

# DIVINE TOUCH: A MEDITATION ON THE LAYING ON OF HANDS IN THE CHURCH

• Stratford and Léonie Caldecott •

“The Church does not save by light alone,  
or by words alone, in Gnostic fashion,  
but by touch.”

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For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control. (1 Tim 6–7)

“He’s got the whole world in his hands.” But what are the hands of God? For Irenaeus, they were the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> The problem with this image is that it risks reducing the second and third Persons of the Trinity to mere parts or extensions of the Father. Yet if we take the image as referring to the economic rather than the immanent Trinity, it is more persuasive. Son and Spirit are indeed the “hands” with which God reaches into the world and effects his will. The Father does not enter the world directly, whereas the Spirit is breathed upon the primordial waters to create order out of chaos, and the Son is sent to save the world from sin and bring it back to the Father.

God as pure spirit, as *actus purus*, whether Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, has no “hands” except metaphorically—but as incarnate,

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<sup>1</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.20.1.

in the Person of the Son, he not only “is” the right hand of the Father but has hands like us, and, though human, these are the hands of God. In these human–divine hands resides the fate of the world; through their touch grace is communicated; and by them we are held in an everlasting embrace. In the gesture of the *laying on of hands*, which we will explore in this article, the wholeness of Christianity is reflected and may be better understood.

### *1. The symbolism of the body*

The particular history by which God entered into a covenant with the human race, with the Chosen People, and with us is a story of families and of personal contact, generation after generation. This is the way God works: not like a construction engineer, a demiurge drawing up a chart and ordering his workers around the site. He works from the inside out, from within, creating and re-creating each thing to be what it is. He constitutes all things, ourselves included, *relationally*, as parts of a whole. In Adam we are all contained, from Eve all human life flows, and in order to save us, God needs to create a new genealogy, one that works backwards not forwards in time, reaching from the *eschaton* to the beginning, making all things new. The turning point, where the two genealogies come together and are woven into one story, is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

In order to understand the role of *hands* in our salvation and in the continuity of Holy Orders we need to reflect on the Incarnation itself, when God took to himself a pair of hands and began to use them. Human nature is fallen, and this may have affected the body, the cosmos, and matter itself, but the basic structure of the human person remains what it was. The human body is the manifestation of the soul which animates it; the human spirit is the “face” the soul turns to God; the human person is the unity in which body, soul, and spirit cohere—the subject or owner of all these faculties and experiences. In the Incarnation, the Son of God assumed the body, soul, and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth in the first moment of his existence. The second Person of the Trinity, in other words, was and remains the subject or owner of these human elements.

The body that he assumed had, like all corporeal things, symbolic properties. For everything created is a “word,” the expression of some aspect of the divine essence, wisdom, and beauty, and the human body is no exception—in fact it is a microcosm reflecting the world as a whole and the widest possible range of divine attributes. Each part of the body, and the whole organism, may be “read” like a book if viewed in the correct light.

Like a book opened at the spine, the human body has a simple reflective symmetry (two legs, arms, ears, etc.) when viewed from the front or back, and the face similarly. Whatever other reasons there may be for this, it underlines the fact that the human being is intended to be seen face-to-face. We are persons. The vertical posture suggests our role as mediators between earth and heaven. The human face represents the sky, with the dome of the firmament above, and the eyes providing illumination like the sun and moon, the nose and ears corresponding to the air around us, and the mouth an entrance to the “sea” of digestion below. The bilateral symmetry that extends throughout the body (with notable exceptions—we have only one heart, for example, though even that has two valves)<sup>2</sup> is shared with other animals and expresses the fact that animal nature has to do with the power of horizontal movement.

