

Historical-Liturgical Notes on the Rite of the Eucharist

Like a weaned child on its mother's lap. (Ps 131:2)

BY THE MOST REVEREND ATHANASIOS SCHNEIDER,

AUXILIARY BISHOP OF KARAGANDA, KAZAKHISTAN

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John Paul II in his last encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, has left the Church an ardent admonition that resounds like a veritable testament:

By giving the Eucharist the prominence it deserves, and by being careful not to diminish any of its dimensions or demands, we show that we are truly conscious of the greatness of this gift. We are urged to do so by an uninterrupted tradition, which from the first centuries on has found the Christian community ever vigilant in guarding this treasure. Inspired by love, the Church is anxious to hand on to future generations of Christians, without loss, her faith and teaching with regard to the mystery of the Eucharist. There can be no danger of excess in our care for this mystery, for in this sacrament is recapitulated the whole mystery of our salvation. (n. 61)

Knowledge of the greatness of the Eucharistic mystery is demonstrated particularly by the way in which the Body of the Lord is distributed and received.

Aware of the greatness of the moment of Holy Communion, the Church in her two-millennium-long tradition has searched to find a ritual expression that can bear witness in the most perfect manner to her faith, love and respect. This is verified when, in the wake of an organic development, stemming from at least the sixth century, the Church began to adopt the method of distributing the Sacred Species of the Eucharist directly into the mouth. This is attested in several places: in the biography of Pope Gregory the Great and an indication by the same Pope relative to Pope Agapitus (*Dialogues*, III); the Synod of Cordoba in 839 condemned the sect of so-called Casiani because of their refusal to receive Holy Communion directly into their mouths; then the Synod of Rouen in 878 confirmed the norm in force regarding the administration of the Lord's Body on the tongue, threatening sacred ministers with suspension from their office if they distributed Holy Communion to the laity on the hand.

In the West, the gesture of prostration and genuflection before reception of the Body of the Lord is found in monastic settings already from the sixth century, e.g., in the monasteries of St. Columbanus. Later, in the tenth and eleventh centuries, this gesture was even more widely diffused. At the end of the patristic age, the practice of receiving Holy Communion directly into the mouth became thenceforth an almost universal practice.

This organic development may be considered a fruit of the spirituality and Eucharistic devotion of the Fathers of the Church. Already in the first millennium, due to the highly sacred character of the Eucharistic Bread, the Church in both the East and the West in an admirable consensus and almost instinctively perceived the urgency of distributing Holy Communion to the laity only in the mouth. The liturgist Joseph Jungmann explains that, with Communion distributed directly into the mouth,

various concerns are eliminated: the need for the faithful to have clean hands; the even graver concern that no fragment of the consecrated Bread be lost; the necessity of purifying the palm of the hand after reception of the Sacrament. The white tablecloth and, later, the Communion plate would be the expression of heightened attention to the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Pope John Paul II teaches thus in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*: With this heightened sense of mystery, we understand how the faith of the Church in the mystery of the Eucharist has found historical expression not only in the demand for an interior disposition of devotion, but also *in outward forms* meant to evoke and emphasize the grandeur of the event being celebrated (n. 49). The attitude more consonant with this gift is the attitude of receptivity, the attitude of the humility of the centurion, the attitude of one who allows himself to be fed, precisely the attitude of a child. The word of Christ, which invites us to receive the Kingdom of God like a child (cf. Lk 18:17), can find its illustration in that very beautiful and impressive manner of receiving the Eucharistic Bread directly into one's mouth and on one's knees. John Paul II demonstrated the need for external expressions of respect toward the Eucharistic Bread:

Though the idea of a banquet naturally suggests familiarity, the Church has never yielded to the temptation to trivialize this intimacy with her Spouse by forgetting that he is also her Lord and that the banquet always remains a sacrificial banquet marked by the blood shed on Golgotha. *The Eucharistic Banquet is truly a sacred banquet* in which the simplicity of the signs conceals the unfathomable holiness of God: *O sacrum convivium, in quo Christus sumitur!* The bread which is broken on our altars, offered to us as wayfarers along the paths of the world, is *panis angelorum*, the bread of angels, which cannot be approached except with the humility of the centurion in the Gospel:

Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof *Mt 8:8; Lk 7:6.* (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 48)

The attitude of a child is the truest and most profound attitude of a Christian before his Savior, Who nourishes him with His Body and Blood, according to the following moving expressions of Clement of Alexandria: *The Logos* is everything for the child: father, mother, teacher, nourisher. Eat My Body, He says, and drink My Blood! . . . O incredible mystery! (*Paedagogus*, I, 42, 3). Another biblical consideration is furnished from the account of the call of the prophet Ezekiel. He symbolically receives the Word of God directly into his mouth: Open your mouth, and eat what I give you. And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and, lo, a written scroll was in it. . . . So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. . . . Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey (Ez 2:8-9; 3:2-3). In Holy Communion, we receive the Word-made-Flesh made Food for us little ones, for us children. And so, when we approach Holy Communion, we can remind ourselves of this gesture of the prophet Ezekiel. Christ truly nourishes us with His Body and Blood in Holy Communion and this is likened in the patristic era to a mother's nursing, as demonstrated by these words of St. John Chrysostom: In this Eucharistic mystery, Christ unites Himself to every member of the faithful, and those whom He has generated He nourishes from Himself and does not confide that task to another. Do you not see with how great a rush newborns press their lips to the breast of their mother? Well, then, let us also with like ardor approach this holy table and the breast of this spiritual drink; even more so, with a greater ardor than that of sucklings! (82, 5).

