liturgical celebration is an action of Christ and the Church — that is, the faithful people, who are united and “ordered” under the bishop of a diocese. Because priests and bishops offer the sacrifice of the Eucharist in the person of Christ, and deacons assist with the distribution of the Eucharist, they are the “ordinary” ministers. That is what they are ordained to do — it is a normal part of their ministry. Lay men and women who distribute Holy Communion do so as extraordinary ministers because it is outside of their normal responsibilities as members of the liturgical assembly.

The Church allows for extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to assist the ordinary ministers when required by the size of the congregation. Extraordinary ministers should receive adequate spiritual, theological and practical preparation so they can fulfill their role with reverence and respect for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Their extra-ordinary role is to assist the ordinary ministers in the distribution Holy Communion to the congregation. In the United States, extraordinary ministers do not purify vessels, they do not distribute Holy Communion *to* ordained clergy and their number should not be increased beyond what is necessary for an orderly and reverent distribution of Holy Communion.