

## Should Catholics Receive Holy Communion on the Tongue or Hand?

### Why Did the Church Forbid Communion in the Hand Centuries Ago?

The Church's decision on this matter was NOT primarily based on which practice was most ancient or prevalent in the early Church. This decision was based on careful theological discernment. Three important considerations profoundly influenced the Church's decision to limit Communion to on the tongue only:

#### **1] Reverence for the Eucharist**

St. Ephrem, [300's], captures this sense beautifully for us as he places the prophetic words of Isaiah 6:6-8 on Jesus' lips. Here, the priest, representing Jesus in "persona Christi", is the tong of the angel used to touch the burning coal [the Eucharist] to purify the lips of the faithful, represented by Isaiah: "The coal carried [by the seraph] cleansed the lips of Isaiah. It is I [Jesus] Who, carried now to you by means of bread, have sanctified you. The tongs which the Prophet saw and with which the coal was taken from the altar, were the figure of Me in the great Sacrament. Isaiah saw Me, as you see Me now extending My right hand and carrying to your mouths the living Bread. The tongs are My right hand. I take the place of the seraph. The coal is My Body. All of you are Isaiah." Incredible!

The Liturgy of St. James, the oldest liturgy of the Church, draws from this same imagery. Before distributing Holy Communion, *the Priest* prays: "The Lord will... make us [Priests] worthy with the pure touchings of our fingers to take the live coal, and place it upon the mouths of the faithful for the purification and renewal of their souls and bodies".

This purification imagery is very appropriate to our current situation. And given the very early date of this liturgy, it also points to Communion on the tongue as the prevalent Communion form in the first centuries of the Church as well.

The great theologian Doctor of the Church, St Thomas Aquinas gives us one of the strongest theological foundations to why only the consecrated hands of a Priest should touch the Eucharist: "out of reverence towards this Sacrament, ***nothing touches it, but what is consecrated... the priest's hands... it is not lawful for anyone else to touch it*** except from necessity..."

St Thomas insists that the unconsecrated hands of the laity ***should not touch the Precious Body***, except for "necessity". Now some might argue that this virus constitutes "necessity". But if so, it would still be up to Rome to make that determination, not individual priests or Bishops, and to give clear instruction as to the appropriate form of Communion.

#### **2] Concern for loss of even the *smallest* particle of the Precious Body**

Additionally, the danger of losing even a single particle of the Precious Body on the hands of a communicant is a risk we cannot take. Listen to the consistent teaching of the Church Fathers on this. For example, St. Cyril of Jerusalem [300's] wrote: "take care to lose no part of It... guard against losing so much as a crumb of that which is more precious than gold". Similarly, Origen in the 200's warned: "exercise every care lest a particle of It fall... lest anything of the consecrated gift perish."

#### **3] Concern for a loss of reverence in the faithful**

The Church had a profound concern for anything that could lead to a loss of reverence for the Eucharist in the faithful.

St. John Chrysostom, called "the Doctor of the Eucharist", relays this sense powerfully: "within you... you do not have the ark or the manna or the tablets of stone... but the Body and Blood of the Lord... an unutterable gift." St Augustine similarly stresses that, "No one eats that flesh without first adoring it; we should sin were we not to adore it."

### What Did the Church Decide: Communion on the Tongue or Hand?

Pope St Paul VI, after much study and with special consultation of all the Bishops of the world, concluded in ***Memoriale Domini, the Instruction on the Manner of Administering Holy Communion***, that: "ancient usage once allowed the faithful to take this divine food in their hands and to place it in their mouths themselves", but, "with a deepening understanding of the truth of the Eucharistic mystery... and of the presence of Christ in it, there came a greater feeling of reverence... a deeper humility was felt to be demanded when receiving it... the minister placing a particle of consecrated bread on the tongue of the communicant."

***Memoriale Domini*** also emphasizes that Holy Communion on the tongue "does not detract in any way from the personal dignity of those who approach this great sacrament: ***it is part of that preparation that is needed for the most fruitful reception of the Body of the Lord.***"

The Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff further details the Pope's decision to retain Communion on the tongue, highlighting 2 key points: "From the time of the Fathers of the Church... Holy Communion in the hand became more and more restricted in favor of distributing Holy Communion on the tongue. The motivation for this practice is two-fold: a) first, to avoid, as much as possible, the dropping of Eucharistic particles; b) second, to increase among the faithful devotion to the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist." Could anything be more important than these 2 considerations?

