

Eucharist: From Then to Now and How We Got Here

How do you receive communion? In the hand or on the tongue? Standing or kneeling? Why? What is canonically permitted? What is liturgically correct? What does your heart say? Let's take a look at history and at reality.

Today – In the Vatican

The Vatican does not allow communion in the hand. One key reason is because tourists were taking the Holy Eucharist home as a souvenir of their trip to Rome.

Today – In the United States

In response to a provision of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops describes the methods of distributing Holy Communion to the faithful under both kinds and approves the following norms¹, with the proper *recognitio* of the Apostolic See²:

1. Holy Communion under the form of bread is offered to the communicant with the words “The Body of Christ.” The communicant may choose whether to receive the Body of Christ in the hand or on the tongue. When receiving in the hand, the communicant should be guided by the words of St. Cyril of Jerusalem: “When you approach, take care not to do so with your hand stretched out and your fingers open or apart, but rather place your left hand as a throne beneath your right, as befits one who is about to receive the King. Then receive him, taking care that nothing is lost.”³
2. Among the ways of ministering the Precious Blood as prescribed by the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, Communion from the chalice is generally the preferred form in the Latin Church, provided that it can be carried out properly according to the norms and without any risk of even apparent irreverence toward the Blood of Christ.⁴
3. It is the choice of the communicant, not the minister, to receive from the chalice.⁵
4. Children are encouraged to receive Communion under both kinds provided that they are properly instructed and that they are old enough to receive from the chalice.⁶

Further, the *General Instruction* asks each country's Conference of Bishops to determine the posture to be used for the reception of Communion and the act of reverence to be made by each

¹ “Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America” (USCCB)

² Cf. GIRM, no. 283. The text before approval of Adaptations for the Dioceses of the United States of America read, “As to the manner of distributing Holy Communion under both kinds to the faithful and the extent of the faculty for doing so, the Conferences of Bishops may publish norms, once their decisions have received the *recognitio* of the Apostolic See.”

³ Ibid, No. 41

⁴ Ibid, No. 42

⁵ Ibid, No. 46

⁶ Ibid, No. 47

person as he or she receives Communion. In the United States, the body of Bishops determined that Communion should be received standing, and that a bow is the act of reverence made by those receiving. These norms may require some adjustment on the part of those who have been used to other practices, however the significance of unity in posture and gesture as a symbol of our unity as members of the one body of Christ should be the governing factor in our own actions. At the same time, the body of Bishops have decided that those who kneel to receive Holy Communion should not be denied the Sacrament.

I argue that we must preserve the practice of taking communion on the tongue for two reasons:

1. Because it is based on a practice transmitted through a tradition of many centuries. This alludes to a principle that goes back to [the times] of Aristotle: For the law has no power to command obedience except that of custom, which can only be given by time, so that a readiness to change from old to new laws enfeebles the power of the law⁷; this same doctrine is later restored by Saint Thomas⁸.
2. But above all, because that liturgical gesture means the reverence of the faithful Christian toward the Eucharist. Note the force of this expression used after saying that the Church affirms by the very rite itself its faith in Christ and its adoration of Him⁹. This meaning of reverence was so well known that Protestant reformers, such as Martin Bucer, counsellor of the Anglican reform, strove to change the practice and introduce Communion in the hand so that their faithful would not think that Christ was present under the form of bread.

The practice of receiving Holy Communion in the hand first began to spread in Catholic circles during the early 1960s, primarily in Holland. Shortly after Vatican II, due to the escalating abuses in certain non-English speaking countries (Holland, Belgium, France, and Germany), Pope Paul VI took a survey of the world's bishops to ascertain their opinions on the subject. On 28 May 1969, the Congregation for Divine Worship issued *Memoriale Domini*, which concluded:

“From the responses received, it is thus clear that by far the greater number of bishops feel that the present discipline [i.e., Holy Communion on the tongue] should not be changed at all, indeed that if it were changed, this would be offensive to the sensibility and spiritual appreciation of these bishops and of most of the faithful.”

After he had considered the observation and the counsel of the bishops, the Supreme Pontiff judged that the long-received manner of ministering Holy Communion to the faithful should not be changed. The Apostolic See then strongly urged bishops, priests and the laity to zealously observe this law out of concern for the common good of the Church.

