

# Our Sacramental Life

## Talks on the Sacraments. Part 3: Holy Communion (the Food of Souls); the Mass.

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### THE FOOD OF OUR SOULS.

THE sacraments, as we know, are outward signs; and they give the grace which they signify. The Blessed Eucharist is received under the outward form of eating and drinking, and this signifies that the effect produced in our souls is like that produced in our bodies and in our natural life by the food and drink which we take. Through the sacrament of Baptism, we received supernatural life. Confirmation ratified the consecration given to our souls in Baptism, brought us into closer union with God, and called us to higher responsibilities in the supernatural order. Now every living being needs food, and the more active it is the more its energy needs to be restored and maintained by regular and suitable nourishment. This is none the less true of the supernatural life of the soul. We must grow in grace; we must have strength to practise high and difficult virtues; we must be able to resist those evil influences which are within us and all around us; and we must counteract what we may call the ordinary wear and tear to which we are subject — even spiritually — so long as we are on trial in this world.

We may, in a true sense, say that all sanctifying grace which we receive from God is food for our souls, because, by it our souls are strengthened and our supernatural life intensified. But God has given us one particular sacrament which is in a special sense the food of our souls, and the food which we receive in this sacrament is really and truly God Himself. Suppose that we had been allowed to plan for ourselves, and arrange the spiritual helps that were to be given to us to enable us to lead a holy life. Could we ever have dreamt that it would be possible for us to have our souls nourished by the very substance of Jesus Christ Himself? And even if the possibility of such a thing had crossed our minds, could we have dared to hope or expect that God would give us such a gift? Even though His infinite goodness and love were known to us, could we have imagined that God, Who had taken our nature in order to be more closely united with us, would go still further and give Himself to each of us, individually, under the appearance of corporal food?

### DO WE REALISE?

Let us imagine that we are telling this truth to someone who has never heard it before, a visitor — let us suppose — from another world. We first explain the conditions of our life on earth — our dependence on God, the absolute necessity of serving Him, and thus saving our souls, the difficulties, temptations, and dangers, to which we are exposed. The picture would, no doubt, appear a gloomy one, and our visitor might well judge our task to be a difficult one. But then we might go on to tell how it was possible for each Catholic to receive God Himself — Jesus Christ, true God and true Man — under the form of bodily food, and thus bring about a marvellously close

union between God and his soul; and this, not once only, but over and over again — even daily. This hypothetical stranger might well say, "What, then, have you to complain of? If God Himself will come and make Himself one with you like that; if, weak and foolish as you may be, you can bring the strength and wisdom of God into your souls, surely that must make a great difference in your lives, and compensate for all its difficulties." Have we fully realised this truth yet?

We read that the prophet Elias (Elijah) once fled into the wilderness from the wicked Jezebel. After travelling for a day, he threw himself down to die, and fell asleep under a juniper tree. While he slept an angel called him and said, "Arise and eat." He looked and saw a hearth cake and a vessel of water. He ate and drank, and fell asleep again. A second time the angel called him and said, "Arise and eat, for you have still a long way to go." He ate and drank the second time, and then, we are told, "he walked in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights till he reached the mountain of God, Horeb." (See 1 Kings 19:8. It is called 3 Kings in the Vulgate.) We are all travelling through the wilderness of this world to an eternal home. Lest we faint of hunger, God has provided us with food far more wonderful than that which sustained the courage and strength of the prophet till he reached the mountain of God.

We have, therefore, a spiritual food, than which no more perfect can be imagined, and no more perfect is possible. And this food is available for all. There are many people in the world, unfortunately, who cannot always get good food for their bodies, or cannot get enough; but no one need go hungry for this food of the soul. Perhaps we have not realised all that God has done for us in giving us this sacrament. It may be that, just because we have always known of the gift of the Blessed Eucharist, having been familiar with it since childhood, we have come to take it too much for granted, and consequently do not appreciate either God's Incomprehensible Goodness in giving us this sacrament or the incalculable value it is to us.

#### WE MUST EAT TO LIVE.

What does food do for us? It first of all keeps us alive. Deprive a living thing of food and it soon dies. When Our Lord first spoke of the Blessed Eucharist, He spoke of it as food and as giving life to the soul. "The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. . . . I am the bread of life. He that comes to Me shall not hunger, and he that believes in Me shall never thirst. . . . I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate manna in the desert, and they are dead. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, that whoever eats of it may not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he shall live for ever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, for the life of the world. . . . Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you. He that eats My flesh and drinks My blood has everlasting life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. . . . As the living Father sent Me and I live by the Father, so he that eats Me shall also live by Me. . . . He that eats this bread shall live for ever." (Saint John 6:33-59). We see how Our Lord insists on the necessity of eating this divine food if our supernatural life is to be maintained. As supernatural life is so much more precious to us than our natural life, we should be all the more careful that our souls are not deprived of the nourishment which God in His goodness has provided for them.

