

A PRIVILEGE OF THE ORDAINED

By Michael Davies

First printed by Neumann Press in 1990

“To touch the sacred species, and to distribute them with their own hands, is a privilege of the ordained...” Pope John Paul II

1. A PRIVILEGE OF THE ORDAINED

Of all the countless gifts which God has bestowed upon mankind there can be no doubt that the most Holy Sacrament of the Altar is the greatest and the most precious. St. Augustine of Hippo introduced the term “Sacrament of the Altar” to emphasize the sacrificial character of the Eucharist, reminding us that this Sacrament of Sacraments, *Sacramentum Sacramentorum*, is not simply reserved upon the altar for our adoration, but is the Saving Victim offered upon the altar during the Sacrifice of the Mass, Who opens wide the gates of Heaven to mankind:

O Salutaris Hostia, Quae caeli pandis ostium.

There can be no doubt that the most Holy Sacrament of the Altar is indeed the *Sacramentum Sacramentorum* because, as St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us, It contains Christ Himself. In fact, the Blessed Sacrament is Christ Himself, and hence God Himself. A Catholic can, and must, make the equation: “*The Eucharist is God.*” He must offer Divine worship to the most Holy Sacrament under pain of anathema. Naturally, because the most Holy Sacrament of the Altar is God Himself, we can never offer It sufficient honor, sufficient reverence. Those who remember the devotion shown to our sweet Sacrament Divine in Catholic churches before Vatican II will know that, humanly speaking, this manifestation of our adoration could hardly have been improved upon.

2. LITURGICAL DEVELOPMENT

It is a mistake to think of the Christian religion as something static. Such an attitude is a characteristic of some of the more extreme Protestant fundamentalist sects. Thus, because the Bible does not mention the Holy See, cardinals, religious orders, or reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, the Catholic Church is accused of introducing novelties, not countenanced by Scripture, or even of deviating from the pure Bible Faith. In his great book, *The Development of Christian Doctrine*, Cardinal Newman proves that development is an essential characteristic of a true and living faith. The original Gospel message, handed on by Our Lord to His Apostles, and preached by them throughout the world, can be compared to an acorn which develops into a mighty oak. The oak, indeed, bears little resemblance to the acorn, but at each stage of its development it is consistent with the stage that came before. Had it been stunted at any stage of its growth this, indeed, would have been an aberration. But to call an oak an aberration because it does not resemble an acorn is to lose all claim to credibility.

In the case of Christianity, as the centuries passed, and under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, the original seed of the Gospel message has developed in many ways within the one true Church founded by Our Lord. The doctrine of the papacy, the veneration shown to Our Lady, the theology of the Sacraments, and, above all, the doctrine of the Blessed

Trinity, have undergone considerable developments. Yet, where the developed doctrine, as we have it today, is sometimes scarcely recognizable as the original seed found in the Gospel, if we trace its development back, stage by stage, we will find that every stage is consistent with the one which preceded it. There is no more justification for alleging that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, as explained in the Catechism of the Council of Trent, is unfaithful to the Gospel, than there is for claiming that the magnificent oak is unfaithful to the acorn from which it sprang.

Where the Blessed Sacrament is concerned, as the years passed Christians became more and more aware of Its awesome nature as God the Son truly present among us. Naturally, this increasing awareness was given liturgical expression, nowhere more apparent than in the distribution of Holy Communion. The pattern of development differed slightly in the East and in the West. As Catholics of the Western, or Latin Rite, the development of devotion to the Blessed Sacrament within our own branch of the Church is what should most concern us. In the first centuries, Holy Communion under the form of bread was usually given to the faithful in the hand. But, by the fourth century, awareness of the Divine Nature of the Sacrament had become so acute that there was already anxiety lest the smallest particle should fall upon the ground.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem warned the faithful:

Partake of It, ensuring that you do not mislay any of It. For if you mislay any, you would clearly suffer a loss, as it were, from one of your own limbs. Tell me, if anyone gave you gold dust, would you not take hold of it with every possible care, ensuring that you did not mislay any of it or sustain any loss? So will you not be much more cautious to ensure that not a crumb falls away from that which is more precious than gold or precious stones?

Not surprisingly, this enhanced reverence for the Blessed Sacrament developed to the point where the Host was placed on the tongue of the communicant. This gradually became the general practice in a number of regions. The Synod of Rouen, in the year 650, condemned the reception of Communion in the hand as an abuse, indicating that reception on the tongue must already have been a long-established practice in that area. The *Roman Ordo* of the ninth century accepts Communion on the tongue as the normal practice. Scholars are divided as to the precise reasons for the change. Father Joseph Jungmann, one of the greatest liturgical experts of this century, cites “*growing respect for the Eucharist*” as the decisive reason. By the thirteenth century, it was already a firmly established tradition that only what had been consecrated specifically for the purpose should ever come into contact with the Blessed Sacrament.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) writes:

The dispensing of Christ’s Body belongs to the priest for three reasons. First, because he consecrates in the person of Christ. But as Christ consecrated His Body at the Supper, so also He gave It to others to be partaken of by them. Accordingly, as the consecration of Christ’s Body belongs to the priest, so likewise does the dispensing belong to him.

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 towards this Sacrament, nothing touches It but what is 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.

