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Letters to the Editor

Pope Francis' last dilemma: To kiss or not to kiss the Piscatory Ring?

To the Editor:

Few weeks ago, during his visit to a Catholic shrine in Loreto, Italy, Pope Francis repeatedly withdrew his right hand to people who were bowing trying to kiss his ring. The ritual of the Pope's ring kiss is very ancient and deeply rooted in Catholic tradition. The main international newspapers have taken up the news, sparking a debate between conservative and progressive Catholics. "To kiss the ring on the Pope's hand or not to—that is the question," as the *Guardian* reported.¹

The response to the question why the Pope refused the ring kiss was reported on the main newspapers. The Vatican spokesman, urged by journalists, reported that the Pope does it for hygiene, because he does not want germs to be scattered. This is not for himself, but to prevent the faithful from infecting each other, especially when there are long queues.²

Therefore, it is not an attempt to break with the Catholic tradition, but only the application of a correct sanitary and hygienic standard.

The spread of pathogens by hands is a serious global health problem. The World Health Organization (WHO) focused its attention on this argument and published the *WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care*.³

As reported by the WHO document, several studies have shown that skin underneath rings are more heavily colonized than comparable areas of skin on fingers without rings. Although these data have to be further supported, WHO states "The consensus recommendation is to strongly discourage the wearing of rings or other jewelry during health care. If religious or cultural influences strongly condition the attitude, the wearing of a simple wedding ring (band) during routine care may be acceptable, but in high-risk settings, such as the operating theatre, all rings or other jewelry should be removed."⁴

Interestingly, in WHO guidelines, there is a short chapter on "Religious and cultural aspects of hand hygiene."⁵ Two indications for hand hygiene emerged in Christianity (Catholic rite): one ritual cleansing before the consecration of bread and wine, and one hygienic cleansing after handling Holy oil.⁵

The spread of pathogens during religious rites is a problem common among all religions. Comparable risks may be reported for kissing icons for Orthodox worshipers, especially during flu and/or gastrointestinal epidemics.

To reduce these risks, that is, in Paris, during the presentation of the relics of the Passion of the Christ, the friars disinfect with hydro-alcoholic solution between worshipers kissing the relics.

In conclusion, we think that Pope Francis has 2 possible solutions: to abolish the Piscatory Ring's kiss, safeguarding the hygiene; or to save both rite and hygiene. In the last case, he could use a hydro-alcoholic solution between each kiss (because of the amount of people he receives, it could be an uncomfortable solution); alternatively he could ask to avoid the direct contact between the people's lips and the ring, a kind of fake-kiss.

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Conflicts of interest: None to report.

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