

THE LAYING ON OF HANDS: THE BASIC SACRAMENTAL RITE

During the past fall academic term, I conducted a graduate seminar on the laying on of hands in the history of the sacraments. My interest in the subject dates back to at least a decade, when I had become aware of how prominent this rite is in Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*. But my surprise (and I should add: the students' consternation) was very great last fall when we discovered how inadequate the bibliography on the subject was. All four major studies (Behm, Coppens, and the entries in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* and the *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*) were written fifty and more years ago; Behm in 1911. And except for an essay by Fiala in the 1972 Botte *Festschrift* which in eighteen pages attempts an overall survey of the Western rites, and of course the usually brief entries in the various dictionaries and encyclopedias, the remarkably few essays on the subject since the four major studies a half-century ago for the most part deal with specific problems concerning the laying on of hands employed for a specific sacrament, and often only at a given time. Most surprising and discouraging of all, however, was the fact that in the monumental index of Liturgical Bibliography, prepared by Mont César in Louvain, with its tens of thousands of index cards, we were unable to find the subject *Imposition des Mains* at all.

And yet our little seminar felt compelled to arrive at the *tentative* conclusion that laying on of hands, understood as a conferring of the Holy Spirit, constituted in early Christianity *the* basic liturgical rite common to all the sacraments. And further, that the post-Vatican II reforms of the sacramental rites have as a principal objective the restoration of the laying on of hands as a central liturgical rite or gesture, with a view to recovering the pneumatological signification and understanding of the sacraments.

Please note: I said "tentative conclusion." For however fascinating and even exciting our research proved to the participants of our seminar, its resultant conclusion is obviously so weighty in its implications that much more work has to be done by way of corroboration. I hope

to devote most of the summer to the task, and to conduct another seminar on the subject in the Spring Term 1975 at Catholic University. The present brief talk cannot do more than indicate some of the avenues of approach.

For my point of departure, I have selected Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*. Not only because it furnishes us the first massive, detailed evidence of the sacramental rites as performed in Rome (after very sparse information on the subject during the preceding two centuries from any Christian community). The evidence gains in importance, because the author of set purpose describes what he claims is the apostolic tradition, the way things used to be done, over against the innovators (I suppose we would call them "the new theologians"); and in this case his claim would necessarily have to rest not only on his own recollections, but on the "collective memory" of the Roman community; this in turn confers considerably greater reliability to his evidence. Of singular significance, too, is his witness to the history of sacramental rites because of the influence the *Apostolic Tradition* exercised on subsequent church orders in the East.

But the *Apostolic Tradition* is not only an interesting archeological showpiece. It is, even for us today, engaged as we are in a process of major reforms of the sacramental rites, a point of departure that demands our most diligent study. For the mind of those responsible for our present-day reforms can be gauged from the fact that two of the key revisions have been deliberately borrowed from Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*. Hippolytus' prayer of ordination of bishops has been taken over verbatim; and our new Eucharistic Prayer II is basically the eucharistic prayer of Hippolytus—but, it must be added, tampered with needlessly, to our great ecumenical loss.

That in the *Apostolic Tradition* the laying on of hands is the basic liturgical rite common to all the sacraments mentioned—the ordination of bishop, of presbyter, of deacon; the Eucharist; and Baptism and its complementary rite which we call Confirmation—seems to me to be beyond dispute. That this laying on of hands was meant to signify the conferral of the Holy Spirit is also clearly expressed in all these instances, except in the case of the baptismal rite, where it is however (to my thinking) unmistakably implied.

The paradigm rite in Hippolytus is the ordination of a bishop, in

chapters 2 and 3:

With the consent of all the people, the bishops lay hands on the man to be consecrated bishop while the presbyters stand by. All are to be silent, praying in their hearts that the Spirit may come down on the man to be ordained bishop. Then, at the request of all, one of the bishops lays his hands on the man to be ordained and prays in this way:

And then follows the prayer of ordination, which expresses more concretely the specific intention of this Spirit-giving laying on of hands: in this instance, it is the conferral of the spirit of leadership and of high priesthood.