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<sup>2</sup>G. K. Chesterton has some fun with this in the beginning of his book *Orthodoxy* (1908). “The real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable, but not quite. Life is not an illogicality; yet it is a trap for logicians. It looks just a little more mathematical and regular than it is; its exactitude is obvious, but its inexactitude is hidden; its wildness lies in wait. I give one coarse instance of what I mean. Suppose some mathematical creature from the moon were to reckon up the human body; he would at once see that the essential thing about it was that it was duplicate. A man is two men, he on the right exactly resembling him on the left. Having noted that there was an arm on the right and one on the left, a leg on the right and one on the left, he might go further and still find on each side the same number of fingers, the same number of toes, twin eyes, twin ears, twin nostrils, and even twin lobes of the brain. At last he would take it as a law; and then, where he found a heart on one side, would deduce that there was another heart on the other. And just then, where he most felt he was right, he would be wrong.” He goes on to show that this slight but significant departure from perfect “logical” symmetry is typical of the world as a whole—and typical, too, of Christianity, which departs from logic exactly where the world does, and thus reveals its most significant features.

These suggestions of symbolic meaning are tentative but not entirely arbitrary. All religious traditions try to read the body symbolically, and the various schools of traditional medicine are based on imagined correspondences between each part of the body and some element or component of the universe at large. The human body is like a very dense, very complex poem. We know it is dense with meaning because it is made by and in the image of God. Our attempts to decipher it in the past may have been crude, but they were based on a valid intuition. In recent times we have neglected the symbolic dimension almost completely, to our loss. As Cardinal Ratzinger said in 1989, “bodiliness reaches the metaphysical depths and is the basis of a symbolic metaphysics whose denial or neglect does not ennoble man but destroys him.”<sup>3</sup> Among other things, a blindness to symbolism and its “metaphysical depths” renders Scripture almost unintelligible. The “theology of the body” developed by Pope John Paul II was precisely an attempt to read Scripture and the human body as two books that illuminate one another, revealing what it means to be human.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. *The hand of God*

Whereas the foot represents the power of moving the whole body from place to place, the human hand, with its opposable thumb (adding another dimension of freedom to that possessed by animals), is symbolic of the power we exert over the things within our reach, and the power of “making” in the sense of art, or craft, or skill (*téchne*). It is also the way we reach out “from the heart” to others—since the arms are roughly on a level with the chest—and the way we touch them, whether in a gentle, friendly, and loving way, or aggressively and cruelly. (Perhaps one might even say, *the path to the heart begins with the hands.*) The hands are also fashioned for holding, for clasping and grasping—for giving and receiving. All these natural functions and many others have a symbolic dimension

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<sup>3</sup>From his opening address at a meeting of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with the Presidents of the European Doctrinal Commissions at Laxenburg (Vienna) from 2 to 5 May 1989.

<sup>4</sup>See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006).

or application, which form the basis for social conventions such as shaking hands to greet someone or to seal an agreement, or raising the hand to pose a question or objection. Asian traditions have elaborated dozens of symbolic hand gestures (*mudras*) for use in dance, iconography, and yoga. Eastern Orthodox iconography also has a basic vocabulary of hand gestures representing doctrinal positions or spiritual actions (blessing, teaching, and so on).

Some of the earliest cave paintings, dating back 30,000 years, show human hands, and the hand has often been used in Egyptian and Asian art to represent the power of God or man, and the distribution of gifts or grace (one thinks, for example, of the light rays ending in hands that emanate from the solar disk of Amon, or of Amida Avalokiteshvara in China). The natural posture of the suppliant—knees bent, open hands raised to the level of the head—is adapted to express the prayer of adoration.<sup>5</sup> Becoming incarnate, God respects the natural symbolism of his own creation, and uses it. Christ walks on the water, raises his gaze to heaven, rubs spittle into a man's eyes to heal them, breathes on the disciples to communicate the Holy Spirit, and lays his hands on people in order to bless them. In Christian art, made possible by the fact that the invisible God has entered the world of images, a hand descending from heaven may be used as a symbol of God the Father or (on a cruciform nimbus or otherwise clearly distinguished) the Son. The left and right hands represent the justice and the mercy of God, respectively. (The latter may be shown slightly larger.) Christ's hand is shown holding the seven stars of the Apocalypse, or an Orb surmounted by a Cross representing the world. He may have his hand extended in blessing or, perhaps with his index finger also extended, teaching. And in the beautiful fresco of the Descent into Hell at Chora in Istanbul, he is grasping Adam and Eve by their wrists in order to drag them into the light.

