



**Fœderatio Internationalis *Una Voce***

***Positio N. 3***

THE MANNER OF RECEIVING  
HOLY COMMUNION

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### From the General Introduction

These papers, commissioned by the International Federation *Una Voce*, are offered to stimulate and inform debate about the 1962 Missal among Catholics ‘attached to the ancient Latin liturgical tradition’, and others interested in the liturgical renewal of the Church. They are not to be taken to imply personal or moral criticism of those today or in the past who have adopted practices or advocated reforms which are subjected to criticism. In composing these papers we adopt the working assumption that our fellow Catholics act in good will, but that nevertheless a vigorous and well-informed debate is absolutely necessary if those who act in good will are to do so in light of a proper understanding of the issues.

The authors of the papers are not named, as the papers are not the product of any one person, and also because we prefer them to be judged on the basis of their content, not their authorship.

The International Federation *Una Voce* humbly submits the opinions contained in these papers to the judgement of the Church.

### The Manner of Receiving Holy Communion: Abstract

The Instruction *Universae Ecclesiae* makes it clear that Holy Communion is to be received kneeling and on the tongue at celebrations of the Extraordinary Form. Reception on the tongue is, in fact, the universal law of the Church, from which particular Episcopal Conferences have received derogations. The value of kneeling to show one’s humility in the presence of the sacred is affirmed in innumerable texts of Scripture and emphasised by Pope Benedict XVI in his book ‘The Spirit of the Liturgy’. The moment of receiving Holy Communion is the most appropriate of all to show this attitude. Reception on the tongue, while not universal in the Early Church, became so quickly, and this reflected the great concern shown by the Fathers that particles of the host not be lost, a concern reiterated in Pope Paul VI’s *Memoriale Domini*. In conclusion, the traditional manner of receiving Holy Communion, which evinces both humility and childlike receptivity, prepares the communicant for the fruitful reception. Further, it conforms perfectly to the general attitude of reverence towards the Sacred Species to be found throughout the Extraordinary Form.

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## THE MANNER OF RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION

1. As with the issue of service at the altar by men and boys,<sup>1</sup> the question of the manner of receiving Communion at celebrations of the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite is settled by the Instruction *Universae Ecclesiae* (2011), which upholds the bindingness, in celebrations of the Extraordinary Form, of the liturgical law in force in 1962.<sup>2</sup> This specifies that Holy Communion is to be received by the Faithful kneeling and on the tongue.
2. Whereas service at the altar by females has been permitted in the Ordinary Form at the discretion of the local Ordinary, the prohibition on the reception of Holy Communion by the Faithful in the hand was expressly reiterated by Pope Paul VI,<sup>3</sup> who merely noted that applications for a derogation of the law would need to be made by an Episcopal Conference to the Holy See. To explain the value of this practice, as this paper seeks to do, is to explain the value of the Church's own legislation.

### Kneeling.

3. As Pope Benedict XVI has observed. 'Kneeling does not come from any one culture—it comes from the Bible and its knowledge of God.'<sup>4</sup> As he goes on to elaborate, kneeling is found in numerous passages of Scripture as a proper attitude both of supplicatory prayer, and of adoration in the presence of God. In kneeling, we follow the example of Our Lord Himself,<sup>5</sup> fulfil Philippians' Hymn of Christ,<sup>6</sup> and conform ourselves to the heavenly liturgy glimpsed in the Book of Revelations.<sup>7</sup> The Holy Father concludes:  
It may well be that kneeling is alien to modern culture—insofar 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, so that, in our prayer, we remain in fellowship with the apostles and martyrs, in fellowship with the whole cosmos, indeed in union with Jesus Christ Himself.<sup>8</sup>
4. It remains to observe that the moment of one's reception of the Body of Our Blessed Lord in the Blessed Sacrament is an appropriate moment to kneel, and doing so is a very longstanding tradition in the West.<sup>9</sup> Blessed Pope John Paul II reminds us that the proper attitude in receiving Holy Communion is 'the humility of the Centurion in the Gospel':<sup>10</sup> this attitude is both manifested and nurtured by the recognised posture of

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<sup>1</sup> FIUV Positio 1: The Service at the Altar of Men and Boys

<sup>2</sup> Instruction *Universae Ecclesiae* (2011) 28

<sup>3</sup> Instruction *Memoriale Domini* (1969): 'the Supreme Pontiff judged that the long received manner of ministering Holy Communion to the faithful should not be changed'

<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph, Cardinal Ratzinger) 'The Spirit of the Liturgy' (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000) p185

<sup>5</sup> Luke 22.41 (during the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane).