3. THE PROTESTANT HERESY

Reverence towards this Sacrament led to a number of signs of devotion which were observed universally throughout the Western Church until the time of the Protestant Reformation. Wherever the Protestant heresy triumphed, many or all of these signs of reverence were quite logically forbidden because, within the context of this heresy, the bread and wine are no more than symbols of the Body and Blood of Christ. In themselves they remain bread and wine, no different and no more holy than bread and wine used outside the Communion Service.¹

Catholics were accused of "bread worship" which, the Protestants alleged, constituted idolatry. Some sects abolished every sign of reverence which was offered to the Blessed Sacrament within the Catholic Church; others retained a number in the interests of good order and decorum. For example, the Church of England retained the practice of kneeling for Holy Communion, but added the notorious "Black Rubric" to its prayer book. This rubric stressed that the act of kneeling involved no adoration, that the bread and wine remained in their own natural substances, "*and therefore may not be adored, for that were idolatry to be abhorred by all faithful Christians.*"

The first Protestant Prayer Book was imposed upon the English people in 1549. It retained the practices of kneeling and receiving Communion on the tongue. This was one of several details in the 1549 Prayer Book which evoked the displeasure of the more radical Protestant Reformers, particularly Martin Bucer, a German who exercised a considerable influence upon the liturgical work of Thomas Cranmer, principal author of the Anglican Prayer Book. In his criticism of the 1549 Prayer Book, Bucer wrote:

I have no doubt that the usage of not putting these sacraments into the hands of the faithful has been introduced out of a double superstition: firstly, the false honor they wish to show to this sacrament, and secondly, the wicked arrogance of priests claiming greater holiness than that of the people of Christ, by virtue of the oil of consecration.

Bucer decided that "*as every superstition of the Roman anti-Christ is to be detested, and the simplicity of Christ, and the Apostles, and the ancient Churches, is to be recalled,*" the sacrament should be placed into the hand of the laity:

¹ The one exception was within the Lutheran heresy where the Body and Blood of Christ were said to co-exist with the bread and wine, i.e., the theory of consubstantiation.

In that way good men will easily be brought to the point of all receiving the sacred symbols in the hand, conformity in receiving will be kept, and there will be safeguards against all furtive abuse of the sacraments. For, although for a time concession can be made to those whose faith is weak, by giving them the sacraments in the mouth when they so desire, if they are carefully taught they will soon conform themselves to the rest of the Church and take the sacraments in the hand.

When the revised edition of the Anglican Prayer Book was published in 1552, not only had the “Black Rubric” been added, but the practice of Communion in the hand was introduced. Thus, from the time of the Reformation, the placing of the sacrament in the hand of the communicant acquired a new signification. It signified rejection of the Catholic belief that there is a difference in essence between Eucharistic Bread and ordinary bread or a difference in essence between a priest and a layman. Although the practice is not intrinsically irreverent (a practice sanctioned by the Church so widely and for so long could not be intrinsically irreverent), as a result of the significance placed upon it by the Protestant Reformers, it became unacceptable to Catholics.² The reception of the Blessed Sacrament on the tongue by laymen testifies to their belief in the priesthood and Real Presence; the reception of their sacrament in the hand by Protestants testifies to their rejection of these beliefs. Thus the situation remained until the closure of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. When the Council ended, the Liturgical Revolution got underway.

4. THE COUNCIL AND LITURGICAL REFORM

The standard response given to the faithful who complain about the endless succession of liturgical innovations which have been foisted upon them since Vatican II is that these innovations were ordered by, authorized by, or are a response to the Council. I have a copy of a letter sent by an English bishop to a group of Catholics who pleaded with him to prevent the vandalization of the sanctuary in their parish church, particularly the removal of the tabernacle from the high altar. The bishop informed them that these changes had been ordered by the Liturgy Constitution of the Second Vatican Council. There is not one word in this Constitution which so much as hints at the possibility of removing the tabernacle from the high altar. Nor does the Constitution mention Mass facing the people, lay-ministers of Communion, dancing in the sanctuary, or Communion in the hand. Pope Paul VI complained that: “*Some priests and members of the faithful mask with the name ‘conciliar’ those personal interpretations and erroneous practices that are injurious, even scandalous, and at times sacrilegious.*”

² An incident during the pontificate of St. Gregory the Great illustrates the manner in which a practice which is in no way intrinsically opposed to the faith can become unacceptable to Catholics because of the significance placed upon it by heretics. St. Gregory had been asked if it was licit to immerse a person being Baptized three times. It was suggested to the Pope that this could signify the three days’ burial of Christ, and the final emergence the resurrection (in Baptism we die and rise with Christ). It was also pointed out that the threefold immersion could signify the Trinity. But certain heretics had adopted the practice and invested it with an anti-Catholic signification. It had become a symbol of their rejection of orthodoxy. In view of this St. Gregory answered as follows: “*Since at the present day the infant is immersed three times by heretics, I think it ought not to be done by you, lest in numbering the immersions they divide the godhead, and in continuing their own practice they boast that they have changed our custom.*”

The practice of Communion in the hand was introduced soon after Vatican II by ecumenically-minded priests in Holland who wished to ape the Protestant practice. This was done as an act of calculated defiance of liturgical law and legitimate ecclesiastical authority. The Dutch rebels soon found imitators among the progressive clergy in Germany, Belgium, and France. Sadly, most bishops reacted with the weakness which has characterized Western hierarchies since the Council, when faced with defiance by Liberal clerics, they failed to take prompt disciplinary action and the abuse spread. Thus the practice, which had already become unacceptable to Catholics in view of the Protestant signification it had acquired during the Reformation, became additionally tainted as the symbol *par excellence* of liturgical anarchy, the banner of those who had defied the authority of Rome, and more than a thousand years of unbroken Catholic tradition.