Despite the vote, in 1969, Pope Paul VI decided to strike a compromise with his disobedient bishops on the continent. Given “the gravity of the matter,” the pope would not authorize Communion in the hand. He was, however, open to bestowing an indult under certain conditions: first, an indult could not be given to a country in which Communion in the hand was not an already

⁷ *Politics*, II, c. 5, 1269a

⁸ *Summa Theologicae*, I-IIae, q. 97, a. 2

⁹ *Mediator Dei*

established practice; second, the bishops in countries where it was established must approve of the practice “by a secret vote and with a two-thirds majority.” Beyond this, the Holy See set down seven regulations concerning communion in the hand; failure to maintain these regulations could result in the loss of the indult. The first three regulations concerned¹⁰:

1. respecting the laity who continue the traditional practice (of receiving kneeling and on the tongue);
2. maintaining the laity’s proper respect of the Eucharist; and
3. increasing the laity’s faith in the real presence.

How did Communion in the hand come to America?

In 1970, the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions (FDLC) conducted a survey to determine whether American Catholics supported the practice of Communion in the hand. 92 dioceses reported that, at least on a limited basis, the distribution of Communion in this way had already begun in their region. 106 believed that the American bishops should seek official permission to implement this practice on a larger scale. At the time, about 50% of the laity supported this idea (especially younger people).

The results of the survey led the FDLC to send a proposal to the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy (BCL) advocating that the American bishops petition Rome to allow them to authorize the adoption of Communion in the hand in their respective dioceses. The BCL agreed, and suggested that the bishops vote on the issue at the NCCB meeting in November 1970. The proposal sent to the NCCB recommended that an individual bishop be allowed to permit the practice of Communion in the hand if: the individual receiving the Eucharist could indicate the manner in which he would like to receive the sacrament; the role played by the minister of Communion was maintained; and the introduction of the practice was preceded by catechesis so that devout Catholics could learn the reasons for introducing this change. The bishops rejected this proposal.

In 1975 and again in 1976, Archbishop Joseph Bernardin, the president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) attempted in vain to garner two-thirds of the bishops to vote in favor of receiving Communion in the hand. In 1977, the last year of Bernardin’s term as president, he made a third attempt to garner the required votes. Bernardin appointed Archbishop John R. Quinn, who became Bernardin’s immediate successor as NCCB president, to be the chief lobbyist for Communion in the hand with the idea that “not to have the option is more irreverent to the Blessed Sacrament than to have it.”

During the proceedings, a brave bishop requested a survey of the bishops be taken. The proposed survey would ask each bishop whether or not Communion in the hand was widely practiced in his diocese, for without the practice’s current wide-use the first condition of the indult would not be satisfied.

¹⁰ Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship. Letter “*En reponse a la demande*” to presidents of those conferences of bishops petitioning the indult for communion in the hand, 29 May 1969: AAS 61 (1969) 546-547; Not 5 (1969) 351-353.

Of course, everyone knew that Communion in the hand was not a previously established practice in the United States.

Though his request was seconded and supported in writing by five other bishops, Bernardin had the motion dismissed as “out of order.” Bishops attending the May 1977 meeting voted and approved the practice; but because a two-thirds majority was not achieved, Bernardin needed to do something else. At this point Bernardin decided to (unlawfully) begin gathering “absentee votes” from any bishop he could find – including retired bishops who no longer administered any dioceses. These new votes (i.e., from those bishops not present in the meeting) cast their votes during the second week of June. When the votes were counted, two-thirds of the American bishops had approved the distribution of Communion in the hand. Word that their action had been approved by the Holy See was received on 27 June 1977, and the practice “officially” began on 20 November 1977.

