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The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Padraic Brennan

Handshakes of
God

October 2021

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It is often said that we do not reflect on the true value of something until it is no longer there. A good example of this is the handshake, that is taken from us in these Covid-19 times. Taken for granted for so long, we now miss it so much in a variety of situations. It had become a universal expression of good will in human encounters at so many different levels. Where people meet it is (or was!) used in greeting, congratulating, sympathising, expressing friendship, and initiating business in commercial, social and political human interactions. To an alien from space seeing it for the first time, the handshake might seem a strange mechanical physical act empty of meaning. But in many cultures, engrained on the human psyche through practice over countless generations, it has become for so many peoples, the natural way to greet each other when meeting.

MANY KINDS

Depending on the type of human encounter, the handshake has of course many levels of purpose and depth. The handshake of two people sitting down to do business, whether in politics or commerce, is very different in meaning from that of two good friends meeting after some time apart. The handshake can at times be unthinking and automatic among casual acquaintances. Sometimes it is 'awkward' or unsure between people who do not know if they can trust each other or who have some underlying issues unresolved between them. For friends the handshake has a much deeper meaning and the closer the friendship the more that it expresses. A warm handshake given with feeling between two friends, at one and the same time is a way of expressing and renewing their appreciation of each other and in the process of deepening the bond of friendship between them. Significant too are handshakes genuinely given to express empathy in times of trial or trauma and sympathy in time of losing a loved one. These can be given to friend or foe and in the case of the latter can at times be a source of healing and reconciliation. The 'empathy/sympathy' handshakes are perhaps the handshakes most missed since Covid 19 intervened. Not to be forgotten either are the handshakes

Padraic Brennan, Newtown, Cloghans, Ballina, Co. Mayo.

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given to express congratulations at times of achievement or when milestones in life are reached. These celebratory handshakes can give great joy and enhance for the recipients a sense of self worth and well being and can be a source of encouragement as they continue life's journey.

DIFFERENT ELEMENTS

When we reflect on these different kinds of handshake we can identify some core elements that in varying degrees are always present. The first and obvious one of these is the actual act of shaking hands. This, of little value in itself, takes on powerful significance as a sign act pointing to realities that transcend the merely physical. It does so because the minds and hearts of the two people involved give it or see in it a meaning far beyond itself. For them in fact it is a conduit for the other deeper elements of what constitutes a handshake. These include personal presence, acceptance and affirmation. Of course often there are words spoken as well that confirm and illuminate the purpose of the handshake. But a silent handshake can on occasion stand on its own in conveying 'all that needs to be said', particularly at a time of bereavement or traumatic event, when maybe no words seem adequate, to say anything meaningful. In a genuine handshake we are present to a person at that particular moment in a way that we are to nobody else. That presence is a positive presence in which we reach out to the other person. It constitutes an attempt to be with the other in the experience of their life as it is now, whether that be sad or joyful or a combination of both. It at the same time, involves an acceptance of the here and now reality of the other and an affirmation of their self worth, often confirmed in deeper encounters by warm eye contact and a welcoming smile. As we reflect on all of this we see that inherent in every handshake is an element of self gift, to some degree or another. In the moment of contact there is a giving of self to the other in outreach, attention and above all in presence. Normally this element of self gift is present both on the part of the initiator and of the responder to the handshake. However there can be times when a handshake is met with a less than enthusiastic reception! But in so far as a handshake is given or responded to genuinely from the heart, it has in it, however partially, a 'selfless gift of self'. In fact we can say it contains something of the 'agape of God' – his selfless love.

