

Hand or tongue? Kneeling or standing? Either way, receiving the Eucharist should be an act of communion

This is the eighth [in a series of articles](#) exploring the gift and promise of Vatican II's liturgical reforms.

Last month, I was in Poland. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for the first time, Polish Catholics were encouraged to receive the Eucharist on the hand rather than on the tongue. As one might imagine, this desired regulation of the Polish bishops was not received with universal acclaim. A meme began to circulate via social media sites. It showed an image of dirty and bloodied hands receiving the Eucharistic host. Surrounding the image were words (in Polish) describing the desecration precipitated by such reception.

Reception of Communion on the hand or tongue is not quite as controversial in the United States. In my parish, both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the faithful receive the Lord in their hands. They receive the Lord on their tongues. Peace is mostly kept.

At least within the United States, the two postures for reception are both allowed.

Both are acceptable

Now, things are always a bit more complicated. At least some traditional Catholics argue that reception of the Blessed Sacrament in the hands is an act of desecration. The priest alone, it is presumed, has the capacity to touch the Blessed Sacrament. The faithful should receive on the tongue if they are to acknowledge the sacredness of Christ's presence. In

fact, some correlate the decline in faith in the doctrines of Real Presence and transubstantiation with this mode of reception.



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As you might suspect, I do not hold this position. In the early Church, reception on the hand was, in many places (such as Jerusalem), the normative posture of reception. Cyril of Jerusalem, for example, developed a robust account of Eucharistic presence while encouraging the faithful to receive the presence of Christ by making their hands into a throne.

After all, where in the Church's theology does it say that the faithful are not worthy of touching the body of the Lord? Are the hands of the baptized incapable of holding the Eucharistic Lord?

At the same time, reception on the hand is not also universally required.

The faithful may receive on the tongue. Growing up, the possibility of reception on the tongue was not presented to me (at least in a way that was remotely attractive). Yes, I could receive the Eucharist on the tongue. But since the Second Vatican Council, I was told, we have encouraged people to receive the Blessed Sacrament in their hands.



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In fact, I received the Blessed Sacrament almost exclusively on the hands until my son arrived. When he began to eat “real” food, I paid attention to the way that he came to me for food. My little toddler walked up to me, opened his mouth and allowed me to feed him. As someone who thinks about Catholicism more than the average person, I at once connected this posture to the Eucharist. I, too, could receive Our Lord as a little child, totally receptive to the presence of Jesus.

But then COVID-19 came along. It was interesting, because, at once, I had no problem receiving Our Lord in my hands. My body knew the way of receiving Jesus in both ways. My hands could be a throne to receive the Eucharistic Lord. I could approach Jesus as a child, letting the Lord feed me.

Be intentional

All of this made me think about a letter from St. Augustine to Januarius, written 1,600 years ago. Januarius wrote to Augustine demanding to know why some churches had different liturgical practices than his own. Some churches received the Eucharist on Good Friday. Some didn't. Which ones were right? And Januarius, it should be noted, was very clear that the ones who didn't were in the right.

Be wary of writing letters to St. Augustine. He wrote back. The doctor of grace informed Januarius that liturgical

practice can differ if such practice doesn't contradict faith and morals. Some people received the Eucharist on Good Friday. Some didn't. Simmer down, Januarius.

The post-conciliar practice, therefore, allows both practices. You can receive the Blessed Sacrament in the hand. You can receive on the tongue. Simmer down, everyone. Both are allowed. Both postures should be taken up in a spirit of profound reverence.

My second-grade catechists, who did discourage us from receiving on the tongue, also underlined for me that in receiving Jesus in my hands, I was receiving a beautiful king. Be intentional. Be thoughtful. Receive the beloved. Such catechesis, I hope, is integral to the National Eucharistic Revival in the U.S. Church. But again, both are allowed. Both can lead us to glorify God and receive the sanctification God wants for us.

Standing or kneeling?

The question about receiving while standing or kneeling is more complicated. The official position of the U.S. Church is that one should receive the Blessed Sacrament while standing. Liturgical law within the United States encourages this posture for the sake of unity. As St. Thomas Aquinas notes, the reality that the Eucharist points to is deeper unity within the Church.



A woman kneels for Communion at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington in 2013. (CNS photo/Nancy Phelan Wiechec)

Let me be a bit provocative here, I hope in a way that is helpful to increasing unity. It is right and just, of course, that the end of the Eucharist is unity. But is it possible that such unity can co-exist even within a diversity of postures for Eucharistic reception? Could the Church in the United States have allowed for a bit more diversity here?

I dare to hope, but yes. I have been to campus ministries where a small kneeler is placed at the front of the church during Communion. Some received on the tongue while kneeling. Some received on the hands while standing. Some received on the hands while kneeling. It didn't feel that this diversity ripped apart ecclesial unity. Rather, it felt like here we were. There were those of us who stood and received and those of us who kneeled, but we were united in a common act of liturgical devotion.

Maybe this is the "organic" development really happening in the Church these days. What's happening is a return to Augustine's principle that liturgical practice can be diverse if it doesn't contradict faith and morals.

We stand and receive on the hand. This is an ancient posture, one in which we welcome the Eucharistic Lord as one who stands upright, as a creature made for Eucharistic praise.



Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo, left, and Bishop Daniel E. Flores distribute Communion during a Mass at the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan del Valle in San Juan, Texas. (CNS photo/Chaz Muth)

We stand and receive on the tongue. We are fed by the Lord. We receive as a child welcoming Christ into our hearts.

We kneel and receive on the hand or the tongue. In assuming this posture, we underline our radical dependency on the God who feeds us.

I hope none of this is taken as relativistic. But, dear me, perhaps it's a return to a more robust account of the Catholic both/and. If the Church allows it, let it happen. And maybe, if it's not destroying the very fabric of ecclesial life (and that's a discernment that's outside my pay grade), the Church should, in fact, allow it.

This isn't about my preferences. It's about the unity of the Church, a Church that has a lot of different people who think about worship in different ways. We all belong to one another.

Together.

Even if we stand or kneel or receive in the hand or on the tongue.

After all, we're Catholic.

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