

## Case s01e13 Manhandling God

Why do you go to Mass? It's not a trick question, not a Zen koan, not some riddle. It's an honest question. And you might be surprised to learn the answer.

We go to Mass in order to be in the physical presence of Jesus Christ — Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity in the Eucharist. Yes, the Church says we have to go. Yes, it is an act of worship and adoration. Yes, it allows us to participate in the Sacrifice of Calvary.

But all of those things are achieved by being in the physical presence of God.

And not just in the physical *presence* of God. We are called to have an intimate relationship with God, and when you have an intimate relationship with someone, you are not just physically *close* but you physically interact.

God comes to us in the most vulnerable way: Not only does the Creator of the Universe make Himself a Man, but that Man presents Himself to us under the appearance of bread and wine, and He offers that bread and wine to be consumed as food.

But how do we physically interact with God, when we take Him as food and eat His Flesh and drink His Blood? Having come so far — orienting the altar the right way, using beautiful sacred music, keeping reverent silence when we are not speaking the sacred language of Latin — do we risk stumbling at the last hurdle by being *too* familiar? I call this case — and it's a big one — “The Case of Manhandling God.”

There is a Catholic maxim, expressed — of course! — in Latin: “Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi.” “The law of prayer is the law of belief is the law of life.” How you pray leads to how you believe, and how you believe leads to how you live your life.

The great Abp. Fulton Sheen expressed the same sentiment when he said, “If you do not live what you believe, you will end up believing what you live.” C.S. Lewis, writing in the voice of the devil Screwtape, puts it even more bluntly, saying humans “are animals and that whatever their bodies do affects their souls.”

Our bodily postures and gestures are not something external to us. We are not souls that temporarily inhabit bodies, trapped in a fleshy prison. We *are* bodies and we *are* souls, a combination of the two. We can sin with our bodies: murder, violence, lying, theft, even what are euphemistically called “the sins of the flesh.” It is Christ's Flesh, His blood shed on the Cross, His Body dying for us, offered to us in the Eucharist, which saves us from sin.

There is no case to be made — no Catholic case, at least — that what our bodies do, particularly during Mass and the reception of the Eucharist, have no effect on the disposition of our hearts, souls and minds.

“No Catholic case” — it is interesting to say that. During the Protestant Revolt of the 16th century, many of the soi-disant “reformers” made it a priority to attack the Eucharist; they, at least, recognized its central importance to Catholicism! Knowing they could not immediately attack it directly and destroy belief in the Real Presence, they instead adopted a clever and patient tactic: change the liturgy and prescribe the Eucharist be received *not* in the traditional manner it had been received for 15 centuries — that is, on the tongue and kneeling — but rather in a new and novel manner: in the hands and standing.

There are two things here: our bodily posture and how we take Christ Himself. Both point to the same things — either belief in or denial of the Real Presence of Christ, but in different ways. Let's start with our posture; should we stand or kneel?

Kneeling is a traditional posture of humility, of supplication, of subordination. It is a natural posture to show such things. Even animals show a similar posture. Watch a dog or a monkey with a bigger, superior animal; the inferior crouches down, makes himself smaller. And, of course, the reverse is true. Watch two cats hissing and facing off. They will arch their backs, puff themselves up so they look bigger, taller, more important.

Lowering the head, bowing, kneeling, even prostrating ourselves on the ground — they all make us smaller before someone else. They are natural gestures of humility, and we use them outside of religious contexts. Although it's perhaps unpleasant to American sensibilities, we bow before kings, curtsy to queens, kneel when proposing marriage.

But it is in prayer that kneeling is most often used. Throughout Scripture, we see examples of this. Moses knelt on Mt. Sinai when he asked God to forgive His people. Daniel knelt down each day to pray. Solomon knelt to pray in the Temple. Jairus fell to his knees when asking Jesus to save his dying daughter. Saint Peter knelt when bringing the woman Tabitha back to life.

Heck; Our Lord *Himself* knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane to pray to His Father the night before the Crucifixion. If it's good enough for Jesus ...

As Pope Benedict XVI writes in his book “The Spirit of the Liturgy,” the Greek word “proskynein” (proh-skee-noon), which means to prostrate oneself and worship, “occurs 59 times in the New Testament, 24 of which are in the Apocalypse, the book of heavenly liturgy, which is presented to the Church as the standard for her own liturgy.”

