



Ritual Indeterminacy in Receiving Communion

ABSTRACT

How is holy communion to be received: on the tongue or by the hand? More than being a possible source of ritual failure, the indeterminacy ensuing from this binary option can lead to a revitalizing experience of the Eucharist. Considering that the mass is a heavily structured and scripted ritual, this paper explores how this particular indeterminacy of receiving communion opens up opportunities for dynamism and liminality and thus creating a more dynamic and meaningful experience of the sacrament.

Keywords: Indeterminacy in Communion. Thick Description. Ritual in Performance. Communitas.

INTRODUCTION

Digression and mistakes in executing the liturgical rubric can shatter the solemnity of a Catholic liturgy. When such moments happen, it can elicit either the irritation or the stifled laughter of the entire congregation. The most solemn of all Catholic liturgies is the Eucharist, more popularly known as the Mass. In Catholicism,



the celebration of the Eucharist is the highest form of worship. The theologian Richard McBrien explains that the preeminence of the Eucharist can be summed up in two basic doctrines: that “Christ is present in the Eucharist even before it is used” and that the “Liturgy” in the “divine sacrifice of the Eucharist” is the “outstanding means whereby the faithful can express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the Church”.¹ In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Eucharist is further described as the “source and summit of the Christian life.”² Priests of the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church are obligated to celebrate mass regularly. In spite of this regularity, masses are prone to awkward liturgical situations.

A particular personal incident, which has been repeated on many instances, comes to mind. During the communion rite, there was this middle-aged man who was about to receive communion from me, as the priest. As he stood in front of me, he simultaneously opened his mouth and extended his hand, which confused me as to where I should place the Body of Christ. Right then, the previously smooth procedure of distributing communion halted for a bit, we engaged in an awkward exchange of gestures, as both of us could not determine how the host was to be received. Eventually, I ended up placing the host in the man’s open palm and resolved the situation.

How is holy communion to be received: on the tongue or by the hand? There is a history to this dilemma. In the nascent period of the Church, the communion was customarily received by the hand, up until the Byzantine liturgy in the 7th century.³ Beginning in the 9th century, the practice shifted to communion

¹Richard Peter McBrien, *Catholicism* (North Blackburn, Victoria: HarperCollins, 1994) 820.

²Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1324.

³See Cheslyn Jones, “The New Testament” in *The Study of Liturgy*, eds. C. Jones, G. Wainright, & E. Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1978), 154; Edward Yarnold, “The Liturgy of the Faithful in the Fourth and Early Fifth Centuries” in *The Study of Liturgy*, 194; Hugh Wybrew, “The Byzantine Liturgy from the Apostolic Constitutions to the Present Day” in *The Study of Liturgy*, 297.

on the tongue.⁴ This custom continued until the late 1960s, when communion by the hand was once more permitted by the Catholic Church.⁵ Since then, Catholics have expressed differing opinions on which manner of receiving communion is more desirable and appropriate.

In examining this particular moment in the reception of communion, this paper will argue that, instead of threatening the efficacy of the ritual, the indeterminacy inherent in this part of the rite can be revitalizing. In this paper, I will begin by providing a thick description of the liturgical phenomenon that will be examined. Next, I will pose a counterargument that this dilemma can result in a ritual failure. I will then argue that this is not the case, by approaching this ritual as a performance. The final part will address how two key aspects of this rite can revitalize the ritual and its participants.

TOWARDS A THICKER DESCRIPTION

How is holy communion to be received: on the tongue or by the hand? This binary question can be narrated according three different perspectives: from the priest distributing communion, from a communicant receiving communion, and from an observer watching both priest and the communicant. I have had the opportunity of experiencing all three vantage points—not simultaneously—but on countless occasions, where I have been either distributing communion as the priest, or receiving from a priest as a member of the congregation. Capturing this situation from three different angles is an exercise on the “elaborate venture” that characterizes “thick description”⁶ because there seems to be a lacuna in “thick” accounts of this moment in the communion rite where the host is simultaneously distributed by the priest and

⁴Wybrew, *The Byzantine Liturgy*, 297.