5A. THE INSTRUCTION *MEMORIALE DOMINI*

Despite the scandalous refusal of the bishops to exercise their authority, the indignation of large numbers of the faithful at this breach with tradition, and the irreverence or even sacrilege to which it led, prompted Pope Paul VI to act. He polled the bishops of the world upon the issue; they voted overwhelmingly to retain the traditional practice. At this time, 1969, the abuse was still confined to a few “advanced” Western countries. On May 29, 1969, the Instruction *Memoriale Domini* was promulgated by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship. It had been prepared at the special mandate of Pope Paul VI, and was approved by him in virtue of his apostolic authority. This Instruction explained how the earlier practice of Communion in the hand had been superseded:

From a pressing sense of reverence toward this holy Sacrament, and of the humility which its reception demands, the custom was introduced by which the minister himself would place the piece of consecrated Bread on the tongue of the communicants.

In view of the state of the Church as a whole today, this manner of distributing Holy Communion must be observed, not only because it rests upon a tradition of many centuries, but especially because it is a sign of the reverence of the faithful toward the Eucharist. The practice in no way detracts from the personal dignity of those who approach this great Sacrament, and it is part of the preparation needed for the most fruitful reception of the Lord’s Body.

The Instruction quoted the result of the ballot among the bishops of the world, and warns that the practice of Communion in the hand can lead to: “*a lessening of reverence toward the noble Sacrament of the Altar, its profanation, or the adulteration of correct doctrine.*” It adds that:

From the responses received it is thus clear that by far the greater number of bishops feel that the present discipline should not be changed at all, indeed, that if it were changed, this would be offensive to the sensibilities and spiritual appreciation of these bishops and of most of the faithful.

After he had considered the observations and the counsel of those whom “*the Holy Spirit has placed as bishops to rule*” the churches, in view of the seriousness of the matter and the importance of the arguments proposed, the Supreme Pontiff judged that the long received manner of ministering Holy Communion to the faithful should not be changed.

The Apostolic See therefore strongly urges bishops, priests, and people to observe zealously this law, valid and again confirmed, according to the judgment of the majority of the Catholic episcopate, in the form which the present rite of the sacred liturgy employs, and out of concern for the common good of the Church.

5B. THE TEXT OF *MEMORIALE DOMINI* APPENDIX I

MEMORIALE DOMINI

Instruction on the Manner of Distributing Holy Communion Congregation of Divine Worship (May 29, 1969)

When it celebrates the memorial of the Lord, by that rite the Church witnesses to its faith and adoration of Christ, Who is present in the sacrifice and Who is given as food to those who share in the Eucharistic table.

For this reason it is of great concern that the Eucharist be celebrated and shared in most worthily and fruitfully, by observing unchanged the tradition that has reached us step by step, the tradition whose riches have been poured into the practice and life of the Church. The documents of history demonstrate that the ways of celebrating and receiving the holy Eucharist have been diverse. Even in our time many and important ritual changes have been introduced into the celebration of the Eucharist in order to bring it into accord with the spiritual and psychological needs of men today. Because of circumstances, communion under both kinds, bread and wine, which was once common in the Latin rite but had fallen into disuse little by little, has again been made a part of the discipline governing the faithful’s mode of receiving the holy Sacrament. At the time of the Council of Trent a different situation had arisen and was in effect everywhere; the Council approved and defended it as suited to the conditions of that period.

With the renewal of the modes of communicating, however, the sign of the Eucharistic meal and the complete fulfillment of Christ’s mandate have been effected more clearly and vividly. At the same time a full sharing in the celebration of the Eucharist, expressed through sacramental communion, has recently stirred up in some places the desire to return to the practice by which the Eucharistic bread is placed in the hand of the faithful who communicates himself by putting it in his mouth.

In some communities and localities this rite has even been performed without obtaining the prior approval of the Apostolic See and occasionally without appropriate preparation for the people.

It is true that, according to ancient usage, it was once permitted for the faithful to take the sacred food in their hands and themselves to place it in their mouths and even, in the earliest period, to carry the holy Sacrament with them from the place of celebration, especially in order to receive it as viaticum if they should have to suffer for the profession of the faith.

Nevertheless the precepts of the Church and the writings of the Fathers give abundant witness to the great reverence and prudence shown to the holy Eucharist. For “*no one ... eats this flesh unless first he adores,*” and each recipient is warned: “*... receive it and take care that none of it be lost to you*”: “*for it is the Body of Christ.*”

In the meantime the care and ministry of the Body and Blood of the Lord was entrusted in a quite special way to sacred ministers or to persons assigned to this function: “*After the president has completed the prayers and all the people have made the acclamation, those among us whom we call deacons distribute a part of the bread and wine and water, in which the thanksgiving has been made, to each one present and bring them to those who are absent.*”

The office of bringing the Eucharist to those who were absent was soon entrusted to sacred ministers alone, for the reason that greater care might be shown for the reverence due to the Body of Christ as well as the needs of the people. In the following period, after the true meaning of the Eucharistic mystery, its effect, and the presence of Christ in it had been profoundly investigated, from a pressing sense of reverence toward this holy Sacrament, and of the humility which its reception demands, the custom was introduced by which the minister himself would place the piece of consecrated Bread on the tongue of the communicants.

In view of the state of the Church as a whole today, this manner of distributing Holy Communion must be observed, not only because it rests upon a tradition of many centuries, but especially because it is a sign of the reverence of the faithful toward the Eucharist. The practice in no way detracts from the personal dignity of those who approach this great sacrament, and it is a part of the preparation needed for the most fruitful reception of the Lord’s Body.

