

Does Communion Cup Runneth Over With Germs?

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Church member J.H. Brittain worried about the spread of disease caused by hundreds of parishioners drinking from the same Communion cup.

The Englishman wrote to the editors of the *Lancet*, an international medical journal: "I venture to think that there is a strong prima facie case against the use of one cup, but the task of the hygienic innovator would be made much easier if he could cite actual example of contagion."

Brittain wrote the letter in 1903, and a century later, no evidence has surfaced proving what so many churchgoers intuitively fear: that the Communion chalice contains more than wine. They suspect that the cup, used by scores of fellow worshippers during a service, teems with germs that could cause colds, the flu or worse.

"People who sip from the Communion cup don't get sick more often than anyone else," said Anne LaGrange Loving, a New Jersey microbiologist who has conducted one of the few studies on the subject. "It isn't any riskier than standing in line at the movies."

Traditional worry over illness-producing microbes lurking in the Communion cup had been heightened because of an earlier national shortage of flu shots. From Boston to Seattle, congregants within denominations that use a common cup have been urged in church bulletins and from the pulpit not to take a sip if they are sick.

Some have gone further. Priests in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington, Vt., have been ordered by their bishop to stop offering the Communion cup until the spring. The Archdiocese of San Francisco took similar measures during a flu outbreak.

In California, it appears there has been no formal declaration from any denomination to refrain from taking a drink from the Communion cup.

However, many local church leaders, like those with the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, have offered common-sense suggestions to reduce the chance of infections.

Those include having their ministers wash their hands thoroughly before Communion, wipe the chalice rim thoroughly after each sip, and wash the cup with soap and hot water after each service.

A written statement by the Los Angeles archdiocese also asked those in church "to be considerate of others and not drink from the chalice when sick."

For Christians, whether to sip from the cup is no small decision. The act of Communion, in which worshipers eat a piece of bread or wafer and drink wine or, in some cases, grape juice, replicates the Last Supper.

According to Gospel accounts, on the night before his Crucifixion, Jesus instructed his disciples to remember his imminent sacrifice by bread, which represented his broken body, and wine, which symbolized his spilled blood.

Catholics, Episcopalians and Lutherans are among the denominations that use a single Communion cup. Others, including Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and many evangelical congregations, pass out individual or disposable mini-cups.

Concerns about catching a disease date to the 19th century and have spiked during epidemics, whether diphtheria and tuberculosis in the late 1800s, polio in the first half of the 20th century or AIDS in the 1980s.

The Very Rev. Peter D. Haynes, rector of St. Michael's & All Angels Episcopal Parish Church in Corona del Mar, said he brought in infectious-disease specialists in the late 1990s to soothe his congregants' worries over catching the AIDS virus from the Communion cup.

"One doctor said, 'The number of bugs you can get from a Communion cup don't have a prayer,' " Haynes recalled. "The chances of getting sick are less than talking after the [service] with someone who has a cold."

Officials with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta said inquiries about Communion cup dangers have been small but steady over the years.

"Theoretically, there's a risk," spokeswoman Bonnie Hebert said. "But the risk is so small it's probably undetectable."

Loving, the microbiologist, said the risk of infection is reduced because the chalice is wiped after each sip, the alcohol in the wine can kill germs and, unlike ceramic cups, the silver and gold used in most chalices don't harbor microbes.

"There is a difference sipping from a Communion cup and sipping a cup of coffee that someone left on the curb," she said.

Loving, a community college professor and Episcopalian, decided to undertake in 1995 the first of two studies because "I'm a microbiologist and attend church. I had some concerns about what goes on at the Communion rail."

Her first study, conducted in a laboratory, investigated whether germs were transferred to the wine during intinction, or the dipping of the bread or wafer into the wine that's done in some churches.

Participants were asked not to wash their hands before the tests and to shake hands with two to 10 others in the study, as they would during a service's "passing of the peace."

Loving found some bacteria had been transferred to the wine and that the microbes would then be absorbed by the bread.

But next she wanted to find out whether illnesses were caused by Communion. In 1997, she surveyed 681 people in New Jersey over a 10-week period and found no difference in illness rates among those who attended church and received Communion, those who attended church and didn't receive Communion, and those who never attended church.

"This even held true for the participants who attended church and received the sacraments every single day during the 10 weeks," she wrote.

Some in the pews take a practical approach to sipping from the Communion cup. If Oralie Enos, 75, hears a lot of coughing and sniffing, she will pass on the wine and receive only the wafer, a practice the Catholic Church believes completes the rite.

"It's not something I worry about," said the Orange resident. "People have been receiving the cup for so many years, and you never hear of any problems."

Many who take Communion believe science and God are at work to prevent disease.

Renate Goutier, 48 of Huntington Beach, says that as a mother of four, she has plenty of experience with how germs are spread and doesn't worry much about drinking from the Communion cup. In addition, she believes she has extra protection. As a Catholic, she believes that during Communion, she receives the actual body and blood of her savior.

"On a spiritual level, this is Jesus Christ I'm receiving."