

Tridentine Community News

March 1, 2009

Care in Handling the Blessed Sacrament

We have stated before a concept that seems as though it should be self-evident to Catholics, and even to non-Catholics: If we truly believe that the consecrated bread and wine are the Most Precious Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, then they deserve to be shown utmost respect. They should not be handled or distributed casually as though they were hors d'oeuvres.

The Rubrics and customs of the Extraordinary Form Mass are designed to do just that. It starts with the basics: If they are not in a collective motion involving the priest, the sacred ministers and altar servers genuflect when they cross the tabernacle, as a sign of reverence to our Lord reserved in the Blessed Sacrament.

Even the Tiniest Particle is Our Lord

Great care is taken after the Consecrations to ensure that no particle of our Lord's Sacred Body, and no droplet of His Most Precious Blood, are scattered, trampled upon, spilled, or desecrated in any way. The celebrant holds his thumb and forefinger together from the Consecration to Holy Communion, lest any crumbs fall. The priest uses the paten to scrape off any particles there may be on the altar, and then wipes off the paten into the chalice, thereby ensuring that all particles of the Host are consumed.

After a priest or deacon has touched a Sacred Host, he must purify his hands. During Mass, this is done at the ablutions after Holy Communion. First, wine is poured into the chalice or ciborium, when is then tilted around so that the wine cleanses its side walls. Then the priest takes the chalice to the Epistle side of the altar, where the altar servers pour wine and water over his fingers into the chalice. Again, the chalice is tilted to ensure thorough cleansing. The priest wipes his fingers dry with the purificator cloth and drinks the wine and water from the chalice.



If there was a second distributor for Communion, such as a deacon, he cleanses his fingers in a little glass cup of water that sits to the right of every tabernacle, and then wipes his fingers with a cloth that sits next to this cup.

During the Distribution of Holy Communion

At the Communion Rail, an altar server holds a paten underneath the chin of each communicant, to catch a Host that may fall. The server never tilts the paten, lest any particle of the Host that may be on the paten fall to the floor.

Some churches, including St. Josaphat and Assumption-Windsor, have Communion Rail Cloths that augment the paten and expand the area where a dropped Host might be noticed.

What Happens If a Host Falls on the Floor?

The paten and the Communion Rail Cloth cannot and do not handle all situations. Sometimes a Host does fall to the floor. It is our collective responsibility, altar servers and those kneeling at the rail alike, to alert the priest or deacon distributing Holy Communion if this does happen.

The Rubrics prescribe that a dropped Host "is to be taken up reverently, a little water is to be poured over the place where it fell, and the place is to be dried with a purificator" [*De Defectibus* #45]. The priest either consumes the Host or places it in the water cup next to the tabernacle, so that it dissolves. Similar rubrics exist for spilled Precious Blood and other mishaps.

Every so often, the tabernacle's water cup is emptied directly into the earth, either outside the church or via a *Sacrarium*, a sink in the sacristy that drains directly into the ground. Chalices and ciboria purified outside of Mass are also drained into the earth in this fashion if their contents are not consumed.

Each of these steps is taken to ensure that no profane end – such as being trampled upon underfoot, being swept into trash, or being flushed into the sewer system – occurs to any particle of our Lord.

It Can Give One Pause...

...to consider just what message is being sent by the more casual methods of distributing Holy Communion that have become the norm nowadays. On a practical level alone, theological issues aside, Communion given in the hand while standing, and with the disuse of patens held under communicants' chins, is simply going to result in particles, and even entire Hosts, falling, being stepped upon, and even ground into the floor. Why are we letting our God be treated in such a manner?

Encouraging Signs of Regained Respect for the Eucharist

There is good news: In the 1980s, one would have had to search high and low to find a church offering Benediction or Holy Hours. By the grace of God, Eucharistic Adoration is making a comeback, via Adoration Chapels, Benediction services, and the example set by EWTN. Perhaps if people ponder just why they are showing such devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, they will notice the incongruity of handing the Blessed Sacrament in a casual manner before, during, and after Holy Communion.

Fortunately, at an Extraordinary Form Mass, the rubrics minimize such risks. Let us pray that a renewed sense of respect for the Blessed Sacrament results not only in increased Eucharistic Adoration, but also in adoration of a different sort, the day-to-day reverence that we should be showing our Lord at every Holy Mass.