⁵See Pope Paul VI, *Memoriale Domini: Instruction on the Manner of Distributing Holy Communion*.

⁶Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6.

received by the communicant. In her observation of liturgical performance in the communion rite, Kelleher writes:

To each one the minister held up a host and said, "The Body of Christ." The person said "Amen" and then received the host on the tongue or in the hand. After consuming the host, the person returned to his or her place.⁷

As one can see from this account, there seems to be nothing worth exploring further because it doesn't provide any other detail about that moment. While it seems to have been described matter-of-factly, it doesn't contribute to a discourse that could unlock new understandings of the significance of receiving the host by the hand or on the tongue. The initial attempt, therefore, to examine what seems like an ordinary sequence in the communion rite has to begin with an incisive observation. As Geertz asserts, "A good interpretation of anything... takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation".⁸ In establishing that this specific part of the rite is really worth examining, I had recourse to Geertz's suggestion. The first account is taken from a recent experience where I recorded my observations as priest presider in an Australian parish:

In the mass I was the presider, during the distribution of communion, I positioned myself in the front and center of the middle aisle of the church. The first ones who lined up were the people who were sitting in the front pews. The first one in line was an old lady, who wobbled as she came forward. As soon as she drew near, I picked out a small, wafer host from the brass-plated ciborium I was holding in my left hand. I raised the host up with my right hand, about a foot away from her eye level, and without really glancing at her, I uttered the words as I held the host: "The Body of Christ". She faintly replied,

⁷Margaret Mary Kelleher, O.P., "The Communion Rite: A Study of Roman Catholic Liturgical Performance" in *Journal of Ritual Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1991): 106.

⁸Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 18.

“Amen”. I didn’t notice it, but as soon as I lowered down the host, her hands were already right in front of her chest, extended a bit towards me, left palm over the right hand which supported it. I dropped the host carefully in her palm. She then gently moved to the side, and took the host from her left palm using her right thumb and forefinger. I didn’t catch the exact moment she placed it in her mouth because my attention shifted to the next communicant. I briefly noticed, however, that she didn’t look at the host pinched between her right thumb and forefinger. Instead, she oriented her gaze towards the altar. The next thing I knew, she was chewing with her mouth closed, and had already taken her seat in the front pew to my left.

The rest of the communicants devoutly observed the same palm gestures as they received communion. I mostly relied on the gestures that they made as they approached me. There was a certain slowness, probably in reverence, in how they received the host. There was one woman, however, who didn’t take the communion by the hand. When she came forward, I performed the same motions and uttered the same words, and as I was about to place the host into what I had expected as the same receiving palm gesture, she opened her mouth instead, and hesitatingly extended her tongue out. I tried to place the host right on her tongue but as I let go of it, I accidentally flicked my right index finger on her upper lip, and felt a bit of saliva as the tip of my right thumb touched her tongue. She kept her eyes open all throughout that time, and only closed it as soon as the host was already in her mouth. She made a slight bow towards the altar and slowly moved to the side. During that entire time, I was giving communion, I expect most of the people to receive communion by the hand but I also expected that there will be some who will receive it

on the tongue. Not knowing which of the communicants preferred that way evoked a bit of uncertainty. I also noted that my attention shifted from the host to the people who were lining up to receive communion. The notions of distributing communion felt instinctive that I mostly noticed the people who received communion rather than what I felt about what I was doing.

