

## Of Particles and Presence

In some circles within the Church there is much debate about whether it is more appropriate to receive Holy Communion on the tongue or in the hand. The debate is fueled, primarily, by those who feel that reception of Holy Communion in the hand has led to a loss of appropriate reverence for the sacrament and the real presence of Christ therein. Moreover, there are those among the clergy arguing that American Bishops overstepped their bounds in allowing the practice of reception of Holy Communion in the hand by a misinterpretation of ruling from the Pope and/or Vatican.

Is it self-evident that reception of communion by sticking one's tongue out to receive is more reverent than opening the palm of one's hand? Is the tongue more reverent than the hand?

Sure, I suppose an argument could be made that reception on the tongue is inherently more "receptive" because it removes from the action the "willfulness" of feeding oneself. But, are we required to measure degrees of reverence, or can we accept reverence as reverence? Every mode of reception ought to be accompanied by appropriate reverence!



Much of the debate on this matter concerns the particles of Holy Communion which might be lost in the transfer from the priest's hand to that of the communicant's hand: This is where the debate gets really interesting, because it forces us to consider the nature of the sacrament. Holy Communion does maintain the natural, material appearance of bread and wine: As is true with all matter, microscopic particles are shed because of natural forces such as friction, and electromagnetic charges. As the priest clasps his fingers on the host and raises it up to

offer it to the recipient, particles are blown off by molecules of air: Some of these are inhaled by people, along with the dust in the atmosphere, and some fall to the ground. It is humanly impossible to prevent this sort of loss to the environment of some of the material which composes the host! Does this mean that we are trampling the Eucharist underfoot?

We tend to compare Holy Communion to things which are more familiar to us, like chemical compounds or things which are a result of chemical or physical reactions. The Eucharist, however, is of another order of reality: For there to be a sacrament, there must be a sign. To quote one online blogger discussing this matter, "*A Sacrament consists of an outward sign which signifies an inward, supernatural, grace-giving reality. Both the sign and the thing signified are necessary for a valid Sacrament. Hence, if the sign is destroyed, the thing signified ceases to be present as well.*" St. Thomas Aquinas speaks of this in terms of "corruption:" You can see by the following that he uses the word broadly:

*"But if the change be so great that the substance of the bread or wine would have been corrupted, then Christ's body and blood do not remain under this sacrament; and this either on the part of the qualities, as when the color, savor, and other qualities of the bread and wine are so altered as to be incompatible with the nature of bread or of wine; or else on the part of the quantity, as, for instance, if the bread be reduced to fine particles, or the wine divided into such tiny drops that the species of bread or wine no longer remain"* (Summa Theologica, III, Q. 77, Art. 4).

Much more can be said on the matter, but it does provide an opportunity for us to break free from the inadequate analogies we use to think about Holy Communion: It is not a chemical reaction, but a mystery bound up with the reality of a sign. And, yes, of course, the utmost reverence is called for whichever mode of reception is chosen.