

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Receiving the Body of Christ

Once, there was no question, and no choice. When I was first receiving communion in the mid-1960s—and when a lot of Catholics of a Certain Age were starting to receive—you knelt and received the slender white wafer on your tongue. To touch the Body of Christ with your hands was unthinkable. Only the priest could do that. Right?

How times have changed.

In the wave of reforms instituted after Vatican II, one significant change involved receiving communion in the hand. In 1969, Pope Paul VI granted permission to receive the wafer in the hand, echoing the ancient instructions of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who around the year 350 A.D. wrote: “When you approach Holy Communion, make the left hand into a throne for the right, which will receive the King. Then with your lower hand, take the consecrated Host and place it in your mouth.”

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Anyway, I think it's worth revisiting all this now, as flu season begins, since receiving communion in the hand is a way to avoid spreading illness.

But I think it's also a good opportunity for us to think more deeply and more prayerfully about why we receive communion this way—and how we can grow in our appreciation for this form of taking the Eucharist.

I started receiving in the hand decades ago because it seemed simpler and, frankly, a little more daring. Over time, it just seemed more natural and more comfortable.

But we shouldn't forget that this form of reception is an invitation, and a challenge. It requires a kind of consciousness and participation. When we take communion in the hand, we offer our

hands outstretched, like the humble beggars that we are.

We do not just receive; we extend ourselves to accept a graciously offered gift—in fact, the greatest gift of all, Christ himself. We then complete the action by bringing this gift into ourselves. What began at the altar of sacrifice, at the hands of the priest, becomes complete in our own hands, with our own “Amen” and our own consuming of the Body of Christ. Something profound is offered—and, significantly, taken.

In the words of the popular Spanish hymn: “We become what we receive.” Speaking for myself, I think that receiving in the hand makes that sacramental truth even more powerful.

Of course, receiving communion in the hand also asks us to be more keenly aware of what we are doing, and why.

Pope Paul's 1969 instruction, *Memoriale Domini*, sums it up beautifully:

“The option offered to the faithful of receiving the Eucharistic bread in their hand and putting it into their own mouth must not turn out to be the occasion for regarding it as ordinary bread or as just another religious article. Instead, this option must increase in them a consciousness of the dignity of the members of Christ's Mystical Body, into which they are incorporated by baptism and by the grace of the Eucharist. It must also increase their faith in the sublime reality of the Lord's Body and Blood, which they touch with their hand.”

Many years later, as more of us receive this sacrament this way, it's still a message we need to hear.

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