This reverence is a sign of communion not in “*common bread and drink*” but in the Body and Blood of the Lord. By it “*the people of God shares in the blessings of the paschal sacrifice, renews the new covenant once made by God with man in the Blood of Christ, and in faith and hope prefigures and anticipates the eschatological banquet in the Kingdom of the Father.*”

In addition, this manner of communicating, which is now to be considered as prescribed by custom, gives more effective assurance that Holy Communion will be distributed with the appropriate reverence, decorum, and dignity: that any danger of profaning the Eucharistic species, in which “*the whole and entire Christ, God and man, is substantially contained and permanently present in a unique way,*” will be avoided; and finally that the diligent care which the Church has always commended for the very fragments of the consecrated bread will be maintained; “*If you have allowed anything to be lost, consider this a lessening of your own members.*”

On this account, since some few episcopal conferences and individual bishops had asked that the usage of placing the consecrated bread in the hand of the faithful be admitted in their territories, the Supreme Pontiff decreed that each bishop of the entire Latin Church should be asked his opinion concerning the appropriateness of introducing this rite. A change in the matter of such importance, which rests on a very ancient and venerable tradition, besides touching upon discipline can also include dangers. These may be feared from a new manner of administering Holy Communion: they are a lessening of reverence toward the noble Sacrament of the Altar, its profanation, or the adulteration of correct doctrine.

Three questions were therefore proposed to the bishops. Up to March 12 the following responses had been received:

1. Does it seem that the proposal should be accepted by which, besides the traditional mode, the rite of receiving Holy Communion in the hand would be permitted?

Yes: 567

No: 1,233

Yes, with reservations: 315

Invalid votes: 20

2. Should experiments with this new rite first take place in small communities, with the assent of the local Ordinary?

Yes: 751

No: 1,215

Invalid votes: 70

3. Do you think that the faithful, after a well planned catechetical preparation, would accept this new rite willingly?

Yes: 835

No: 1,185

Invalid votes: 128

From the responses received it is thus clear that by far the greater number of bishops feel that present discipline should not be changed at all, indeed that if it were changed, this would be offensive to the sensibilities and spiritual appreciation of these bishops and of most of the faithful.

After he had considered the observations and the counsel of those whom "*the Holy Spirit has placed as bishops to rule*" the churches, in view of the seriousness of the matter and the importance of the arguments proposed, the Supreme Pontiff judged that the long received manner of ministering Holy Communion to the faithful should not be changed.

The Apostolic See therefore strongly urges bishops, priests, and people to observe zealously this law, valid and again confirmed, according to the judgment of the majority

of the Catholic episcopate, in the form which the present rite of the sacred liturgy employs, and out of concern for the common good of the Church.

If the contrary usage, namely, of placing Holy Communion in the hand, has already developed in any place, in order to help the episcopal conference fulfill their pastoral office in today's often difficult situation, the Apostolic See entrusts to the conferences the duty and function of judging particular circumstances, if any. They may make this judgment provided that any danger is avoided of insufficient reverence or false opinions of the Holy Eucharist arising in the minds of the faithful and that any other improprieties be carefully removed.

In these cases, moreover, in order to govern this usage properly, the episcopal conferences should undertake the appropriate deliberations after prudent study; the decision is to be made by a two-thirds majority by secret ballot.

These deliberations should then be proposed to the Holy See for the necessary confirmation, together with an accurate explanation of the reasons which moved the conferences to take this action. The Holy See will weigh the individual cases with care, remembering the bonds which exist between the several local Churches among themselves and with the entire Church, in order to promote the common good and edification and the increase of faith and piety which flow from mutual good example.

This Instruction, prepared at the special mandate of the Supreme Pontiff Paul VI, was duly approved by him, in virtue of apostolic authority, on May 28, 1969. Pope Paul also decreed that it be brought to the attention of the bishops through the presidents of the episcopal conferences.

Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.
Rome, May 29, 1969.

Benno Card. Gut
Prefect
A. Bugnini,
Secretary

6. DISLOYAL BISHOPS

Unfortunately, the Holy See made a calamitous error of judgment within the Instruction. It agreed that, where the abuse had already become firmly established, it could be legalized by a two-thirds majority in a secret ballot of the national episcopal conference, providing that the Holy See confirmed the decision. This concession gave the green light to liturgical anarchists, despite the fact that it clearly referred to countries where the abuse had become established at the time *Memoriale Domini* was promulgated, *i.e.*, May 1969.

Clerical rebels in such countries as England or the U.S.A. would naturally conclude that if rebellion could be legalized in Holland it could be legalized in any country. They decided that if they ignored *Memoriale Domini* and defied the liturgical law of the

Church, their rebellion would be tolerated and eventually legalized. Their judgment proved to be only too accurate. Despite the appeal of the Holy See for bishops to observe zealously the traditional practice, despite the fact that they themselves had voted for the traditional practice, as the abuse spread from country to country the bishops first tolerated it and then voted for its legalization. Only in a few countries, such as Italy or Poland, did the bishops respond to the appeal in *Memoriale Domini*, and insist upon maintaining the practice of Communion on the tongue “*out of concern for the common good of the Church.*”

7. DECEITFUL PROPAGANDA

In such countries as England and the U.S.A., the bishops went beyond first tolerating the abuse and then having it legalized. To cover up their own weakness they promoted the abuse as the better way of receiving Holy Communion. Some of the propaganda utilized to induce the faithful to change to the Protestant practice involved a serious manipulation of the facts, and sometimes, outright falsehood. For example, the Catholic Truth Society of England and Wales, an episcopally-approved organization, published a pamphlet which assured the faithful that the Eastern churches had preserved this practice of Communion in the hand. This is totally false. In the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Churches of the Eastern rites, the faithful receive the Sacrament upon their tongues. The fact that this pamphlet was written by Father Anthony Boylan, Secretary of the Liturgy Commission of England and Wales, indicates the ignorance of some of those claiming to be liturgical experts. The Catholic Information Office of England and Wales published a statement claiming that the practice had been introduced only after widespread consultation among priests and laity. Nothing could be further from the truth. Few of the clergy so much as knew that the bishops had voted upon the matter until the innovation was imposed upon them as a *fait accompli*.

