

Health

Illness throws wrench into reception of host

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Leo Finucane views the Eucharist as a sacrament that all the faithful are invited to receive.

"We don't know of any instance where Jesus turned someone away from the table," Finucane said.

Yet Finucane's 8-year-old daughter, Adair, was unable to receive the host with her first Communion class at Pittsford's Church of the Transfiguration last spring. She has a condition that prevents her from being able to digest wheat bread.

Due to Catholic Church regulations, she is also not permitted to use a non-wheat substitute.

"We are called to the table, but she can't have what's offered," said Adair's mother, Carol.

Mike and Kathy Terrillion, parishioners at St. Charles Borromeo Church in Greece, voiced similar frustrations. Their daughter Sara, also 8, missed first Eucharist with her class because she is allergic to wheat.

"She was very upset because she couldn't do what the others were doing," Kathy remarked.

According to Joan Workmaster, diocesan director of liturgy, Catholic Church regulations stipulate that eucharistic bread must be made from wheat flour. Although rice-based hosts are permitted in some Protestant denominations, she said they are prohibited in the Catholic Church.

The rule presents a dilemma for people like Adair, who suffers from celiac sprue. The disease prevents her from properly digesting gluten, a protein in wheat, rye and barley. Gluten is also added as a preservative to ice cream, chocolate bars and many other common foods. "Celiacs," as they call themselves, are prone



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer
Adair Finucane accepts a cup of low-sulfite wine as a substitute to the host during Mass at Church of the Transfiguration, July 13.

to such unpleasant side effects as diarrhea and severe abdominal pain.

Although Sara's parents said she has not been diagnosed as having celiac sprue, Sara also suffers abdominal pain when she takes products containing gluten. In addition, both Sara and Adair are sensitive to the wine their parishes use, due to its high sulfite content.

However, the Finucanes have partly circumvented the problem by providing their parish with a church-allowed, low-sulfite wine. Adair took this wine at her first Eucharist in the spring, and had no adverse reactions. She continues to receive the wine — which is

placed in a special cup — at weekly Sunday Masses.

Workmaster said that although Adair isn't receiving the host, the sacrament of Eucharist is fully acknowledged through receiving the cup.

"We recognize the body and blood of Jesus in both. That's the teaching of the church," Workmaster said. "It's the same understanding as when we received just the bread for years, and that was considered to be both the

body and blood."

Adair, also, seems satisfied that she is a full participant in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

"I feel like it's the body and blood of Christ," she said.

The Terrillions, meanwhile, said Sara is scheduled to receive first Eucharist at St. Charles on Aug. 9. Although the Catholic Church allows celiacs to take a small part of the host, Sara will still be at risk, her mother said.

"It's, 'Let her have a little sliver and hold our breath,' or not have her do it at all," Kathy said.

Sara's parents said it would probably be at least a few years before they would allow her to take the host again. However, Sara was adamant about receiving first Eucharist this year — and therefore, her parents reluctantly she could receive.

"If I don't take Communion with the other kids, I feel left out," Sara said.

"It's an issue of sharing and participation," Mike Terrillion said. "She sees us receiving it, and friends her own age. And the teachings say this is the focal point of the Mass."

Workmaster noted that there are about 85,000 known celiacs in the United States, "a fair number of whom are Catholics." She added that Catholic celiacs are of all ages and share the same distress.

"Of the people I've heard about, most do not go to Communion, period. They have a great emotional letdown every Sunday, especially if they're in a large family where spouses and children go forward to receive

Eucharist. It's a very difficult thing to deal with," Workmaster said. "One person I know started jumping around to parishes, because people would talk about why she never went to Communion."

The Finucanes said they've heard of similar struggles among fellow members of a Rochester-based celiac support group. Kathy Terrillion said the issue is also discussed frequently by celiacs she has met over the Internet. "There's a lot of frustration. I guess a feeling of ostracism comes through," Kathy said.

However, Workmaster noted that celiac sprue was only discovered within the last 50 years — so there's a good chance that current church rulings will be altered to accommodate all celiacs. In 1995, for example, the Vatican approved low-gluten bread as an acceptable form of Eucharist. Because celiacs have varying degrees of tolerance for gluten, this action will allow several celiacs to receive Eucharist regularly.

"There is a very concerted effort to represent this cause to the Vatican and change this," Workmaster said. "Hopefully, it will be happening soon."

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