

The Proper way of Receiving Communion

I have been asked to address the recent assertion of certain individuals that in the writings of the Servant of God Luisa Piccarreta, she and Jesus condemn Communion in the hand and considered it an absolute sacrilege. This patently false assertion comes at a time of the Corona virus pandemic, which has led several North American dioceses to administer Communion only in the hand and refrain from administering the Chalice, so as to minimize exposure to and contagion of said virus. Indeed, several bishops and pastors expressed a founded concern over “the risk of touching the tongue and passing the saliva on to others,” which may cause another to contract the virus. Conversely, some individuals claim that Communion in the hand is an absolute sacrilege and under no circumstances is one to receive Communion this way.

Before explaining the Catholic Church’s Traditional practice of the proper manner of receiving Communion, let me first say in no uncertain terms that nowhere is Communion in the hand condemned by either Jesus or Luisa, as **a) during Luisa’s lifetime Communion in the hand was never practiced nor therefore was it condemnable, b) the passage of October 20, 1906 that the aforementioned asserters rely upon does not refer to Communion in the hand at all! Rather, this passage refers, in Luisa’s own words, explicitly to those seculars who were sent “by the authority of the government... to profane the holy place (the church). Some (of these seculars sent by the government) stamped upon, acted with violence toward and seized the Most Blessed Sacrament and the Priests also.”¹**

In sum, those who use this text to claim that Jesus and Luisa condemn Communion in the hand are distorting Luisa’s words and creating more obstacles to her cause for beatification. Indeed, the late Archbishop Carmelo Cassati stated, “*If it is true that private revelation may not add anything essentially new to Public Revelation, though it may extend what the Church already holds by means of a definable development of doctrine, it is the task of those who explain her doctrine to others (including her authorized promoters) to reconcile it with the teaching of the Church. Poor or exaggerated explanations of her writings have already scandalized some faithful, who then attribute the error to the Servant of God*” (William G. Bilton to Arthur & Joanne Kirby, April 04, 1997).

Notice how the late Archbishop emphasizes the importance of reconciling Luisa’s writings to the teachings of the Church – the same Church that, in certain dioceses during this pandemic permits Communion in the hand. I wish to emphasize that the Church's praxis and normative way of properly receiving Communion is on the tongue. Although in 1977 the Pope granted an indult to the dioceses of the U.S. to permit Communion in the hand, the number of Catholic rites and countries that received the indult are few. Furthermore, these are exceptional times we are witnessing. This pandemic viral outbreak and church and state lockdowns offer a context within which the Church is permitted by God to regulate said discipline in the administration and reception of Communion without diminishing the “*profound reverence and devotion*” that must accompany them (cf. the Letter of St. Pope John Paul II, “*Dominicae Canae: Letter to All Bishops of the Church in the Mystery and Worship of the Eucharist*”, art.

¹ In the original Italian text, Luisa states, “...pareva che per autorità del governo entrassero altre persone a profanare il luogo santo. Chi saltava, chi violentava e chi sacrilegamente metteva mano al Santissimo e ai sacerdoti.”

11). St. Pope John Paul II affirms, *“It is necessary for all of us who are ministers of the Eucharist to examine carefully our actions at the altar, in particular the way in which we handle that food and drink which are the body and blood of the Lord our God in our hands: the way in which we distribute Holy Communion; the way in which we perform the purification. All these actions have a meaning of their own. Naturally, scrupulosity must be avoided, but God preserve us from behaving in a way that lacks respect, from undue hurry, from an impatience that causes scandal”* (Ibid).

When the Church permits Communion in the hand in these exceptional times, it is improper for one to claim that is an absolute sacrilege. Nevertheless, anyone who is not in the state of grace and receives Communion, either on the tongue or in the hand, commits a sacrilege. To better illustrate this point consider an unusual circumstance of a saint in whose hands Jesus desired to rest on account of her purity and holiness. St. Faustina Kowalska writes:

“The crusade day, which is the fifth of the month, happened to fall on the First Friday of the month. This was my day for keeping watch before the Lord Jesus. It was my duty to make amends to the Lord for all offenses and acts of disrespect and to pray that, on this day, no sacrilege be committed. This day, my spirit was set aflame with special love for the Eucharist. It seemed to me that I was transformed into a blazing fire. When I was about to receive Holy Communion, a second Host fell onto the priest’s sleeve, and I did not know which host I was to receive. After I had hesitated for a moment, the priest made an impatient gesture with his hand to tell me I should receive the Host. When I took the Host he gave me, the other one fell onto my hands. The priest went along the altar rail to distribute Communion, and I held the Lord Jesus in my hands all that time. When the priest approached me again, I raised the Host for him to put it back into the chalice, because when I had first received Jesus I could not speak before consuming the Host, and so could not tell him that the other had fallen. But while I was holding the Host in my hand, I felt such a power of love that for the rest of the day I could neither eat nor come to my senses. I heard these words from the Host: ‘I desired to rest in your hands, not only in your heart.’ And at that moment I saw the little Jesus. But when the priest approached, I saw once again only the Host” (Diary Divine Mercy, entry 160).

Admittedly, St. Faustina received the Lord in this way without intending to do so, and the Lord was pleased by it on account of her holiness. And yet Tradition reveals that Communion in the hand, when done properly, was observed from the earliest centuries of Christianity. The 4th century Church Father and Doctor St. Cyril of Jerusalem instructed those preparing for Baptism that, upon receiving Holy Communion, the faithful should place one hand on top of the other, palms up, so as to prepare a throne to “receive the King.”

Apropos of the spread of the corona virus and the aforementioned concern of bishops over “the risk of touching the tongue and passing the saliva on to others,” the Archdiocese of Portland, USA conducted a study. It consulted with two physicians, one of which is a specialist in immunology, who concluded that that the chance of touching someone’s hand is equally probable in spreading the virus. They related that one’s hands have a greater exposure to germs, and that when “done properly the reception of Holy Communion on the tongue or in the hand poses a more or less equal risk.”

In light of the preceding, Communion on the tongue remains the norm in the church for it reduces the chance of abuse, e.g., mishandling of the Host, fragments of the Host remaining in the hand (in the Latin rite the Host is made very compact, reducing chances of residual fragments, but the same cannot be said in many eastern rites). Let us always remember that the Church's preference for Communion on the tongue and permission of Communion in the hand must *always* be accompanied by the reverence, devotion, humility, respect, adoration, and decorum befitting our Savior (cf. 1969 CDF Instruction, *Memoriale Domini*; 1980 Apostolic Letter *Dominicae Canae*). Although the manner of Eucharistic reception does not necessarily guarantee a life of fidelity and loyalty to God's grace, it is certainly a cause for one to reflect upon how the outward manner of reception expresses and fosters his or her faith in the Eucharist.

I conclude with the words of Psalm 81.10: "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it*".

Rev. Joseph L. Iannuzzi, S.T.L., S.Th.D.