Those insisting on a return to Communion on the hand have missed the key reasoning that had moved the Church solely to Communion on the tongue in the first place. The rejection of Communion on the hand was not a decision based on history – which practice best conformed to the practice of the early Church – but on theology: which practice best instilled and preserved reverence for the Eucharist. To then argue for a return to Communion on the hand for historical reasons, as some do today, is a step backwards theologically – and contrary to the will of the Church.

Additionally, some even try to argue that Jesus probably gave Communion on the hand at the Last Supper. But this is absolute speculation. And regardless, the Apostles were ordained Priests that night, and would have been permitted to touch the Eucharist by Jesus Himself at that point.

Reflecting on the above points, 2 highlights come to the forefront:

### **1. Countless Fragments of the Precious Body on Hands**

Communion in the hand undoubtedly creates a far greater risk of losing individual particles of the Precious Body on the palms and fingers of literally millions of lay Communicants. To lose even a particle of the Precious Body on someone's hand, and have it trampled on the floors of the Church, would be a sacrilege. An altar server friend has observed multiple particles of the Precious Body on the paten after Communion on many occasions. This has been one of the greatest tragedies, among others, of the special indult of Communion on the hand.

This fact alone is reason enough to restrict Communion to on the tongue. As St. Ephrem attests: "It is His living Body... do not trample underfoot even the fragments. The smallest fragment of this Bread can sanctify millions of men and is enough to give life to all who eat It."

Altar servers can testify to the multiple particles that fall on the paten at virtually every Mass. Far less risk of lost Particles exists when only the Priest, accompanied by an altar server with a paten, gives Communion on the tongue, and then carefully purifies the sacred vessels and his hands afterwards.

### **2. Bodily Gestures Convey Spiritual Realities and Reverence: Pope Emeritus Benedict XV**

Secondly, Communion on the hand with simply a bow of the head while standing is, Biblically speaking, a symbolically less reverent form of reception of Communion. Scripture is filled with references to both humans and angels kneeling – even prostrating – in worship in God's presence – and often at His command! And if, "at **the name** of Jesus, **every knee shall bend**", what should we do in His actual Presence?!

But some might point out that this is certainly not an area to quarrel about, or judge each other's spiritual intentions. And many claim that they feel equal reverence when receiving on the hand versus the tongue – the key is the attitude of the heart. Reverence comes from the heart, they insist, and isn't necessarily bound to a particular external action. And there is some truth in this.

However, when we receive the Body of Christ in the hand – in the same way we would eat any other common food – there is *always* danger of an accompanying loss of the sense of the sacred.

In his book, "*Theology of the Liturgy*", Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI summarizes this spiritual principle for us perfectly: "**the bodily gesture itself is the bearer of the spiritual meaning**... when someone **tries to take worship back into the purely spiritual realm and refuses to give it embodied form, the act of worship evaporates**". This is a powerful statement worthy of deep reflection in these days of diminished reverence...

### **Cardinal Sarah: "Satan's target is the Sacrifice of the Mass and the Real Presence of Jesus"**

Listen to Cardinal Sarah, prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship: "Satan's target is the Sacrifice of the Mass and the Real Presence of Jesus in the Consecrated Host... Why do we insist on communicating standing [and] in the hand? Why this attitude of lack of submission to the signs of God? ... Why do not we kneel down to receive Holy Communion after the example of the saints? Is it really so humiliating to bow down and remain kneeling before the Lord Jesus Christ?" Receiving kneeling and on the tongue "is much more suited to the sacrament itself... This is a

further act of adoration and love that each of us can offer to Jesus Christ.” He also added that receiving Communion on the hand “undoubtedly involves a great scattering of fragments.”

He then continues: the “most insidious diabolical attack is trying to extinguish faith in the Eucharist, by sowing errors and fostering an unsuitable way of receiving it; truly the war between Michael and his Angels on one side, and Lucifer on the other, continues in the hearts of the faithful.” It doesn’t get much clearer than that...