This last image in particular seems to sum up much about the importance of human touch. Salvation requires God to reach down into the depths and take us by the hand (or the arm—he grasps Adam and Eve by the wrists to indicate that they can do nothing to help bring about their own rescue). Incarnate as a human

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<sup>5</sup>Here and in the following paragraph we are relying on the summary in Louis Charbonneau-Lassay's study of religious symbolism, *The Bestiary of Christ* (New York: Parabola Books, 1991), 36–41.

being, the divine Person of the Son can show us the Father's love in a form we understand, by touching, caressing, and even washing us. But perhaps most poignant of all is when God's hands reach out for us—reach out in justice and mercy toward both the good and the bad thief, for we are all thieves—on the Cross. Nailed to the wood, stretched out in pain, in that moment he can touch no one. Yet this is the very moment when he reaches everyone. The apparent passivity of God as victim masks the most intense activity. When his hands are seemingly at their most passive in death is the moment that he is actively clasping Adam and Eve and hauling them up to heaven. The will to accept what has been assigned to him on our behalf is forcing the whole of bent nature back into shape.

The wounds on Christ's body are sacramental, and have inspired particular devotions. They are not simply washed away by the resurrection, but glorified. The risen Lord is able to show the disciples his pierced hands and feet and the wound in his side. These wounds are emblems and tokens of love, and in that sense complete the body of the Perfect Man instead of marring it. Through those wounds, we are told by many of the mystics, we may travel—as it were up the stream of blood that they release—into the Body and the Heart of the Lord, where we become part of him in the general resurrection. The blood from the hands and side is gathered, according to many sacred pictures, into a cup by the angels, making a direct link to the Eucharist. The wounds in the hands are the effects of sin on the power to act, to control, to shape. In this moment the powers of the divine potter, weaver, gardener, sculptor, scribe, warrior, mason, physician, and carpenter are handed over, returned to the Father with the Spirit.

### *3. The laying on of hands*

It is the breathing of the Spirit, coupled with the laying on of hands, that we must turn to now. With this gesture, Christ once again absorbed a perennial, natural symbol—part of the language of the body—which had been known from the earliest times, and made it a sacrament. It is a gesture well-known from the Old Testament or *Tanakh*—for example, it is often assumed that the blessing of Esau and Jacob by the Patriarch Isaac was accompanied by the laying on of hands, and certainly Moses ordained Joshua to succeed him in this

way according to the Lord's command in Numbers 27:18, filling him with the "spirit of wisdom" (Dt 34:9). There are analogous ceremonies in other ancient civilizations, since it was widely believed (and may even be true) that a kind of mysterious healing energy can be conveyed in this way from one person to another. Kneeling to allow another to lay his hands on your head is, in any case, a fairly evident sign of accepting his authority, and in body-language makes one a kind of vessel to receive whatever the other may choose to give. The Mosaic tradition includes also the ordination of seventy elders in this way at Numbers 11:16–25, who in turn ordained their successors—a succession that may have continued right up until the suppression of the Sanhedrin, several centuries into New Testament times.

The Church took over this Jewish custom for her own purposes. Jesus himself "laid his hands" on people only to bless and heal, for example when he blessed the children that the disciples wanted to turn away. He commissioned the Twelve and the Seventy by his word alone (Lk 6:12; 10:1–16). The accounts of the Last Supper do not record a formal laying on of hands, though he uses his hands to wash their feet and to feed them. Later he breathes on them after the Resurrection (Jn 20:22–23) in order to communicate the Holy Spirit. The formal ceremony of the laying on of hands was instituted by the apostles according to the Book of Acts after Pentecost, to ordain the first deacons (6:6), and to commission Barnabas and Saul (13:3). Thereafter it seems to have become the standard ritual for ordination, and so today we can safely say that our local parish priest can trace his sacramental "ancestry" through the bishop who ordained him all the way back to one of the apostles.

#### 4. *The priest in action*

But what of the gesture itself, and its association with the invocation of the Spirit, and the anointing with oils?