Three things are to be noted. *One.* The bishop is the leader of the community because he, in a unique sense, is Spirit-filled. (Parenthetically, closer attention to this early understanding of the role of the bishop, as visible sign in the community of the Spirit's presence—a viewpoint echoed and re-echoed in the extant early rites of episcopal ordination—might throw needed light on the vexed problem of hierarchy *versus* [!] charismatics.)

Two. This Spirit is the Spirit residing in the whole community. Though it is the bishop (or, as in Baptism, his extension, the presbyter) who lays on hands, the entire community actively participates in the rite by prayer and by the manifestation of its consent. This is equivalently true also of the eucharistic as well as the baptismal and confirmational laying on of hands. It follows that a layman, e.g., a teacher, may lay hands on the catechumen—though, clearly, not in order to impart the Spirit of ordained ministry.

(The complicated problem of *not* laying hands on a confessor for the dignity of presbyter cannot be gone into here. I strongly suspect, however, that a solution must be sought in connection with what Hippolytus says in chapter 14 about not laying hands on another class of charismatics, those who have the gift of healing: "the facts themselves," he says, show whether the Spirit has been given him apart from the official laying on of hands.)

Three. The laying on of hands for the giving of the Spirit continues *throughout*, i.e., for the entire duration of, the prayer of consecration, both here and in all the subsequent sacramental rites. In other words,

the entire anaphora, coextensive with the laying on of hands, is epicletic. The mentality that sought to determine at what precise point of the consecratory prayer the Holy Spirit descends, or correspondingly, what precise words effect the conversion of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ (that is to say: what precisely is necessary *ad validitatem*) is still, mercifully, centuries in the future.

While both bodily gesture and the total, coextensive consecratory prayer are therefore epicletic, the prayer does state the specific purpose for which the Spirit is being conferred, what gift or office he imparts, what he effects. In the case of the Eucharist, Hippolytus' witness in this regard is of special interest: the Spirit is sent both to convert the elements, *and* to transform those who participate in the mysteries into a true Christian community. In our historical Western quarrel with the Eastern churches about the epiclesis, we concentrated so much on the former, because of our own transubstantiation controversies, that we failed almost entirely to consider the epicletic transformation of the community; whereas in the East, particularly after Basil, the eucharistic interpretation of "the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit," cf. 2 Cor 13:14, played an ever-increasing role in their pneumatological understanding of the economy of Christian salvation and life. We in the West are only now beginning to recover from this oversight; and, as we shall see later, our three new eucharistic prayers, in which both epicletic transformations are clearly stated, can and should (with proper catechesis) constitute a basis for such a recovered theology of the Spirit's role in sacramental sanctification.

As to the baptismal laying on of hands, the text itself, especially against the background of the cardinal significance of previous instances of the laying on of hands, makes clear that in Baptism, too, it is not something peripheral, something more or less accidental or introductory, to be followed by what is essential, namely the immersion. Rather, the laying on of hands is itself a prominent part of the central "essential" rite. Here is the text:

He who baptizes [bishop or presbyter] places his hand on the person's head and says to him: 'Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?' The person being baptized says: 'I believe.' And keeping his hand laid on his [the neophyte's] head, he immediately baptizes him the first time. Etc. (Chapter 21).

It is as if the act of immersing were a follow-through, a ritual extension or specification of the laying on of hands—just as the consecratory prayer is its verbal specification. Baptism is a more expansive and declaratory, a more visually developed version of the laying on of hands.

This perhaps surprising conclusion finds support in a number of catacomb pictures from the second to the fourth century, depicting the act of baptizing. The one to be baptized is shown standing in water, the baptizer beside him, his right hand on the head of the person to be baptized.