### **Protestant Practice: “To avoid any suggestion that the bread was being venerated”**

But let’s change historical gears and consider the revealing testimony from the Protestant tradition. Early in the Reformation, Lutherans still received kneeling on the tongue, because Luther still believed in a form of the Real Presence. But many Reformers [who totally rejected the Real Presence] actually **prohibited** Communion on the tongue while kneeling, insisting via codified church law, on communicants *receiving standing, on the hand, while in procession*. Why? **“In order to avoid any suggestion that the bread was being venerated”** (*Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*).

Interestingly, since the indult of receiving Communion on the hand, we have seen a massive fall off in belief in the Real Presence. Polls show a stunning 60% to 80% of Catholics now fail to hold the teaching of the Church in this key area – “the source and summit” of our Faith. Whether this correlation is a direct result of this indult is hard to say for sure. But perhaps a return to a more reverent reception of Holy Communion might help.

Memoriale Domini insists exactly this: “this method of distributing Holy Communion [on the tongue] must be retained ... especially because it expresses the faithful’s reverence for the Eucharist... This reverence shows that it is not a sharing in ‘ordinary bread and wine’ that is involved, but in the Body and Blood of the Lord”.

### **Can a Catholic be Denied Holy Communion on the Tongue?**

The **General Instruction of the Roman Missal** [GIRM], the official guide of the Catholic Church on how to celebrate Mass, states: “The consecrated host may be received either on the tongue or in the hand, **at the discretion of each communicant**. . . The communicant... receives the Sacrament either on the tongue or, **where this is allowed and if the communicant so chooses, in the hand**” [160-161].

**Redemptionis Sacramentum [RS]: On certain matters to be observed or to be avoided regarding the Most Holy Eucharist:** “it is not licit to deny Holy Communion to any of Christ’s faithful... **Each of the faithful always has the right to receive Holy Communion on the tongue, at his choice**”. “If there is a **risk of profanation, then Holy Communion should not be given in the hand to the faithful**”. (RS 91-92)

However, the Secretary for the Congregation for Divine Worship has recently released a letter where it seems that Bishops have been given an authority in certain unique circumstances to temporarily ban Holy Communion on the tongue. But if a particular Bishop does ban Holy Communion on the tongue, he is not saying you *must* receive Holy Communion in the hand. He is only saying that for now, you cannot receive on the tongue.

The Church teaches that we need to receive Holy Communion at a minimum, once a year [obviously not the ideal!], and preferably at Easter. CCC **1389 states:** The Church obliges the faithful to take part in the Divine Liturgy on Sundays and feast days and, prepared by the sacrament of Reconciliation, to receive the Eucharist at least once a **year**, if possible during the **Easter** season.

The fact that the Church has, by her valid authority, permitted Bishops to ban Holy Communion on the tongue, makes the faithful less culpable in this matter if this turns out to be something Jesus does not desire. Recall that the Church is not infallible in these disciplinary matters, though the faithful are still obliged to submit obediently to the Church in such matters.

But again, **Redemptionis Sacramentum clearly teaches:** “If there is a **risk of profanation, then Holy Communion should not be given in the hand to the faithful**” (RS 91-92). There is ALWAYS risk of profanation when people receive on the hand, never mind the priest moving throughout the church [or even worse, the parking lot] without a paten. As an altar server for many years, my son would regularly see Particles of the Precious Body on the Paten. Given this instruction, it is hard to imagine *any* situation where it would ever be possible to receive Holy Communion on the hand without “the risk of profanation.” So for this reason alone, a person is well within their rights to not receive Holy Communion on the hand.

Consequently, if a person *is* aware of the potential for profaning the Precious Body by receiving Holy Communion on the hand, particularly through the great potential for loss of Particles of the Precious Body on the ground, then I believe

they are bound by conscience to follow what they believe to be right. Again, it is not disobedience to choose not to receive Holy Communion on the hand. In fact it may be a great suffering in the face of tremendous, but very subtle persecution.

So if that means refraining from receiving Holy Communion for a period of time, there is an ancient history and approved practice of Spiritual Communion in the Church. God is never bound by the Sacraments, and He can choose to distribute His graces in the manner he chooses. **Many** saints have practised this in times of necessity. I believe that this is the route we must choose when faced with a choice of only Holy Communion on the hand. I believe it is far safer to err on the side of caution in this critical area.

