

Eucharistic Spirituality

It is now approaching a third year since we first became aware of the fact that we were living in a diseased world, and it seems that we are still not out of the woods. People continue to come down with Covid. Our Boston Archdiocese responded to this new situation two years ago by stating that Holy Communion was no longer to be taken on the tongue but rather in the hand. This ruling was obviously based on the belief that there was less danger of infection in giving people Communion in their hands than in their mouths. A possible touch of hands seemed less dangerous than the possibility of the saliva of the person receiving Communion on the tongue touching the hand of the one ministering Communion.

But some of those used to receiving Communion on the tongue found this archdiocesan ruling difficult to accept. Indeed, some refused to accept it and continued to present themselves for Communion with their mouths open. This left priests and communion ministers with a difficult choice: Should they follow the diocesan ruling or should they respect the piety of those used to receiving Communion on their tongues? One compromise was to ask those wishing to receive Communion on the tongue to wait until others receiving in the hand had been served. That way, if an exchange of saliva occurred, there would be less of a disruption in the Mass.

But why did those insisting on communion on the tongue refuse to follow the archdiocesan instruction? Is it not a matter of indifference whether one receives the Body of the Lord on the tongue or in the hand? The important thing is to receive the Lord's body---and, in healthier times, his blood as well. But for some who are accustomed to receive the Lord's body on their tongues that was and is not true. They would rather go without receiving the Eucharist than receive it in their hands. Why is that so? I cannot but think that behind this firm stance lies an unconscious belief that to take the consecrated host into our hands is a sacrilege. Our hands are dirty. Who know where they have been and when they were last washed thoroughly. In fact, it does not really matter whether they have or have not been washed. For not only our hands but our entire bodies are unclean in some fundamental way precisely because they are physical. Therefore they should not come into contact with the Lord.

But if that is the case, then receiving the Lord's body into our mouths must also be sacrilegious, for our mouths are as physical as our hands? But in some not intellectually fathomable way they seem less involved in the ordinary material world than our hands do. When we take the Lord's body into our hands, we act in a

way that is almost magisterial. We are the ones acting while the Lord's body becomes the one suffering our action and therefore in some sense subject to us. But that is not the case when we received the Lord's body on our tongues. Then we are passive, and the Lord's body is the one acting, as it were, on us, through the instrumentality of the communion minister. And that is more respectful, more worshipful than our taking the Lord's body into our hands. Nevertheless, this oral reception of the Lord remains sacrilegious because it too cannot escape its own materiality, and matter is dirty.

It sounds far-fetched, but in the end must we not say that the ultimate basis of this refusal to accept the host in one's hand is a denial of the basic goodness of the material world and therefore of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Our faith insists that in the man Jesus the unseen Word of God has become physical, has become FLESH. And behind that belief lies the conviction that matter is good, that matter is God's creation and as such is good. If it is not, then there is a dualistic understanding of the world, a world of spirit which is good, and a world of matter which is evil. Therefore there must be two gods, two creative principles, one good, one evil. But this is not the understanding of Christian faith. God is one, and God is good, and what God creates is also good, and that includes the material world. And it is precisely because matter is God's good creation that the incarnation of the Word in matter is possible.