

Solemnity of Corpus Christi – June 18, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
St. Paul’s Cathedral, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 2,000 words

For this great feast of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have the pleasure of singing or reciting a liturgical sequence – that is, a work of sacred poetry which the Church has seen fit to incorporate into the liturgy, alongside the scriptural readings. The one for this feast is called “Lauda Sion” – “Laud, O Zion” – and was written by none other than the great St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. There is a homily in practically every single line of this important sequence! The one that has really captivated my attention this year is at the very beginning of the second verse, where it says, “Bring him all the praise you know”. That is a poetic translation of the Latin; if it were translated more literally it would say, “Dare to do as much as you can” – dare to do whatever you can to give praise and show reverence to Our Lord in the Most Blessed Sacrament! And as the verse ends, “never can you reach his due”; even if we do all that we can to honor the Lord, we still will not have corresponded to his infinite greatness.

When it comes to reverence and honor for the Holy Eucharist, then, the Church promotes a “maximalist” approach: we can never do enough – it is the Lord! We do believe that he is really, truly, and substantially present in his Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity in the consecrated bread and wine. In fact, we believe that the consecrated elements are no longer bread and wine at all, for their substance is changed. With us, our outward appearance changes down through the years, as we grow up, grow older, gain weight, lose weight, get gray hair, perhaps start to lose our faculties later in life, and so forth. But the core – who and what we are, our *substance* – always remains the same. With the Eucharist, the change that happens is exactly the opposite. When a validly ordained bishop or priest recites the words of consecration – which are the words of our Lord – over the bread and wine, at that very moment their substance is changed, even while their outward appearance, texture, taste, smell, and so forth, remains the same. What it is changes from bread and wine to the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ, and this we know by faith, because God himself told us. The transubstantiation that takes place during every Mass, then, is a true miracle, and it is in this way that the Lord perpetuates the sacrifice of his life for our salvation on our altars down through the ages, until he comes in glory. And not only that – it is in this way that he gives himself to us as our heavenly food and drink.

“Dare to do as much as you can” – “Bring him all the praise you know”! There is so much I would like to say about this verse, and indeed, I originally wrote a much longer homily. But today, what is most on my heart is to reflect a bit with you on how this principle unfolds in our personal reverence toward the Blessed Sacrament. I do think we have some room for growth. Every pastor, from time to time, has to address the manner in which the Eucharist is received, for bad habits or other factors come into play and need to be corrected. From hosts that are dropped on occasion to mishaps with the Precious Blood, we are reminded of just how fragile the Lord makes himself in coming to us under the appearances of bread and wine; thus the Church reminds us sternly that we must avoid all risk of profanation of the Holy Eucharist.¹ In the last month, in particular, there have been a couple of mishaps here that have been fairly serious and have shaken us up – to say nothing of the disrespect they have caused our Lord. My purpose is not to point fingers or cast blame, but simply to instruct so that we can do better going forward.

Several people at our Masses prefer to receive holy communion while kneeling, and many more have expressed to me a desire to do so, but feel they could not physically do that without a kneeler or rail. I very much regret that we do not have a communion rail to make the process easier and more reverent for those who wish to kneel; unfortunately, our rail – as in so

¹ Cf. Vatican Instruction *Redemptionis sacramentum*, n. 92, 25 March 2004.

many parishes – was removed during a very ideological period in the Church’s history, even though not a single Vatican teaching ever instructed the removal of such sacred furnishings. It’s a tragic thing, but it is what it is. Perhaps someday we will be able to restore the communion rail here, as has happened recently in many other parishes – one in our diocese, and many around the country. In the meantime, I would like to reassure those who wish to kneel that that manner of receiving Holy Communion is very traditional and is totally permitted.

Reception of Holy Communion on the tongue is what the universal law of the Church indicates and also what is most traditional. In this way, we are fed our portion of the holy sacrifice by the priest, who stands in the person of Christ – or by the deacon or the other duly-deputed extraordinary ministers who assist the priest. The priest’s hands are consecrated for the purpose of touching the Holy Eucharist, and this consecration still means something, even if our current clergy shortage requires that we depute others to assist us in the task of distribution also. When we receive on the tongue we should not stick out our tongue all the way or even open too wide; it is sufficient to open the mouth a little and extend the tongue to the bottom lip so that the priest or other minister may place the host there. During my years of priestly ministry I have met parishioners here and there who have wanted to start receiving this way, but were never instructed in it and were nervous about beginning. To anyone who might be in that category: please do not hesitate to tell me; we can do a little practice in the sacristy one day, so that you will be more confident as you approach in the communion line.