### **A Heavenly Perspective: Seek First the Kingdom**

As people start to receive the Eucharist in ordinary, even profane ways, the danger is an accompanying loss of the sense of the sacredness of the Eucharist, that could ultimately lead even to a loss of faith. The Church is well aware of this. These rights are in place for deep theological reasons. Physical wellbeing, while important, cannot be emphasized above spiritual wellbeing. As many know, this is why we have so many martyrs for the faith in the history of the Church. Every one of them was willing to forego their physical earthly lives/wellbeing in order to not deny or compromise their faith.

I believe this is a large part of what is at issue today. All of us often lack a heavenly perspective at times. People are grasping so tightly to their earthly lives in the midst of this virus [especially as a result of distorted media reporting], that they live paralyzed in fear, forgetting that they were not made solely for this Earth, but primarily for eternal life with God. And so, many are often willing to go to almost any length, reasonable or not, to preserve this earthly life – even to the detriment of their faith. Again, I think of all those martyrs for the faith that risked their lives to hide Priests, hold secret Masses, to endanger themselves to distribute the Eucharist to the faithful. How different things seem today.

Life is a balance of faithfully calculated risks. Even driving to Mass each Sunday has risk. Even catching the flu or some other communicable disease has risk. At what point do we carefully, prudently and prayerfully move forward and “seek first the Kingdom”?

### **But what about the Coronavirus and the best practices for preventing its spread?**

Many insist Holy Communion on the hand is the safest way to receive now. But for these two particular reasons – the certain loss of particles on hands, and unconsecrated hands touching the Precious Body – and many other reasons, receiving Holy Communion on the hand is simply not an option for many, despite Rome giving an indult [a special exception] for this to certain countries back in the 70’s.

But interestingly, research and public health authorities actually support the idea that Holy Communion on the tongue is actually the **safest way** to receive Holy Communion during COVID times.

### **Holy Communion on hand or tongue: this virus is not spread by ingesting/eating it!**

There is not a single study indicating that this virus is spread by ingesting/eating it, but **many** indicating that hand transmission is a **very significant vector**. Multiple studies and health authorities have stated that COVID19 is not spread via ingestion/food:

- the WHO notes this in their bulletin, [COVID-19 And Food Safety: Guidance For Food Businesses](#), stating that: “COVID-19 is a respiratory virus... There is no evidence to date of viruses that cause respiratory illnesses being transmitted via food.”
- Government of Canada’s website: Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19): Prevention and Risks: “There’s currently no evidence to suggest that food is a likely source or route of transmission of the virus. There are currently no reported cases of COVID-19 transmission through food.”
  - [<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks.html>]
- BC Center for Disease control: “COVID-19 doesn't appear to be transmitted by eating food contaminated with the virus... There is no evidence that COVID-19 is spread through food made by infected people.”
- US Center for Disease Control: “Currently, there is no evidence to support transmission of COVID-19 associated with food”
  - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>

Additionally, some have expressed concern over the priest’s hand being close to the communicant’s mouth during Communion on the tongue, but this virus is not spread via normal breathing either, according to the BC CDC. In their document, *About COVID-19, How it Spreads*, the BC CDC notes [as of July 30, 2020] that: “COVID-19 is spread by liquid droplets when a person coughs, sneezes or sometimes talks or sings... COVID-19 can also spread by touch. If

droplets are left on objects and surfaces after an infected person sneezes, coughs on, or touches them”  
[<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/about-covid-19/how-it-spreads>].

On the other hand, again, spreading via hand contact is an absolutely known vector of contamination, and a person’s hands are far more likely carry this virus as a result of touching various surfaces through the day than a person’s tongue, generally speaking.

Because this virus does not spread via food/ingestion, or through normal breathing, as noted in the studies and documents above, again, Holy Communion on the tongue is likely the safest way to receive right now to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As long as **EVERYONE** received Holy Communion on the tongue, no one would catch this disease through receiving in this manner. Even if a priest contacted someone’s tongue that *had the virus*, this would still not result in anyone else becoming sick from this virus, as again, this virus is not caught via ingestion. But very positively, viral transfer through hand contact would be **eliminated!** Additionally, the priest could also purify his hands as needed [for instance, if he did contact someone’s mouth or hands], to remove or destroy any virus particles on them as a backup measure, just as we do when we enter and leave the church each time.

When Jesus touched and healed contagious lepers without endangering his disciples and followers, with regards to this virus, how can we think receiving his Precious Body would be any different?