The type of propaganda used to popularize the abuse in the U.S.A. is well illustrated by a book entitled *Preaching and Teaching About the Eucharist*, by Msgr. Joseph M. Champlin. It is a faithful popularization of an official publication of the American Bishops entitled *The Body of Christ*. Msgr. Champlin explains the introduction of Communion in the hand into the U.S.A. as follows:

Around the time of the Second Vatican Council, some Catholics, following the liturgical principles approved by the bishops, sought to have the ancient practice of Communion in the hand restored as an option.

Msgr. Champlin thus gives his readers the impression that Vatican II provided a mandate for the abuse when, in fact, it is not hinted at in any document of the Council. He also conceals the fact that what he describes so euphemistically as a desire to have “*Communion in the hand restored as an option*” was, in fact, an open rebellion against established tradition and ecclesiastical authority. He continues:

As these desires intensified, Pope Paul surveyed bishops throughout the world about the desirability of reintroducing this as an alternative to communion given directly on the tongue. In response to their views, our Holy Father decreed that the present method would be retained, but that

bishops in a particular country might vote to introduce communion in the hand as an option.

The obvious conclusion to which Msgr. Champlin's readers would come is that the bishops had voted in favor of the innovation, and that the Pope had agreed to permit it in response to this vote. As has just been shown, the bishops voted overwhelmingly against it, and permission to legalize the practice was clearly intended to apply only to countries where it had been established by 1969.

Much of the propaganda for the abuse consists of little more than gibberish. Unfortunately, few people are critical by nature, and many are only too willing to succumb to propaganda which flatters their sense of self-esteem. Thus, in *The Body of Christ*, the American Bishops assure the faithful that the act of receiving Communion in the hand:

...forms a positive, human, understandable response to Jesus' invitation "take and eat" ... reflects the giving-receiving dynamic ... appears to many a more mature and adult gesture ...

8. A WICKED MOVEMENT

Probably the most frequently reiterated argument in favor of the abuse is that it is a return to primitive practice. This was the same argument which the Protestant Reformers used to justify it. Pope Pius XII had condemned attempts to subvert the liturgy, under the guise of a return to primitive practice. In his encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947), he described this tendency as "*a wicked movement that tends to paralyze the sanctifying and salutary action by which the liturgy leads the children of adoption on the path to their heavenly Father.*" He explained that: "*... the desire to restore everything indiscriminately to its ancient condition is neither wise nor praiseworthy. It would be wrong, for example, to want the altar restored to its ancient form of table; to want black eliminated from the liturgical colors, and pictures and statues excluded from our churches.*" Mention has already been made of Cardinal Newman's explanation of the process of doctrinal and liturgical development. The great Cardinal warned that to reverse the course of an existing development is not a development but a corruption.

9. POPE JOHN PAUL II SPEAKS

In his Apostolic Letter *Dominicae Cenaе*, dated February 24, 1980, Pope John Paul II noted that since the introduction of Communion in the hand "*cases of a deplorable lack of respect towards the Eucharistic species have been reported, cases which are imputable not only to the individuals guilty of such behavior, but also to the pastors of the Church who have not been vigilant enough regarding the attitude of the faithful towards the Eucharist. It also happens, on occasion, that the free choice of those who prefer to continue the practice of receiving the Eucharist on the tongue is not taken into account in those places where Communion in the hand has been authorized.*" He made no secret of his own preference in the same letter, by stressing the custom of "*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.” Unfortunately, the Pope clearly believes that it would not be practical to attempt to enforce a return to the traditional practice during the present climate of anarchy within the Church. His attempt to persuade nuns who have abandoned their religious habits to return to them, even in a simplified form, has not simply been defied, but ridiculed.

10. COMMUNION IN THE HAND—A SYMPTOM OF IRREVERENCE

The abuse of Communion in the hand is just one example of a widespread pattern of decreasing reverence for the most Holy Sacrament of the Altar. When the Council closed, the practice throughout the Church was for kneeling communicants to receive the Host on their tongue from the consecrated hands of a priest. Now It is commonly placed in the hands of standing communicants by lay distributors, sometimes while the priests sit in their presidential chairs and watch. Similarly, the many signs of reverence on the part of the priest have been abolished, simplified, or made optional. An example here is the practice of keeping the thumb and forefinger together from the moment of consecration, until the meticulous ablutions which followed the communion of the people. Now, before the Communion, the priest is often seen rushing about inside and outside the sanctuary, shaking hands with as many people as possible.

