

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Make of Your Hand a Throne...

One of the joys of being a deacon is having the opportunity to give out Holy Communion every weekend at the Sunday Masses. It's a privilege—and can also be a challenge.

It seems everybody has a different way of receiving the Body of Christ. Some people hold out one hand, as if waiting for a five-dollar bill at the bank; some grab the host (a priest I know calls them the “body snatchers”); some don't know what to do with their hands and turn them into a kind of cup. After receiving, some people say “Thank you,” others say nothing. Most people consume the host then and there; I've had to stop a few, though, who wander away with it, as if it's a snack to be saved for later on.

Given all that, I think a refresher course is in order. It's helpful to recall the writings of one of the Fathers of the Church, from the 4th century:

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. 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.

What was true more than 1,600 years ago is just as valid today. And Rome agrees. A few years ago, the Vatican approved an update on the General Instruction of the Roman Missal—the ultimate guide for all things liturgical. It describes that moment in the Mass this way:

When receiving Holy Communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the Sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the Body of the Lord from the minister. The consecrated host may be received either on the tongue or in the hand, at the discretion of each communicant. If Communion is given only under the species of bread, the Priest raises the host slightly and shows it to each, saying, ‘The Body of Christ.’ The communicant replies, ‘Amen,’ and receives the Sacrament either on the tongue or, where this is allowed, in the hand, the choice lying with the communicant. As soon as the communicant receives the host, he or she consumes the whole of it.

In summary:

- When receiving in the hand, place one hand under the other. Before receiving, make a slight bow as a sign of reverence.
- When the minister of Holy Communion says “The Body of Christ,” respond with “Amen.”
- With the lower hand, pick up the Body of Christ and consume it before going back to your seat.

Finally, there's the issue of whether to receive in the hand or on the tongue. Several years ago, the Congregation for Divine Worship issued an instruction called *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, which noted:

Although each of the faithful always has the right to receive Holy Communion on the tongue, at his choice, if any communicant should wish to receive the Sacrament in the hand ... the sacred host is to be administered to him or her. However, special care should be taken to ensure that the host is consumed by the communicant in the presence of the minister, so that no one goes away carrying the Eucharistic species in his hand.

I think what is most important is maintaining a sense of reverence and even awe. This is no ordinary bread. This is Christ himself. As I've mentioned in homilies, this is God, the creator of all, humbling himself to something no bigger than a coin.

When you consider what we have been given, it is overwhelming. How can we possibly be worthy of such a gift? That wise instruction from the 4th century added an apt comparison—and did it with great clarity, I think, and simplicity:

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?

To which I can only respond as every communicant responds ...

Amen.