Probably the best corroboration, however, because it throws light on Hippolytus' own manner of thinking, is what seems to me the parallel instance of a ritually expanded laying on of hands, namely, in Confirmation. Here there are two layings on of hands. The first is coextensive with the prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The text of the second reads: "Pouring the oil of thanksgiving on his hand, he places his hand on the head of the person and says: 'I anoint you . . . etc.'" (chapter 21). This is therefore essentially a laying on of hands ritually further specified by an anointing: so too in Baptism, it would seem, we have a laying on of hands ritually specified by an immersion.

Nor should it be overlooked that besides its central role in the actual baptism, the laying on of hands was the most prominent rite during the entire period of the catechumenate. It was conferred whenever the candidates met for instruction, and daily as the time of their Baptism approached; in the final days, the bishop himself performed the rite. Its use in the Baptism of Easter morning served, therefore, as a climactic summation and fulfillment of what the candidates had experienced frequently and even daily throughout their long period of preparation.

Much more needs to be said of the laying on of hands according to the *Apostolic Tradition*. But perhaps this suffices to at least illustrate my thesis, that the rite of laying on hands constituted a central sacramental rite for all the sacraments, and that it signified the conferral of the Holy Spirit. Hippolytus also tells us: "In every blessing let there be said: Glory to you, Father and Son, together with the Holy Spirit in the holy Church . . . etc." And there are those who would argue from this paradigm doxology to Hippolytus' theology of the holy Pneuma's all-embracing presence and activity in the Church—above all,

in the Eucharist and the other sacramental actions of which he writes. But it is high time we inquire, however briefly, into the scriptural bases of the early Church's predilection for this sacramental sign of laying on of hands.

Many of the encyclopedia and dictionary articles on the laying on of hands in both the Old and the New Testaments are not particularly helpful. They list the instances it occurs, and then attempt to categorize them into various classes or species. One author succeeded in finding no less than nine species. More important even than the task of distinguishing would seem to be the effort to discover what is common to them all, the underlying purpose, utilizing for this purpose the valuable assistance of anthropologists and sociologists of religion. For we know that God did not usually create new religious rites and symbols for his chosen people, but gave new dimensions and understandings to some of the religious practices generally extant and accepted from the contiguous cultures of the time.

Two such currents of religious thought and practice would seem to have coalesced in the rite of laying on of hands found in the Old Testament. A person (or object) communicated his numen to another person (or object) by touching him. By the act of bodily touching—or its several equivalents, e.g., the transfer of a teacher's mantle to his disciple—the spiritual force inherent in one person flowed over, as it were, into the other.

The second generally accepted mind-set was in regard to the meaning of the hand (and of its prolongation, as for instance the rod of Moses). The hand was not merely the means or instrument by which a person accomplished something. The Jews, as well as the neighboring cultures, viewed man as a psychosomatic unity. The hand was accordingly regarded as in some manner the extension of the self, of the person, and especially of his power. "The hand of God," no less than "the word of God," as it were personifies God, is creative and full of power. Full not only of power, but also of compassion and mercy. The author of Revelation faithfully reflects this Old Testament mentality when he speaks of the hand of God, so strong it holds the seven stars (the seven churches), and yet so full of compassion that it wipes away every tear (cf. Rev 1:16; 21:4).

These two viewpoints, about the meaning of touch and of hand

respectively, unite in the religious rite of laying on of hands. The gesture of ritually laying hands on someone is the gesture of touch *per eminentiam*, its clearest and most potent expression. It signifies that the communication of numen, of the life-force or of divine power, is deliberately willed and directed. It is such a power-laden gesture that it effects what it signifies: thus everyone understood that when the patriarch Joseph laid his hand on the head of Ephraim and of Manassah in blessing, the gifts he prayed for would *de facto* be theirs (Gen 48:13-16).

