

Communion in the Hand

Bottom line first: “The Conference of Bishops [of England & Wales] allows the reception of the Body of the Lord in the hand. However, the choice whether to receive in this manner is the prerogative of the communicant.”¹ In his book *The Eucharist – Essence, Form, Celebration*, the late Dr. Johannes Emminghaus, who was professor of liturgy studies and sacramental theology at the University of Vienna, wrote:

The freedom of the individual and his(her) responsible choice must be respected. To make the matter a divisive issue among communicants is a direct contradiction of the spirit of the Eucharist. Let each individual make it his(her) business to assure his(her) own interior reverence and reverence of outward action.

That said, backing up about five paragraphs, Dr Emminghaus makes a number of points which are equally deserving of our consideration.

It is certain that at the Last supper the Jewish custom was followed: the bread over which the blessing was to be spoken lay on the table and was taken into the president’s hand at the blessing and then broken. That is what Christ did: he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and distributed it, placing it in the hand of each person at table. If he had acted otherwise, he would have departed from custom, and the evangelists would certainly have reported this as (having) symbolic significance.

The giving of Communion on the tongue began in the early Middle Ages and was motivated by fear lest crumbs stick to the hand, or fall to the ground, and thus be dishonoured. Communion in the mouth was thus simply a cautionary measure inspired by reverence.

It might also be said that, at some point in history, again possibly the Middle Ages, the concept of “unworthiness” flourished: people felt unworthy to handle the consecrated bread or host and therefore it was received directly on the tongue – a practice and a concept that continues to this day despite a more recent return to original traditional practice.

This does beg the question, however, as to why people felt their hands were unworthy to touch the host but their tongues were? Back to Dr Emminghaus who is of the opinion that the tongue is no more suitable for receiving communion than the hand, and he quotes from the letter of St James: “Among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a whole wicked world in itself...it is a pest that will not keep still, full of deadly poison. We use it to bless the Lord and Father, but we also use it to curse men who are made in God’s image: the blessing and the curse come out of the same mouth.” [3 v 6-12] Not to labour the

¹ 2005 Bishops’ Conference document *Celebrating the Mass*, para 211.

point, the tongue can be the instrument by which someone might express a kind word or a compliment, offer comfort, or speak a prayer, but it is also the means by which they voice obscenities, blasphemies, lies and gossip.

Emminghaus goes on to say that, of course, “the same is true of the hand: it can do unjust deeds and strike blows, but it can also toil, caress, and bless.” Nor does he feel that the reverence argument holds water:

The trouble is that set rituals do not guarantee reverence once they have become routine. Gestures expressing reverence have vitality only if they manifest an interior attitude of reverence... To receive the host in (the hand) can be just as much – or just as little – an expression of reverence as reception on the tongue.

When receiving communion on the tongue was stopped recently as part of the measures introduced to reduce the risk of spreading the swine ‘flu virus, many of those who had always received on the tongue had no choice but to receive in the hand and yet, as I said at the time, no one to the best of my knowledge was struck by lightning! When we elected to lift those restrictions, it was encouraging to see just how many continued to receive in the hand, though, at the same time, puzzling that others reverted immediately to receiving on the tongue.

The thing is in all of this that this is not how we eat – we do not feed one another (except for babies, toddlers, and those unable to feed themselves as a result of health or age issues). It is, therefore, unnatural to put food into someone else’s mouth. On the many occasions when I have spoken to potential ministers of holy communion as part of their pre-commissioning training, I have forewarned them of what it is going to be like to be “on the receiving end”, as it were, of people receiving communion on the tongue – and I make no apologies for mentioning some of this here because, from a personal point of view, I think it contributes greatly to the argument in favour of receiving in the hand.

With all due respect to the hoped-for interior reverence of the communicant, from the priest or minister’s point of view it never looks very reverent to be faced with someone sticking their tongue out. They may not even do it very effectively and it can be quite difficult, as a result, trying to minister a host through what may be little more than a thin slit between someone’s lips. I also warn them to be prepared to get their fingers licked, or even bitten, in the process – it happens. There is far less risk to reverence, I would argue, when the host is received on the hand and then the person feeds his or her self as they ordinarily do.

At the Last Supper, the ritual celebration of the Jewish Passover, Jesus took certain of the elements of that meal – the bread that accompanied it and the final

cup of blessing – and he did something different with them by consecrating them to become his body and blood. But it was still the Passover meal and, as the host (hence our use of the word), he broke the bread into pieces, as was the custom, and distributed them to his disciples and then passed around the cup of blessing for all to drink – exactly as we hear in the words of consecration at Mass. No one at the Last Supper asked Our Lord to put the bread directly into their mouth (nor did anyone refuse to drink from the cup).

There can really only be one argument that someone would use to explain their choice to receive communion on the tongue, because nothing else makes any sense, and that would be their feeling of unworthiness to handle the host and yet, as we have seen, the words of St James quoted above must surely convince us that the tongue is no more or less worthy than the hand, and, more to the point, receiving food in our hands and feeding ourselves is the normal and natural way to eat.

Having said all of that, the bottom line remains that while our Bishops' Conference allows the reception of the Body of the Lord in the hand, the choice to receive in this manner, or not to, is the prerogative of the communicant

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And so to a rather nice (I think) closing thought not unconnected with what we have been saying though not part of my argument...

Perhaps because the majority of people are right-handed, when they receive communion in the hand it tends to be with their left hand on top of their right so that they can then pick up the host with their right hand to transfer it to their mouth. This means that as the priest, or minister of holy communion, places the host on their hand, it sometimes inadvertently comes into contact with their wedding ring. It occurs to me that Our Lord, in the Blessed Sacrament, thus touches – and so by contact blesses – that symbol of the vowed commitment of life and love they made to their spouse. (At the same time of course, and as nice as the thought might be, it shouldn't become the reason for receiving communion in the hand, nor a distraction to doing so – but if it happens, it's a thought.)

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