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:10: 'That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow':

<sup>7</sup> Revelations 5:8

<sup>8</sup> Pope Benedict XVI *op. cit.* p194.

<sup>9</sup> In the West, the development of kneeling for Communion can be traced back at least to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century: see Athanasius Schneider 'Dominus Est' (Pine Beach NJ: Neman House Press, 2008) p27.

<sup>10</sup> Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003) 48: 'cum demissione centurionis in Evangelio'

humility, of kneeling. The requirement, in the current discipline of the Church, that a 'gesture of reverence' be made before Holy Communion is received,<sup>11</sup> is fulfilled in a most natural and unforced manner by receiving while kneeling.

### On the Tongue.

5. The reception of Holy Communion on the tongue, as opposed to in the hand, while not the exclusive practice of the Early Church, does go back to the earliest times. It is attested by St Ephrem the Syriac<sup>12</sup> and the ancient Liturgy of St James,<sup>13</sup> is mentioned at least as a possibility by Pope St Gregory the Great,<sup>14</sup> and was mandated by the Council of Rouen c.878.<sup>15</sup> Our Lord seems to have placed bread directly in the mouth of Judas at the Last Supper,<sup>16</sup> and may have used the same method for the Consecrated Species. The spread of this method throughout the Church (with distinct variants for East and West) derived naturally from the great concern of the Fathers that no particle of the consecrated Host be lost. St Cyril of Jerusalem (invariably cited for his description of Communion in the hand)<sup>17</sup> cautions that fragments of the Host should be considered more precious than gold dust;<sup>18</sup> a similar concern is shown by Tertullian,<sup>19</sup> St Jerome,<sup>20</sup> Origen,<sup>21</sup> St Ephrem,<sup>22</sup> and others.<sup>23</sup> This concern is rooted in Scripture, in the command of Our Lord to the Disciples following the Feeding of the Multitude, a type of the Eucharist: 'Gather up the fragments that remain, lest they be lost.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> General Instruction on the Roman Missal (2002) 160

<sup>12</sup> St Ephrem the Syriac *Sermones in Hebdomada Sancta* 4, 5: 'Isaiah saw Me [sc. Christ], as you see Me now extending My right hand and carrying to your mouths the living Bread.' The reference is to Isaiah's vision of the live coal with which the angel touched his lips (Isaiah 6.6-7).

<sup>13</sup> Bozestwennaya Liturgia Swjatago Apostoloa Iakowa Brata Boziya I perwago bierarcha Ierusalima (Roma-Grottaferrata, 1970) p151: 'The Lord will bless us, and make us worthy with the pure touchings of our fingers to take the live coal, and place it upon the mouths of the faithful, ...'

<sup>14</sup> Pope St Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 3,c. 3: 'after he had put our Lord's body into his mouth, that tongue, which long time before had not spoken, was loosed.' The context is the cure of a sick man, who may not have been able to put the Host into his own mouth; again, it was the man's tongue, among other things, which needed to be cured. Nevertheless the text does not indicate any surprise at the putting of the host directly into a man's mouth.

<sup>15</sup> Council of Rouen, Chapter 2: 'let him [sc. the priest] place the Eucharist in the hand of no layman or woman, but let him place it only in his or her mouth with the following words: "Corpus Domini et Sanguis prosit tibi ad remissionem peccatorum et ad vitam aeternam".' ('nulli autem laico aut feminae eucharistiam in minibus ponat, sed tantum in os eius...') Mansi 10:1199f. Cf. Joseph Jungmann 'The Mass of the Roman Rite: its origins and development' (English Edition: New York: Benzinger, 1955) Vol II, pp381-2.

<sup>16</sup> John 13:26-27: 'Jesus answered: He it is to whom I shall reach bread dipped. And when he had dipped the bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. And after the morsel, Satan entered into him.'

<sup>17</sup> St Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* 5, 21f

<sup>18</sup> *Mystagogical Catechesis* 5, 2

<sup>19</sup> Tertullian *De Corona* 3: 'We feel pained should any wine or bread, even though our own, be cast upon the ground.'