In the following two observations I have made as a member of the congregation, I went to a different parish to attend the mass that was presided over by another priest:

I attended mass in another parish, and participated with the rest of the congregation. When it was my turn to receive communion, it seemed natural to receive it by the hand, probably because it was something that I have been doing out of a habit. It was convenient, and did not feel like it was an invasion of my personal space. The thought of taking communion on the tongue evoked a lot of awkward feelings. So, I made the same gesture, left palm over right, to signal that I intended to receive communion by the hand. I was conscious of reverently receiving it with my hands, and I made sure that I didn't drop it. As the priest raised the host and said, "The Body of Christ," I responded, "Amen." Then the priest placed the host in my palm and I gently picked it up with my right hand and placed it in my mouth. I did not swallow it, but allowed it to stay on my tongue until it eventually dissolved. I made a sign of the cross as soon as I consumed the body of Christ and went back to my seat.

As I waited for the rest of the congregation, I observed other people as they received communion. From where I sat, the motions between the priest and the communicant went fluidly as everyone seemed to memorize the gestures and the scripted exchange of words. As soon as the priest raised the host, he mouthed

the formula phrase, and the communicant responded, sometimes with a slight bow. Simultaneously, the communicant receives the host accordingly. I didn't observe any instance when people seemed confused or hesitant in receiving communion. The priest also did not show any sign of discomfort while giving communion. Most took communion by the hand, while others received it on the tongue. There seemed to be no distinct patterns in terms of who preferred receiving communion in a certain way.

These narrations have obviously thickened what Keheller has tersely described in only three sentences. Far from padding it with pointless information, attempting a “thick description” of this rite has yielded a richer account, which primes this moment for further examination. Could this multi-perspective description signify something else apart from being a particular, individual experience?

It seems necessary at this point, to abstract salient features of those observations. Firstly, there is a scripted pattern of gestures and words between the priest and the communicant. It is not a random exchange of indiscriminate actions and words, but rather it is characterized by a certain formality, that is, it uses “a more limited and rigidly organized sets of expressions and gestures.”⁹ Secondly, coupled with these external gestures are inner states or dispositions which may or may not be expressed in the physical gesture. The gesture could therefore be hollow or meaningful, or at least according to the one performing it. Since it is framed, however, within a rite that has its own culturally embedded and institutionally prescribed significations, then the gestures are not entirely devoid of meaning. Whatever significance it may have for the person already intertwines with what the gestures previously signify. This is even more evident in the physicality of gestures. The allowable gestures within the rite structure the bodies of those

⁹Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, rev. edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 139.

who perform the gestures. This is ritualization work. Bell argues that rather than expressing interior dispositions, the “molding of the body... primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves”.¹⁰ Thirdly, whilst there is a conventional script, the awareness that there are two possible options creates a certain unpredictability in terms of how each party will initiate and respond. This is evident in the hesitancy, for example, that the priest, communicant, or both, experience in the moment of interaction.

THE POSSIBILITY OF RITUAL FAILURE

When the gesture of the priest and the corresponding gesture of the communicant intersect, it can generate possible disruptions in the ritual, even though the disruption may only last for a few seconds. The likely sources of these disruptions could be drawn from the salient characteristics of the interaction. One source seems to be the bodily gestures that signify how one party is supposed to reciprocate to ensure the smooth interaction or exchange. From the priest’s perspective, the communicant’s gesture signals to the priest the communicant’s intention and preference in receiving communion. The communicant, in turn, takes its cue from the initiating gestures of the priest, which consists of the act of elevating the host in front of the communicant and uttering the words, “The Body of Christ”. The disruptive event can happen when both parties misinterpret each other’s gestures and end up performing an action that does not correspond to the other’s intention. For example, the priest might interpret that the communicant wants to receive communion on the hand based on how the communicant’s hands are devoutly clasped together, positioned near the chest and close to the chin; and so, the priest proceeds to lower the host anticipating that the communicant will open his/her hands to receive the host, but this anticipation to

¹⁰Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 100.

ensure a smooth reciprocation of gestures can be disrupted when the communicant open his/her mouth instead, to signal that this is his/her preferred manner of reception.

