

Baking the Bread to Become the Body

Where does altar bread come from?

BY RACHEL NEWMAN

THE Eucharist is a cornerstone of living out the Catholic faith. Every time a Catholic goes to Mass, he or she has the opportunity to encounter Christ in the Eucharist and contemplate the mystery of faith. For such a fundamental part of our shared spiritual tradition, we may have never stopped to wonder where the bread that becomes the Body of Christ is made.

Until recently, The Basilica of Saint Mary received its altar bread from the Contemplative Sisters of the Good Shepherd, an order of nuns in Saint Paul. The Sisters recently discerned that they will discontinue their altar bread ministry because of the advanced age of their sisters. The Basilica received their last shipment of 30,000 hosts from the Sisters in early January and will now look for a new source.

“Altar bread is different than bread or crackers at the grocery store. It must be made with wheat and water and without any additives,” said Johan van Parys, Director of Liturgy and Sacred Arts at The Basilica. Though it’s not required, hosts are typically made by religious communities like the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

ABOUT THE SISTERS OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd are a contemplative order of nuns who historically have made altar breads and sewed shirts for their source of income. Contemplative orders focus on silence, solitude, and practices which help foster prayer and rest in God, like study, work, and leisure. Baking altar breads gave the Sisters an opportunity to contemplate the mystery of faith and the Catholics worldwide who participate in the Eucharist every day.

“It has always been a joy and privilege to do this kind of work,” says Sister Beverly Hedgecoth, a nun who lives at the convent in Saint Paul. “It allows us to have a small part in supplying the hosts that will become the body of Jesus and allows us to pray for all those who will receive the consecrated host.”

When the Convent first opened in Saint Paul at the turn of the century, the Sisters used a heavy cast iron baker over a fireplace to bake the hosts. (Imagine a vintage waffle iron with a long handle and disc-shaped divots for the batter.) The baking mechanism evolved when electricity became available; the Sisters began to use heavy electric plates to bake the hosts.



The Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Saint Paul.

In 1986, the Sisters were the first convent in the United States to receive a modern host baker. A German man whose wife was a benefactor of the Carmelites modified a cookie machine with 30 plates and a conveyor belt so that they could bake hosts faster.

“With fewer vocations, this was a god-send,” said Sr. Beverly. “We could bake 18 sheets a minute, which was a joy. It allowed us to get into a rhythm, and we could pray or sing in our heart to our beloved Jesus Christ for all who were to receive the Eucharist.”

KEEPING UP WITH THE TIMES

Some parishioners might not realize that The Basilica offers low-gluten hosts for those with Celiac Disease or gluten sensitivity. Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley, and rye that some people find hard to digest. The Catholic Church requires altar breads be made with only wheat and water, because it’s believed that’s what Jesus used at the Last Supper.

With an estimated 20 million Americans suffering from gluten sensitivity, this poses a problem. Luckily the Benedictine Sisters of

Perpetual Adoration in Missouri were able to find a solution. Working with a scientist, the Sisters developed a low-gluten host made out of two different types of wheat starch. Most of the gluten is removed from wheat starch, so this type of host is softer on the stomach for those who have gluten sensitivities.

Because of the Sister’s good work, The Basilica can now provide low-gluten hosts so everyone can participate in the Sacrament of the Eucharist regardless of dietary restrictions.

If you need a low-gluten host, simply ask one of the hospitality ministers (ushers) before Mass. The host will be prepared in a pyx — a small, round container used to carry the Consecrated Host, typically to those who are sick or homebound. When it comes time to receive Communion, simply point to the pyx in the presider’s plate, and the priest will drop the host from the pyx into your hands with minimal risk of cross-contamination with the regular hosts.

REFLECTION

The Eucharist is an invitation to participate in the Last Supper by contemplating Christ’s sacrifice and recommitting ourselves to following His teachings. The next time you receive the Eucharist, consider the effort, joy, and prayer that went into baking this bread that became the Body of Christ. From the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Saint Paul to the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde, Missouri, religious communities are praying for all of us who receive the Eucharist, that we grow deeper in faith and closer to Christ. Please keep them in your prayers too. ✝

Rachel Newman is a parishioner and RCIA sponsor.