

The Hands

EVERY part of the body is an expressive instrument of the soul. The soul does not inhabit the body as a man inhabits a house. It lives and works in each member, each fibre, and reveals itself in the body's every line, contour and movement. But the soul's chief instruments and clearest mirrors are the face and hands.

Of the face this is obviously true. But if you will watch other people (or yourself), you will notice how instantly every slightest feeling,--pleasure, surprise, suspense,--shows in the hand. A quick lifting of the hand or a flicker of the fingers say far more than words. By comparison with a language so natural and expressive the spoken word is clumsy. Next to the face, the part of the body fullest of mind is the hand. It is a tool for work, a weapon of attack and defence,--but also, with its delicate structure and nerves, it is adaptable and sensitive. It is a workmanlike instrument for the soul. It receives from the outside world. For when we clasp the extended hand of a stranger are we not receiving from a foreign source the confidence, pleasure, sympathy or sorrow that his hand conveys?

So in prayer, where the soul gives herself to God and receives him to herself, the hand should take on expressive forms.

When we pray, our hands interlock, finger in finger, a gesture of control. It is as if we would prevent the inner current from escaping by conducting it from hand to hand. It is as if we were collecting all our forces in order to keep guard over the hidden God, so that he who is mine and I who am his should be left alone together. Our hands take the same position when some dire need or pain weighs heavily on us and threatens to break out.

But when we stand in God's presence in humble reverence, the open hands come together in sign of obedient homage, as if to say that the words we ourselves would speak are in good order. Or it may be a sign of inner surrender. These hands, our weapons of defence, are laid, as it were, tied and bound together between the hands of God.

In moments of joy when the soul is entirely open to God the hands are uplifted and spread apart to let the river of the spirit stream out. So too when we long for God and cry out to him.

Finally when sacrifice is called for and we gather together all we are and all we have and offer ourselves to God with full consent, then we lay our arms over our breast and make with them the sign of the cross.

There is greatness and beauty in this language of the hands. The Church tells us that God has given us our hands in order that we may "carry our souls" in them. The Church is fully in earnest in the use she makes of the language of gesture.

Our hands may also indicate our unchecked impulses, our distractions, and other faults. Let us hold them as the Church directs and see to it that there is a real correspondence between the interior and exterior attitude.

In matters such as this we are on delicate ground. We would prefer not to talk about things of this order. Something within us objects. Let us then avoid all empty and unreal talk and concentrate the more carefully on the actual doing. That is a form of speech by which the plain realities of the body say to God what its soul means and intends.