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Arising from this, the human experience of a handshake can help us appreciate the nature of our direct encounters with this love of

God, particularly in the Sacraments. The two realities bear certain similarities. Allowing for the fact that all metaphors have their limitations, we could describe the Sacraments as 'handshakes of God'. Both handshakes and sacraments have at their core 'sign acts' that take on a meaning and purpose that go far beyond themselves in their 'visible reality'. Both constitute acts of reaching out in presence to and acceptance of the other. For instance just as there is a power in a handshake to express and renew a human friendship, there is a power at a much deeper level in the Eucharist, to express and renew a friendship between the human and God made human in Jesus. Central to both is the act of mutual personal presence to the other. In the case of two friends however close their relationship may be, while their presence in a handshake to each other is a 'real presence', it is always so with a small 'r'. It always has its limitations. Even in a warm handshake two good friends are only partly and imperfectly present to each other. This is so because of the limits of our finite nature. It is also so because, as we have seen, presence implies self gift, or in other words the selfless love we call 'agape'. We all in varying degrees fall a bit short in that department! But when it comes to the 'handshake of the Eucharist' we are confronted with a 'Real Presence' with a capital 'R', where God made flesh is fully present to us in the person of the risen Lord Jesus, in an act of a total self gift in love. So powerful and complete is that presence in 'his handshake' of the bread and wine that the latter become what they signify: the very person of Jesus himself gifted to us in love.

INVITATION TO RESPOND

As in the case of a handshake given, the gift of love always invites a response, never more so than when it is gift of God's love that is in question. The extent to which the bond of a relationship is given 'fresh life', is renewed and deepened in a handshake depends very much on the quality of this response. This is very much so in the Eucharist. To be remembered at the very heart of the Eucharist, indeed in its very institution, is an invitation to respond: 'take and eat ... take and drink'. The response this invitation calls for is not just a 'nice to see you' one. It calls for much more than an attitude of 'welcome ... thanks for coming Jesus ... what a nice feeling to have you enter again into my heart'. Of course all this is good for starters. In our reception of communion in response to the invitation, we are in a holy moment, in a sacred place. Like the apostles on the mountain we can cry out 'it is good to be here'. But it is not a time or place for making 'cosy tents' and resting on 'spiritual laurels'. This is so because the self giving love of Jesus

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is always calling for a similar love in us, back to him and out to others. The words of the New Testament scream at us in so many different ways the message of Jesus; 'love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12). So our response to his invitation to imbibe his eucharistic presence only has meaning, in so far as it contains a desire to be renewed in his way of loving and to be empowered to make it more concrete in our everyday lives.

SACRIFICE AND MEAL INSEPARABLE

The 'handshake' of the Eucharist is therefore not something to be taken lightly. For it calls us right into the celebration and renewal in us of the sacrificial love of Jesus. Following Vatican II, with the new emphasis on the Eucharist as the 'breaking of bread' and the sharing of a meal, there was a concern in some quarters that its sacrificial nature was being lost. But in fact the focus on the meal aspect of the Eucharist helps us appreciate better how the life of the Christian is intimately linked with and a participation in the sacrifice of Jesus – always of course in so far as it lives up to what it is meant to be. Prior to this new emphasis, in the minds of many twentieth century Catholics very little connection was made between 'the sacrifice of the Mass' and 'receiving Holy Communion'. The raising of the 'sacred species' immediately after the Consecration was seen not just only as an invitation to venerate the sacramental presence of the Lord. For many it was also understood to be the pivotal 'holy moment' in which he was again being 'offered up in sacrifice'. Receiving Holy Communion was then experienced as a separate part of the celebration in which we encountered the Lord in a different way. It was like as if we were dealing with two different kinds of his presence. In reality meal and sacrifice in the Eucharist are inseparable. One is what Jesus chose to make the other present. 'As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes' (1Cor 11:26). In other words in the the meal of the Eucharist we are recalling, proclaiming and celebrating the triumph of Jesus in his love unto death on the cross, a triumph *that* opens the possibility for all humanity to share in his resulting glorified state. Through the Eucharistic meal Jesus makes himself present *in his sacrifice*. That is he makes himself present in his enduring total surrender of himself to the Father in love. That mode of being which he eternally lived as Son in relation to the Father was given full human expression on earth in the life and death of Jesus, the Son made flesh. In its human translation in a sinful world, it inevitability ended up a 'crucified love'. In the process however, but only at this price, the humanity of Jesus, 'crowned with glory

