

Should Catholics Receive Holy Communion on the Tongue or Hand?

[Parts 1 and 2]

By Graham Osborne

Interestingly, this is a question that elicits a lot of discussion. What does the Church teach in this area?

Turning to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM], the official guide of the Catholic Church on how to celebrate Mass, GIRM 161 states: “The communicant... receives the Sacrament either on the tongue or, *where this is allowed* and if the communicant so chooses, in the hand.”

In Canada and the US, we are now permitted to receive Holy Communion either on the tongue or in the hand, but Communion in the hand is only allowed as an indult [a special exception from the norms of the Universal Church that needed to be applied for and permitted by Rome], with the universal norm still remaining Communion on the tongue.

So should it matter whether we receive Communion on the tongue, versus on the hand, especially if this practice is allowed? A closer look into the process whereby this indult was originally granted is revealing.

In the document, *Memoriale Domini, the Instruction on the Manner of Administering Holy Communion* [1969], the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship outlined St Paul VI's decision on this matter. The Pope, after much study and with special consultation of all the Bishops of the world, concluded that, “this method of distributing Holy Communion [on the tongue] must be retained, taking the present situation of the Church in the entire world into account, not merely because it has many centuries of tradition behind it, but 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”.

So the Pope decided to retain the traditional universal discipline of receiving on the tongue because it expresses a greater reverence for the Eucharist! So what happened? If people had been receiving Communion exclusively on the tongue for centuries now, how did it happen that, in this same document, the Pope did allow some countries the possibility of an indult for reception in the hand as well? That is an interesting story...

In the 1900's, a handful of countries started to revive Communion in hand – unfortunately, in complete disobedience to the Church's clear teaching on this matter. Chief among the reasons given was the idea that some felt Communion in the hand represented the most ancient practice of the early Church, and so, should actually be the preferred form of Communion.

But while it is true that Communion in the hand certainly happened in the early Church, it is unclear exactly when this practice started and how universal it was. There are quotes

from Church Fathers supporting both forms, and a case can be made for both practices occurring, to greater or lesser degrees, in the first millennium of the Church.

However, it is worth noting one quote in particular here, purported to be from St. Cyril of Jerusalem [around 350 AD] – arguably the premier quote typically given to try to establish an historical precedence from the early Church for Communion in the hand: “placing thy left hand as a throne for thy right, which is to receive so great a King, and in the hollow of the palm receive the body of Christ”.

Scholars now tell us that this quote was likely not written by St. Cyril at all [we’re not sure who wrote it], and several other ancient manuscripts attest to this.

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.

On the other hand, there is also ample testimony from the Early Church for the practice of Communion on the tongue, including great saints such as St. Gregory the Great, St. Leo the Great, St. Basil and others, all suggesting that reception on the tongue was the standard for the early Church.

Bishop Athanasius Schneider’s book, *“Dominus Est, It Is the Lord”*, contains some of the most recent scholarship the Church has on this matter, and it argues eloquently on several levels for Communion on the tongue as the primary historical practice of the first centuries of the Church.

But either way, the Church eventually moved to forbid Communion in the hand completely, and “on the tongue” has been the universal norm of the Church for centuries now. Why?

The key point of note for us today, is that this decision was not an appeal to a particular historical ancient practice at all, but a decision based on careful theological consideration. Those arguing for a return to Communion on the hand had somehow missed the key reasoning that had, centuries ago, moved the Church away from Communion on the hand in the first place. This decision was *not* based on which practice was most ancient, but on which Communion form best conformed to the theological reflections of the Church over time on the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

So in the end, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship under St Paul VI declared that, “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.” It then mandated that

“this method of distributing Holy Communion [on the tongue] must be retained” [Memoriale Domini].

And eager to bring those countries and Bishops allowing Communion in the hand back into obedience and unity with the universal Church on this matter, the Apostolic See “emphatically” urged “bishops, priests and laity to obey carefully the law which is still valid and which has again been confirmed... to take account of the judgment given by the majority of Catholic bishops, of the rite now in use in the liturgy [Communion on the tongue], of the common good of the Church.”

But after all this, *Memoriale Domini* then added a disclaimer. Pope Paul VI, desiring to leave an avenue open to those Bishops he felt would still likely remain in disobedience with regards to Communion in the hand despite this call to conformity, gave them a way to carry on with this practice and still remain in obedience to him: “Where a contrary usage, that of placing Holy Communion on the hand, prevails”, if it was still felt necessary to seek an indult allowing the option for Communion in the hand, “in such cases, episcopal conferences should examine matters carefully...” Their decisions should then be sent to Rome to receive the necessary review: “The Holy See will examine each case carefully” and then decide whether to allow the indult or not.

And in the end, these countries requested exactly that – and the indult was given – I am sure, much to the sadness of St Paul VI.

But then a flood of other countries requested this same indult, including countries where Holy Communion on the hand DID NOT prevail [including Canada and the US]. Based on the instructions in *Memoriale Domini*, these countries had not been given permission to even ask for this indult. But ask they did, and the permission was eventually given. And so we find ourselves in the situation we are in today.

But the point is that the Pope who ultimately allowed this change was, himself, very much opposed to it, as were the great majority of the Bishops in the world. Why? In large part because they felt it could contribute to people seeing the Eucharist as simply common bread and wine. And it also gave more occasion for “Eucharistic particles” to be dropped, or even worse, stolen and used in Satanic Masses and other blasphemous practices [consecrated hosts have even been offered for sale on Ebay!]