<sup>20</sup> St Jerome *In Ps* 147, 14: '...if anything should fall to the ground, there is a danger.'

<sup>21</sup> Origen *In Exod. Hom.* 13, 3: '...when you have received the Body of the Lord, you reverently exercise every care lest a particle of it fall.'

<sup>22</sup> St Ephrem *Sermones in Hebdomada Sancta* 4, 4: '...do not trample underfoot even the fragments. The smallest fragment of this Bread can sanctify millions of men...'

<sup>23</sup> Notably, from the Canons of the Coptic Church: 'God forbid that any of the pearls or consecrated fragments should adhere to the fingers or fall the ground!' *Collationes canonum Copticae* (Denzinger, *Ritus Orientalium* I, p95)

<sup>24</sup> John 6.12. Cf. Matthew 14.20 and 15.37; Mark 6.43 and 8.9; Luke 9.17

6. This concern is reiterated, and linked to the value of reception on the tongue, by the Instruction *Memoriale Domini* (1969), which summarises a number of considerations in favour of the traditional manner of distributing Holy Communion:

In view of the state of the Church as a whole today, this manner of distributing Holy Communion must be observed, not only because it rests upon a tradition of many centuries but especially because it is a sign of the reverence of the faithful toward the Eucharist. The practice in no way detracts from the personal dignity of those who approach this great Sacrament and it is a part of the preparation needed for the most fruitful reception of the Lord's body.<sup>25</sup>

This reverence is a sign of Holy Communion not in "common bread and drink"<sup>26</sup> but in the Body and Blood of the Lord. ...

In addition, this manner of communicating, which is now to be considered as prescribed by custom, gives more effective assurance that Holy Communion will be distributed with the appropriate reverence, decorum, and dignity; that any danger of profaning the Eucharistic species, in which "the whole and entire Christ, God and man, is substantially contained and permanently present in a unique way,"<sup>27</sup> will be avoided; and finally that the diligent care which the Church has always commended for the very fragments of the consecrated bread will be maintained: "If you have allowed anything to be lost, consider this a lessening of your own members."<sup>28</sup>

7. The possibility that Holy Communion in the hand might lead to a 'deplorable lack of respect towards the eucharistic species' was confirmed by Bl. Pope John Paul II.<sup>29</sup> The danger of deliberate profanation of the Blessed Sacrament, also noted in *Memoriale Domini*, has also sadly become evident, in an age in which sacrilegious acts can be made public on the internet to the scandal of Catholics all over the world. This issue is raised again by the Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (2004), which again refers to the distribution of the Blessed Sacrament exclusively on the tongue as the effective remedy:

If there is a risk of profanation, then Holy Communion should not be given in the hand to the faithful.<sup>30</sup>

8. Bl. Pope John Paul II raised a related issue when he wrote 'To touch the sacred species and to distribute them with their own hands is a privilege of the ordained'.<sup>31</sup> He links this to the consecration of the hands of the priest.<sup>32</sup> This recalls a famous passage of St Thomas Aquinas, cited in this regard in an official statement of the Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff:<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> [Footnote 6 in *Memoriale Domini* (MD)] Cf. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 98, 9: PL 37, 1264-1265.

<sup>26</sup> [Footnote 7 in MD] Cf. Justin, *Apologia I*, 66: PG 6, 427; cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.4, c. 18. n. 5: PG 7, 1028-1029.

<sup>27</sup> [Footnote 9 in MD] Cf. *ibid.* n. 9, p. 547.

<sup>28</sup> [Footnote 10 in MD] Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses Mystagogicae*, V. 21: PG 33, 1126.

<sup>29</sup> Bl. Pope John Paul II Letter *Dominicae Caenae* (1980) 11

<sup>30</sup> Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (2004) 92, reiterating the Congregation of Divine Worship's response to a dubium given in 1999, recorded in *Notitiae* 35 (1999) pp. 160-161

<sup>31</sup> *Dominicae Caenae* 11

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, the preceding paragraph: 'But one must not forget the primary office of priests, who have been consecrated by their ordination to represent Christ the Priest: for this reason their hands, like their words and their will, have become the direct instruments of Christ.'

