

Explaining the Mass

With Fr. Mark Bentz, STL

Part 12: Sacred gestures

We come back to the Eucharistic Canon—the prayer which consecrates ordinary bread and wine, transforming them into the body and blood of Christ. During this prayer, the movements, gestures, and sounds all reveal something of the mystery that is happening. Everyone kneels in silence, because we are now watching the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross—a truly holy and *awesome* mystery. The priest alone stands, in the person of Christ, making intercession on our behalf (assisted by the deacon, if there is one). In every Eucharistic prayer, there is a moment where the priest calls down the Holy Spirit upon the gifts. At this moment, the priest extends his hands over the gifts—‘laying hands’ on them—which has always been a gesture used when asking for the Holy Spirit to come. (think about Confirmation, Holy Orders, anointing of the sick, etc.) This has been traditionally accompanied by the ringing of bells, which has the practical purpose of calling us back to attention if our minds have wandered! More than that however, is the fact that bells are symbolic of angel voices, which always ring out in the presence of God. This is why we ring the bells at the consecration of the bread and wine as well.

The gestures of the priest are important. However, the current rubrics do not tell a priest exactly how he must move. There are general rubrics, but not precise directions (for example, ‘pray with hands extended’ rather than ‘shoulder width apart’ or ‘bowing profoundly’ rather than ‘bowing from the waist’). There is both a blessing and a disadvantage to this. The blessing is that the priest doesn’t have to be neurotic about following tiny details, but the disadvantage is that sometimes the rich symbolism of the gestures is lost and the mass can look very different depending on the personality of the priest. Perhaps it would be helpful to look at the gestures used in the Extraordinary Form of the Mass to understand what I’m talking about. What I’m describing next applies to the Extraordinary Form, or ‘Tridentine’ liturgy, but can just as easily be done with the current Roman Missal’s rubrics.

At the consecration, the priest picks up the host, using only his thumb and index fingers. From this point on, the priest does not separate those two fingers (except to touch the hosts) until after distributing communion and purifying his fingers with water. The reason for this is that we believe Christ is present in every *visible* particle of the host or every drop of the chalice after the consecration. We shouldn’t be neurotic about it, but I can tell you from personal experience that hosts are ‘crumbly’ and particles of the host easily stick to your hands, especially if you’re perspiring! Having the fingers together prevents you from unintentionally dropping any particle of the host on the ground. And, if the priest handles the host in this way, it should make us think twice about how we receive Holy Communion or distribute it as extraordinary ministers. Gestures matter.

In the Extraordinary Form, at the words “This is my body”, the priest rests his arms against the altar, ‘attaching himself’ to it. If we remember that the altar is used for sacrifice, and that the priest is acting, ‘*in persona Christi*’ (in the person of Christ), the priest is uniting himself with Christ’s sacrifice, even *physically*, through this gesture. Just as Christ’s arms were ‘attached’ to the Cross, so the priest

attaches his arms to the altar, as a symbol of being crucified with Christ on the cross. In a very real way, the priest says “This is **my** body,” not “Christ’s body.” This is the grace of priestly ordination: at that moment, the distinction between the priest and Christ himself is purely *accidental* external appearance. The priest becomes a *sacrament* of Christ in the same way that the bread and wine are transformed!

But the sacrifice is not finished yet. We have only the body that has been consecrated. At every mass, we witness the one sacrifice of Calvary: his passion, death, AND resurrection. The body has been consecrated, but the blood has not been separated from the body; Christ has been crucified, but has not died. When the priest consecrates the wine with the words “This is the chalice of my blood”, we now have a separation of the blood from the body—in other words, death. This is the piercing of the heart of Christ where ‘blood and water flowed out’ until nothing remained--proving that He was dead. Body and blood are now separated, so we have witnessed His death on the cross through sacramental gestures.

At this point, an important question emerges, “Do we eat the dead flesh and blood of Christ?” NO. It is the risen body, blood, soul and divinity that we consume in the Eucharist. So, where is the resurrection? If we have witnessed Christ’s death through the separation of blood from his body, where are they reunited? Stay tuned for the answer next week...