and splendour'(Hebs 2:9) was fully absorbed into the eternal self gift of the Son to the Father. Of monumental significance for the rest of humanity, is that this paved the way for it to break free from its own self absorption and share in this mode of being with the Incarnate Son. The invitation to 'take and eat ...' is really an invitation to celebrate and have renewed in us our participation in this life of self gift to the Father that now endures eternally in the Son Incarnate in his humanity as well as in his divinity. But this self gift of the risen Lord Jesus now also aspires to encompass all of humanity for whom 'at God's right hand He stands and pleads' (Rom 8:34) for mercy and new life. In the words of Hebrews, there 'beyond the veil'(6:20), in 'no man made sanctuary' but in 'heaven itself' (8:24), 'he is living for ever to intercede for all who come to God through him'(7:25). Those of us who are part of the Church, are part of a 'royal priesthood'(1 Peter 2:9) called by and with Jesus to likewise plead for God's mercy, uniting our pleas with his through whom they are given merit before the Father. We are called to plead for mercy in this way, not only for our own sins but also for those of peoples everywhere throughout the world. In so far as we are 'in Jesus', in a relationship of love with him, this is our inner mode of being as Christians, even in our everyday lives. In our eucharistic celebration with Jesus we exercise this function as a 'priestly people' together in the most powerful way possible, as we encounter his 'Real Presence' with us again in the sacrament of his body and blood.

SAVOURING THE MOMENT

The time between the issuing of the invitation 'Take and eat ... take and drink' and our actual sacramental response in the reception of Holy Communion can be seen as but a pause to 'savour the moment' of Jesus coming to us in this way and as a time for gathering together both individually and as a faith community our thoughts and our prayers, so as to bring ourselves as meaningfully as possible into our response. It is in the first instance a time for expressing wonder and awe before the presence with us in such a special way of the risen Lord Jesus. This we do in our veneration of the sacred species lifted up before us immediately after the consecration. It is also a time for the praise of the Father who sent Him to us and for all that implies. We bring our expression of this to a climax in the prayer leading up to the 'Great Amen', which in itself further confirms our desire through Jesus to give 'all honour and glory to the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit'. The prayer of the Our Father immediately continues this acclamation and praise of the Father in the words 'hallowed be thy name'. All this is but a

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coming back again to the recurring theme of thanksgiving of God that marks the whole of the Eucharistic Celebration. It emphasises how much the Mass is indeed a *eucharistia*, a celebration of thanksgiving, that in the words of Patrick McGoldrick, “flows over into and expresses itself in, praise and blessing and glorification and acknowledgement and confession of God”.¹ This it is in response to the gift of God’s love, made flesh in Jesus for the purpose of drawing humanity into that love eternally. Going back to the Our Father, the praise of the Father leads us into the four other great themes of prayer, namely the coming of the Father’s kingdom of love, the daily needs of people, forgiveness of sin and protection from evil. These are expanded on both before and after the Our Father, in prayers of intercession for ourselves, those who have died, the church community and the wider world of all humanity. As we approach the moment of Communion, conscious of our own unworthiness, these prayers focus on petitions for mercy, healing and peace.

UNENDING SACRIFICE OF PRAISE

All this we gather together in our hearts as we dare in response to the invitation ‘take and eat ...’ to, as it were, again grasp the outstretched hand of Jesus with ours and have renewed in us the bond of friendship and love that exists between us, by welcoming him again sacramentally into every fibre of our being. In doing so we are conscious that in our lives we fall far short of the fullness of love which we again seek to have renewed in us. For the love we aspire to share in with Jesus, is a love that in the Son is eternally one of total self gift to the Father, in thanksgiving for the eternal self gift of his being from the Father. In him we are called to make our lives ‘an unending sacrifice of praise’ (Heb 13:15) to the Father. We do this in so far as we live in agape, that is in selfless love of God and our fellow humans, prepared to endure whatever effort, trouble, pain or suffering this may in practice entail. Every time we come to ‘shake hands’ with Jesus in the Eucharist, we do so conscious that we have once again fallen far short of the fullness of what in this regard we are meant to be. Yet we come again and again multiples of ‘seventy times seven’ times, trusting that the love and mercy of God is much greater than our failure, and indeed much greater than the failure of the whole of humanity. Each time we bring to this intimate encounter with Jesus our flawed offering of praise and thanksgiving to be purified by him and joined to his ongoing self gift in love to the Father. We include in this, gratitude

1. Patrick McGoldrick ‘Always and Everywhere to give You Thanks – Eucharist’. *The Furrow*, June 2020, v. 71, pp 361-368.

