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Holding Hands at the Our Father?

ROME, NOV. 18, 2003 (Zenit.org).- Answered by Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical Athenaeum.

Q: Many say we should not be holding hands in the congregation while reciting the Lord's Prayer because it is not a community prayer but a prayer to "Our Father." Local priests say that since the Vatican has not specifically addressed it, then we are free to do as we please: either hold hands or not. What is the true Roman Catholic way in which to recite the Lord's Prayer during Mass? -- T.P., Milford, Maine

A: It is true that there is no prescribed posture for the hands during the Our Father and that, so far at least, neither the Holy See nor the U.S. bishops' conference has officially addressed it.

The argument from silence is not very strong, however, because while there is no particular difficulty in a couple, family or a small group spontaneously holding hands during the Our Father, a problem arises when the entire assembly is expected or obliged to do so.

The process for introducing any new rite or gesture into the liturgy in a stable or even binding manner is already contemplated in liturgical law. This process entails a two-thirds majority vote in the bishops' conference and the go-ahead from the Holy See before any change may take effect.

Thus, if neither the bishops' conference nor the Holy See has seen fit to prescribe any posture for the recitation of the Our Father, it hardly behooves any lesser authority to impose a novel gesture not required by liturgical law and expect the faithful to follow their decrees.

While there are no directions as to the posture of the faithful, the rubrics clearly direct the priest and any concelebrants to pray the Our Father with hands extended -- so they at least should not hold hands.

One could argue that holding hands expresses the family union of the Church. But our singing or reciting the prayer in unison already expresses this element.

The act of holding hands usually emphasizes group or personal unity from the human or physical point of view and is thus more typical of the spontaneity of small groups. Hence it does not always transfer well into the context of larger gatherings where some people feel uncomfortable and a bit imposed upon when doing so.

The use of this practice during the Our Father could detract and distract from the prayer's God-directed sense of adoration and petition, as explained in Nos. 2777-2865 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, in favor of a more horizontal and merely human meaning.

For all of these reasons, no one should have any qualms about not participating in this gesture if disinclined to do so. They will be simply following the universal customs of the Church, and should not be accused of being a cause of disharmony.

A different case is the practice in which some people adopt the "orantes" posture during the Our Father, praying like the priest, with hands extended.

In some countries, Italy, for example, the Holy See has granted the bishops' request to allow anyone who wishes to adopt this posture during the Our Father. Usually about a third to one-half of the assembled faithful choose to do so.

Despite appearances, this gesture is not, strictly speaking, a case of the laity trying to usurp priestly functions.

The Our Father is the prayer of the entire assembly and not a priestly or presidential prayer. In fact, it is perhaps the only case when the rubrics direct the priest to pray with arms extended in a prayer that he does not say alone or only with other priests. Therefore, in the case of the Our Father, the orantes posture expresses the prayer directed to God by his children.

The U.S. bishops' conference debated a proposal by some bishops to allow the use of the orantes posture while discussing the "American Adaptations to the General Instruction to the Roman Missal" last year. Some bishops even argued that it was the best way of ridding the country of holding hands. The proposal failed to garner the required two-thirds majority of votes, however, and was dropped from the agenda.

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Follow-up: Communion for Late Arrivals

An attentive reader suggested that my reply to a Nigerian correspondent as to "what point in time during Mass it is considered too late for anyone coming into the Mass to receive Communion" (see [Nov. 4](#)) did not quite address the question at hand. The core query appeared to be "asking a more direct question, about how much Mass is required before receiving Communion."

This could have serious consequences, the follow-up questioner noted, as "Mass is not a prerequisite for receiving Communion. If it were, I and other extraordinary eucharistic ministers could not bring Communion to the shut-ins, the sick, the elderly, or the imprisoned."

I believe I did address the question at hand in the previous column, although it entailed explaining why I eschewed suggesting a clear minimum Mass requirement in order to receive Communion and also to fulfill Sunday obligation. Yet, our correspondent raises a valid point.

In preparing my original reply I had thought of mentioning Communion outside of Mass, but as the question was tailored to late arrival at Mass I considered it might confuse the issue and left it out. It appears that my hesitation has returned to haunt me.

It is necessary to distinguish Mass from other moments in which Communion is received. The Church provides two basic rites for receiving Communion outside of Mass. One is for those occasions when for some good reason Mass is unavailable but Communion is possible. The other is for bringing Communion to those who are unable to attend Mass due to age or infirmity.

Both rites have the same basic structure but differ in the prayers and texts provided.

This structure is: greeting; penitential rite; Liturgy of the Word; on some occasions homily and prayers of the faithful; Communion rite with the Our Father; sign of peace; "This is the Lamb of God ..." and its response "Lord, I am not worthy ..."; Communion; concluding prayer; and final blessing.

There are slight variations in the rite when presided by a priest, deacon or by an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Word may be extended or abbreviated according to pastoral needs with the possibility of using the same readings as at Mass or just reciting a brief verse from Scripture.

The question as to how much of this is required in order to receive Communion varies according to

concrete situations. But when Communion is distributed because Mass is unavailable, then, in principle, those who wish to partake should attend the entire rite.

This would be the situation, for example, in parishes with no resident pastor and, usually, in prisons whenever it is possible to gather the inmates so as to form an assembly. Otherwise the rite may be carried out at each cell with a brief Liturgy of the Word, although the local ordinary may approve particular adaptations to special circumstances unforeseen in the liturgical books.

Communion to the sick, elderly or shut-ins presents a different pastoral situation, and the special circumstances allow for particular solutions. If possible the entire rite should be carried out each time, although the Liturgy of the Word may be abbreviated so as not to sap the strength of the weak.

When Communion is distributed to large numbers of infirm people living separately in hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, etc., the liturgy allows the minister to carry out an abbreviated rite reciting the antiphon "Oh Sacred Banquet" in the chapel or in the first room and distributing Communion in each room using just the formula "This is the Lamb of God..." and "Lord, I am not worthy." He recites the closing prayer in the last room or the chapel but omits the final blessing.

I consciously omit here any reference to bringing viaticum to the dying as this rite is usually united to the anointing of the sick and is the exclusive province of the priest.

The structure of Communion outside of Mass could also provide a guideline for those who strive to attend daily Mass (apart from Sunday Mass). While the principle of attending the entire Mass remains firm, one may be a little bit more flexible regarding reception of Communion on weekdays if it is impossible to arrive at the very beginning.

In these cases it is best to consult directly with the pastor as to the best means of proceeding in order to fulfill one's desire for Communion while respecting the dignity and sanctity of the sacrament.

Another interlocutor asked about the opposite end of Mass and if people may leave after receiving Communion.

The Mass ends with the dismissal, but as a mark of respect the faithful should wait until the priest has entered the sacristy and any final song has ended. Leaving after Communion does not allow us to thank God properly for the gift of his Son and also deprives us of the added grace of the concluding prayer and final blessing.

At times the members of the congregation resemble marathon hopefuls as they stampede toward the exit after Mass. In other circumstances, one wishes they would only get out sooner and not hang around chatting in the aisles. But that is a theme for another occasion.

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