What, then, should be the reaction of a faithful Catholic to the abuse of Communion in the hand? Clearly, out of respect for the Blessed Sacrament, which is God, he should insist upon receiving It only upon the tongue from the consecrated hands of a priest, and to receive It kneeling. Alas, in some churches today this means that he will be refused Holy Communion. This has happened in London’s Westminster Cathedral. But, surely, although we receive Holy Communion to unite ourselves with our Divine Savior we can manifest our love for Him more clearly by depriving ourselves of this consolation where it would involve receiving Him without due respect. Those who kneel to receive Our Lord upon the tongue are following the example of countless great Saints throughout the centuries—and acting in the manner which the present Holy Father clearly prefers.

However, we should certainly refrain from passing judgment, in private or in public, upon any of our acquaintances who receive Holy Communion in the hand. While the practice has certainly led to much irreverence, it does not necessarily denote irreverence on the part of every individual who now receives in this manner. Where a parish priest has made it clear that he wishes Communion to be received this way, where it has been made clear that this is the wish of the diocesan bishop, where an incessant campaign of cleverly slanted propaganda has been aimed at ordinary members of the faithful, it is hardly surprising that so many have succumbed. But this does not mean that, perhaps by distributing pamphlets such as this, we should not attempt to persuade our friends and relatives to return to the traditional practice. Any effort we make to achieve this is an effort intended to increase reverence to our Eucharistic King, and surely we could engage in nothing more worthwhile than this.

Remember then, O Savior,
I supplicate of Thee,
That here I bowed before Thee
Upon my bended knee;
That here I owned Thy Presence,

And did not Thee deny:
And glorified Thy greatness
Though hid from human eye.

11. EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION

APPENDIX II

The introduction of Communion in the hand was invariably followed by the introduction of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Unlike the practice of Communion in the hand, which was accepted within the Church for some centuries, the use of extraordinary ministers during the Mass has no historical precedent. Not a shred of evidence can be brought forward to prove that Holy Communion has ever been distributed during the liturgy by anyone but a bishop, priest, or deacon. There is some evidence of such cases outside the liturgy in the early centuries (see page [5b](#)). By the thirteenth century, it was already an established tradition that only what had been consecrated specifically for the purpose should ever come into contact with the Blessed Sacrament until It has been placed upon the tongue of the communicant. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) wrote:

The dispensing of Christ's Body belongs to the priest for three reasons. First, because he consecrates in the person of Christ. But as Christ consecrated His Body at the Supper, so also He gave It to others to be partaken of by them.

Accordingly, as the consecration of Christ's Body belongs to the priest, so likewise does the dispensing belong to him. 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 towards this Sacrament, nothing touches It but what is 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.

The document authorizing the introduction of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist is an Instruction of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, issued on January 29, 1973, and entitled *Immensae caritatis*. It authorizes the use of extraordinary ministers in "cases of genuine necessity." These are listed as whenever:

- (a) there is no priest, deacon, or acolyte;
- (b) these are prevented from administering Holy Communion because of another pastoral ministry or because of ill health or advanced age;
- (c) the number of the faithful requesting Holy Communion is such that the celebration of Mass or the distribution of the Eucharist outside Mass would be *unduly* prolonged.

The Instruction stipulates that:

Since these faculties are granted only for the spiritual good of the faithful and for cases of genuine necessity, priests are to remember that they are not thereby excused from the task of distributing the Eucharist to the faithful who legitimately request it, and especially from taking and giving it to the sick.

It is hard to envisage circumstances justifying the use of extraordinary ministers existing outside mission lands. It is possible to envisage circumstances arising there when it becomes physically impossible for a priest responsible for a vast area to give Holy Communion to all the sick and dying who request it. Clearly, the good of souls must take the first priority, and if the alternative were between someone dying without receiving the Sacrament, or receiving It from a layman, the latter alternative would be preferable, always presuming that it was physically impossible for a priest to get to him. Obviously, in such circumstances it would be desirable for the communicant to have access to the Sacrament of Penance, but, once again, where this is physically impossible an act of perfect contrition would suffice even for mortal sin. However, there is no comparison whatsoever between such truly extraordinary circumstances and the all too common practice in so many countries today of commissioning the laity by the hundreds in individual dioceses to undertake a task which, as Pope John Paul II has noted, should normally be “a privilege of the ordained one.” It is not uncommon for priests to sit in their presidential chairs, conduct hymn singing, or even act as ushers to marshal the faithful into lines while *élite* members of the parish distribute Holy Communion for them, perhaps cutting down the time of Mass by five minutes or even less. The fact that a person is selected to be an extraordinary minister can certainly pander to the self-esteem of those who are eager to obtain offices which set them apart from (and above) their fellows. This phenomenon soon became apparent when the laity were permitted to read the Epistle or take part in Offertory Processions. Priests who have declined to introduce such practices are frequently the subject of complaints to bishops by laymen who are eager for the status which these offices will bestow upon them.

Catholics who have seen extraordinary ministers introduced into their own parishes will have noted that the correct term “extraordinary” is rarely used. This is the official term used in *Immensae caritatis* and the new Code of Canon Law. The terms “lay” or “special” ministers are preferred as this serves to camouflage the fact that the use of such ministers should constitute an extraordinary event, one which should rarely if ever be seen outside the mission lands. It is hard to imagine any pastor in, say, the U.S.A. who has so many pressing engagements that he has no time to take Holy Communion to the sick. If the burden of administrative work has become so great, surely, this is an area where he could get lay help. The present situation in which priests are engaged in activities which laymen could undertake, while laymen undertake their work of taking Holy Communion to the sick, is positively bizarre, a fitting epitomization of the ethos of the Western Church today. As for the celebration of Mass being unduly prolonged, where a parish has a large congregation there is usually a curate to help out. Even where no curate is available, and the distribution of Holy Communion would be prolonged, I cannot imagine it being *unduly* prolonged. The priest could urge the people to use the time to make a fitting preparation and thanksgiving for the privilege of receiving their Savior. Could any time spent in such thanksgiving be unduly prolonged? It would rarely

extend beyond ten to fifteen minutes. When it is considered how much time the average Catholic will spend watching T.V. each day, can a thanksgiving of even fifteen minutes be considered as unduly prolonged?

