
The Fingers that Hold God

Two years ago I recall celebrating my first Mass of Thanksgiving as a priest, the day after my ordination which happened to be the **Sunday** for the Solemnity of Corpus Christi. Since my ordination, I've had a handful of people who have noticed the rather particular way in which I hold my hands during Mass and ask me about it. The fact that some had noticed surprised me since my experience of "priests' hands" at Mass are about as numerously unique as each priest. Nevertheless, I've always seen it as a good teaching opportunity to explain the discipline when asked. Since it is the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, I thought such a topic might be relevant for a bulletin message.

When people ask about the way I hold my hands, they are always referring to the fact that I keep my index finger and thumb pressed together during the Orans posture (praying). But it's important to note that I don't do this for the entire Mass; I only do this for a very specific part of the Mass, namely after the Consecration of the bread into the Body of our Lord. When the priest picks up the ordinary and simple wheat host, it is not placed back down on the altar in the same manner. A remarkable change has occurred through the power of the Holy Spirit with the utterance of the divine commands of the Lord of the Universe himself by the human lips of the ordained priest.



It is our belief as Catholics that Jesus' words have the power to change reality— to change the bread and wine into his Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity in fulfillment of his promise that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will abide in him eternally. The Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is the Source and Summit of our faith, and so the Church surrounds this with all sorts of practices that uphold, protect, and magnify our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament: precious vessels are used, care taken in the cleaning of the soiled linens after Mass, the remaining Eucharist is kept in a locked tabernacle with a vigil light always on to indicate God's presence among us, to name just a few.

Along with these traditions, there also existed the discipline and custom known as 'liturgical or canonical digits'. This referred to the index finger and thumb fingers of the priest being pressed together after the consecration until they had been cleansed thoroughly by water poured over them into the chalice called the ablutions. The reason for this practice was the logical consequence of our belief that the whole entirety of Jesus, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity becomes present in every piece of the consecrated host, even the smallest of recognizable particles. It is not uncommon for some of these particles to remain stuck to the priest's fingers after consecration, so these same fingers are kept together lest our Blessed Lord fall to the ground and risk profanation. The priests therefore had to be intentional about how they celebrated Mass, and so their bodies would conform to the belief of their mind and soul, even as unnatural as it seems to turn pages in the missal or move objects on the altar without the use of those fingers.



When I had discovered this tradition during my formation, I found it to be especially fitting given our faith and how the liturgy teaches us: *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief). Both faith and prayer enrich each other, but it all begins with prayer. I also know the danger in how easily love and care can be lost in doing things repeatedly, not necessarily “familiarity breeds contempt”, but rather “familiarity breeds indifference or apathy”. Like any important relationship in our life, we must always take care that we do not grow cold toward loved ones through regular encounters. The same can be true of a disciplined prayer life, and priests are not immune to it, even in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. So I have made a conscious attempt, since my ordination, to practice the habit of ‘liturgical digits’ as a way to protect myself from casually allowing my mind to drift off rather than be focused on what I am celebrating in love and devotion, on the Bread of Life who is made present to us. Such a discipline is no longer strictly mandatory for the current celebration of Mass, but not everything in life that is good and beneficial to us is necessarily an obligation, just the same as certain gestures of affection between spouses are not strictly mandated.

As a little concluding bit of relevance, I thought I would share a little story of St. Isaac Jogues, a Jesuit priest and one of the Canadian Martyrs. When he and his companions had come as missionaries to North America, they had been welcomed and accepted by some of the residents, but this also meant they were seen as enemies of other warring peoples. In one event, St. Isaac Jogues was captured as a prisoner and was subjected to much torture, including the loss of much of his fingers. He escaped with his life, but the greatest tragedy was no longer being able to lawfully celebrate Mass due to his mutilated hands. On a trip back to Rome, he requested special dispensation from the Pope to celebrate Mass without the use of his thumbs and index fingers. The Pope granted him the dispensation, stating, “It would be shameful that a martyr of Christ not be allowed to drink the Blood of Christ,” allowing him once again to be able to celebrate Mass. It was our Eucharistic Lord in the Mass that gave him the love, strength, courage, and perseverance to return to his missionary work in North America once again where he would end up offering his life and dying. It is the same Lord who was offered by those consecrated hands then as is being offered to us today. We ought to do all that we can to cherish this great and precious gift.

God love you.

Fr. Brian Trueman

Corpus Christi Evening of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament Sunday, June 19 at 7 pm

This year, I invite you to join me on Sunday, June 19th, for a time of Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and adoration. We shall begin in the evening at 7 pm for about an hour and a half, so it should hopefully not conflict with too many plans for Father’s Day, and could even be an excellent way to also pray for our fathers, both living and deceased, on that occasion. During the time of adoration, we shall have moments of silent prayer, readings from Scripture and reflections from the saints, some singing of hymns, devotional prayers, and Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours. The time shall then conclude with Benediction (a solemn blessing by the Eucharist), singing the Divine Praises, and then Reposition of the Blessed Sacrament. If you’re new to Adoration - please come! Come renew your love and devotion for the Eucharist! There will be a program to follow.

