

Code of Canon Law, § 916

A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to celebrate Mass or to receive the Body of the Lord without prior sacramental confession unless a grave reason is present and there is no opportunity of confessing; in this case the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible.

Canon 915, based on canon 855 of the 1917 Code, prohibits giving the Eucharist to anyone who obstinately perseveres manifest sin. A manifest sin is one which is publicly known, even if only by a few; obstinate perseverance is indicated when a person persists in the sin or sinful situation and does not heed the warnings of church authorities or adhere to church teachings. Clearly, those who are excommunicated or interdicted by an inflicted Church as grave and manifest sinners, and they are excluded from the sacraments by penal law as well (cc. 1331, §1, 2°; 1332). Other categories of manifest and grave sins are not so neatly discernible. The minister cannot assume, for example, that the sin of public concubinage arising from divorce and remarriage is always grave in the internal forum. Any prudent doubt about either the gravity or the public nature of the sin should be resolved by the minister in favor of the person who approaches the sacrament.

Canon 916, a composite of canons 807 and 856 of the 1917 Code, is based on Tridentine doctrine. Citing the Scriptures (1 Cor 11:28-29), Trent confirmed the Church's teaching that one who is conscious of grave sins may not receive the Eucharist. The 1967 Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery affirmed this discipline, adding that confessions should not be heard during the celebration of Mass. Canon 916 adds nothing new to past discipline in requiring those who are conscious, i.e., certain of having committed a grave sin, to return to the state of grace by sacramental confession or a perfect act of contrition when sacramental confession is not possible. However, unlike canon 856 of the 1917 Code, this canon makes it explicit that a perfect act of contrition includes the intention to confess as soon as possible.