The Vatican directive was, unfortunately, far too loosely worded. The phrase “*unduly prolonged*” could mean five or fifty minutes, depending upon who was interpreting it. *Immensae caritatis* thus opened the door to the proliferation of extraordinary ministers which has been described here. Linked with the introduction of Communion under both kinds at Sunday Masses, this outbreak of extraordinary ministers has reached epidemic proportions, an epidemic made possible, if not strictly authorized, by *Immensae caritatis*. Very few bishops today pay the least heed to the admonition of Pope John Paul II in his letter *Dominicae cenae*, February 24, 1980, that; “*To touch the sacred species and to distribute them with their own hands is a privilege of the ordained.*” On the contrary, some bishops, or the liturgical bureaucrats who manipulate them, show such enthusiasm for Communion under both kinds principally for the excuse it gives them to increase the epidemic of extraordinary ministers to plague proportions. In 1987, in a letter the text of which concludes this appendix, the Holy See did attempt to restrict the spread of this plague, but with little effect.

No objective observer could deny that there has been a widespread decline in reverence towards the Blessed Sacrament since the Second Vatican Council. In *Dominicae cenae* Pope John Paul II deplored the fact that:

Cases of a deplorable lack of respect towards the Eucharistic species have been reported, cases which are imputable not only to the individuals guilty of such behavior, but also to the pastors of the Church who have not been vigilant enough regarding the attitude of the faithful towards the Eucharist.

The Holy Father concluded this letter with his famous apology to the faithful for the scandal and disturbance to which they had been subjected concerning the veneration due to the Blessed Sacrament: “*And I pray the Lord Jesus that in the future we may avoid in our manner of dealing with this sacred mystery anything which could weaken or disorient in any way the sense of reverence and love that exists in our faithful people.*”

The sense of reverence and love of the faithful people for the Blessed Sacrament must inevitably be weakened in any diocese where the bishop, either from conviction or from weakness, has permitted the use of extraordinary ministers where extraordinary circumstances do not exist, and it is certain that such circumstances do not exist in ninety-nine per cent of the parishes where such ministers are employed. What should be extraordinary has become the norm, and what should be the norm has become extraordinary. Such is the state of Catholicism in the Roman Rite today.

We are witnessing not simply a diminution in respect for the Blessed Sacrament, where such respect exists at all, but a diminution in respect for, and awareness of, the sacred character of the priesthood, where such respect and such awareness exist at all. Very few young Catholics today think of their priest primarily as another Christ, an *alter Christus*, a man who differs not simply in degree but in essence from the rest of the faithful, a man

whose primary function is to enter the sanctuary and perform sacred rites which he alone can undertake. In *Dominicae cenae*, Pope John Paul II reminded Catholics that:

One must not forget the primary office of priests, who have been consecrated by their ordination to represent Christ the Priest: for this reason their hands, like their words and their will, have become the direct instruments of Christ. Through this fact, that is, as ministers of the Holy Eucharist, they have a primary responsibility for the sacred species, because it is a total responsibility. They offer the bread and wine, they consecrate it, and then distribute the sacred species to the participants in the assembly who wish to receive them. ... 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!

THE HOLY SEE INTERVENES

In September 1987 the Holy See sent letters to the presidents of a number of Episcopal Conferences on the subject of extraordinary ministers, urging them to curb the abuse of making what should be extraordinary the norm. The full text of the copy sent to Archbishop May, President of the NCCB, is included here.

It hardly needs stating the document was totally ineffective, but it does at least provide evidence that the Holy See is aware of the extent of the abuses concerning extraordinary ministers (“*numerous indications of such abuses*” had been received), even if it could do nothing to curb them.

A copy of the full text of the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio’s letter to Cardinal May follows:

21 September, 1987
Most Reverend John L. May President, NCCB
1312 Massachusetts Avenue,
N. W. Washington, D.C. 20005

Dear Archbishop May:

The Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation of Sacraments, in a circular letter to all Papal Representatives, has issued the following clarification with regard to extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist.

To be sure, the faculty granted to the laity enabling them to distribute Holy Communion as extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist (Canons 230, 3; 910, 2) represents without a doubt one of the more suitable forms of lay participation in the Church’s liturgical action. On the one hand, this privilege has provided a real help to both the celebrant and to the congregation on occasions when there exists a large number of people receiving Holy Communion. On the other hand, however, in certain instances, significant abuses of this privilege have taken place. Such abuses have led to situations where the extraordinary character of this

ministry has been lost. At times, it also appears as though the designation of extraordinary ministers becomes a kind of reward to repay those who have worked for the Church.

Cardinal Mayer notes that the abuses he speaks of happen if:

- the extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist ordinarily distribute Holy Communion together with the celebrant, both when the number of communicants would not require their assistance, and when there are other concelebrants present or other ordinary ministers available, though not celebrating;
- the extraordinary ministers distribute Holy Communion to themselves and to the faithful while the celebrant and concelebrants, if there are any, remain inactive.

