The Lavabo and the Ablutions: Before and After Holy Communion.

Why does the priest wash his hands or fingers before Communion? It takes only a few seconds and is easily overlooked. A little water, a small bowl called a *lavabo*, and a quiet prayer. Yet this brief action carries one of the deepest confessions that priest makes before celebration the Holy Eucharist. That is why this simple gesture has a name and a place in the liturgy.

This act is also known as the *Lavabo*, a Latin word associated with washing. It refers to washing or cleaning of the priest's fingers. In some traditions, the *ablution* refers more specifically to the cleansing of the sacred vessels or the priest's fingers after Holy Communion. It takes place at the altar, or at the credence before the Eucharistic Prayer begins.

When does it the Lavabo happen?

After preparing the altar and arranging the bread and the wine the priest steps aside and washes his hands. This action is called the *Lavabo* after the Latin prayer traditionally whispered by the priest.

"Lord wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin." (Psalm 51: 2)

The priest is about to do something no human act can fully explain: he will speak the words of Jesus and proclaim Christ's words and celebrate the Eucharist. At that moment, the priest humbly confesses: "I am not worthy on my own. I need mercy before I handle the means of mercy."

The celebrant is not just washing away physical dirt. His hands may not be dirty at all. Rather, through this simple act, he is asking God to cleanse his heart. As he whispers the words of Psalm 51. " *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion; blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin."* (Psalm51:1-2) NIV. The *Lavabo* hence becomes a quiet prayer of repentance and dependence upon God's grace.

The inner cleaning is the true meaning of the washing and it speals not only to the priest but to the whole people of God. It reminds both the priest and the people that no one comes to the altar by personal worthiness. We come because God is merciful.

Before the priest handles the holy gifts he first acknowledges his own need for cleaning. Before he offers the sacrament of Christ Body and Blood to others he stands before God as one who also needs forgiveness grace and mercy.

Consequently, the congregation is invited to examine their hearts before receiving. The truth is not just a tradition or a modern practice; it is rooted in scripture itself.

Biblical perspective

The washing of hands by the priest ministering at the altar has biblical roots. In the Old Testament, priests were required to wash before they enter the altar. Exodus 30:17–21 describes priests washing before entering the tent of meeting.

In Psalm 26:6 (NIV) says: "I wash my hands in innocence, and go around your

altar, O Lord." This prayer is not only for the celebrant. When he washes his hands the church quietly invites everyone to pray in the same manner. "Lord cleanse my heart" because we cannot approach Jesus Christ with any form of merit. We are all sinners Romans 3: 23.(NIV), "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Even though the priest is ordained even though he stands at the altar and celebrates the Eucharist he still pause to ask for forgiveness. Because holiness is never assumed it is always received.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem explains that the "deacon washing the priest's hand is not for physical cleaning but serves as a symbol that the faithful should be pure from all sinful and unlawful deeds symbolising freedom from sin."

This understanding leads us to another part of the liturgical practice; the development of the post communion ablutions

Development of this practice.

Early Christian writers, including Tertullian, Origen, and Cyril of Jerusalem, stressed the reverence due to the Eucharistic bread. They warned Christians not to treat even the smallest fragment carelessly. In later centuries, this concern contributed to practices intended to ensure that remaining particles and drops were reverently consumed and that the sacred vessels were carefully cleansed.

This practice of ablution therefore developed both as an expression of reverence and as a practical liturgical means of ensuring that any remaining fragments or drops were reverently consumed and that the sacred vessels were properly cleansed.

Out of this deep reverence, the practice of ablution developed both a sign of honour towards the Eucharist and as a practical liturgical means of ensuring everything is treated with care and due consideration.

Even the disposal of the ablution water was treated with care. It was poured onto the ground rather than into an ordinary drainage system. The concern was that no portion of the consecrated bread or wine should be treated carelessly or lost.

Anglican ceremonial practice

Anglican practice has never been entirely uniform. The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* provides the authorised text and rubrics, while ceremonial customs—especially in Anglo-Catholic traditions—have developed alongside the Prayer Book.

An example is found in *Ritual Notes*, one of the most influential Anglican ceremonial manuals of the nineteenth century. It gives detailed instructions for the priest, after Communion, to:

- consume any remaining consecrated Bread and Wine;
- carefully collect any remaining particles from the paten or corporal;
- receive wine into the chalice as a first ablution;
- receive wine and water over the priest's thumbs and forefingers;
- rinse the vessels;
- and consume the ablutions.

In this Anglo-Catholic ceremonial tradition, the ablutions are performed at the altar, normally with a server or other minister bringing the wine and water.

The practice of ablution became more clearly established within Anglican ceremonial developed within Anglican

ceremonial tradition, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, it is necessary to say that not all Anglicans followed one uniform practice.

Common Worship

Interestingly, the more recent liturgical provision of the *Common Worship*, explicitly recognises that, in some traditions, the ministry of a deacon at Holy Communion includes "the ablutions." This shows that ablution is now openly acknowledged as part of Anglican liturgical practice, even though it was not explicitly prescribed in the 1662 rite.

In *Common Worship,* the Additional Directions under "The Taking of the Bread and Wine" provide for the reverent consumption of any remaining consecrated bread and wine and for the cleansing of the sacred vessels. In some Anglican traditions, the deacon's ministry may also include the ablutions.

Yet behind these directions lies a deeper spiritual truth; God does not need perfect hands; He needs humble hearts; a sacred moment when the priest quietly asks to be made clean so that Christ alone may be seen.

In conclusion, the *Lavabo* and the post-Communion ablutions are not merely practical actions. They express reverence for the Holy Eucharist and remind both priest and people that we depend entirely on God's mercy.

When the priest washes his hands before the Eucharistic Prayer, the whole Church is invited to pray, "Lord, cleanse my heart." When the vessels are cleansed after Communion, we are reminded to treat the Eucharistic gifts with care and reverence.

Holiness is not something we assume; it is God's gift of grace. We come to the altar not because we are worthy in ourselves, but because Jesus Christ cleanses us, forgives us, and makes us ready to receive Him.

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