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for so many blessings received and our hopes, dreams and petitions for the future. We also bring to our offering all our concerns, fears and worries, as well as our brokenness, caused by the pains and scars and hurts of life often magnified by our own failures and by those of others.

INCLUSIVE OF ALL HUMANITY

We include in this offering not only the 'script' of our own lives but that of others as well in ever widening circles, going from family and friends to local community, church and nation, and indeed to all the peoples of the world, especially those in particular distress at the time. Wherever the Church gathers to celebrate the Eucharist, both individually and collectively, we are called as a 'priestly people' to bring all humanity before the Father through Jesus. At all times we do so in faith that 'through him, and with him and in him' our 'offering', both for ourselves and for others, will be 'acceptable', having been assumed into his perfect self gift in love. We do so too with cries for mercy from the Father, for our ongoing failures in agape (otherwise called our sins), again trusting that through the enduring pleas of Jesus on our behalf such cries will be heard. With such thoughts and prayers simmering in our mind and hearts we finally dare to 'grasp the hand' of Jesus once more in Holy Communion. In doing so we trust that the surge back of the Father's love in response to the enduring pleas of his Son Incarnate will overflow onto us and the world at large through the Holy Spirit, who emanates from where the love of Father and Son meet. We trust that this 'overflow' of the Father's love through the Spirit will in its mercy bring us forgiveness, healing of the wounds of life, and empowerment to renew our efforts to live in agape, as shown to us by Jesus.

REACHING OUT TO ALL PEOPLES

These 'efforts' of ours continuously fall short. But we come back again and again to the Eucharist always hoping that in it we will find the resources and strength to start afresh. In this way we aspire to more and more 'have in us the mind that was in Christ Jesus' (Phil.2:5) and to have our lives grow in conformity to his way of love. Parallel with this, each time we come to the celebration of the Eucharist, we do so in the hope that through our pleas to the Father, joined to those of Jesus the risen Lord, grace pours out through the Spirit to the whole world, invoking in people of 'good will' everywhere, of whatever creed or no creed, acts of agape, helping to lead them also, by whatever path, into the life with God

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for which they were created. For the Church is the Sacrament of the World, that is the visible and effective sign of Christ's presence on earth, reaching out to all peoples in grace and invitation, to likewise in their own way, 'grasp the hand' of the God who comes to them in love, regardless of what their understanding of Him may be. While it is all the time in different ways, and at different levels performing this ministry, nowhere does the Church do so more powerfully than when it gathers in the celebration of the Eucharist, to respond once more to the invitation to 'take and eat ... take and drink' and embraces again the Real Presence of the risen Lord Jesus. Such is the Eucharist - and so *very much more*. Some 'handshake'!

Gratitude. I was watching a series on television recently. The main character was a barrister. He was a complex character. While good at his job, his personal life was in tatters. He was also quite humorous and entertaining. One day, while in conversation with his assistant and reflecting on the outcomes of a case, he came out with a nugget of wisdom that bowled me over. He said 'gratitude is often the shortest-lived emotion'! Every night I try to think of three things in the day that has passed that I can give thanks for. Sometimes it requires a bit of a struggle because something may have happened in that day that has obscured any sense of gratitude. However, and to be honest, there are always at least three things to give gratitude for. The little bit of wisdom that 'gratitude is often the shortest-lived emotion' has forced me to dwell on those things I give thanks for. When I think of the things in my day that I can say 'thank you' for, rather than swallow them quickly I savour them and dwell on them. I have often given this bit of advice to people who are struggling with a spot of depression, and they've come back to me to say 'thank you'.

– ALAN HILLIARD, *Dipping Into Life*, 2021 (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 35.