What about Pope Paul VI’s regulations that could result in the loss of the indult? Let’s consider each of the initial three regulations in turn:

1. Respecting the laity who continue the traditional practice (of receiving kneeling and on the tongue)
 - Reports are now widespread of priests refusing Communion to those who wish to receive kneeling and on the tongue. Even reports of priests berating people for this. I have heard of an instance in which a man was traveling and attended Mass where he proceeded to kneel and indicate that he wished to receive on the tongue. The minister of Holy Communion refused and ended up walking away from him. He remained. Finally, the priest came over and said, “Get up son, we don’t do it that way here.” My friend said, “So, you are refusing me Communion?” The priest said, “Yes, I am.” He got up, walked out and reported him to the chancery.
Note: It is a severe infraction against canon law for any priest to do this.
2. Maintaining the laity’s proper respect of the Eucharist
 - Here is a testimony from a Deacon:
 - I’ve watched a mother receive communion, her toddler in tow, then take it back to the pew and share it with him like a cookie.
 - At least four or five times a year, I have to stop someone who just takes the host and wanders away with it and ask them to consume it on the spot.
 - Once or twice a month I encounter the droppers. Many are well-intentioned folks who somewhere, somehow, drop the host or it slides out of their hands and Jesus tumbles to the floor.
 - I’ve found the Eucharist in a hymnal, under a pew, in the bathroom and in the parking lot.

3. Strengthening the laity's faith in the Real Presence:
 - In 1950, 87% believed in the Real Presence. Today, that number has dropped to less than 55%¹¹. The abusive and hurried manner in which the practice of Communion in the hand was imposed after Vatican II led to a widespread lack of reverence for the Eucharist and caused great pain for many in the Church. It disoriented many people, who with real justification — especially in light of the recent and overwhelming loss of faith in the Eucharist as the real presence — feared that the very heart of Catholic belief had been compromised.

From the status of these three regulations, we can conclude that canonically speaking, Pope Paul VI's indult must be stripped from the United States.

Historically Speaking...

The first Christians still frequented the synagogues and, in many cases, observed Jewish dietary regulations. Centuries passed before the true nature of the Trinity and the Divine nature of Christ were fully clarified. Forms of worship used in times of persecution were clearly no longer adequate when the Christians emerged from the catacombs and were presented with great basilicas. As with other doctrines, without ever contradicting what had been previously believed, the nature of the Sacrifice of the Mass and the Real Presence of Our Lord in the Eucharist became more and more apparent, and this was reflected in the liturgy. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* (i.e., the manner in which the Church worships will reflect what she believes). Cardinal Newman correctly observed¹² that “a developed doctrine which reverses the course of development which has preceded it, is no true development but a corruption; also that what is corrupt acts as an element of unhealthiness towards what is sound.” A more accurate description of the nature and effect of the reversal of development which has occurred with the introduction of Communion in the hand does not exist.

Scholars are not clear why the transition took place – differing explanations are given and there is probably some truth in many of them. The precise reason is, however, unimportant. What is important is that the change must have been made for good reason under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The change to unleavened bread is given as one reason; the fear of abuse is another; Fr. Jungmann cites “growing respect for the Eucharist” as the decisive reason¹³.

A study of patristic and early medieval sources reveals not only a continually heightened appreciation of the Eucharist as the true Body and Blood of Christ – not simply to be received, but to be adored – but of the nature of the Mass as a solemn Sacrifice, the prime purpose of which is the adoration of Almighty God. The essential sacrificial act required a validly ordained priest, wheaten bread, and wine. It was offered by the priest acting in the person of Christ. The laity had the awesome privilege of being present at the Sacrifice – but the liturgy naturally and logically

¹¹ U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, Pew Forum on Religious & Public Life (2010). More than four-in-ten Catholics in the United States (45%) do not know that their church teaches that the bread and wine used in Communion do not merely symbolize but actually become the body and blood of Christ.

¹² John Henry Newman, “An essay on the development of Christian doctrine,” (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), p. 202

¹³ *The Mass of the Roman Rite* (London, 1959), p. 510.

came to accentuate the primary role of the priest and the solemnity of the Sacrifice. A booklet of propaganda in favor of communion in the hand, *The Body of Christ*, issued by the American Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, writes of this as if it were something to be condemned:

“In the eighth and ninth centuries, the laity were almost completely excluded from the celebration. They no longer took the offerings to the altar during Mass, but were required to do so beforehand; the singing was done by the *schola* only; the general intercessions disappeared; the faithful could no longer see what was happening on the altar because the priest was in front of the altar, now sometimes completely surrounded and completely hidden by the *iconostasis*; the canon was said quietly and everything took place in silence or in a language less understood by the people.”