In the Roman Catholic Church, the action is an essential part of the sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Orders—in both cases normally by a bishop (who possesses the fullness of the priesthood). In both, it is accompanied by an invocation of the Holy Spirit. *Confirmation* is an outpouring of the Spirit and his seven gifts akin to that grace received by the apostles on the first day of

Pentecost. This grace is intended for all believers, all full members of the Church, and for that reason in the early days was not so clearly distinguished from Baptism. *Ordination* communicates the Spirit in the way Christ communicated it to the Twelve through giving them communion at the Last Supper and by breathing on them after his Resurrection—that is, to make them able to act *in persona Christi* toward the rest of the faithful, in binding and loosing sins, in teaching, and in consecrating the Eucharist.

In the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches, anointing with the oil of chrism (which is also used in the Roman sacraments) is regarded as the equivalent of the laying on of hands, in that the oil itself is supposed to have been descended from that used by the apostles and on which they had laid their hands. Nevertheless, the hands of the bishop are needed to ordain a priest. Hands are also laid on the sick in the sacrament of Anointing or Unction, in both Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

So we see in the tradition a very close, indeed inseparable, connection between the communication of the Holy Spirit and the laying on of hands, especially in Confirmation and Holy Orders. This is particularly important when it comes to the priesthood, where questions of legitimacy are often raised, and where the Apostolic Succession has been brought into question by varied historical circumstances (such as the Great Schism, the Reformation, and the schism with the Old Catholics in the nineteenth century).

What interests us here is a theological reading of this connection. We note that the priest operates through his hands. In the laying on of hands that transmits to him the power to bless and consecrate, it is as though he were being given the hands of a priest, the hands of Christ. The other part of the sacrament involves the breath—so the pronouncement of certain words over him—because his work as a priest depends on the use of his voice as well as his hands. But what does he do with these hands? Supremely, he consecrates and offers the Eucharist, as Christ did at the Last Supper anticipating his sacrifice on the Cross.

##### *5. The power to consecrate*

In the Mass, the priest receives the offerings of bread and wine, and consecrates them, invoking the Holy Spirit in such a way



that, when he speaks the words of consecration, it is Christ's words—or at least his intention—that is transmitted down to the present moment. The power of God to effect whatever he intends then ensures the transformation of the elements into the Body and Blood of Christ (appearances notwithstanding). But if the eucharistic Christ enters the world through the hands of the priest upon the altar, it is not just the Last Supper that is “remembered” in this action. It is also the Incarnation itself, both the moment of Christ's conception within the womb of Mary when she pronounced her *fiat* to the angel's words, and the moment of Nativity when Christ was first presented to the world.

We may say, then, that there is an exact equivalence between the hands of the priest and the mother's womb, Mary's womb in which the Lord becomes incarnate, and from which he appears, in order to be worshiped by men. Those hands are the *womb of the Church*, and they are received in direct line from the first apostles (a supernatural genealogy analogous to natural descent *via* the maternal womb) through the “laying on of hands”—a gesture which is echoed during the *epiclesis* or invocation of the Spirit upon the gifts, which in the Catholic rite immediately precedes the words of Institution, or what is regarded as the consecration proper.

The power of the priest to absolve sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation is linked to the Eucharist, in that it enables the faithful to approach and receive the Lord in a state of grace. The power of the priest to read and preach the Gospel is also ordered to this, because it enables the faithful better to *know* the Lord they are about to receive, and so to receive in the most receptive state possible.

Thus the *power* of the priesthood is concentrated and exemplified in this one great act or sacrament of the Eucharist. But what kind of “power” is this? It is a power like that of the mother who brings a child into the world—feeling herself, no doubt, at her *least powerful and most vulnerable* in that very moment. The moment when the priest most clearly identifies himself with Christ on the Cross, offering Body and Blood for the salvation of the world and the rebirth of the Christian, is also the moment when he should identify most closely with Mary and with every mother in childbirth, locked into a process over which she has no real control because it is in the hands of God—bringing new life into the world through suffering.