The most typical gesture of adoration is the biblical one of kneeling, as received and practiced by the first Christians. For Tertullian, who lived between the second and third centuries, the highest form of prayer is the act of adoration of God, which ought to manifest itself also in the gesture of genuflection: All the angels pray, every creature prays, the cattle and wild beasts pray and bend their knees (*De Oratione*, 29). St. Augustine warned that we sin if we do not adore the Eucharistic Body of the Lord when we receive It: Let no one eat this flesh who has not first adored It. We sin if we do not adore

It (Enarrationes in Psalmos, 98, 9). In an ancient *Ordo Communio* in the liturgical tradition of the Coptic Church, it is established: Let all prostrate on the ground, small and great, and thus let the distribution of Communion begin. According to the *Mystagogical Catecheses*, attributed to St. Cyril of Jerusalem, the faithful ought to receive Communion with a gesture of adoration and veneration: Do not extend your hands, but in a gesture of adoration and veneration approach the chalice of the Blood of Christ (5, 22). St. John Chrysostom in homilies on the letter to the Corinthians exhorts those who approach the Eucharistic Body of the Lord to imitate the Magi from the East in a spirit and gesture of adoration:

Let us approach Him to whom we adore during the Eucharist, although in our minds we say: Magi. Now, do not think that we know of Him and that we adore the Lord who is far from Him. We adore the Lord who is far from us, but we adore Him in the Eucharist. Unlike the Magi, you do not simply see the Body, but you know it, and you adore it. Let us adore Him in the Eucharist, as the Magi did. (215)

On the intimate link between adoration and Holy Communion, Pope Benedict XVI in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, has written: Receiving the Eucharist means adoring Him Whom we receive (n. 66). While still a cardinal, Ratzinger underscored this aspect:

Eating it (the Eucharist) as we have just said is a spiritual process, involving the whole man. Eating it means worshipping it. Eating it means letting it come into me, so that my I is transformed and opens up into the great we, so that we become one in him (cf. Gal 3:16). Thus adoration is not opposed to Communion, nor is it merely added to it. No, Communion only reaches its true depths when it is supported and surrounded by adoration. (*The Spirit of the Liturgy* [Ignatius Press, 2000], p. 90)

In the Book of Revelation, the book of the heavenly liturgy, the gesture of prostration of the twenty-four ancient ones before the Lamb can be the model and standard of how the Church on earth ought to treat the Lamb of God when the faithful approach Him in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

The Fathers of the Church demonstrate a lively concern that no one lose the smallest particle of Eucharistic Bread, as exhorted St. Cyril of Jerusalem in this very impressive manner:

Be careful that you do not lose anything of the Body of the Lord. If you let fall anything, you must think of it as though you cut off one of the members of your own body. Tell me, I beg you, if someone gave you kernels of gold, would you not guard them with the greatest care and diligence, intent on not losing anything? Should you not exercise even greater care and vigilance, so that not even a crumb of the Lord's Body could fall to the ground, for It is far more precious than gold or jewels? (*Mystagogical Catecheses*, 5, 2)

Already Tertullian gave witness to the Church's anxiety and sorrow, should even a fragment be lost: We suffer anxiety lest anything from the Chalice or the Bread fall to the ground (*De Corona*, 3). St. Ephrem, in the fourth century, taught thus:

Jesus filled up the Bread with Himself and the Spirit and called It His living Body. That which I have now given you, says Jesus, do not consider bread, do not trample underfoot even the fragments. The smallest fragment of this Bread can sanctify millions of men and is enough to give life to all who eat It (*Sermones in Hebdomada Sancta*, 4, 4). In the liturgical tradition of the Coptic Church is found the following warning: There is no difference between the smaller and larger particles of the Eucharist, even those smallest ones which cannot be perceived with the naked eye; they deserve the same veneration and possess the same dignity as the whole Bread (Heinrich Denzinger, *Ritus Orientalium*, 1863, I, p. 405). In some Eastern Liturgies, the consecrated Bread is designated by the name pearl. Thus in the *Collectiones Canonum Copticae*, it says: God

does not will that any of the pearls or consecrated fragments should adhere to the fingers or fall to the ground! The extreme vigilance and care of the Church of the first centuries lest any fragment of the Eucharistic Bread be lost was a universally diffused phenomenon: Rome (cf. Hippolytus, *Traditio Apostolica*, 32); North Africa (cf. Tertullian, *De Corona*, 3, 4); Gaul (cf. Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo* 78, 2); Egypt (cf. Origen, *In Exodum Hom.*, 13, 3); Antioch and Constantinople (cf. John Chrysostom, *Ecloga Quod non Indige Accedendum Sit ad Divina Mysteria*); Palestine (cf. Jerome, *In Psalmos*, 147, 14); Syria (cf. Ephrem, *In Hebdomada Sancta*, 4, 4).