This reads like a list of complaints made by a 16th century Protestant Reformer and, in most of the instances given, is a condemnation of the present liturgical practice of the Orthodox and Eastern-rite Catholics. As an example of the shoddy scholarship in this pamphlet, and all the propaganda for Communion in the hand, it needs only to be pointed out that the very idea of the faithful needing to see “what was happening on the altar” would have been totally alien to the Christians of this time, as Fr. Charles Napier, Superior of the London Oratory, has pointed out¹⁴. Similarly, from the time that Christians first had churches, it was the almost invariable custom for Mass to be offered facing the East, and so the priest always stood before the altar with his back to the congregation.

Once the true nature of the Mass is grasped, once there is a true understanding of what takes place when a priest of God pronounces the awesome words of consecration, it is not hard to understand why the most solemn moments of the Sacrifice take place behind the iconostasis in the Eastern Churches. It is, indeed, a matter for wonder that any priest dares to pronounce these words or that the laity dare to be present when he does. There is a passage in the ancient liturgy of St. James which expresses perfectly the attitude which sinful men should adopt in the presence of this mystery, an attitude epitomized perfectly by the manner in which Mass was celebrated by the close of the ninth century, but which is found totally deplorable by today's proponents of Communion in the hand. The passage reads:

“Let all mortal flesh be silent, and stand with fear and trembling, and meditate nothing earthly within itself for the King of kings and Lord of lords, Christ our God, comes forward to be sacrificed, and to be given for food to the faithful; and the bands of Angels go before Him with every power and dominion, the many-eyed cherubim, and the six-winged seraphim, covering their faces, and crying aloud the hymn, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.”

The key issue of the debate concerning the escalating imposition of Communion in the hand is not whether it was once widespread in the early Church, but whether it should be introduced in the present day. In order to simplify the debate, let it be conceded, for the sake of argument, that for some centuries it was considered acceptable for the priest to place the host in the hand of the communicant. There is, however, definite evidence that, in at least some regions, the laity were receiving Communion on the tongue by the end of the sixth century¹⁵. The *Roman Ordo* of the

¹⁴ *The Clergy Review*, August 1972, p. 628

¹⁵ St. Gregory, Dialogues, iii, 3; *Patrologiae cursus completes – Series Latina*, lxxvii, 224

ninth century accepts Communion on the tongue as the normal practice¹⁶. The Council of Rouen in the year 650 condemned the reception of Communion in the hand by the laity as an abuse, saying, “Do not put the Eucharist in the hands of any layman or laywomen but only in their mouths.” The 6th Ecumenical Council at Constantinople (680–681) prohibited the faithful from giving Communion to themselves (which is of course what happens when the Sacred Particle is placed in the hand of the communicant). It decreed an excommunication of one week’s duration for those who would do so in the presence of a bishop, priest or deacon. These documents from early Church councils clearly indicate that the reception of Holy Communion upon the tongue must have already become the established practice¹⁷.

It is often noted that there is evidence for “Holy Communion in the hand” in the writings of the early Church. Whenever this argument is presented, we should note that it does not provide the context for this situation in the early Church. It is true that Holy Communion in the hand did happen. However, when we read the Patristic passages in context we discover the reasons why Holy Communion in the hand was tolerated and the conditions under which it was permitted.

We note *ab initio* that St. Leo the Great (ca. 400–461) and St. Gregory the Great (540–604) are early witnesses to Communion on the tongue as the normative. In his comments on the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, St. Leo speaks of Communion in the mouth as the current usage: “One receives in the mouth what one believes by faith” (Sermon 91.3). The Pope does not speak as if he were introducing a novelty, but as if this were a well-established fact.

However, Saint Basil (ca. 329–379) admits that Communion on the hand did happen. Saint Basil explicitly explains that Communion in the Hand was only allowed under certain circumstances:

“If one feels he should in times of persecution, in the absence of a priest or deacon, receive Communion by his own hand, there should be no need to point out that this certainly shows no grave immoderation for long custom allows this in such cases. In fact, all solitaries in the desert, where there is no priest, reserving Communion in their dwellings, receive It from their own hands.”

Therefore, St. Basil provides¹⁸ the reasons that communion in the hand may be allowed and the conditions under which it was permitted; i.e., (1) during times of persecution where no priest is present, and (2) for hermits and ascetics in the wilderness who do not have priests. Further, St. Basil says that that Communion in the hand under any other circumstance is “grave immoderation.” Therefore, the laity were allowed to hold and touch the Holy Eucharist with their hands only in *exceptional cases* and was not the norm.

