

# The Real Presence: Christ is with us throughout Mass

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Is Communion in the hand a diabolical attack on the faith? Some high ranking leaders in the Universal Church have suggested this. Cardinal Robert Sarah, who heads the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship, the Pope's administrative department that monitors all things sacramental and liturgical, asks, "Why do we insist on receiving Communion standing and on the hand? Why this attitude of lack of submission to the signs of God?" He laments that this practice has weakened belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Many younger Catholics probably don't know the answer to his question because it's been 50 years since this practice was reinstated — through an indult (a formal permission) from Pope Paul VI in 1969. "Reinstated" is the appropriate word because Communion in the hand is the oldest practice of the Church. In the middle of the 4th century, Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem instructed new converts: "When you come forward for Holy Communion, do not draw near with your hands wide open or with fingers spread apart; instead, with your left hand make a throne for the right hand, which will receive the King. Receive the body of Christ in the hollow of your hand and give the response: Amen." In the 8th century, a Romano-Frankish Ritual book describes Communion during Mass, saying: "Then the bishop steps down from his seat and gives Communion to the people, who extends their hands out to him, and then he returns to his seat."

Pope Paul VI reinstated Communion in the hand at the request of Bishops for several reasons: First, it's more traditional — it uses the practice handed down from the apostles to the early church rather than using a practice (Communion on the tongue) introduced centuries later. Second, in Western cultures kneeling can be seen as a sign of subjugation rather than of humility, like a slave kneeling before his master. Standing is our sign of respect (we rise to greet people, honor the flag, or give a "standing ovation"). More recently practical considerations have entered in. For example, our U.S. Bishops ask us to use a simple bow from the shoulders as our gesture of reverence when receiving Communion, in part because it does not slow our long communion lines; and receiving in the hand minimizes transfer of saliva during flu seasons. But the profound reason for the return to Communion in the hand was to recover the Church's theology of the Body of Christ as meaning both the people of the Church and Eucharist.

"I do not call you servants but friends," Jesus said. Communion is an act that joins the body of Christ that is the people with the risen body of the Lord. The act of touching the host is an important one. It

expresses the essential worthiness of our bodies, holy temples where the risen Christ lives. It also affirms that while the ordained man is a priest, we also are priests by baptism — "the priesthood of the faithful." Today communion in the hand is the customary practice in many countries of the world. But receiving on the tongue is still permitted.

What about Cardinal Sarah's assertion that this practice weakens belief in the real presence of Christ? It is true that on surveys, about 60% of Catholics say that they do not believe in the real presence, or transubstantiation. Transubstantiation is a technical explanation of "real presence." It means that the substance of the bread and wine are transformed during the Mass into the substance of the Lord's body and blood. The term "transubstantiation," problematic even when it was adopted, seems to contradict today's science, so people who cannot just "take it on faith" end up rejecting this understanding of "real presence." Perhaps if we used language other than transubstantiation, people would again affirm their belief in the real presence of Christ at Eucharist.

A good starting point is the way Church documents of recent years describe the presence of Christ at Mass. His presence is expansive! Christ is in the people; in the proclaimed and preached word; in the person of the priest; in the Eucharist; and in the communion Christ gives us as we are sent out at the end of Mass. So the Consecration of Mass is the pinnacle but not the totality of Christ's presence at Eucharist.

Another helpful starting point is to think about human experiences of fundamental change. For example, a woman who has a child has a new permanent identity, that of parent, which she can never undo. A man who takes a vow or oath of office is different forever from someone who has not. A fundamental human change also happens at each Mass. It has to do with covenant. The Lord chooses to bond with us anew, and we accept Him and say Amen. It is the Lord who acts at Mass through the authorized successors of the apostles who invoke the power of the Spirit. Then the Lord, already present in the assembly, joins his risen body with ours through the bread and wine. A fundamental change happens at every Mass: the relationship between Christ and his body, the Church, is the deepened and renewed. This foundational belief we Catholics have about Eucharist is the real area of Holy Mystery.

As an Extraordinary Eucharist Minister, when I look at the reverent faces of people holding out their hands to receive their Lord, I am sure that belief in the presence of Christ is alive and well!

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