In the Early Church, before receiving the consecrated Bread, people had to wash the palms of their hands. Moreover, the faithful bowed profoundly in receiving the Body of the Lord with the mouth directly from the right hand and not from the left. The palm of the hand served as a kind of paten or corporal, especially for women. Thus one reads in a sermon of St. Caesarius of Arles (470-542): All the men who desire to communicate, must wash their hands. And all the women must carry a linen cloth, on which they receive the Body of Christ (*Sermo*, 227, 5). Customarily, the palm of the hand was purified or washed after the reception of the Eucharistic Bread as is up to now the norm in the Communion of clerics in the Byzantine Rite. In the ancient canons of the Chaldean Church, even the celebrating priest was forbidden to place the Eucharistic Bread into his own mouth with his fingers. Instead, he had to take the Body of the Lord in the palm of his hand; the reason for this was to signify that he was dealing here not with ordinary food but with heavenly food: To the priest, we read in the Canon of John Bar-Abgari, it is directed that he receive the particle of consecrated Bread directly from the palm of his hand. He may not place It with the hand into the mouth, but must take It with his mouth, for this concerns heavenly food.

In the ancient Syriac Church, the rite of Communion distribution was compared to the scene of the purification of the Prophet Isaiah by the seraph. In one of his sermons, St. Ephrem puts these words on Christ's lips:

The coal carried (by the seraph) cleansed the lips of Isaiah. It is I Who, carried now to you by means of bread, have sanctified you. The tongs which the Prophet saw and with which the coal was taken from the altar, were the figure of Me in the great Sacrament. Isaiah saw Me, as you see Me now extending My right hand and carrying to your mouths the living Bread. The tongs are My right hand. I take the place of the seraph. The coal is My Body. All of you are Isaiah. (*Sermones in Hebdomada Sancta*, 4, 5)

In the Liturgy of St. James, before distributing Holy Communion to the faithful, the priest recites this prayer: May the Lord bless us and make us worthy to take with pure hands the burning coal, placing it into the mouths of the faithful.

If every liturgical celebration is a sacred action par excellence (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 7), the rite of Holy Communion must be such above all. John Paul II insisted on the fact that, before the secularized culture of modernity, the Church of today must feel a special obligation toward the sacredness of the Eucharist:

This must always be remembered, perhaps above all in our time, when we see a tendency to do away with the distinction between the sacred and profane, given the widespread tendency, at least in some places, to desacralize everything. In view of this fact, the Church has a special duty to safeguard and strengthen the sacredness of the Eucharist. In our plural-

istic and often deliberately secularized
society, the living faith of the Christian
community – a faith always aware of its
rights vis-a-vis those who do not share that faith – ensures respect for this sacredness. *Dominicae Cena*e, n. 8)

Based on the experience of the first centuries, in the organic growth in theological comprehension of the Eucharistic mystery and its consequent ritual development, the manner of distributing Communion on the hand was limited by the end of the patristic era to a specific group, that is, the clergy, as is still the case with the Eastern rites. The Eucharistic Bread began to be distributed to the laity – intincted in the consecrated Wine in the Eastern rites – directly into the mouth. In the Eastern rites, only the non-consecrated bread is distributed on the hand, the so-called *antidoron*. Thus is shown in a clear manner the difference between Eucharistic Bread and bread that is merely blessed. The most frequent admonition of the Fathers of the Church about the attitude to possess during Holy Communion resounded thus: *cum amore ac timore* (with love and fear). The authentic spirit of Eucharistic devotion of the Church Fathers developed organically at the end of antiquity in the whole Church – East and West – in the corresponding ways of receiving Holy Communion in the mouth, preceded by prostration on the ground (in the East) or with kneeling (in the West). Would it not correspond much better to the intimate reality and truth of the consecrated Bread, if today also the faithful one in receiving It prostrated on the ground and opened his mouth as the Prophet received the Word of God (cf. Ezekiel 2) and let himself be fed like a child – since Communion is a spiritual nourishment? Such a gesture would likewise be an impressive sign of the profession of faith in the Real Presence of God in the midst of the faithful. If some non-believer happened upon the liturgical action and observed such an act of adoration, perhaps he too, falling on his face, will worship God and declare that God is really among you (1 Cor 14:25).