



33. Why Is Such A Point Made Of Eating And Drinking Up All The Bread And Wine After Communion?

This relates back in two ways to the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation - that the bread and wine, once consecrated, become the body and blood of Christ, offered for believers. The Church was very concerned to ensure that any of the consecrated elements left unconsumed after the Eucharist should not be put to unworthy use, and particularly that it should not be taken away by anyone to be put to magical purposes. Consecrated wafers might however be reserved for the communion of the sick, or to be exhibited for veneration.

At the time of the Reformation, the Protestants decisively rejected the idea of Transubstantiation, at least in its more extreme forms. In the English Prayer Book of 1552 it is laid down that the bread used at Holy Communion must be such as is ordinarily used, albeit the finest that may be obtained, and that bread and wine left over 'may be had by the Curate (i.e. priest) for his own use'. The idea was to ensure both that the Elements were not just thrown away, and also that they were not reserved for veneration.

The form for Communion of the Sick provides for the Priest to follow a shortened form of the Communion service, not to administer bread and wine previously consecrated.

The Prayer Book of 1662 tightened up the procedure for disposal of bread and wine by requiring that any bread and wine that had been consecrated but not used for communion were to be reverently eaten and drunk immediately after the Blessing by the Priest 'and such other of the communicants as he shall call to him'.

The Methodist Church simply requires that any consecrated elements remaining unconsumed should be 'reverently consumed or otherwise reverently disposed of'.

At St Mary's, when any consecrated wafers or wine are required for communion of the sick, they are placed immediately in the Aumbry in the Lady Chapel. Any other unconsumed elements are eaten and drunk by members of the Altar Team, as laid down in the Prayer Book.

It is difficult to see in what other acceptable way the Elements could be dealt with. It would be irreverent to pour unconsumed wine down the drain; the bread

might (with difficulty) be burned; but experience with trying to get rid of Chinese prawn crackers has taught me that birds and squirrels are highly conservative in their tastes and I have no intention of trying any experiments with wafers.

In some Roman Catholic churches, the problem of knowing how much bread to consecrate is neatly solved by placing the box of wafers by the entrance to the church before the service. Each person attending Mass and wishing to communicate takes a wafer from the box and places it on the paten, which is brought forward at the Offertory. By doing it this way, there is no surplus to be disposed of.