It comes as no surprise, then, that in a number of key instances of transmitting God's covenant-relationship to succeeding generations of his people, this was accomplished by the laying on of hands. The incident of Joseph handing on the heritage of covenant-blessing has just been cited. At God's command, Moses laid his hands on Joshua, thereby constituting him his successor as leader of God's people: "Lay your hand upon him . . . invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey" (Nb 27:18-20). In Deuteronomy 34:9, in the concluding and summarizing verses of the book, it is stated explicitly: "And Joshua, the son of Nun, was full of the spirit of wisdom, *because* Moses had laid his hands upon him." No mention is made of prayer: the laying on of hands itself seems to have been the full ordaining rite. The Levites too were instituted in their office by the laying on of hands, but in their case, "the people of Israel shall lay their hands upon the levites" (Nb 8:10).

How this was *understood* as almost a physical communication of the spirit is perhaps best illustrated in the famous passage of Nb 11:25 (though here there is no mention of laying on of hands): "The Lord took some of the spirit that was upon Moses, and put it on the seventy elders." This incident is cited, by the way, in both Hippolytus' and our present-day prayer of ordination of presbyters, and in both, of course, the prayer accompanies the laying on of hands.

Among the gospel accounts, John has relatively little about healing by touch or laying on of hands. As might be expected, he prefers to present Jesus as working miracles by a word of command. It is in the Synoptics, but especially in Mark and Luke, that we find the many instances bearing upon our subject. In many cases, explicit mention is made of Jesus laying his hands on the sick and suffering (sometimes

with the additional use of some reputedly curative or alleviative substance, such as spittle. Is it excluded that he sometimes used a healing oil? Compare Mk 6:5 and 6:3); or he blessed by laying on of hands. Often too, only the word or command is recorded. But, as Coppens points out, it is significant that laying on of hands is mentioned in the so-called "summaries," which concisely state the usual way of acting of Christ, and later, of the apostles (cf. Mk 6:5; 16:18; Lk 4:40; Acts 5:12).

In the gospel narrative, moreover, particularly in Mark and Luke, it is even more apparent than in the Old Testament stories that the laying on of hands can only be properly understood in its religio-sociological context: namely, that it is an instance, the most impressive instance, of communicating numen, spirit, power, by bodily touch. Mark and Luke have almost an embarrassing number of incidents in which this seemingly magical transfer of numen is spoken of and taken for granted. People crowded around Jesus eager to touch him, or even the tassel of his cloak, for *virtus ex illo exibat*. In the Greek text, *haptomai* is as operative a word as *epitithemi*—and is used, curiously, almost exactly the same number of times.

The laying on of hands is, then, a formalized, ritualized, more declarative instance of Jesus' healing and blessing touch (or of the latter's equivalent or substitute). It more clearly illustrates that the healing or blessing is at the deliberate initiative of him who thus lays on his hands: that it is a power-filled and compassionate touching. It is spirit-filled. Jesus communicates of the spirit that is in him to others, above all, if they have shown themselves receptive to it by their faith.

Nor is the laying on of hands absent in the eucharistic blessing. Authors remind us that taking the bread in his hand, or placing his hand on it, was a normal part of the Jewish father's manner of blessing. And as a matter of fact, in each of the four accounts of institution, it is explicitly said that Jesus *took* the bread, *took* the cup, and gave thanks. For good measure, the verbs *taking* and *blessing* (or giving thanks) are likewise found as correlative terms in all five accounts of the miracle of multiplication of loaves and fishes, as well as in the Emmaus story.

After Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit, we still find in Acts the same mentality about power or numen communication in instances of healing by laying on of hands. But a major change in

understanding is occurring. The spirit that is communicated is recognized to be none other than the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, whom Jesus had promised to send them.

