

A CATECHETICAL MOMENT

Why Reception of the Body of Christ on the Tongue is More Suitable Than in the Hand



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Bishop Sheridan, the Bishop of the Diocese of Colorado Springs, has instructed pastors to begin catechetical re-instruction to the diocese's lay faithful, regarding how and why reception on the tongue is the more suitable manner of reception of the Body of Christ in Holy Communion.

Receiving the Sacred Host on the tongue is still the prescribed method of distribution of Holy Communion around the world today. In 1977, Dioceses in the U.S. asked for and received permission from the Holy See (in the form of an indult) for Communicants to receive the Sacred Host in the hand. In short, an indult is an exception to the universal law of the Latin Rite (commonly renewed every 3 years thereafter). (NB: Like other granted indults over the centuries, the indult may be suspended or rescinded by the Holy See or no longer recognized by the diocese's Apostolic Successor (the bishop) at any time for just cause (such as desecration of the Eucharist).

“The “Sacrament of Unity,” the Holy Eucharist, demonstrates great diversity. In its historical celebration, ritual families from Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, Armenia, and Rome make their own unique cultural contributions. Indeed, the “*mystery of Christ is so unfathomably rich that it cannot be exhausted by its expression in any single liturgical tradition*” (Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 1201).

Within these traditions, the laity/faithful may receive Holy Communion in a variety of ways. In the Latin Church alone, legitimate options include the communicant's posture of standing or kneeling. In addition, the minister may distribute the Blood of Christ directly from the chalice, by intinction (dipping the host in the Precious Blood) [if/where permitted], or—even if not customary for most Catholics—“by means of a tube or a spoon” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM], 245) [most common in the Eastern Church].

Communion in the hand, is relatively new to today's Latin Church (cf. 1969 Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship's *Memoriale Domini*, “Instruction on the Manner of Distributing Holy Communion”). The U.S. bishops, in their Vatican-approved norms on the distribution and reception of Holy Communion, invoke the oft-cited remarks of St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 368):

When you approach, take care not to do so with your hand stretched out and your fingers open or apart, but rather place your left hand as a throne beneath your right, as befits one who is about to receive the King. Then receive him, taking care that nothing is lost. (cf. “Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America” 41)

Despite the “ancient usage,” however, and even within the boundaries of the current discipline, the Church has made clear that ***reception of Communion on the tongue is the preferred practice***. (Considering especially the entire 1969 text of *Memoriale Domini*, as well as Pope John Paul II's 1980 Apostolic Letter *Dominicae Cena* 11). The Church's preference for the reception of Holy Communion on the tongue is nearly always justified by notions of reverence, devotion, humility, respect, adoration, and decorum. And, while Pope John Paul II acknowledges those “*who, receiving the Lord Jesus in the hand, do so with profound reverence and devotion*” (*Dominicae Cena*

11), permission for Communion in the hand is accompanied by warnings of potential disrespect, profanation, weakening of Eucharistic faith, and indifference.

But more needs to be said about these connections between the manner of [personal preference of] reception and potential reverence or abuse. Potential for abuse is often not sufficient reason to forego a valid option. Instead, a positive theology for reception of Communion on the tongue is more helpful. *Why*, for instance, might Communion on the tongue help one's Eucharistic faith, increase devotion, and better express one's love to Jesus in the Sacrament? Conversely, *why* does receiving Communion in the hand risk profanation, weakened belief, or signify a possible lack of Eucharistic faith? Indeed, I have received Communion in the hand many times and should like to think I am among those mentioned by St. John Paul II who receive "with reverence and devotion." Similarly, reception on the tongue does not necessarily guarantee fidelity and a grace-filled spiritual life. Still: how can I more clearly understand the Church's instruction for Communion on the tongue and, more importantly, how can I benefit spiritually from this preferred practice?

Whether receiving Communion on the tongue, in the hand, or each way from time to time, every communicant should reflect upon how the outward manner of reception expresses and fosters his or her Eucharistic faith.

