



Jesus *wants* to be touched by human hands

DEAR FATHER KERPER: For several years I've been a minister of Holy Communion at my parish. I recently learned that, until the 1960s, no one except priests could touch the Blessed Sacrament and other sacred objects connected with the Mass. How could long-established Church rules change so much?

Your question touches on three matters: liturgical traditions, the influence of Israel's laws and theology on Christian worship, and the Lord's manner of shaping our sacraments.

Liturgical Traditions

You're partially correct about the long-standing prohibition against lay people touching the Blessed Sacrament and sacred objects. *The Roman Catechism* published in 1566, three years after the Council of Trent, explicitly states this but added these words: "unless some case of great necessity intervene." As such, the prohibition was neither absolute nor permanent. Moreover,

The Roman Catechism never defined a "case of great necessity." One may imagine all sorts of exceptions, such as rescuing the Blessed Sacrament from profanation, carrying the Eucharist to a dying person in a priestless territory and so forth. Two heroic cases come to mind. First, St. Clare of Assisi in 1240 raised up the Blessed Sacrament and drove away invaders who threatened her convent. Second, we have the case of St. Tarcisius, a very young acolyte entrusted with the dangerous task of bringing eucharistic particles to imprisoned Christians. This happened in the 3rd century.

Liturgical traditions necessarily change when situations change. This happened in 1972, when Pope

St. Paul VI granted permission to non-ordained people to distribute Holy Communion in the "case of great necessity." Such cases include the urgent need to bring the Eucharist to the sick, the elderly and prisoners. Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist frequently bring Holy Communion to people, which necessarily requires them to touch the Blessed Sacrament.

As much as we value ancient traditions, the reasonable availability of the sacraments, especially to isolated and suffering people, takes precedence over human customs.

Texts from the Hebrew Scriptures

Now let's consider how Israel's customs have influenced our own, including the norms that emerged from the Council of Trent. Within the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Torah, we find numerous and precise laws that prohibit people from touching sacred objects. These laws expressed Israel's distinctive understanding of God as infinitely above and beyond created things, including human beings. As a result, they believed that any contact with God — or even through objects "touched by God" — necessarily caused death. We witness this in the terrifying story of Uzzah, the son of Abinadab. (2 Sm 6:1-8)

Here's what happened. Before entering combat, King David or-

dered that the ark of the Covenant to be transferred from the house of Abinadab to the battlefield. While moving the ark in a cart, it began to tip over. Uzzah, Abinadab's son, immediately tried to set the ark aright with his hand. When he touched the ark, he dropped dead. Uzzah's story reflects Israel's *absolute* prohibition against touching sacred objects. Even Uzzah's good intention failed to preserve his life.

Israel's prohibitions also have linkages with the priesthood, which descended from Levi, the brother of Moses. By restricting all "sacred touching" to the Levitical priesthood, which was entirely hereditary, these consecrated men enjoyed a complete monopoly on sacrifice, liturgy and the temple.

The Practice of Jesus and Sacraments

Norms against touching the sacred surely promoted reverence, but they caused us to forget that the Lord created sacraments *that require touching the sacred*. Indeed, the rituals of six of the seven sacraments require "flesh on flesh" contact between the minister and recipient. (Penance is the sole exception; it requires the bodily presence of the confessor.)

This brings us to the ultimate foundation of the sacraments: the incarnation of God's Son, who forever *touches us spiritually and bodily* in these highest forms of Catholic worship.

St. Augustine once remarked about this. He wrote: "*This Word, who became flesh in order that He could be touched by hands, began to be flesh in the Virgin Mary's womb.*"

Here, St. Augustine bluntly asserts that the Incarnation of the Word happened specifically to enable human beings to make **physical contact** with the Lord. In truth, the Lord *wants* us to *touch* him.

St. Augustine supported his claim by citing 1 John 1: "*That which*

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was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life."

Notice St. John's sequence of *sensual* experience, which runs from *hearing* to *seeing* and then culminates in *bodily contact*, skin against skin.

Another verse from 1 John offers a possible explanation for the Lord's desire to be touched: "*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because he first loved us.*" (1 Jn 4:18-19)

Perhaps touching indicates the loss of fear on the part of the believer. After all, the Hebrew Scriptures, written long before the incarnation of Christ, never mention touching the divine. We, however, enjoy an astonishing familiarity with the Lord, whom we touch — an experience unimaginable for ancient Israel.

Reverence and personal familiarity with the Lord always require balance. Excess in either ruins everything. Father Joseph Jungmann, in his classic work, *The History of the Mass of the Roman Rite*, recounted how fearful reverence toward the Eucharist reduced the Blessed Sacrament to another "sacred object," neither touched nor eaten. As an antidote to this paralyzing fear, he cited a

4th century text that taught new Christians how to receive Holy Communion:

"Make the left hand into a throne for the right which will receive the King, and then cup your open hand and take the Body of Christ, reciting the Amen. Then sanctify with all care your eyes by **touching the Sacred Body**, and receive It."

Arguments for *not* touching sacred objects, especially the Eucharistic Body of Christ, are well known, reasonable and held by people of good faith. But the living Catholic tradition also contains valid customs that establish a proper balance between reverence and tender love for the one who came "*in order that He could be touched by hands.*" ■



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