Ironically or paradoxically, when the priest is performing his most masculine role—representing by his actions at the altar the Bridegroom in relation to the Church as Bride—he is also reflecting or embodying the most feminine role of all, that of the mother who must submit herself to the will of God and the great sacrifice required of her in order to welcome the child who has been given to her by God and who must be given in turn to others.<sup>6</sup>

### 6. *Theology of the body*

When a priest is first ordained, it is customary for the people to kiss his hands, on the exact place where he has been anointed (between thumb and palm), after receiving his first blessing. This reverence shown to the hands of the priest encapsulates the relationship between the people (the bride) and the priest as newly created *alter Christus*. It is a reminder, both for him and for them, of the solemn purpose to which he now lends his all-too human body, heart, and soul. The priest stands on the “threshold,” to use a favorite term of John Paul II (see *Roman Triptych*), between heaven and earth, between the bride and the bridegroom, the man and the woman.

In Michelangelo’s painting of the creation of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, it is through the *hands* that God the Father is shown eliciting human life. Here, as John Paul II noted many times, the creation of humanity is inseparable from the reality of the fact that he is creating them man and woman. With his right hand the Father reaches out to Adam, who in turn extends his left hand to God, receiving the Divine life. At the same time the Father’s *left* hand is stretched in a very unusual configuration round the left arm of Eve, who is still inside the womb-shaped vortex of divine creativity that encompasses the Father on the right side of the picture.

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<sup>6</sup>Matthias Joseph Scheeben writes: “Thus Christ is born anew through the priesthood by a continuation, as it were, of His miraculous birth from Mary; and the priesthood itself is an imitation and extension of the mysterious maternity that Mary possessed with regard to the God-man” (*The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J. [London: Herder Book Co., 1946], 547).

It is almost as though the weight of God, reaching out to Adam, were being balanced on the arm of Eve as she awaits her own epiphany at the hand of God—except, of course, that the language of linear time is irrelevant here. Not only does the Creator balance his act of creation of mankind on an axis that centers on the form of the woman, but he emphasizes it with his left index finger, pointing to earth, as well as to the hidden hand of the woman (the *left* hand, the hand that traditionally wears a wedding ring). All this at the same time as he extends his right index finger toward Adam. Thus the mystery of masculine and feminine in the act of creation is expressed in the relationship of the hands.

### 7. *The tender compassion of our God*

When the priest uses the hands that have been consecrated to the sacramental continuation of this creative work of God, he represents both halves of this moment. His hands are given over entirely to the work now entrusted to them, a work that goes beyond the natural human sphere and into the heavenly order. The deep resonance in this bodily parallel with the mystery of creation and redemption may go some way toward explaining the discipline of clerical celibacy.

Like a potter, like a weaver, like a gardener, like a mother, the priest shapes the Christian people into Christ, and does so with his hands and breath. It would be a complete distortion—albeit one that occurs, as we know, all too frequently—to regard this priestly craft and calling as a “power” in the worldly sense, meaning a power to dominate, control, and force the human “substance” into a shape determined by the will of the priest himself. That would be to usurp the place of God as Creator. The most human beings can do is “procreate,” or collaborate with God’s creative act. The priest’s true power is not a technological but a “pastoral” power, the power of a shepherd to call and guide. Anything else comes from the Evil One.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>A similar distortion is involved when we speak of a man as having a “right” to ordination, or a priest having the “right” to consecrate the Eucharist. The language of rights is inappropriate here. He is either called, or not.

The priest is a father who must learn his fatherhood from a mother. In being most a father, he contains and represents the motherly presence of the Church and the tenderness of God. In the tiny but pervasive gesture of the laying on of hands, in the act of healing and in the sacraments, the Church expresses this tenderness in the very moments when the Holy Spirit is most active in transmitting the life of Christ to those who need light and salvation. She does not save by light alone, or by words alone, in Gnostic fashion, but by touch.

The hands, like all parts of the human body, are an expression of the soul and an extension of the human spirit, but they have a particular function. More than any other part of the body, they are at our command. They are the organs with which we touch, receive, take, and make. They reveal and express the will. With them we can perform both good and evil. As such, they are made to express the love for which we ourselves are made, and which we so often fail to manifest. Christ's hands, however, do not fail. He touches his apostles, he consecrates them and washes their feet, and this human-divine touch is passed on, without interruption, until it reaches the very priest who, right here, right now, is placing the eucharistic Lord gently in our hands and in our mouths so that we may be saved from death. □

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