

“YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST” - COMMUNION HOSTS - Fr. Steve Lape

Why do we call the Communion bread “hosts”?

The word “host” comes from the Latin word “hostia,” which means “a victim for sacrifice.” As you may know, animals were sacrificed by the ancient Israelites and by Jews, especially at the Temple of Jerusalem, up until Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. Jews no longer practice this, but in biblical times, they offered up such sacrifices as their way of showing their commitment to God in faith, as well as asking forgiveness from God for sins committed. The Book of Leviticus offers more details about what was required in such rituals, especially in its first 7 chapters. When Jesus died on the cross for all humanity, there was no need for anyone to offer up such sacrifices again, since He died once and for all as the ultimate sign of God’s love. Thus, the word “host” indicates Jesus’ willingness to become a sacrificial victim for us and all people. It’s a term that is used to describe both the bread at Mass before it’s consecrated and the Body of Jesus after consecration (which occurs during the Eucharistic Prayer.) Yet, it’s more fitting to call the wafers “hosts” after consecration, since it is actually, by then, the real presence of Jesus.

Why are the Communion hosts (wafers) flat and not looking like regular bread?

The flat, unleavened (without yeast, and, thus, non-rising) bread recalls the time when the Israelites fled Egypt, leaving their lives of slavery behind to follow God’s commands and head to the land that God promised them. As it says in Exodus 12:39, “Since the dough they had brought out of Egypt was not leavened, they baked it into unleavened loaves. They had been rushed out of Egypt and had no opportunity even to prepare food for the journey.” As a Jew, Jesus partook of unleavened bread as part of the Passover meal, which was His Last Supper. Thus, with His Last Supper being the very 1st Eucharist, we continue today, at our Masses, using unleavened wafers (hosts). Symbolically, we could look at yeast (which is a type of very small fungus) in the following way, according to St. Paul in his 1st letter to the Corinthians (5:7-8): “Get rid

of the old yeast to make of yourselves fresh dough, unleavened loaves, as it were; Christ our Passover (who died for us, so that we may not have to die in the next life) has been sacrificed. Let us celebrate the feast not with the old yeast, that of corruption and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” Thus, the bread for the hosts is made to look more pure, as Christ is pure.

Are “gluten-free” hosts legitimate to use at Mass?

Totally gluten-free hosts are invalid for use at Mass, since wheat must be present to some degree in the host, according to Canon 924 in the Catholic Church’s *Code of Canon Law*. Usually, though, when people use the term “gluten free” to describe the host, it’s a host with a very miniscule amount of gluten in it (less than .01%). Such a host has been approved for Masses. Hosts are to be made of wheat flour and water only, which helps preserve their shelf life in parishes. An estimated 2 to 3 million people have been reported in the U.S. alone (and probably several million more undiagnosed) with health concerns concerning gluten (certain proteins found in wheat) in foods. It’s called celiac disease, which involves an intolerance in some people’s bodies for gluten in various foods, leading to severe problems in their small intestine and beyond. Over the past 20 years, efforts have been made to help those with this condition to be able to still receive the Body of Christ without having a reaction to too much gluten in the hosts. According to the website of U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, there are 4 places in the U.S. that are approved for making low-gluten hosts. For those too sensitive to receive even the slightest gluten, the other option would be to receive only from the cup at Communion time. One would still be receiving the fullness of Christ with either the Body only or the Blood only.

For those who desire to receive low-gluten hosts, due to celiac disease, our parish has them upon request before the Mass begins, kept separate from the other hosts.