Let us now turn to the most controversial quote regarding Holy Communion in the hand. Even today¹⁹, the reasons come from one of the five mystagogical (i.e., post-Easter) lectures ascribed to

¹⁶ *Patrologiae cursus completes – Series Latina*, lxxvii, 994

¹⁷ Some authorities place the Synod of Rouen in the mid-ninth century; others speak of two Synods. It is the fact that Communion in the hand was condemned as an abuse which matters, not the exact date of the Synod.

¹⁸ Letter 93

¹⁹ See the text from the USCCB, above.

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem in ca. 350. We currently have 18 undoubted lectures from Saint Cyril given to his catechumens in preparation for Holy Baptism at Easter. There are an additional five mystagogical lectures allegedly given by Cyril to this same group of people (at which point his audience has been baptized, confirmed, and has received the Holy Eucharist). Note that the five follow-up lectures are highly debated and may not be authentic. In other words, they may have may been added by someone other than Saint Cyril. In fact, there exist manuscripts that do not attribute these five lectures to Saint Cyril. Hence, it is *not* entirely responsible to quote these last five lectures as a valid authority.

In any case, the classic “communion in the hand” passage from the fifth mystagogical lecture of St. Cyril says²⁰:

“When thou goest to receive communion go not with thy wrists extended, nor with thy fingers separated, but 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, saying, Amen.”

This is the passage on which the Patristic argument for Communion in the Hand stands or falls. Whereas there is this one alleged quote from St. Cyril, there are many undoubted quotes by other Church Fathers that affirm Communion on the tongue (e.g., Popes Saint Leo the Great and Saint Gregory the Great) explicitly witness to Communion on the tongue.

Further, the “make your hand a throne” passage quoted above and by the USCCB is incomplete; the entire passage reads as follows:

“In approaching therefore, come not with your wrists extended, or your fingers spread; but make your left hand a throne for the right, as for that which is to receive a King. And having hollowed your palm, receive the Body of Christ, saying over it, Amen. So then after having carefully hallowed your eyes by the touch of the Holy Body, partake of it; giving heed lest you lose any portion thereof; for whatever you lose, is evidently a loss to you as it were from one of your own members. For tell me, if any one gave you grains of gold, would you not hold them with all carefulness, being on your guard against losing any of them, and suffering loss? Will you not then much more carefully keep watch, that not a crumb fall from you of what is more precious than gold and precious stones?

Then after you have partaken of the Body of Christ, draw near also to the Cup of His Blood; not stretching forth your hands, but bending, and saying with an air of worship and reverence, “Amen” and, hallow yourself by partaking also of the Blood of Christ. And while the moisture is still upon your lips, touch it with your hands, and hallow your eyes and brow and the other organs of sense. Then wait for the prayer, and give thanks unto God, who has accounted you worthy of so great mysteries.

²⁰ *Catechesis mystagogica* V, xxi–xxii, Migne *Patrologia Graeca* 33

Hold fast these traditions undefiled and, keep yourselves free from offense. Sever not yourselves from the Communion; deprive not yourselves, despite the pollution of sins, of these Holy and Spiritual Mysteries.”

If this passage is authentic²¹, some St. Cyril’s practices indicated here (include wiping one’s eyes and brow with leftover particles and residue from the Eucharist – a practice absent in the testimony of all other Church Fathers) seem unorthodox. Furthermore, the last sentence cited above should raise pious eyebrows: St. Cyril apparently exhorts all to receive Communion “despite the pollution of sins”, in direct contradiction of the Apostle Paul’s teaching on worthy reception of the Eucharist²², and at odds with the practice of other liturgies of the time.

Therefore, we have a text of dubious origin and questionable content that is in favor of communion in the hand. On the other hand, we have reliable witnesses, including two popes, that placing the Sacred Host in the mouth of the communicant was already common and unremarkable in at last the fifth century.

The two current methods of distributing Holy Communion can be seen as symbolizing two conflicting attitudes to the Mass: those who consider it primarily as an awesome Sacrifice offered to Almighty God, with all possible solemnity and reverence; and those who consider it the convivial gathering of a mutual self-admiration society. The present conflict can, in fact, be seen as a symbol of the struggle within the Church between those who see Christianity as the cult of God and those who consider it to be the cult of man.

