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April 24, 2007

Priests of the Diocese of Austin

Dear brothers in Christ:

This is a personal reflection from a local Catholic on her understanding of how Celiac Disease impacts her faith. I offer it for your consideration, if you have parishioners with Celiac Disease.

Most Reverend Gregory M. Aymond  
Bishop of Austin

### **Hand Picked by God: The Blessing of Celiac Disease**

The world over, excited eight-year-old Catholic children and their parents are eagerly making final preparations for their impending First Holy Communion. Conscientious pastors and faith formation teachers are giving careful and loving instruction, working to ensure that each child understands both the privilege and the responsibility that they are about to be given in receiving Christ into their own bodies. Parents are helping their children practice prayers and explaining the Church's teaching of the true presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist. Mothers turn their attention also to organizing family celebrations and ensuring that the clothing is all in order: many of the boys will be wearing their first real suit; the girls are selecting beautiful white dresses and veils.

Nearly indistinguishable amongst this crowd of eager children will be a few that were hand picked by God to receive an extra special blessing. These children have an auto-immune disorder, known most commonly as Celiac Disease, which makes it impossible for them to receive the standard consecrated host without serious risk to their health. Some of them may not yet be aware that their condition is a blessing, and a few may even mistakenly believe instead that it is merely a special burden. Certainly, in recent years there have been several melodramatic newspaper articles that would lead these children and their families to mistakenly believe that being a Catholic with Celiac Disease is something other than a blessing from God.

And yet, no matter how well disguised, can anything that strengthens one's relationship with Jesus Christ and deepens one's understanding of Church teaching truly be something other than a blessing? A Catholic with Celiac Disease is compelled to learn more about the Holy Eucharist and the Church that vigilantly stands guard to protect the integrity of the Bread of Life.

Properly guided by his pastor and his parents, the Catholic Celiac will discover that Christ built His Church upon a rock, not upon quicksand, and also that Christ's Church loves with Christ's infinite Agape love. He will learn that because Christ himself instituted the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist with unleavened wheat bread and grape wine, the altar bread must be made from only wheat flour and water in order to truly become the Body of Christ. He will also learn that Jesus is fully present (Body and Blood, soul and divinity) in every particle of the consecrated host and in every drop of the Precious Blood, therefore communion under only one element is indeed full communion. Further, so that he may receive Jesus into his body each time he participates in Mass, the Catholic Celiac must learn to be strong enough and bold enough in his faith to ask his priest to licitly accommodate his special needs either with an extremely low-gluten altar bread that has been approved by the Vatican or with a separate cup of the Precious Blood. And, because this life is somewhat less than perfect, he will at times be challenged to forgo a physical communion and to instead make a valid spiritual communion.

All of these lessons, properly nurtured, will coalesce to lead the Catholic Celiac into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ and with His Church. To believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist is an act of faith; for God to test that faith, strengthen it, and reveal just what His Real Presence means to you personally is a profound gift. Oh, what it is to be so richly blessed.

Patsy P. Van Huyck  
A Catholic Celiac and mother to a young Catholic Celiac