



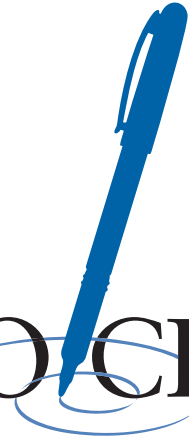
About the Author

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About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



Priestly Hands

The Rev. Ken Kesselus

As I look back over my active ministry, I am struck by the importance I always placed in priestly hands. I always scooped up and poured baptismal water with my cupped hand — never with a baptismal shell — because the shell seemed to remove me slightly from the water, the liturgy and the baptismal candidate. I always have believed that liturgical actions should be as close, direct and tactile as possible: administering baptismal oil with my thumb, touching heads in healing and blessing, clasping hands in mine when exchanging the peace, marking foreheads with the ashes of mortality and spreading a handful of dirt onto their caskets at burial (for me, it had to be “real” dirt dug from the grave, not the sanitized sand provided by the mortuary).

My father is one likely source for my “hands-on” priestly approach. He was a carpenter who made a living working with his hands. And he never wore gloves. He measured and marked, sawed and hammered, shoveled dirt and mixed concrete, painted and plastered — all with his bare hands. I watched him and obviously imprinted this behavior. I grew up working without gloves, and to this day, even though I understand the obvious safety factors involved, I have trouble putting them on when making repairs on my old wood-frame house in the town where I grew up. In his last years, Daddy helped me remodel and add a room. Even then, his hands remained skilled, strong, steady and, I dare say, artistic. He could perform wonders with wood, bare-handed.

Perhaps spending two-thirds of my active ordained ministry in the small-town Texas parish in which I grew up also helped to mold my style of ministry. I performed all the rituals for the most familiar people in my life — parents, children, brother and wife; close lay associates and staff; childhood friends; former teachers and neighbors, as well as newcomers. (It was during the early years of this ministry that my father helped me — with his tough, weathered, familiar hands — to work on the old rectory I purchased from the parish.)

Or maybe it was the stripped-down simplicity and plainness of life for a boy who grew up in a Low-Church 1950s Episcopal environment that molded me. For example, I always avoided sacerdotal paraphernalia whenever I could. Although I never got around to sprinkling my congregation with baptismal water, I suspect that, had I done so, I would have flicked the water with my fingers rather than using a branch or aspergillum.

Then again, it is possible that I absorbed some High-Church ideas without knowing it — a more Catholic emphasis on sacerdotal manual acts, signified by the anointing of the hands of a priest at ordination, as expressed by the Rev. Fr. Louie R. Coronel, OP, which I recently read online:

The anatomical structure of the human hand with its 27 bones and 37 muscles is designed for dexterity and fine movements. It has a considerable number of sensory endings and intricate motor configuration [so] that a person can convey various emotions through its gestures, warmth and tactility. Furthermore, it is a metaphor for love and service so as to underscore the profundity of the anointed hands of the priest.

Had I acquired this Roman Catholic priest's understanding of priestly hands earlier in my career, I might have avoided an error in priestly judgment that I made as a completely inexperienced 25-year-old in my first parish. A young couple came to me with their own baptismal shell and asked me to use it to baptize their child. I casually refused. I later learned that this shell was an heirloom used by their family to make several generations of Christians. Looking back, I now understand that my decision must have seemed quite an affront. I realize now that it was selfish of me and nearsighted.

Unfortunately, I repeated this error 30 years later. I had just arrived as the new rector of a large, old parish and was facing my first Baptism there. The altar guild planned to lay out a shell used by previous rectors. I explained politely that I only used my bare hands at the font. Since I was still in the "honeymoon phase," they didn't express indignation, but I imagine they felt it.

Looking back on both these cases, I wish I had possessed the maturity to swallow my convictions and comply with the requests. It isn't that I now doubt those convictions, but I now have a better understanding of their true nature: the role of physical touch involves sacramental acts that are only the outward sign of the much greater grace of God. The deeper point isn't really whether I used a shell or not; the deeper point is that Baptism is an expression of God's love in action. At our best, priests express God's love, and ours, as servants through connecting with parishioners — from Baptism forward — offering a comforting, caring touch, as an intimate connection with the holy.



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