Dietrich von Hildebrand had noticed the direction the innovations were taking as early as 1966, noting²³:

“The basic error of most of the innovations is to imagine that the new liturgy brings the holy sacrifice of the Mass nearer to the faithful, that shorn of its rituals the Mass now enters the substance of our lives. For the question is whether we better meet Christ in the Mass by soaring up to Him, or by dragging Him down into our workaday world. The innovators would replace holy intimacy with Christ by an unbecoming familiarity. The new liturgy actually threatens to frustrate the confrontation with Christ. It discourages reverence in the face of mystery, precludes awe, and all but extinguishes a sense of sacredness.”

But surely the apostles received Communion in the hand at the last supper? It is usually presumed that this was so. Even if it were, though, we would point out that the apostles were themselves priests (or even bishops). We must not forget a traditional practice of middle-eastern hospitality, which was practiced in Jesus’ time and which is still the case: one feeds one’s guests with one’s own hand, placing a symbolic morsel in the mouth of the guest. And we have scriptural evidence

²¹ Recent textual and historical analysis reveals that these sections are likely interpolations from Cyril’s successor, John, who succumbed to Arian influence; additional evidence comes from the correspondence of St. Epiphanius, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine.

²² See 1st Corinthians 11:27-32

²³ Dietrich von Hildebrand, “The Case for the Latin Mass,” *Triumph*, 1(2), October 1966

of this as well: our Lord dipped a morsel of bread into some wine, and gave it to Judas. Did he place this wet morsel into Judas's hand?

After persecution had ceased, evidently the practice of Communion in the hand persisted here and there. It was considered by Church authority to be an abuse to be rid of, since it was deemed to be contrary to the custom of the apostles.

What does Holy Scripture say?

Let's start with a very clear point. In English, we are used to hearing the words of consecration/institution in the form "take this, all of you, and eat" or "take this, all of you, and drink." Because of this, many interpret this as a command to actively take the Eucharist, again trying to justify Communion in the hand. This is (yet) another case when we need to examine the text in its original Greek.

Simply put, the English translation of the word "take" is incorrect. The Greek word λαμβανω (lambano) does not have the connotation of active taking as in English; the verb really signifies a passive taking, or more accurately, to receive. Matthew 26:26 says:

Λαβετε φαγετε, τουτο εστιν το σωμα μου
("receive and eat, for this is my body").

By contrast, the idea of actively taking (as opposed to passive taking, or receiving) is denoted by the verb αιρω (airo); in John 1:29, we find:

Ιδε ο αμνοζ του θεου ο αιρων την αμαρτιαν του κοσμου
("Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.").

This distinction between λαμβανω (passive) and αιρω (active) is preserved in St. Jerome's translation of the Bible (i.e., the Vulgate), as well as in the Latin liturgy (which predates St. Jerome). In Matthew's Last Supper, we find *accipite et comedite: hoc est corpus meum*; in the Mass, we recognize *accipite et maducate ex hoc omnes: hoc est enim corpus meum*. In the Gospel of John, we find *ecce agnus Dei qui tollit peccatum mundi*, while in Mass we hear *ecce Agnus Dei, ecce qui tollit peccata mundi*. The verb *accipere* denotes passive reception, while *tollere* indicates active taking. Other instances of the verb *tollere* is found in the dream of St. Augustine, who encounters the vision of a boy who exhorts, *tolle et lege!* ("take and read!"); further, in the Preface for Requiem Masses, we find *vita mutatur non tollitur* ("life is changed, not taken away"). Thus, receiving the Eucharist is exactly that – receiving it passively, for we are fed the bread of heaven. We do not take it for ourselves.

When Ezekiel received the word of God, in a wonderful yet lesser manner than do we, it was as follows²⁴:

And [the Lord] said to me: ... “But you, son of man, hear what I say to you; be not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth, and eat what I give you.” And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and, lo, a written scroll was in it ... And He said to me, “Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go speak to the house of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and He gave me the scroll to eat [“And I opened my mouth, and He caused me to eat that book” - Vulgate]. And he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.” Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

This passage from Holy Scripture does not say that the prophet stretched out his hand, but that he opened his mouth. This is quite fitting, since we are to receive the word as little children, whether it be the bread of doctrine or the Bread come down from Heaven.