The Passive Action of Communion

An ancient maxim of the Holy Church teaches that "the law of prayer is the law of belief" (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). Belief and prayer—and prayer and belief—are integrally connected to one another. We pray, for example, in the name of the Father, and of Son, and of the Holy Spirit; because we believe that God is one substance in Three Persons. Similarly, our belief that Jesus is truly and substantially present in the Blessed Sacrament is deepened by humble prayer on our knees during periods of adoration (cf. CCC 1124 and Pius XII's *Mediator Dei* 46-48).

This liturgical law clarifies the Church's discipline regarding the reception of Holy Communion. Like most things liturgical—words, music, postures, time, ministers, architecture—the manner of receiving Communion should be understood and carried out in light of our Christian belief. Our reception—whether on the tongue or in the hand—ought to reflect our Eucharistic faith and, at the same time, foster that same faith within us and in the Church.

So, what does the Church, and we as her faith-filled members, believe about Holy Communion? While there are many (perhaps innumerable) dimensions to receiving the Eucharist, I find three particular notions enlightening to the question of Communion in the hand or on the tongue.

First, in Pope John Paul II's Encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, "On the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church," the late pontiff offers a remarkable comparison between the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Communicant. "There is a profound analogy," he says, "between the Fiat which Mary said in reply to the angel, and the *Amen* which every believer says when receiving the Body of the Lord. Mary was asked to believe that the One whom she conceived 'through the Holy Spirit' was 'the Son of God' (Luke 1:30-35). In continuity with the Virgin's faith, in the Eucharistic mystery, we are asked to believe that the same Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of

Mary, becomes present in his full humanity and divinity under the signs of bread and wine” (55). [Pope John II] goes on to liken Mary to a tabernacle—“the first ‘tabernacle’ in history” (ibid.).

If there is a lesson for the communicant, it is that, like Mary, our reception of Jesus [in Holy Communion] is characterized by lowliness, humility, reverence and docility.

A second consideration of Eucharistic Communion stems from the texts of the Roman Missal. At the end of the preparatory rites (prior to the Eucharistic Prayer), the priest commands us to “Pray that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father.”

This notion of sacrifice, says Pope Benedict, is “a concept that has been buried beneath the debris of endless misunderstandings” (cf. *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 27). While it is tempting to think of “sacrifice” as essentially pain, loss, suffering and deprivation, at its heart sacrifice is union with God, divinization and “becoming love with Christ” (76).

Consequently, if Eucharistic Communion is the fruit of Christ’s—and our own—sacrifice, that is, His action of selfless turning to the Father, our manner of reception likewise, needs be characterized by our heartfelt desire to unite to God our entire freedom, memory, will and all we possess (“Prayer of Self-Offering,” St. Ignatius of Loyola (cf. Roman Missal)).

Finally is the amazing insight of St. Augustine. Recounted by Pope Benedict in his exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*: “Augustine imagines the Lord saying to him: ‘I am the food of grown men; grow, and you shall feed upon me; nor shall you change me, like the food of your flesh, into yourself, but you shall be changed into me.’ It is not the Eucharistic food that is changed into us, but rather, we who are mysteriously transformed [transfigured] by it” (70).

If we believe that this “mysterious food” has the power to change us—if we believe as St. Augustine and Pope Benedict have articulated—our manner of eating [of Holy Communion] must signify such belief. Eucharistic food is “not something to be grasped at”, but is received with humility and obedience (Philippians 2:7-8). Only then will we be, like Christ, “highly exalted” (Philippians 2:9).

The three above reflections offer a number of common elements relative to Eucharistic Communion: humility, docility, fidelity, reverence and selflessness. Which manner of receiving (the *lex orandi*) best expresses and fosters these truths (the *lex credendi*)?

Even though, as Pope John Paul acknowledged: Communion in the hand can be carried out with reverence and devotion; and even though reception on the tongue is no guaranteed symbol of fidelity and humility—[the reception of Holy] *Communion on the tongue is*, all things being equal, *the most suitable manner of reception.*”

(SR: <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/carstens/why-communion-on-the-tongue-is-more-suitable-than-in-the-hand>)