

Note to Catechists: *First Communion in particular provides a wonderful opportunity for catechesis on this issue, especially for parents. While Communion on the tongue or hand are both permitted in the US and Canada now, most have no idea of the depth of theology behind the Church's preference for Communion on the tongue, and this is a perfect opportunity to gently remind all involved [including the children preparing for 1st Communion] of their options, and why the Church's universal norm still remains Communion on the tongue. The **Congregation for Divine Worship** declares that: "The new manner of giving communion **must not be imposed** in a way that would exclude the traditional practice. It is **a matter of particular seriousness** that in places where the new practice is lawfully permitted **every one of the faithful has the option of receiving communion on the tongue**" There has been a great fall of in belief in, and reverence for, the Eucharist over the past few decades. It is very possible that Communion on the hand has played a significant roll in this. Read on to see how.*

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 Church that can only be granted 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.

Which Was the Practice of the Early Church: Communion on the Hand or Tongue?

For centuries now, Communion on the tongue has been the only permissible way for Catholics to receive the Eucharist. But in the 1900's, a handful of countries started to revive Communion in the 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 testifying to both Communion on the hand and tongue in the early Church, and a case can be made for both practices occurring, to greater or lesser degrees, in the first millennium of the 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, including quotes from many great saints including St. Gregory the Great, St. Leo the Great, St. Basil and others.

It is also 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.

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, and still is today. Why?

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

Three important theological considerations profoundly influenced the Church's decision to eventually limit Communion to on the tongue only.

1] Reverence for the Eucharist

The first consideration focuses on reverence for the Eucharist and an awareness of its purifying effect on the faithful.

St. Ephrem, writing in the 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 [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 the very early date of this liturgy, this also makes a good argument for the prevalence of Communion on the tongue in the first centuries of the Church as well.

And St Thomas Aquinas makes things crystal clear for us, giving 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..."

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

The second theological "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."

3] Concern for a loss of reverence in the faithful

The third consideration is a profound concern for anything that could potentially lead to the faithful losing reverence for the Real Presence in the Eucharist.

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?

In the document, *Memoriale Domini, the Instruction on the Manner of Administering Holy Communion* [1969], the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship outlined Pope 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, “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.”

Continuing, *Memoriale Domini* concludes that, “this method of distributing Holy Communion [on the tongue] **must be retained**... 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**”.

Memoriale Domini then further detailed the Pope’s decision to retain Communion on the tongue, highlighting two 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 two considerations?

How Did Communion on the Hand Still Become Permissible In Some Countries?

So how did it happen that, in this same document, the Pope did allow some countries the possibility of requesting an indult for reception in the hand as well? That is an interesting story...

Those still insisting on a return to Communion on the hand had somehow 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 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 instilled and preserved reverence for the Eucharist. To then argue for a return to Communion on the hand for historical reasons, as these countries were doing, was, in a sense, a step backwards theologically – and contrary to the will of the Church.

But desiring to bring those Bishops still promoting Communion on the hand back into obedience and unity with the universal Church on this matter, Pope St. Paul VI added a disclaimer to *Memoriale Domini*. Countries where communion on the hand was **currently** the practice were permitted to apply to Rome for a possible indult, but only after serious internal consultation and reflection. In short order, these countries did 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 **was not** the current practice [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.

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

Countless Fragments of the Precious Body on Hands

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 exist 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.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI: Bodily Gestures Convey Spiritual Realities and Reverence

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 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 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.

And because we are bodily creatures, our bodies and gestures are very important in outwardly expressing the intentions of our heart. Every husband and wife, every child and parent knows this innately. 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...

The Congregation for Divine Worship

So what does our current prefect of the Church's 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... 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."

Protestant Practice: "To avoid any suggestion that the bread was being venerated"

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...

If Communion on the Hand is Permissible, Why All the Discussion?

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 in some countries in the world. 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.