Reception of Holy Communion in the hand is permitted by way of indult; in other words, it is an exception to the law, granted in this country and several others, but not in all places. This indult was originally granted by Pope Paul VI rather reluctantly in 1969 after in several places, in disobedience to the centuries-old law and praxis of the Church, priests and bishops took the initiative themselves to start distributing communion in the hand.² That, in itself, was a tragedy, since every priest and bishop takes an oath of fidelity in which he promises to obey and uphold the laws and disciplines of the Church. I don’t think a lot of people know how this practice arose in modern times – again, it was during that ideological period of which I spoke, during which many good and holy things were cast out and many novelties were introduced. In any case, the permission or indult has remained since then and the practice of receiving in the hand has become quite common in the United States and other places. Those who receive this way, however, *assume a greater responsibility for the body of the Lord*. It becomes easier for particles of the host to be lost on the floor or elsewhere, when the host goes through the additional step of being placed in someone’s hand! And I see so few people – practically no one, in fact – ever checking their hands after they receive. In my experience – and this is certainly not the first time I have preached on this – there are always people who balk at these sorts of observations and even find them offensive. But as one who handles the Holy Eucharist daily – and is quite aware of the strict account which I will have to render to the Lord for my stewardship of his Precious Body and Blood – I can only tell you what I regularly see, and I do so moved by charity: on the communion plates that the servers hold while priests, deacons, and ministers distribute, there are often some particles that are caught. In the ciborium – the vessel that holds the hosts – there is often a goodly quantity of particles remaining after communion is distributed. These visible particles are most certainly the Real Presence of Christ as much as the larger hosts are! I strongly exhort those who choose to receive in the hand, to do so carefully, and to make sure afterwards that no particle remains. If some particle does remain on the hand or fingers, it must be consumed also.

² Cf. Vatican Instruction *Memoriale Domini*, 29 May 1969.

Finally, then, there is one additional thing about which we must be careful, to prevent mishaps. And that is: if we do choose to receive the host in the hand, or if we choose to receive from the chalice, we must have two completely free hands to do so. In another parish recently there was quite a bad spill of the Precious Blood, because a mother who had a child in arms started to drink from the chalice and the child playfully hit it. If you have a child in arms, I ask that you please receive the host on the tongue – not with one hand or not attempting to receive with two hands anyhow – and that you do not receive from the chalice. Even if we only receive the host, we receive Christ whole and entire. He cannot be divided into parts. He is fully present – Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity – in either the host or the chalice, so that if it happens that we can only receive him under one species at some Mass, we nevertheless receive no less of him than anyone else. Those also who have canes in hand or otherwise do not have two hands available: please receive the host on the tongue. It is not proper to receive with only one hand, or with two hands that are partially occupied – for example, holding the strap on the top of a cane. Sometimes I see people who receive with only one hand then manipulating the host so that they can get it into their mouth – there is absolutely no way to ensure that any loose particle does not end up on the floor the way! The proper way to receive in the hand is with two hands, using one hand to take the host from the other and place it in the mouth, then checking afterwards for anything that might remain.

“Give him all the praise you know” – “Dare to do as much as you can”! At the height of the Church’s Eucharistic devotion in the 13th century, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote these beautiful words, which have guided us since. I want to thank all of you for your love and devotion to our Lord in the Most Blessed Sacrament. Although I do have this duty to exhort and correct in some matters, I would err if I did not also recognize the great love that I can see in this place for our Eucharistic Lord – love that impelled our ancestors to sacrifice to build such a beautiful edifice for God, and love that is evident today on the faces of those who approach the altar for Holy Communion; who come here for adoration on Fridays and during the school year, on first Sundays; and love shown in many other ways besides. Let us make any needed corrections to ensure the greatest possible reverence for our dear Lord Jesus, and as a parish, may we continue to “give him all the praise [we] know”, until finally – we pray! – we see him face to face in heaven. Amen.