

COMMUNION IN THE HAND?

How we receive communion is part of the liturgical celebration of the Mass. All the rites, prayers and postures that we participate in during Mass have great significance. These actions are signs that signify what we believe. Remember that as human beings we are both body and soul and therefore our access to the spiritual world is connected to the world of signs and symbols. This sign world is entered into in a deep and mysterious way when we celebrate Mass.

What we believe in is reflected by how we pray. **Lex orandi, Lex credendi** (Latin loosely translated as "the law of praying [is] the law of believing") is a motto in Christian tradition, which means that it is prayer which leads to belief, or that it is liturgy which leads to theology.

Bad Liturgy leads to bad theology. Pope Benedict XVI wrote, *"I am convinced that the crisis in the Church that we are experiencing today is, to a large extent, due to the disintegration of the liturgy."*

So the practice of the rituals and rites within the Mass (lex orandi) have a direct consequence on how we understand the faith (lex credendi). The rituals and rites of the Mass originate from the Jewish Synagogue Liturgy, the Jewish Passover Liturgy and ancient Semitic ritual of the cutting of a blood Covenant.

We need to understand the meaning of a Covenant relationship. A Covenant is a sacred family bond wherein God participates. Jesus (God Incarnate) uses the word "Covenant" only once in all of the Gospels; at the Last Supper when He establishes the Priesthood and the Eucharist as Sacraments. Matthew 26:28 "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

A Covenant ceremony generally consists of three fundamental rites; the swearing of an oath, the sacrifice of an offering and a communal meal. These three rites are expressed at the Divine Liturgy. (1) The swearing of an oath takes place when we say "Amen" after certain prayers and when we recite the Creed "I believe in God..." (2) The offering of a sacrifice occurs when the Priest (in Persona Christi) at the Consecration represents the same sacrificial offering of Jesus to the Father that took place on Calvary. (3) The meal takes place when we receive the Eucharistic sacrifice in Communion.

If Jesus intended to establish a Covenant, and He certainly did, and that Covenant ritual was to be celebrated continuously by the Church ("do this in remembrance of me" Lk. 22:19) and it certainly has been, then how Jesus and the Apostles understood and celebrated a Covenant ritual should effect how we today celebrate that same Covenant instituted 2,000 years ago. So let us turn our attention to the ancient Semitic Covenant Ritual that was sealed in Blood.

The Blood Covenant

From the mindset of the Eastern (Semitic) understanding from which the Old Testament Scripture was originally written, an agreement made with the shedding and mingling of blood between the makers is the union of two parties in which all assets, debts, liabilities, talents, etc. are held mutually together and this agreement can only be broken by the death of one of the primary makers of this agreement. *(All assets and liabilities are held mutually together, no pre-nuptial agreements, till death do us part)*

This binding relationship is worked out in very carefully defined promises and pledges that each makes to the other. The key word is **Union**. A blood covenant is a **Union of two People or Parties** into one new person (a new creation if you will), in which everything is shared together in common. It is truly an **Exchanged Life**. *(Vows are taken/swearing an oath)*

The blood covenant is the most binding covenant any two people or groups of people can enter into. Once committed to the only way out of it is by the death of one or both of the covenant makers. It is something that is never entered into lightly. *(Free consent of the will, till death do us part)*

These are the steps that are normally involved in cutting the covenant:

There is an exchange of coats

The coat signifies the identity and authority of the person, group, or tribe entering this covenant. The coats are exchanged with each participant in this ceremony. This exchange is saying "Everything I am, everything I represent, now belongs to you. All my possessions, all that I am, my very self, I give to you. I am no longer my own, I now belong to you.

The exchange of weapon belts

On these belts are the bow, knife, sword, or any other weapons. This exchange signifies that all my strength now belongs to you. Your enemies are now my enemies and my enemies are now your enemies. Your friends are now my friends and my friends are now your friends. I will serve you if you ever need me and you will serve me if I ever need you.

The exchange of vows in the walk of blood

An animal is now sacrificed by splitting it down the backbone. It is usually a bull, a goat, or a lamb. The halves are laid open with a pool of blood between them. The covenant parties walk in a figure 8 between the halves and meet in the middle in the pool of blood. The figure 8 is significant because it represents "infinity" or a never-ending relationship. We meet face to face and there pronounce the blessings and the curses of the covenant. The curses are usually pronounced against anyone who would break this covenant. It was usually said like this, "the one who breaks this covenant will die just like this animal has died". A pledge was also given that went like this, "Just as this animal gave its life so I will give my life if necessary." *(Jesus gave his life freely)*

The accounting of all belongings for exchange if and when needed. While standing in the blood, we give an accounting of all of our possessions and declare that they become available to our covenant partner if they ever have need of them.

The exchange of names

Each participant takes the others name to himself. The person's name represents his individuality. This exchange of names demonstrates a death to being an "individual". Remember that covenant is the union of two individuals or of two groups. In a covenant you are no longer concerned only with yourself, your concern now includes your blood covenant brother. You care for your blood brother the same as you care for yourself because the two of you are now one. *(In the marital covenant a wife will take the surname of her husband, in religious life a monk will take a new name.)*

The exchange of blood in the cutting of the covenant

While still standing in the blood face-to-face a knife is used to make an incision in either the palms or the wrists of each participant. This was done to allow the blood to flow freely. Sacred Scripture teaches us that life is in the blood. The two participants now either shake hands or put their bleeding wrists together so that the blood intermingles.

This act symbolizes the two bloods, or two lives, have been joined into one blood or one life. In some cultures, the blood from both participants is drizzled into a cup of wine and stirred together and then the two participants drink from the common cup so that each one's blood enters into the other. This mingling of blood creating this new union of "oneness" is why this is called a "blood covenant". It is the strongest bond of relationship known to humanity. It is the way that God has chosen to interact with all humanity. *(This is why Jesus commands us to eat His body and drink His blood)*

The "Mark" of the covenant

While still in this position and blood is dripping from the wounds, some dark substance such as charcoal would be rubbed into the wound on each arm so that when the wound was healed a dark scar would be clearly visible to everyone who saw it. By doing this, everywhere these blood covenant partners went they would clearly be identified as being in covenant with someone else. *(The sign of the marital covenant are the wedding rings that proclaim that both husband and wife are in a covenant relationship and not available to anyone else)*

The Covenant Meal

The exchange signified by the covenant meal which usually consisted of bread and wine is that the covenant partners have become one. We break one loaf of bread and we each place a piece of that bread into our covenant partner's mouth. When we do that we are demonstrating that a part of each of us has gone into the other. "You are eating me." Then they would drink from the same cup and say, we then drink wine from a common cup indicating that our blood has gone into each other. "You are drinking me." Since life is in the blood, we are demonstrating that we have taken each other's life into ourselves.

(This is signified in the marriage ceremony by the feeding of cake (bread) between the bride and groom at the wedding reception. In a more profound way, communion at Mass is a wedding reception, Jesus (God) is the groom and we are the bride. Pope John Paul II echoes this mystery in his teaching on the "Theology of the Body", where he goes so far as to say that God's eternal plan is to "marry" us (see Hos 2:19 "And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy.").

If God desires to "marry" us and has instituted a Covenant ritual to express this mystery (the Mass) and the rite within this ritual manifests this reality by having the priest, who is acting in the person of Christ, feed us Jesus Himself in communion, then we need to take notice that the ritual does not have one participant put the bread in the others hand but feed the other directly by placing the bread into the covenant partner's mouth. Communion on the tongue directly from the Priest (Jesus) manifests the true depth and meaning of the covenant relationship between God and man.)