Luke 24:50 can likely be viewed as the transitional or introductory statement of this new and all-important insight. Before ascending into heaven, Jesus "lifting up his hands blessed them." Since it follows closely upon Jesus' promise of the mission of the Holy Spirit, this equivalent laying on of hands in blessing probably has some connection with the subsequent apostolic rite of giving the Holy Spirit by laying on of hands: that is, the apostles after Pentecost continue to do for others what and as Christ had done for them.

True, the Spirit blows where he wills. So we find, for instance, the Holy Spirit descending upon Cornelius and his household without any (should we say) sacramental rite (Acts 10:44ff.). There are multiple charismatic gifts. But in the more "normal" course of events, we find the laying on of hands, now explicitly understood as the conferral of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and especially the gift that is the Holy Spirit himself, employed by the apostles and the infant Church in the basic and community or church-formative rites of initiation and of appointment or ordination to positions of church leadership and ministry.

For the former, the evidence is beyond dispute. The same Holy Spirit whom they themselves had received at Pentecost is conferred by Peter and John to the disciples baptized by Philip in Samaria (Acts 8:15-17); and he is conferred by Paul's laying on of hands at Ephesus (Acts 19:2-6).

In the case of appointment or ordination to leadership and ministry (Acts 6:6; 13:1-3; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6; and perhaps 1 Tim 5:22), the cumulative and contextual evidence, according to many authors, argues to the same conclusion.

What strikes us as most remarkable, however, is the fact that the rite of conferring the Holy Spirit which Jesus himself employed on the evening of resurrection Sunday, that of *breathing* on his disciples (John 20:22), is *not* taken up by the apostles, as one would certainly have expected. Instead, they used the laying on of hands. And the early Church too, as far as we know, followed their example. However one may wish to interpret this curious fact, it does seem to bear out what we have been proposing.

However, the big question to be asked, for the details of which much research still needs to be done, is the when and wherefore of the Church in both East and West relinquishing in the course of the centuries this centrality of the sacramental laying on of hands understood as the conferral of the Holy Spirit.

We take for granted, for instance, that the Eastern Church preserved the pneumatological dimension in its theology of the Church and of her sacramental life. Yet it was in the East that the laying on of hands in Confirmation first gave way to an anointing—although this was of course another legitimate, because biblical, sign of the Spirit's action. The East's uninterrupted emphasis on the Holy Spirit, no matter what the changes in its rites, derived in no small part from its continued intimate association of the Spirit with the eucharistic event which, as we have seen earlier, effected the transformation of the assembly into "the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit." This outlook received reinforcement through the introduction of the *zeon*, the hot water symbolizing the Spirit which in the Byzantine liturgies is poured into the chalice shortly before Communion. And the East had its famous and permanently influential treatise on the Holy Spirit by Basil—for whose Western counterpart we unfortunately seek in vain.

In the West, the laying on of hands became in some instances a peripheral rite, prominent, for instance, in the baptismal catechumenate. Or a rite such as the anointing, instead of being understood in its original relation to the laying on of hands and the Spirit, came to be interpreted independently of both Spirit and laying on of hands, simply as a sign of healing or of strength from God.

It is a complex, and still in large measure an unclear story. And it would be a fascinating undertaking to search out the historical interdependence of the crowding out of laying on of hands, and the increasing neglect of the Spirit Sanctifier. Which was cause, and which was effect? There were, moreover, quite paradoxical developments. One would have expected, for example, that the laying on of hands in ordination would most easily remain intact and unchallenged. Yet we know that Thomas Aquinas considered the so-called "handing over of the instruments" as the matter of the sacrament; and that it wasn't until our own time, until Pope Pius XII in fact, that the primacy of the laying on of hands in ordination was restored. Penance for many centuries was

widely known as "the laying on of hands *ad paenitentiam*." It was this sacrament, seemingly, that preserved the ancient rite in its full pneumatological significance most faithfully. When this too waned, Charles Borromeo tried to restore the penitential laying on of hands to prominence. Unfortunately it was also Borromeo who introduced the confessional box and its grill for female penitents—to avoid scandal, we are told. Well, he could hardly hope to have it both ways; and we know which initiative won out.

