

The recently published circular letter, “On the bread and wine for the Eucharist” sent to diocesan bishops at the request of Pope Francis drew worldwide attention by urging bishops to be wary of “gluten-free” hosts, the wafers used at Catholic Mass for Holy Communion.

The letter did not introduce new teachings or regulations. It reminded bishops of their duty to ensure that celebrants use the correct materials in the Mass.

Today, religious communities are no longer the sole suppliers of liturgical bread and wine for the Eucharist. In the Ottawa area, for example, religious Sisters used to make such Eucharistic breads, but they no longer do so due to aging membership and increasing delivery costs. Other suppliers have begun to manufacture these and other liturgical goods.

The document noted that today, “supermarkets and other stores and even...the internet” sell hosts for Mass. In response, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments recommended that bishops set up guidelines, establish an oversight body, or even devise a form of certification to help “remove any doubt about the validity of the matter for the Eucharist.”

Why are we concerned about the ingredients in Communion hosts? To say that the Eucharist—the Mass—is important to Catholics would be an understatement. The Bishops at the Second Vatican Council referred to it as the “source and summit of the Christian life.”

On the night before He died, Jesus made it His legacy. Eating with His apostles at the Last Supper, He told them to continue to celebrate that

sacred meal. He commanded them to continue His sacrifice, saying, “do this in memory of me” (Luke 22.19; 1 Corinthians 11.24).

Thus, the Vatican is ensuring that we properly follow this instruction. This requires that a priest not only use Jesus’ words, but also that he use the correct material.

The ingredients for the hosts must contain at least some gluten so that it truly is “bread.” Accordingly, totally gluten-free hosts are not acceptable for Communion.

How do we help those who suffer from celiac-related conditions and therefore cannot tolerate gluten, which the host must contain?

Some producers have made available “low gluten” hosts that are liturgically acceptable as they contain a minimal amount of gluten (typically less than 0.32 percent). Marketers may legally identify foods with less than 20 parts per million of gluten as “gluten-free.” Some low-gluten hosts—while containing enough gluten to satisfy the Church’s requirements for Mass—would fall into that category. Hosts that do not contain any gluten at all, however, are not acceptable for use in Mass. In the case of someone who cannot tolerate any exposure to gluten, the Church says that that person may receive Communion under the species of wine alone.

Parishes are willing to make special arrangements to assist people who need to receive the Precious Blood instead of the host for medical reasons, even if those parishes do not normally offer Communion under both kinds. This requires some planning to organize the

procedures, but pastors are happy to do this to help parishioners with this difficulty.

Someone who suffers in this way should talk to his or her pastor to plan an effective solution. Understandably, if someone arrives with a request at the last moment before Mass begins, the pastor might not be able to accommodate his or her needs at that time. However, with enough time to find a solution, pastors are delighted to help.

One of the greatest duties and privileges of bishops and priests is making the Eucharist available to the Catholic faithful, and they do their best to make this possible.