Another likely source of disruption is when the communicant, without expressing any external indication, decides at the last minute to revise his/her physical gestures to indicate that he/she wants to receive communion through the other option. A further source of disruption is when the priest would insist that the communicant take the host according to his preference. While in principle, the communicant can decide on how it wants to receive communion, there are instances where clergy can also exercise their agency in these situations. There are other possible confusing scenarios and all these attest to the possibility of the rite being disrupted and to its inherent indeterminacy.

One could argue at this point that these disruptions can lead to ritual failure. In describing a particular Javanese funeral, Geertz¹¹ highlights its ritual failure. Demonstrating ritual failure, per se, was not his main interest; rather, he intended to assert the inadequacy of a functionalist perspective in explaining why the ritual has failed. In doing so, he has also outlined what could constitute a ritual failure; in this case, the ritual was not completed and that it did not produce the *iklas* for the mourning family and the *rukun* for the community. Borrowing this idea, the disruptions in the communion rite could said to “fail” under these circumstances: if it could not be completed, in the sense of a communicant not being able to receive communion; and if it does not produce what the ritual is intended for, in the sense of communicants attaining what they attribute are the effects of consuming the Body of Christ. The possibility of failure due to the disruptions afforded by the option of receiving communion by hand or on the tongue is not unlikely.

¹¹See Clifford Geertz, “Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example” in *American Anthropologist, New Series*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (1957): 32-54.

APPROACHING RITUAL AS PERFORMANCE

In considering ritual as performance, Brown emphasizes “ritual in performance”.¹² This view construes that ritual does not only depend on the script, but reveals its dynamism as it is being performed. One way of thinking of this is to imagine a performer who, perhaps inspired by the moment, suddenly goes ad lib, and elicits an equally spontaneous reaction from the audience which, taken together, affects the performance itself, as well as the performance’s effect on both the performer and the audience. Similarly, the ever-present option of receiving communion either by the hand or on the tongue invokes the dynamism of the moment. Despite the relatively narrowed options officially sanctioned by the institution, the confluence of personal agency and situational context is enough to activate the indeterminacy of meaning in the rite. The difficulty, however, with indeterminacy is that meanings are not static, they are elusive. The precariousness of meaning and its elusiveness are, nonetheless, the strengths of ritual indeterminacy. There is simply no way of pegging meaning down because in the next performance, it could just as easily change into something else. These meanings, however, circulate within a field that is framed by the ritual and the beliefs that underlie it. Another way of looking at it is to see that the options are like bookends and that the meanings are books in between. The books can be re-arranged in countless ways but they will not be thrown off the bookends. Because it is only within the bookends that they can be creatively re-arranged. The limits, therefore, imposed by these two options are further supplemented by the ritual’s and ultimately, the institution’s beliefs. Rapaport asserts that in “ritual, the performer accepts the liturgical order in which he participates”.¹³ In a way, these binary innovations to the rite of receiving communion serve to order the indeterminacy that it also evokes. Out does not go out of hand, as it were, because the constituted and contingent

¹²Gavin Brown, “Theorizing Ritual as Performance: Explorations of Ritual Indeterminacy” in *Journal of Ritual Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2003): 11.

¹³Roy A. Rapaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 146.

meanings that it achieves are framed by the very same options. In other words, there is a plenitude of shifting meanings within a specified field. Brown cautions those who seek to capture “ultimate meaning” will eventually be “frustrated and disappointed¹⁴; and as Brown further explains, “To privilege the moment in ritual processes inevitably necessitates recognizing the contingency and indeterminacy that springs from the moment”.¹⁵

There is another way by which the tension found in the structuring of the communion rite can revitalize the ritual. Van Gennep proposed that ritual has a threefold stage: separation, threshold, aggregation.¹⁶ In other formulations, these stages are also known as: “separation, transition and incorporation”.¹⁷ According to Turner, Van Gennep claims that rituals facilitate the transition of subjects from one state to another.¹⁸

