

A Catholic Coeliac!

Gerard Gallagher discusses some of the problems associated with the coeliac condition

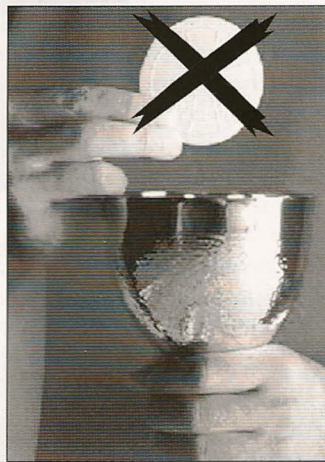
Shortly after I was diagnosed with the life-long incurable condition of coeliac I was at a Papal Mass at World Youth Day in 2000. Proper liturgical practice would have suggested that I step forward around the same time as the Eucharistic Ministers, wait behind them and then receive from the chalice. My problem on the day, even though the norms from Rome said this, was that there was the small number of 2.5million other young people in the way, security concerns and, dare I say it, no one fluent in Italian could give me an accurate translation of my condition. Help was needed.

Being a coeliac is having a disease, which is life-long inflammatory condition caused by a reaction to gluten, a protein found in wheat and other similar proteins found in rye, barley and oats. In layperson's terms it means that coeliacs are unable to absorb food properly if it contains any or some of the above. This includes Holy Communion.

I read recently that going gluten-free is the new *must* in food fashion. Being a coeliac is not a fad. Personally I would not choose this condition, as food can become an anxiety when cooking at home, eating out or worse, going to someone's home for food and then having to confess, 'I am a coeliac!' Hosts can deal with people confessing alcohol, hide the food, drugs, don't mention it, but a coeliac, what do they say. Hide the Gluten! It can become a social stigma. The majority of places where I would go find it hard to integrate a coeliac. Even at work they won't even buy gluten-free biscuits and I work for the Church. However one of the highest places of exclusion for coeliacs is Mass.

I know that lots of work has been done in the area of liturgical good practice around inclusion of people with special needs. More work is needed in the area of inclusion of people with the coeliac condition. If Eucharist is the summit and source of the Church's liturgical life to paraphrase the Vatican Council – then

many people like me are outside the loop. If I can attend a Papal ceremony and not be included – excuses can be given. However recently I was in a convent that makes altar bread and they didn't have any gluten free hosts!



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While Canon 942 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law states – '*The bread must be wheaten only and recently made, so that there is no danger of corruption,*' the Congregation for the Doctrine and Faith explained this further in 1995. It approved the following norms:

- 1 Permission to use low-gluten altar bread may be granted by Bishops to people affected by the coeliac disease.
- 2 Gluten-free hosts are invalid *quibus glutinum ablatum est*. However low-gluten hosts are valid matter, provided they contain the amount of gluten sufficient to obtain the confection of bread and that no foreign materials are added so as to alter the nature of the substance of the bread.¹

It may not seem like a huge issue, but I do miss being able to go to Holy Communion. The celebration of mass lacks something for me if I cannot receive. It's not that I have done anything sinful to put myself outside the sacrament. It is just that many parishes do not accommodate coeliacs. I know of only a few churches that have notices suggesting that coeliacs are catered for. This needs to be improved. Low Gluten hosts (even though they are not fully gluten free) are available in some parishes. It is also a theological question for me: How can I attend so many masses and not share in the Body and Blood of Christ? It is a pastoral and parental issue. Soon my children will receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. Will I be accommodated? They do ask why I don't always receive like their mother.

It is said that around 1 in 100 are coeliac. The majority of diagnoses are made when people are at the average age of 30. The rate of diagnosis is increasing and more shops do have stocks of over priced gluten free food. Maybe the problem is not high on the Church radar because the majority of people my age are not Church goers and do not relate their health problem to a pastoral issue. However, at the last World Youth Day in Germany, a young person disclosed to me that she was a coeliac and asked if she could bring some gluten free hosts. I said 'bring extra', to paraphrase the Lord himself. He did say, 'where two are three are gathered, there am I.' Even for coeliacs!

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NOTES

¹ Quoted in '*Coeliacs, Alcoholics, the Eucharist and the Priesthood.*' Aidan Mc Grath, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 67, 2002.