In the end, the Church clearly realized that Communion on the tongue was a superior form of Communion on several theological and practical levels, eventually disallowing Communion on the hand completely. To then argue for a return to Communion on the hand for historical reasons alone, as these countries had done, was, in a sense, a step backward theologically – and contrary to the will of the Church. Just because a practice might or might not be of ancient origin doesn’t necessarily make it the best option.

But a deeper look into the early history of the Church on all this is very revealing.

Three theological threads run consistently through all of Church history on this matter, and each profoundly influenced the Church's decision to eventually limit Communion to on the tongue only.

The first thread is an *incredible* reverence for the Eucharist and an awareness of its purifying effect on the faithful. St. John Chrysostom, called "the Doctor of the Eucharist", captures this sense beautifully: "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."

Similarly, St Thomas Aquinas makes things crystal clear for us, teaching that, "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..."

But my favourite is St. Ephrem [300's], 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 [the 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". Given its very early date, it also makes a good argument for the prevalence of Communion on the tongue in the first centuries of the Church as well.

The second common historical "thread" running through all the writings of the Church Fathers is an intense concern for the loss of even the *smallest* particle of the Precious Body.

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.

The third thread is a profound concern for anything that could potentially lead to a loss of reverence in the faithful.

Memoriale Domini again summarizes all the historical scholarship and theological study at the Church's disposal on this subject, concluding: "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.”

It then delineates why Communion on the tongue is preferred by the Church: “first, to avoid, as much as possible, the dropping of Eucharistic particles; 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 two considerations?

Jesuit liturgist, Josef Jungmann, summarizes these historical/theological reflections in the Western Church succinctly in his 1940’s book, “*The Mass of the Roman Rite*”, concluding, “growing respect for the Eucharist ... led to the practice of placing the Sacred Host in the mouth” only.

Similarly, Bishop Schneider echoes Jungmann’s conclusion, stating: “The authentic... link uniting the early (patristic) era with the Church of today in these matters is the reverent care for the Body and Blood of the Lord, even in the smallest fragments.”

So again, the rejection of Communion on the hand by the Church was not a decision based on history – which practice best conformed to the practice of the early Church – but on theology – which practice best safeguarded reverence for the Eucharist.

Reflecting further on all the above points, two additional highlights come to the forefront.

First, that 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. This alone, in my opinion, 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.” Far less risk of lost Particles exists when only the Priest, accompanied by an alter server with a paten, gives Communion, and then carefully purifies the sacred vessels and his hands afterwards.

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?!

Now some might still argue: “what’s the big deal? After all, we are talking disciplines here and not unchangeable doctrines. 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 mouth – 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. But when we receive Communion 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...

So what does our current prefect of the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship, Cardinal Sarah, have to say about this situation?

"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?"

Cardinal Sarah continues, insisting that receiving kneeling and on the tongue "is much more suited to the sacrament itself... In my opinion and judgment, this is an important question on which the church today must reflect. 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."

But let's change historical gears here for a moment 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 Calvinists and other 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***" (cf. *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 1958). Things that make you go, hmmm...

Interestingly, since the indult of receiving Communion on the hand, we have seen a massive fall off in belief in the Real Presence: that Jesus is truly present – Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity – under the appearances of bread and wine – the bread and wine themselves now ceasing to exist as such, but having been "transubstantiated". Polls show a stunning 60% or more 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. But perhaps a return to a more reverent reception of Holy Communion might help...

But again, some may still insist that Communion on the hand is a licit/permitted practice in the Church. This is discipline not doctrine. Why are we even talking about this? People should be able to choose however they want to receive Communion, within the confines of the Church's directives. In a sense, mind your own business!

My short answer is, yes, the Church has now allowed Communion in hand – but as an indult, a limited exception. And according to the Church’s teaching, not mine, Communion on the tongue best expresses reverence for the Eucharist, protects against the loss of even the smallest particles of the Precious Body, and best encourages reverence for the Eucharist in believers and non-believers as well.

Many are not aware of the profound theological background to this matter and I think it is important for every Catholic to at least consider these things, and then make their best decision.

Communion on Tongue in Early Church Fathers & Church Councils:

-St. Sixtus 1 (circa 115): “The Sacred Vessels are not to be handled by others than those consecrated to the Lord.”

-St. Basil the Great, Doctor of the Church (330-379): “The right to receive Holy Communion in the hand is permitted only in times of persecution.” St. Basil the Great considered Communion in the hand so irregular that he did not hesitate to consider it a grave fault.

-St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274): “Out of reverence towards this Sacrament [the Holy Eucharist], nothing touches it, but what is consecrated; hence the corporal and the chalice are consecrated, and likewise the priest’s hands, for touching this Sacrament.” (Summa Theologica, Part III, Q. 82, Art. 3, Rep. Obj. 8.)

-The Council of Trent (1545-1565): “The fact that only the priest gives Holy Communion with his consecrated hands is an Apostolic Tradition.”

-Pope Paul VI (1963-1978): “This method [on the tongue] must be retained.” (Memoriale Domini)

Cardinal Sarah: “Mother Theresa ‘was saddened and pained to see Christians receive Holy Communion in their hands.’”