Vatican II officially sanctioned some of the important new theological insights which the liturgical movement of the previous forty years had stimulated: the ecclesial dimensions of the sacraments, sacraments as signs of faith, and above all, the realization that sacraments are not primarily things, but acts, the saving actions of Christ in the present. It was, I am convinced, one of history's most radical and momentous reorientations of sacramental thought. Schillebeeckx' *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, published in the early sixties, had already brought it into wide currency.

But something has been happening as a result of the actual reforms of the sacramental rites in our post-Vatican II decade that is of equal moment and, ecumenically speaking, is of even greater importance. Throughout the Council, members as well as guest observers from the East had kept on insisting that the West has consistently slighted the role of the Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation. Few cared to dispute the charge; and an ever-increasingly serious effort was as a consequence made, in drawing up the documents, to make amends. But overall, this resulted in not much more than a more frequent mentioning of the Spirit. And painting initial letters is not the same as altering the text.

The most striking feature of the reforms of the sacramental rites has been, not their pruning of now useless and actually obstructive ceremonial and textual accretions of the centuries in order to bring the essentials into more meaningful relief, nor even their rather successful effort to elicit a more intelligent participation of the faithful. This was expected, and had been demanded by the Council. The most striking and far-reaching reform has been to bring the Holy Spirit into the center, to the heart of the sacramental happening, thereby fulfilling the *mens* of the Council, even if this was not voiced *in littera*. It was done

by either restoring or, as the case may be, highlighting the laying on of hands in the sacramental rites and also in blessings; *and* by making unmistakably clear in the accompanying documentation its intent to renew or strengthen the pneumatological understanding of the sacred rites. In a very real sense, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy helped us to rediscover Christ; the post-conciliar liturgical reforms will help us to rediscover the Holy Spirit.

It would require a separate paper to point out all the instances in the reformed rites where this pneumatological reorientation occurs and to substantiate their significance by comparison with the previous rites and prayers. I must take for granted your acquaintance with the documents. Nor can it be said that the restoration of the laying on of hands has been successfully accomplished in every instance: the sad compromise in Confirmation comes to mind. But at least an auspicious beginning has been made. The epicletic laying on of hands and prayers in the eucharistic rite are probably the most significant single instance. Of this reform, Yves Congar is reported to have said that it will prove the most important ecumenical step resulting directly from Vatican II.

He was thinking, no doubt, of the Eastern Churches. But is it fanciful on my part to cite also the ecumenical import of the laying on of hands in terms of our presently almost non-existent relations with the historical Pentecostal and other evangelistic bodies? It does seem bittersweet irony that these professedly anti-liturgical or aliturgical Christian groups have *instinctu Spiritus* brought to the fore again the primitively most basic liturgical rite: the laying on of hands, which is the conferral of the Spirit.

For ourselves, the restoration of the laying on of hands, besides centering attention on the Spirit, should also go far to eliminate our historically disastrous tendency to interpret the sacramental action in a mechanistic, impersonal fashion. Allow me to quote from an essay by one of my seminar students:

The laying on of hands is a rite of touch. It demands physical closeness and communication in the deepest sense. On the part of the minister, it implies nurturing care, gentleness, affection, protection, communication of strength. On the part of the receiver, it implies openness, acceptance, confidence, a feeling of belonging, of strengthening, of well-being. To allow another person to touch you

in any way is an act of openness and acceptance—in this case, to the action of the Spirit. Thus the gesture is admirably suited to express and actualize the coming and presence of the Holy Spirit. The Church is a community which 'touches' others.

In conclusion, I dare, in the light of my thesis, to propose a descriptive definition of sacraments: sacraments are the chief Christ-derived visible signs by which he continues to send us his Spirit for the upbuilding of the Church into a community of faith and love, to the glory of the Father.

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