Food also makes us grow, so long as we have not attained our full natural size. In the same way, the Blessed Eucharist makes our souls grow in virtue. But while natural growth comes to an end when we reach a certain age, spiritual growth, fostered by the Blessed Sacrament, can — and should —

go on as long as life lasts. Every Holy Communion we receive should help us to grow in supernatural virtue and in likeness to Jesus Christ, and thus make us more dear to God. As this growth will cease when our life on earth comes to an end, we should be greedy (we might almost say) to receive this sacred food as often as we possibly can.

#### HEALTH AND PROTECTION AGAINST DISEASE.

Food, if it is good and abundant enough, makes us robust and healthy. Doctors tell us that a suitable and sufficient diet is the chief factor in securing good health. The Blessed Eucharist can do for our souls more than the most perfect natural food can do for our bodies. No one particular kind of natural food can be said to provide all that the body needs. But all the needs of our souls are fully provided for in this divine food which has been granted to us. Faith, hope, and charity, and all the other virtues whose presence shows that the soul is in a healthy state, are fostered and strengthened by reception of the Blessed Eucharist. Through this sacrament, we obtain the spiritual vigour which makes us able to practise difficult virtues and work hard in God's service. Obstacles that would ordinarily prove insurmountable become almost negligible for one who is well nourished with the "bread of the strong" which Christ provides at His banquet-table.

Good health carries with it the power to resist disease. Those who are ill-fed or run-down are the first to fall victims in an epidemic. The same thing happens to the soul. We are always liable to be infected by sin, by false principles, by wrong ideas, and by bad example; and bad habits easily take hold of us. But if our spiritual life is vigorous and healthy, we are in less danger. That is why the Blessed Eucharist is the best protection against all those spiritual maladies to which we are subject. It is a real tonic for the soul, and is of particular value in strengthening and safeguarding those who are exposed to special difficulties or temptations.

In every part of our body, there is constant waste going on, and this has to be made good by the food which we eat. Through the processes of digestion, food is changed into our living substance, and thus the different parts of our organism receive what is necessary for their renewal. In this respect, the analogy between the Blessed Eucharist and our natural food is not exact. The various substances that make up our ordinary food are assimilated by us and thus changed into something different, and something of a higher kind. But we do not, of course, change Jesus Christ; rather does He change us into something better than we were, making us more like Himself by communicating to us some share in His divine life and virtues.

#### THE SACRAMENT OF JOY.

Another effect of good food is that it produces cheerfulness and a general feeling of well-being, which contribute a great deal to our happiness in life. You do not expect one who is habitually hungry or under-fed to be very bright and happy. Soldiers without rations are not likely to have the courage that wins battles. The spirit of cheerfulness and joy is very necessary in the spiritual life also. Without it, we shall not be able to continue for long practising virtues that are hard for human nature, and showing energy and generosity in God's service. "A merry heart goes all the way, your sad tires in a mile," as Shakespeare says. But there is nothing which can so comfort and strengthen the heart and inspire such supernatural courage and joy, as the Blessed Sacrament.

Through intimate association with Jesus Christ which Holy Communion brings, we gain a taste for spiritual things and an appreciation of the supernatural, which in turn enable us to resist the fascination of what is purely natural and earthly. "O sacrum convivium," "O Sacred banquet," are words which the Church uses about the Blessed Eucharist, and this banquet of Jesus Christ, while

giving nourishment to our souls, also fills us with the spirit of cheerfulness, which makes it easy for us to bear our burdens gladly and serve God joyfully.

It is obvious that the Blessed Eucharist brings us into closest union with Jesus Christ, God and Man. The union we are thinking of is not the mere physical union, which lasts only a short time after we have received Holy Communion, but a spiritual, sacramental union between our souls and Jesus Christ, which lasts, and grows stronger and more intimate, every time we come to the Holy Table. It is this union which produces what is the most notable effect of this sacrament, an increase of love of Jesus Christ. There is nothing which can so powerfully help us to know and love Our Lord as to receive Him frequently and devoutly in Holy Communion. The love which is thus developed is no mere love of sentiment or feeling, but that true love which impels us to follow in the footsteps of our Master and work generously for the spread of His Kingdom.

