

“YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST”—“PRAYING WITH OPEN HANDS”—Fr. Steve Lape

It’s one of the most recognizable of priestly actions at Mass: the extending of the arms with open hands while praying to God on behalf of the people. The people of the congregation do not do it, since the priest does this action while acting as Christ’s representative during the Mass, serving “in persona Christi” (in the person of Christ) for the benefit of those gathered in worship in this Sacramental celebration. This extending of arms with open hands is known as the “orans” position (the Latin word for “praying.”) It’s an action that goes back several thousand years—not only something done by Catholic priests, but also done by many other religious leaders (Protestants, Jews, ancient Greeks, ancient Romans, other pagan cultures, etc.)

What does it mean? Here are 5 ways to see it:

First of all, it has been seen as a gesture that replicates what beggars have often done: extending hands out and open in the hopes of receiving some gift from another. Thus, in doing this in religious rites, the priest or religious leader is begging for divine help of some kind.

Secondly, for Christians, it alludes to Jesus’ dying on the cross, as our Lord had his hands nailed wide open and spread apart by others, although He willingly allowed this to happen out of sacrificial love for us, taking on our sins and having them nailed to the cross with Him as the ultimate sign of God’s mercy.

Thirdly, such extended hands shows a vulnerability in love, showing a willingness to be unprotected by having our hands away from covering our hearts. Whenever we truly love someone, there’s always the risk that this love will be betrayed, as Judas did to Jesus in the Gospels. If we aren’t willing

to expose our hearts to someone and take such a risk, then we are not fully giving ourselves to another. True love is never supposed to be guarded love.

Fourthly, extended hands demonstrate an openness to God, expressing a desire for God to gift us with whatever God knows is appropriate for us at a given time in a certain place with whatever need God chooses to try to fulfill in our lives. I say “try” because it’s up to us to receive such a gift, willingly and gratefully.

Finally, open hands with extended arms is a sign of blessing, a dispensing of gifts to others. Consider Luke 24:50-51, as the Risen Jesus was about to ascend to His heavenly Father: “Then He led (his chosen disciples) out as far as Bethany, raised his hands, and blessed them. As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven.” So, as Jesus did to His earliest disciples, the priest, serving as Christ’s representative, dispenses spiritual gifts from God the Father upon those under his care.