There really is no case to be made we *shouldn't* be kneeling to pray, particularly during Mass and especially when receiving Holy Communion. It is a gesture both of supplication and humility. It asks for something from God, while at the same time as acknowledging not only His power, might and glory, but also the simple fact He is there!

If we stand to receive the Eucharist, what message are we sending to others who might be watching? That the bread and wine is just ... bread and wine? If you told someone that bread and wine is God, would they believe you if you didn't kneel before It?

And what message are our bodies sending to our minds and hearts? We might not quite be animals, but it is a rare case the devil doesn't tell at least a *little* bit of truth. We might not be animals, but what our bodies do certainly affects our souls. If we don't kneel before the Eucharist, the most important person we are teaching to deny the Real Presence is ourselves.

Fortunately, the Church has your back on this one. The law of the Church requires a gesture of reverence be made towards the Blessed Sacrament. Kneeling is the obvious choice: simple, direct, visually clear, humbling and supplicating, backed up by 2000 or more years of tradition and, perhaps most importantly, fulfilling the words of St. Paul to the Philippians that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.”

But a lot of people don't kneel. Perhaps they don't make a sign of reverence, or perhaps it is just the merest twitch of the head, almost a nod like you are letting your buddy know you've seen him at the bar. Many people — maybe most? — stand to receive the Eucharist.

Sometimes, there are good reasons for that. Infirm people, with leg or spine injuries, can find it hard to kneel. As we get older, it's harder to kneel — well, maybe it's just harder to get back up. And God absolutely respects that; He understands the limitations of the creature He made, after all.

Having said that, every time I go to Mass I see men who stormed the beaches at Normandy and women who riveted planes coming off the line in Detroit struggle to kneel and struggle to get back up, while guys and girls who still get carded when they buy liquor saunter right along. This isn't a *physical* ailment, is what I'm saying.

And, sometimes, it's very difficult to receive kneeling because the altar rails have been torn out. Time was, the congregation would kneel at the altar rail and the priest — the priest! Not a legion of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion — would go up and down and distribute the Eucharist. The “design” (and I use that word under advisement) of modern churches isn't conducive to the appropriate reception of the Eucharist — almost, dare I say it, as if it were deliberate?

Not all the Protestant reformers in the Church are dead, is what I'm saying.

You'll find yourself pressured to receive standing. People — the extraordinary ministers (I call them legion for they are many), other parishioners, even the priest — will say you are making a scene, making a spectacle of yourself, getting in the way. You are delaying the Communion line, people will trip over you, etc.

My response to all of that? *Everyone* should be kneeling. And everyone should be looking where they are going. And, really, did you have somewhere better to be? Am I delaying you, Father? Fellow Catholics? Is this physical encounter with Our Lord, Savior and Creator eating into time you have slated for something more important? I am at a loss to think what

that might be, but, then again, what do I know? I'm just a reactionary Catholic sitting here worshiping Jesus. Well, kneeling here. But you get the idea.

All joking aside, sometimes it is difficult to receive while kneeling. We're moving in a space we don't design with a lot of people we don't control. We should certainly try to kneel while receiving, and encourage the priest and others to facilitate that, but perhaps it's not always possible. We should absolutely make a gesture of reverence before the Eucharist, and the simplest, most appropriate and most visual method of doing that is by kneeling.

A bigger problem — and, frankly, it's a case I don't think I can close on my own — is reception in the hand.

The problem of reception in the hand is a bigger issue because there is really no excuse. It's just as easy for the priest to put the Host on your tongue as it is for him to put It in your hands. You're right there. No one's tripping over you; you're not in anyone's way.

But why should we receive Communion on the tongue rather than in the hand?

First and foremost, it's practical. The Eucharist is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ, but it comes to us under the appearance of bread and wine. To all our senses, it appears as bread. It behaves like bread. It crumbles like bread.

And that's the issue. The rubrics of Mass go to great lengths to ensure not a single crumb, not a single particle of the Eucharist is lost. The priest is to hold his hands in a particular way, to clean the vessels in a particular way. Patens and purificators exist specifically to prevent the tiniest fragment of the Eucharist from going missing.

The Eucharist *is* Christ, and He is really, truly and substantially present in the smallest particle. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem tells us particles of the Host are more valuable than gold — which is a classic example of understatement from a Doctor of the Church!

By putting the Host into a hand and the Host then being picked up by another hand and put into the mouth, we risk fragmenting it. Small particles can break off, stick to our palms or fingers, and then be dusted off into our pockets or the pews.