In another place with clear prophetic, Eucharistic overtones (Psalm 81) that is used in the Office of Corpus Christi²⁵, the Lord says to us,

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you from the land of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it ... But Israel I would feed with finest wheat and fill them with honey from the rock.”

Note again that the Lord says, “I will fill it,” not “fill it yourselves.”

The Return of an Ancient Heresy?

The only people to communicate always standing and with their hands outstretched from the beginning were the Arians²⁶, who obstinately denied the Divinity of Christ and who could not see in the Eucharist any more than a simple symbol of “union,” which can be taken and handled at will. From here, we can see that the practice of receiving Holy Communion in the hand in Catholic circles in the 1960s was a Protestant attempt to undermine the Catholic dogma of the Real Presence. Sadly, millions of present-day Catholics, including many prelates and priests, have been practically converted to Arianism.

²⁴ Ezekiel 2:1,8,9; 3:1-3

²⁵ Psalm 81:10,16

²⁶ Arian teachings were attributed to Arius (256-336), and were opposed to the theological view held by Homoousian Christians. The Homoousian interpretation was affirmed by the first two Ecumenical Councils, and Arianism was deemed as heresy by the First Council of Nicea (325).

Other Arguments: *Why Receive on the tongue?*

Despite the widespread practice of Communion in the hand, the universal discipline of receiving Holy Communion on the tongue has not changed. A bishop, for example, may forbid the practice of Communion in the hand but not the practice of Communion on the tongue. The Church strongly encourages the latter but not the former. With respect to Communion in the hand, the Church speaks only in a cautionary tone because of the many abuses that often accompany this practice.

St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us, with respect to Communion in the hand, that reverence demands that only what has been consecrated should touch the Blessed Sacrament. He writes:

The dispensing of Christ's body belongs to the priest for three reasons. First, because ... he consecrates in the person of Christ ... Secondly, because the priest is the appointed intermediary between God and the people, hence as it belongs to him to offer the people's gifts to God, so it belongs to him to deliver the consecrated gifts to the people. Thirdly, because out of reverence toward this sacrament 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. Hence it is not lawful for anyone else to touch it, except from necessity — for instance, if it were to fall upon the ground, or else in some other case of urgency.

In his apostolic letter *Dominicae Cenaе*, St. Pope John Paul II also states: “How eloquent, therefore, even if not of ancient custom, is the rite of the anointing of the hands in our Latin ordination, as though precisely for these hands a special grace and power of the Holy Spirit is necessary. To touch the sacred species, and to distribute them with their own hands, is a privilege of the ordained, one which indicates an active participation in the ministry of the Eucharist.”

St. Mother Teresa reportedly said, “Wherever I go in the whole world, the thing that makes me the saddest is watching people receive Communion in the hand.” Even St. Pope John Paul II reportedly said: “There is an apostolic letter on the existence of a special valid permission for this [Communion in the hand]. But I tell you that I am not in favor of this practice, nor do I recommend it.”

Become *less* so that you can then become *more*.

Communion on the tongue helps to foster a proper sense of reverence and piety. To step up to a communion rail, and kneel, and receive on the tongue, is an act of utter and unabashed humility. In that posture to receive the Body of Christ, you become less so that you can then become more. It requires a submission of will and clear knowledge of what you are doing, why you are doing it, and what is about to happen to you.

Frankly, we should not only be humbled, but intimidated enough to ask ourselves if we are really spiritually ready to partake of the sacrament. Kneeling means you can't just go up and receive without knowing how it's properly done. It demands not only a sense of focus and purpose, but also something else, something that has eluded our worship for two generations.

It demands a sense of the sacred. Just like Peter, James and John before our Transfigured Lord, it challenges us to kneel before wonder. It insists that we not only fully understand what is happening, but that we fully appreciate the breathtaking generosity behind it. It asks us to be mindful of what “Eucharist” really means: Thanksgiving.

From Meg Hunter-Kilmer²⁷:

I need more awkward helplessness in my life. Until I started hoboing (or maybe just until I gave away my car and had to depend on others for rides for three years) I was about the most self-sufficient person you could find. I was intelligent and independent and privileged and my life was totally under control.

