

One Priest's Thoughts and Experiences Concerning Communion on the Tongue, Part I

Fr. Bryan Jerabek, April 1, 2017

When I was a child and preparing to receive my First Holy Communion, I remember being taught to do so the traditional way: on the tongue. In fact, if memory serves, we received Holy Communion via intinction that first time i.e. the priest carefully dipped the host in the Precious Blood before placing it on our tongues. (We were further instructed to allow the host to dissolve and not chew it; I believe this was very practical advice, for if we chewed it particles might have gotten caught in our teeth, which could then fly out if we coughed, sneezed, or just talked.)

Ever since that important day in my life – though there were many years when I did not go to church in-between – I have always preferred to receive Holy Communion on the tongue. It just seems right. And even now, as a priest, on the occasions when I simply attend Mass in choir, I still receive on the tongue.

In fact, once I was ordained and started reflecting at much closer range, so to speak, on these things – reflections often connected with practical matters, like how to distribute Communion well and efficiently, how to purify the sacred vessels properly, etc. – I went from having a personal preference against Communion in the hand to having serious misgivings about it for more objective reasons. I also started to be aware of the fact that many other priests shared these misgivings as well.

From the lack of reverence that many people show when receiving in the hand (oh, the stories!), to the dirty hands that they present... From the particles of the Sacred Host that most certainly end up on their hands and on the floor (Lord have mercy!), to the real possibility of theft for malicious purposes (which has happened in many places)... Communion in the hand has become something that greatly distresses me. I do not deny that the Church allows it – in the United States, at least – but I do not think that it is an advisable choice for us to make.

Regarding the very widespread practice of Communion in the hand, there are also particular problems with children receiving that way. Besides the fact that they frequently have dirty hands from playing before (or during!) Mass, they also often lack coordination and judgment: it has happened several times that children have dropped hosts that I placed squarely in their hands, due to their movements or a lack of attention.

I remember preaching about the proper way to receive Holy Communion in the hand on one occasion, in particular: about the need to form a “throne” with one’s hands, to consume the host right away, and then to check for particles on the hand, and so forth. And I noticed exactly zero change in how people approached and walked away from the Communion line at that very same Mass! It seemed to fall on deaf ears.

Why did it fall on deaf ears? I think it is because there has been a loss of faith in the Real Presence. Few Catholics would openly deny this dogma with their lips; but in practice, we see it denied all the time. I think this teaching has become something kind of “magical”, if I may put it that way: Christ is sort of mystically present in the host, but he’s not worried about crumbs. Even if such an erroneous belief is better than not believing in any sort of Real Presence, no matter: it is



Part II

Among the other reasons in favor of Communion on the tongue, there is also the fact that the priest’s hands – and his alone – are consecrated for the sake of handling the Most Blessed Sacrament. Unfortunately, in recent decades the practice has been approved of allowing lay people to handle

the Blessed Sacrament as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion; this is regrettable inasmuch as their hands are not consecrated for this purpose. And some may claim that because lay people can now handle the host, therefore everyone should be able to receive in the hand. Yet note well: those who function as extraordinary ministers are given a mandate by Church authority to do so, and are (or should be) provided with training as well.

As I said, I am certainly not the only one who is bothered by Communion in the hand. Many priests share this concern; even a few bishops. Some people suppose that I am scrupulous, given my worry about this matter at all or the care I take, for example, in purifying the sacred vessels: I take great care to remove all of the visible particles of the Precious Body and drops of the Precious Blood that remain. Besides those who flippantly chide me about how I “do the dishes” (they are not dishes!), I have been reprimanded by brother priests and even a bishop. People will say things like, “Jesus is a big boy; he can take care of himself! Don’t worry so much!” This is true. Christ is very great indeed – but in the Blessed Sacrament, he becomes very small and very fragile and he entrusts himself to our care.



Bishop Athanasius Schneider

Among the very few bishops who have spoken out against the practice of Communion in the hand is Bishop Athanasius Schneider – an auxiliary bishop in Kazakhstan. He has written at least two books on the subject, one of which is entitled, *Corpus Christi: Holy Communion and the Renewal of the Church*. In this excellent and concise book, the good bishop presents convincing arguments as to why our current practice and form of Communion in the hand is both imprudent and unprecedented. Maybe “imprudent” is too light of a word: it is offensive to God and is hindering authentic renewal in the Church!

Bishop Schneider also published another excellent book on this subject: *Dominus Est! It is the Lord! Reflections of a Bishop of Central Asia on Holy Communion*. I cannot recommend this little book highly enough. In it, he recounts the story of the “Eucharistic women” who, living during times of communist persecution, safeguarded the Eucharist and handed on to countless others a proper belief in and reverence towards the Most Blessed Sacrament. He also argues in this book why the practice of receiving Holy Communion in the hand is to be discouraged and, if possible, abrogated. If you would like to read some inspiring stories about the sacrifices that holy people made to protect the Eucharist, and grow in your faith, I very much recommend this brief book.

The Church does give us the right – in the United States and in some other countries – to receive Holy Communion in the hand. But, as Bishop Schneider says, our Lord Jesus Christ has rights also: above all, to be treated with the respect and adoration that belong to the Divinity. If you were to ask me, I would advise you against ever receiving Holy Communion in the hand. I encourage all to receive Holy Communion not only worthily (i.e., in the state of grace) but also on the tongue.

O Sacrament most holy! O Sacrament divine! All praise and all thanksgiving be every moment thine!



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Art for this post on Communion on the Tongue: Partial restoration of *San Carlo Borromeo*

comunica San Luigi Gonzaga (St. Charles Borromeo communicates St. Aloysius Gonzaga), tapestry by unknown artist, photographed by Giovanni Dall'Orto, June 22, 2007, copyright holder allows use for any purpose, provided copyright holder is properly attributed; Detail of *Bishop Athanasius Schneider O.R.C. celebrating Traditional Latin Mass in Tallinn, Estonia*, photographed by Marko Tervaportti, 10 December 2009 own work; both Wikimedia Commons.