After receiving numerous indications of such abuses, the Congregation decided to seek an authentic interpretation of the appropriate Canons from the Pontifical Commission for the Authentic Interpretation of the Code of Canon Law. The following doubt was formulated:

Utrum minister extraordinarius Sacrae Communionis, ad normam cann. 910, par. 2 et 23^o, par. 3 deputatus suum munus suppletorium exercere possit etiam cum praesentes sint in ecclesia, etsi ad celebrationem eucharisticam non participant, ministri ordinarii qui non sint quoque modo impediti.³

The Pontifical Commission took up the question in its Plenary Session of February 20, 1987 and responded: NEGATIVE.

This authentic interpretation was approved by the Holy Father on June 15, 1987 who then directed the Congregation for Sacraments to communicate the decision to the Episcopal Conferences.

The reply of the Pontifical Commission clearly indicates that when ordinary ministers (Bishop, Priest, Deacon) are present at the Eucharist, whether they are celebrating or not, and are in sufficient number and are not prevented from doing so by other ministries, the extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist are not allowed to distribute Communion either to themselves or to the faithful.

³ “Whether an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, appointed under canons 910, para 2 and 230, par 3, can carry out his auxiliary duty even when there are also present in the church, even if not participating in the celebration of the Eucharist, ordinary ministers who are not in some way prevented (from distributing Holy Communion).”

Finally, Cardinal Mayer asks that you please convey these directives to the members of the Episcopal Conference.

With sentiments of esteem and every good wish, I am
Sincerely yours in Christ, Pio Laghi
Apostolic Pro-Nuncio

12. COMMUNION IN THE HAND SHOULD BE REJECTED

APPENDIX III

COMMUNION IN THE HAND SHOULD BE REJECTED

by Dr. Dietrich van Hildebrand

There can be no doubt that Communion in the hand is an expression of the trend towards desacralization in the Church in general and irreverence in approaching the Eucharist in particular. The ineffable mystery of the bodily presence of Christ in the consecrated Host calls for a deeply reverent attitude. (To take the Body of Christ in our unanointed hands—just as if it were a mere piece of bread is something in itself deeply irreverent and detrimental for our faith.) Dealing with this unfathomable mystery as if we were merely dealing with nothing but another piece of bread, something we naturally do every day with mere bread, makes the act of faith in the bodily presence of Christ more difficult.

Such behavior toward the consecrated Host slowly corrodes our faith in the bodily presence and fosters the idea that it is only a symbol of Christ. To claim that taking the bread in our hands increases our sense of the reality of the bread is an absurd argument. The reality of the bread is not what matters—that is also visible for any atheist. But the fact that the Host is in reality the Body of Christ—the fact that transubstantiation has taken place—this is the theme which must be stressed.

Early Christian Practice No Valid Argument

Arguments for Communion in the hand based upon the fact that this practice can be found among the early Christians are not really valid. They overlook the dangers and the inadequacy of reintroducing the practice today. Pope Pius XII spoke in very clear and unmistakable terms against the idea that one could reintroduce today customs from the times of the catacombs.

Certainly we should try to renew in the souls of Catholics today the spirit, fervor, and heroic devotion found in the faith of the early Christians and the many Martyrs from among their ranks. But simply adopting their customs is something else again; customs can assume a completely new function today, and we cannot and should not simply try to reintroduce them.

In the days of the catacombs the danger of desacralization and irreverence which threatens today was not present. The contrast between the *saeculum* and the holy Church

was constantly in the minds of Christians. Thus a custom which was not a danger in those times can constitute a grave pastoral danger in our day.

St. Francis on the Dignity of the Priesthood

Consider how St. Francis regarded the extraordinary dignity of the priest which consists exactly in the fact that he is allowed to touch the Body of Christ with his anointed hands. St. Francis said: “*If I were to meet at the same time a Saint from Heaven and a poor priest I would first show my respect to the priest and quickly kiss his hand, and then I would say: ‘O wait, St. Lawrence, for the hands of this man touch the Word of Life and possess a good which far surpasses everything that is human’.*”

Someone may say: but did not St. Tarcisius⁴ distribute Communion though he was no priest? Surely no one was scandalized because he touched the consecrated Host with his hands. And in an emergency, a layman is today allowed to give Communion to others.

But this exception for emergency cases is not something which implies a lack of respect for the holy Body of Christ—which should be accepted with a trembling heart (and should remain a privilege, reserved only for an emergency).

But there is a great difference between this case of touching the consecrated Host with our unanointed hands and that of taking Communion in the hand as a matter of course—on all occasions. To be allowed to touch the consecrated Host with the unanointed hand is in no way presented to the faithful as an awe-inspiring privilege. It becomes the normal form of receiving Communion. And this fosters an irreverent attitude and thus corrodes faith in the real bodily presence of Christ.

It is taken for granted that everyone receives the consecrated Host in his hand. The layman to whom the great privilege is granted for special reasons has to touch the Host, of course. But there is no reason for receiving Communion in the hand; only an immanent spirit of paltry familiarity with our Lord.

Reprinted from *The Maryfaithful*, March-April, 1985.

⁴ *Editor's NB:* St. Tarcisius was actually an ordained acolyte, that is, a cleric, and not merely an adolescent layman as some suppose. In the first early centuries of the Church, acolytes often bore the Blessed Sacrament (*e.g.*, the *fermentum* in a linen bag) either in liturgical procession (as done during the ancient papal Mass as observed in Rome) or in giving Viaticum to the sick (as St. Tarcisius was doing). Later, this privilege was stripped from the order of acolyte in the Latin Church.