<sup>33</sup> Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff: 'Communion received on the tongue while kneeling' (2010)

...out of reverence towards 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.<sup>34</sup>

9. Insofar as we see this traditional method as having developed over time, this is not an argument against it but a testimony to the important considerations which consistently led to its adoption. As Pope Pius XII famously affirmed in *Mediator Dei* (1948), more ancient practices are not *ipso facto* to be preferred to practices which have evolved under the guidance of the Holy Spirit over many centuries.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

10. The importance of an inner attitude of humility, stressed both by Bl. Pope John Paul II, and by the requirement for a 'gesture of reverence',<sup>36</sup> is not only a matter of decorum before the Real Presence of Our Lord, important as that is. Rather, the grace received by the communicant is dependent upon his or her disposition, and the cultivation of the correct disposition, that of humility and child-like receptivity, is facilitated by reception both kneeling and on the tongue. As Pope Paul VI emphasised: it is 'part of the preparation needed for the most fruitful reception of the Lord's body.'<sup>37</sup>
11. This value of the traditional method was reiterated by Pope Benedict XVI's decision to distribute Holy Communion himself to kneeling communicants on the tongue. The official commentary on this decision cites both the concern about the loss of particles of the Consecrated Host, and a concern
- to increase among the faithful devotion to the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.<sup>38</sup>
- Further, the traditional method is called an 'external sign' to 'promote understanding of this great sacramental mystery'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> St Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa Q82 a3 c: 'in reverentiam huius sacramenti, a nulla re contingitur nisi consecrata, unde et corporale et calix consecrantur, similiter et manus sacerdotis, ad tangendum hoc sacramentum. Unde nulli alii tangere licet, nisi in necessitate puta si caderet in terram, vel in aliquo alio necessitatis casu.'

<sup>35</sup> Pope Pius XII Encyclical Letter *Mediator Dei* (1948) 61: 'The liturgy of the early ages is most certainly worthy of all veneration. But ancient usage must not be esteemed more suitable and proper, either in its own right or in its significance for later times and new situations, on the simple ground that it carries the savour and aroma of antiquity. The more recent liturgical rites likewise deserve reverence and respect. They, too, owe their inspiration to the Holy Spirit, who assists the Church in every age even to the consummation of the world.[ Matthew 28.20] They are equally the resources used by the majestic Spouse of Jesus Christ to promote and procure the sanctity of man.' (Haec eadem iudicandi ratio tenenda est, cum de conatibus agitur, quibus nonnulli enituntur quoslibet antiquos ritus ac caerimonias in usum revocare. Utique vetustae aetatis Liturgia veneratione procul dubio digna est; verumtamen vetus usus, non idcirco dumtaxat quod antiquitatem sapit ac redolet, aptior ac melior existimandus est vel in semet ipso, vel ad consequentia tempora novasque rerum condiciones quod attinet. Recentiores etiam liturgici ritus reverentia observantiaque digni sunt, quoniam Spiritus Sancti afflatu, qui quovis tempore Ecclesiae adest ad consummationem usque saeculorum (cfr. *Matth.* 28, 20), orti sunt; suntque iidem pariter opes, quibus inclita Iesu Christi; Sponsa utitur ad hominum sanctitatem excitandam procurandamque.)

<sup>36</sup> See paragraph 4

<sup>37</sup> *Memoriale Domini*

<sup>38</sup> Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff: 'Communion received on the tongue while kneeling' (2010).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

12. In the specific context of the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite, the exclusive practice of receiving Holy Communion kneeling and on the tongue goes hand in hand with the great reverence shown to the Blessed Sacrament in that Form by the celebrating priest. Two examples would be the priest's double genuflection at the Consecration, and the holding together of thumb and forefinger, from the Consecration to the Purification of the Chalice. Reception of Communion in the hand would create a harmful dissonance with other elements of the liturgy. The matter is well expressed in the Instruction *Il Padre, incomprensibile* (1996), addressed to the Oriental Churches, on the importance of maintaining the manner of receiving Holy Communion traditional to those Churches:

Even if this excludes enhancing the value of other criteria, also legitimate, and implies renouncing some convenience, a change of the traditional usage risks incurring a non-organic intrusion with respect to the spiritual framework to which it refers.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Instruction *Il Padre, incomprensibile* (1996) 53