The trouble with that is that my life wasn’t under my control at all. Nobody’s is. I lived with the illusion of control and it made me into my own God. When he asked me to receive on the tongue, he was asking me to be helpless before him, to be a passive recipient instead of the master of my own destiny. The reluctance to receive on the tongue was largely a fear of presenting myself helpless before another person, helpless before my God. Every time I receive with my hands folded in prayer, there’s a slight feeling of weakness and surrender. It reminds me that in eating the flesh and blood of Christ I’m surrendering myself to death for him who gave himself for me. It’s yet another way that I try to let him be Lord of my life. For me, receiving in the hands just doesn’t have that symbolism.

I’m kissing my bridegroom. This is really what pulled me to change my approach to communion in the first place. I’d been praying about how Jesus was the bridegroom and I was his bride, meditating on the fact that I walk down to the aisle to receive my bridegroom in the most intimate way possible. Communion felt like an embrace to me and receiving in the hand was too sterile. I needed the intimacy of the kiss to remind me just what was happening. I’m not saying that receiving in the hand is a handshake in comparison to the kiss of receiving on the tongue, but it began to feel that way to me. At the risk of sharing too much, I needed to approach my lover with my eyes closed and my lips parted. The Eucharist is that intimate whether I notice it or not but I prefer to notice it.

The tongue is extremely sensitive. In ten years of receiving in the hand, I don’t think I once had a meditation prompted by the way the priest handed me the host. He put it in my hands, I walked away. Simple enough. But if you receive on the tongue, you know there are a thousand ways it can feel different and the Holy Spirit speaks to me through that.

In the first few months after I switched over, it always felt as though Jesus was being pressed firmly onto my tongue. Then one day I was at Mass struggling with how hard everything in my life seemed to be. When I went to communion, the host was placed so gently on my tongue that it was like the softest kiss, my Jesus telling me that life wasn’t all hard if I was so sweetly loved by Love. Another time the EM barely touched my tongue and I had to grab at Jesus with my teeth and pull him into my mouth lest he drop. He reminded me that sometimes I have to run after him and cling to him. Sometimes a deacon will see my hands folded over my heart and think I want a

²⁷ Ms. Hunter-Kilmer is a Catholic missionary and blogger. You can read her work at <http://www.piercedhands.com>.

blessing. Even that awkwardness reminds me how much I want Jesus, enough that my heart sinks when I think I might be deprived. Call me a Pietist but I enjoy having feelings when I pray and if doing something that the Church recommends draws my heart deeper in o prayer, I'm all about it.

Quotes from Popes, Saints, and 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.
- The Council of Saragossa (380): Excommunicated anyone who dared continue receiving Holy Communion by hand. This was confirmed by the Synod of Toledo (400).
- Pope St. Leo the Great is one of the most ancient witnesses to the practice of Communion on the tongue. Notably, St. Leo the Great read the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel as referring to the Eucharist (as all the Church Fathers did). In a preserved sermon on John 6²⁸, Saint Leo says:

“Hoc enim ore sumitur quod fide creditor”

This is translated strictly as: “This indeed is received by means of the mouth which we believe by means of faith.” *Ore* is here in the ablative and in this context, it denotes instrumentation. Therefore, the mouth is the means by which the Holy Eucharist is received.

- The Synod of Rouen (650): Condemned Communion in the hand to halt widespread abuses that occurred from this practice, and as a safeguard against sacrilege. “Do not put the Eucharist in the hands of any layman or laywoman but only in their mouths.”
- 6th Ecumenical Council, at Constantinople (680–681): Forbade the faithful to take the Sacred Host in their hand, threatening transgressors with excommunication.
- St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)²⁹: “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.”
- 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)³⁰: “This method [on the tongue] must be retained.”
- Pope St. John Paul II: “To touch the sacred species and to distribute them with their own hands is a privilege of the ordained.”³¹ and “It is not permitted that the faithful should themselves pick up the consecrated bread and the sacred chalice, still less that they should hand them from one to another.”³²

²⁸ Sermon 91.3

²⁹ *Summa Theologica*, Part III, Q. 82, Art. 3, Rep. Obj. 8.

³⁰ *Memoriale Domini*

³¹ *Dominicae Cenaе*, 11

³² *Inaestimabile Donum*, April 17, 1980, sec. 9