

Ritual Indeterminacy in Receiving Communion

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Abstract

How is Holy Communion to be received: on the tongue or by the hand? More than being a possible source of ritual failure, the indeterminacy ensuing from this binary option can lead to a revitalizing experience of the Eucharist. Considering that the mass is a heavily structured and scripted ritual, this paper explores how this particular indeterminacy of receiving communion opens up opportunities for dynamism and liminality and thus creating a more dynamic and meaningful experience of the sacrament.

Introduction

Digression and mistakes in executing the liturgical rubric can shatter the solemnity of a Catholic liturgy. When such moments happen, it can elicit either the irritation or the stifled laughter of the entire congregation. The most solemn of all Catholic liturgies is the Eucharist, more popularly known as the Mass. In Catholicism, the celebration of the Eucharist is the highest form of worship. The theologian Richard McBrien explains that the preeminence of the Eucharist can be summed up in two basic doctrines: that “Christ is present in the Eucharist even before it is used” and that the “Liturgy” in the “divine sacrifice of the Eucharist” is the “outstanding means whereby the faithful can express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the Church”.¹ In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Eucharist is further described as the “source and summit of the Christian life.”² Priests of the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church are obligated to celebrate mass regularly. In spite of this regularity, masses are prone to awkward liturgical situations.

A particular personal incident, which has been repeated on many instances, comes to mind. During the communion rite, there was this middle-aged man who was about to receive communion from me, as the priest. As he stood in front of me, he simultaneously opened his mouth and extended his hand, which confused me as to where I should place the Body of Christ. Right then, the previously smooth procedure of distributing communion halted for a bit, we engaged in an awkward exchange of gestures, as both of us could not determine how the host

¹Richard Peter McBrien, *Catholicism* (North Blackburn, Victoria: HarperCollins, 1994) 820.

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1324.

was to be received. Eventually, I ended up placing the host in the man's open palm and resolved the situation.

How is Holy Communion to be received: on the tongue or by the hand? There is a history to this dilemma. In the nascent period of the Church, the communion was customarily received by the hand, up until the Byzantine liturgy in the 7th century.³ Beginning in the 9th century, the practice shifted to communion on the tongue.⁴ This custom continued until the late 1960s, when communion by the hand was once more permitted by the Catholic Church.⁵ Since then, Catholics have expressed differing opinions on which manner of receiving communion is more desirable and appropriate.

In examining this particular moment in the reception of communion, this paper will argue that, instead of threatening the efficacy of the ritual, the indeterminacy inherent in this part of the rite can be revitalizing. In this paper, I will begin by providing a thick description of the liturgical phenomenon that will be examined. Next, I will pose a counterargument that this dilemma can result in a ritual failure. I will then argue that this is not the case, by approaching this ritual as a performance. The final part will address how two key aspects of this rite can revitalize the ritual and its participants.

³See Cheslyn Jones, "The New Testament" in *The Study of Liturgy*, eds. C. Jones, G. Wainright, & E. Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1978), 154; Edward Yarnold, "The Liturgy of the Faithful in the Fourth and Early Fifth Centuries" in *The Study of Liturgy*, 194; Hugh Wybrew, "The Byzantine Liturgy from the Apostolic Constitutions to the Present Day" in *The Study of Liturgy*, 297.

⁴Wybrew, *The Byzantine Liturgy*, 297.

⁵ See Pope Paul VI, *Memoriale Domini: Instruction on the Manner of Distributing Holy Communion*.