The entirety of Mass is oriented around showing respect and reverence for the physical presence of Christ. And then, at the very moment of receiving Him, of welcoming Him into the temple of our body, we make a boneheaded decision and scatter Him to the floor.

And that leads to the second major issue with receiving Jesus in the hand. How many times did your mother say, “Don't touch that! You don't know where it's been?” Well, you *do* know where your hands have been — and it's not nice! I'm not talking about physical cleanliness; I'm talking about what our hands, the hands of the laity do.

Have you heard the mocking expression of a priest with soft hands not roughened by physical labor? “These hands were made for chalices, not callouses”? Of course, the sentiment behind it is unfair; priests work very, very hard — but it is also true. The hands of the laity are made for mundane work, things of this world. The hands of a priest are consecrated, anointed with oil during his ordination. They are set aside, marked as special, dedicated to the work of the sacraments.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, expresses this in no uncertain terms;

Out of reverence toward this sacrament, nothing touches it but what is consecrated, hence the corporal and the chalice are 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.

And it's not just big dumb oxen from the 13th century who are against the manhandling of God by the laity. Some of the holiest people of the 20th century were against it. The Jesuit Fr John Hardon put it plainly: “Behind Communion in the hand — I wish to repeat and make as plain as I can — is a weakening, a conscious, deliberate weakening of faith in the Real Presence. Whatever you can do to stop Communion in the hand will be blessed by God.”

Mother Teresa said: “Wherever I go in the whole world, the thing that makes me the saddest is watching people receive Communion in the hand.”

Now, remember, this was a woman who saw unimaginable poverty and suffering in the slums of Calcutta — and the thing that made her saddest was Communion in the hand? Either she was completely indifferent to human suffering — something that is patently false and could only be advanced by a weak-minded fool ignorant of her history — or Communion in the hand is really, really, *really* bad, you guys!

Dietrich von Hildebrand, the man called “the 20th-century Doctor of the Church” by Pope Pius XII, said with sorrow:

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. Why — for God’s sake — should Communion in the hand be introduced into our churches when it is evidently detrimental from a pastoral viewpoint, when it certainly does not increase our reverence, and when it exposes the Eucharist to the most terrible diabolical abuses? There are really no serious arguments for Communion in the hand. But there are the most gravely serious kinds of arguments against it.

And lest you think these people are outliers, mad-bad-rad traditionalists unwilling to get with the times, on the fringe of the Church, not in tune with Rome, how about some papal quotes?

Blessed Paul VI — yes, Paul VI, the pope who oversaw the second half of the Second Vatican Council and was the man to implement many of its reforms — advised against it in his instruction “Memoriale Domini,” and Pope St. John Paul II said, “I tell you that I am not in favor of this practice, nor do I recommend it.”

And, in the Spirit of the Liturgy, Pope Benedict XVI wrote;

It may well be that kneeling is alien to modern culture — in so far as it is a culture, for this culture has turned away from the Faith and no longer knows the One before Whom kneeling is the right, indeed the intrinsically necessary gesture. The man who learns to believe learns also to kneel, and a faith or a liturgy no longer familiar with kneeling would be sick at the core. Where it has been lost, kneeling must be rediscovered.

Everything about Communion in the hand — receiving God like it doesn't matter if He gets trampled underfoot, receiving Him in our unworthy hands, just receiving Him like he's a free sample of a new whole wheat cracker at Walmart, taking Him while standing up and munching distractedly while we saunter back to our pew with scarcely a dip of the head — all of this is an attempt to deny the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

And, yes, I say *attempt* to deny it. Oh, sure, most of the people marching up and receiving Christ in their hands aren't deliberately trying to deny or obfuscate the teaching. But they are the useful idiots; they're already acting like they don't believe. Maybe they're actually beyond merely not believing in the Real Presence; maybe they never knew, were never taught, never even heard of the doctrine. And if they did, would they believe it about something that seems to be treated with about as much respect as, well, the latest cookie from Tollhouse?

No. This is why this file is so thick, and why I don't think I can close it today. There was a concerted effort, an organized attempt with behind-the-scenes machinations and skulduggery, obfuscations, deceptions and lies by people sworn to uphold the teaching of the Church. This, more than any other of these cases, was a deliberate attempt to Protestantize the Church and deny the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Mass and the Eucharist.

There's a lot to go through here. For now, we're going to have to leave this case open.