Both the priest and the communicant undergo a state of transition¹⁹ during the common rite. This liminal state, according to Turner, is characterized by ambiguity, where “entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between”.²⁰ What creates this liminality is, on the one hand, the heavily structured and scripted Eucharistic liturgy, and on the other hand, the indeterminacy activated by the binary gestures during the communion. The liminal state during communion is not an imaginary condition, but it can be conceived in spatial and temporal terms, since it happens in a certain place at a certain time. The effect of this liminality on the moment of communion is amplified because the moment when the person actually receives communion is nested within another liminal space within the actual mass itself. The entire communion rite is separated from the parts of the mass that precede it, in the sense that this is the only time when priest and people actually come into

¹⁴ Brown, *Theorizing Ritual as Performance*, 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Cf. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 94.

¹⁷ Brown, *Theorizing Ritual as Performance*, 13.

¹⁸ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94.

¹⁹ See Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

actual physical contact with each other. There is no other part of the mass that affords such intimacy. The exchange that happens in the distribution of communion is a personal exchange mediated by the Eucharistic host and negotiated by the movements and words during the reception of communion. But even with that already-liminal space, the communicant and the priest are both led into an even deeper liminal space because of the indeterminacy afforded by the gestures that frame the reception of the communion.

Let us express this deeper liminal space more concretely. During communion, the priest and communicant are separated from the rest of the assembly when they finally face each other. The priest prepares to administer communion, and the communicant prepares to receive it, as well. They begin to exchange words, and then they begin to reciprocate gestures that will ensure that the communicant receives communion, and that the priest is able to deliver it. But in that very moment where the host could be received in either of the allowable binary gestures—“betwixt and between”, another liminal space is created. In this liminal space, the communicant who has been, prior to the brink of this very moment, subjected to the structure of the entire mass, is now permitted to express agency in receiving communion. At this point, the vitality of this part of the rite becomes more manifest. This becomes a moment of anti-structure, or *communitas*, where order and structure are subverted and hierarchies and divisions are dissolved. The indeterminacy, therefore, gives rise to the *communitas*, which is essentially a “relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals”.²¹ Nowhere in the liturgy of the mass is the individuality of both priest and communicant more expressed and exhibited than in this moment where the indeterminacy of receiving communion by hand and communion on the tongue activates the agency of both priest and communicant.

The complementarity of indeterminacy of *communitas* evoked by these binary gestures revitalize the ritual, the participants,

²¹Ibid., 131.

and the institution. It aids in building up agency in its members; it promotes freedom and flexibility. The perceived rigidity, the limitedness of one's options creates a nested structure with the already heavily structured ritual, which serves to heighten the tension that both priest and communicant experience, increasing the liminality of experience/gestures/moment so that when the ritual succeeds, both can immediately achieve the cathartic powerful experience of ritual. One could also say that the entire structure of the Eucharist builds up to this single moment where one receives the Body of Christ. Contrary to what is being taught in catechism as to the most solemn part of the mass (consecration), this event (actual reception of communion) seems to be the summit and culmination of the ritual experience. The dynamism that inheres in this moment is brought to the surface by the indeterminacy and *communitas* created by the binary ways of receiving communion. The perspective affirms what Bell has stated about ritual as performance: that when seen and analyzed from this perspective, the "event of the performance itself" can bring about "certain shifts and changes, constructing a new situation and a new reality".²²

CONCLUSION

The option of taking communion by hand or on the tongue provides a concrete moment of indeterminacy in a heavily structured and scripted ritual. The meaning that it evokes can go beyond the intended and prescribed meanings of religious institution. What it means can be varied: a resistance to authority and structure, an exercise of one's freedom and agency, an expression of reverence and respect, a means of adoration, an embodied profession of belief in and belief that the host is the real body of Christ. The seemingly conflicting notions that it evokes are precariously balanced in the tension that results from the indeterminacy and the *communitas* that is present in the ritual. Creating and sustaining this tension revitalizes and assures the continued efficacy of the ritual.

²²Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 75.

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