

Manhandling the Lord

I have heard non-Catholic Christians challenge members of our Faith on the belief that Christ is really present under the signs of bread and wine in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. A typical observation goes something like this: *“If Communion is really Christ then why do people at Mass seem so un-moved or nonchalant about it?”*

This observation brings up a whole host of thoughts and considerations: First off, a simple answer to the query is that the Sacrament of Holy Communion demands a response of faith which is not necessarily met by any warm feeling or stirring in the mind or soul. As the Apostle says, *“We walk by faith and not by sight,”* (2 Cor. 5). For us, faith is engaged not only at the hearing of the Word of God, but also in the signs Christ instituted through which He conveys his grace, (Baptism, Communion, etc).

But, I think that there is more of a subtext in such questioning of our faith which constitutes a stumbling-block for many people: How is it that Christ would make himself truly present in the elements of Bread and Wine which are entrusted to our handling and distributing and pouring and sipping and chewing, etc.? As the one who presides over the celebration of Mass on Sunday, I am keenly aware of the awkwardness and the scandal of my “handling” the Lord: I “break the bread” and microscopic fragments of the “Real Presence” explode into the surrounding space, imperceptible to my eyes. I handle the Sacrament of the Lord in metal bowls which clash and clang with my clumsy placement. With my sinful hand I clasp handfuls of hosts in order to distribute them evenly among the bowls used for the Rite of

Holy Communion. In short, I am always confronted with a messy, imprecise manhandling of our Lord in Holy Communion. How can the Risen and Exalted Lord allow this! After the horrible indignity of the Cross, why should the Ascended Lord permit any further indignity?

Consider, however, that this messy manhandling of the Lord under the sacramental sign is part-and-parcel of the human dimension which our Lord fully embraced. He embraced the full embodied reality of being a human, which includes dirty sandaled feet and the sweat and filth which often accompanies our engagement with the nature of this world. The New Testament characterizes this humble condescension of God into the world and our human nature as “Love,” (1John 4, John 15:13). The Incarnation, the Passion and the Crucifixion are all markers of the intense Love of God for us, such that it is said *“God so Loved the world that He gave his only Son. . .* (John 3:16)



We understand the Sacrament as the continued, visible manifestation of this same Love: The immense act of Love which is the Cross is re-presented to us under the signs of Bread and Wine. Just as he was manhandled on his way to the Cross, he continues to allow it in our clumsy, all-too-human handling of his Real Presence. His Exaltation in Glory does not exclude is continued vulnerability to us in Love.