#### ONCE MORE, DO WE REALISE?

If, therefore, we want our lives to be holy, happy, and truly successful, we have only to make good use of the wonderful food which Jesus Christ has provided for us. To starve through lack of food is a sad fate. But sadder still is to starve in the midst of plenty. While, therefore, we must sympathise with those who — through no fault of their own — are outside the true Fold and are thus deprived of this heavenly food, we must at the same time make sure that we ourselves appreciate it, as we should. Since the beginning of the reign of Pope [Saint] Pius X, the Church has been trying to re-establish among her children the practice of daily Communion, where it is possible. For a great many, of course, this is not possible; but once we even begin to realise the sublime nature of the gift, and the marvellous love and goodness of Him who has given it to us, the only answer we can give to the question, "How often should I receive Holy Communion?" is, "As often as I possibly can." What would non-Catholics think of our conduct if, believing what we do about the Blessed Eucharist, we were to show ourselves indifferent to this wonderful gift, and to the love which prompted it? And how foolish we should be, from the point of view of our own interests if through negligence, we were to deny ourselves the help and grace which this sacrament can give, and which we so badly need!

#### A DIFFICULTY.

But here a difficulty might present itself. If all that we have said about the value of sacrament is true (and how could a Catholic deny it?), how does it come about that, in spite of frequent Communions, we do not see the manifest effects in our lives? There are two answers to be given. First, the effects produced may be very real and very noteworthy without our being able always to recognise them. Spiritual results are not always easy to estimate, and a wise director must be consulted before we decide that our Holy Communions are not doing us any good. But if it is true that we are not receiving from frequent Communion all the benefit that we should receive, we must bear in mind that the fault is not in the food, but in the one that eats it. There is a striking passage early in the sixth chapter of Saint Mark's Gospel. Our Lord had gone, in the course of His public life, on a visit to Nazareth. We may be sure that He had a special affection for this town and for its people, among whom He had lived for so many years. We should have expected that He would work His greatest miracles here. But He did not. Saint Mark makes the extraordinary statement that "He could not do any miracles there, only that He cured a few that were sick." Why could He not work miracles in Nazareth, as elsewhere? Was He not all-powerful? The answer is given immediately in the sentence that follows, "He wondered because of their unbelief."

## THE ANSWER.

If, then, Jesus comes to us frequently, and yet there are no miracles of grace worked in our souls, we have to see whether in our case, too, the explanation is not that there is something wanting in our dispositions. Besides frequent Communion, we must insist on fervent Communions. The mere physical presence of Jesus Christ within us is not sufficient to sanctify us. Even a sinner can receive Holy Communion and profit nothing by it; instead, in the strong words of Saint Paul, he "eats judgment of condemnation." What benefits us is the sacramental union between our souls and Jesus Christ, and this is the closer and the more productive of results, the more perfect are our dispositions. We should, therefore, when we come to Holy Communion, make a real effort to excite within us a vivid faith, a deep humility, a strong trust, and an earnest desire. The number of those who receive this sacrament is great, but very different are the results which are produced in different souls. Why is that? The sacrament is the same for all, and the power and love of Christ can never be exhausted; but the dispositions of the recipients vary very much, and with the dispositions the graces which the sacrament confers. (Think of approaching the Sacrament as you would approach a strong tryst with your Beloved.)

We read in the Gospels that Our Lord was once making His way through a great crowd which had gathered to hear and see Him. A woman who was there, and who had been afflicted with an ailment for twelve years, spending all her money on doctors without result, said to herself that if she could only get close and touch His cloak she would be healed. She made her way through the crowd and as He passed, stretched out her hand and touched the hem of His cloak; and instantly she was cured. Our Lord turned and said, "Who is it that touched Me?" Peter and others replied, "What do You mean by that, Lord? See, the crowd is pressing close about You on all sides." But Jesus said, "Someone has touched Me, for I feel that power has gone out from Me." It was true that many were touching Our Lord; but one woman touched Him with firm faith and earnest desire, and at once, the divine power produced effects in her which none of the others experienced. It is with the same faith and desire that we must try to receive Our Lord when He comes to us in Holy Communion. Then we, too, shall experience the effects of His power in our souls.

## FREQUENT COMMUNION AT SCHOOL.

A word of special warning may be useful for boys and girls in Catholic boarding-schools. For them, frequent and daily Communion is easy; they have to make, ordinarily, no particular effort or sacrifice in order to receive Our Lord as often as they wish. This opportunity for frequent Communion is, without doubt, a great blessing. But it also has its dangers. What we can get too easily we may not value highly enough. When it costs us little trouble to receive the sacraments there is danger that we may find ourselves receiving them through routine, just because we have got into the habit of it, and not because of the value which we set upon the sacraments and the positive desire for them which we have. If this happened at school, the result would be, in the first place, that the sacraments would not produce, at a most important period of life, all the fruits that they could produce, because the dispositions of the recipients would be very imperfect; and, furthermore, when school days were past and it was not so easy to receive the sacraments, little effort, perhaps, might be made to keep up frequent Communion. It is important, therefore, that those who, at school, have abundant opportunities of receiving the sacraments should develop a real, personal, and independent appreciation of them for their own sake, and not allow this appreciation to be overgrown by habit and routine.

## PREPARATION AND THANKSGIVING.

It is clear, then, that if we are to profit by our Holy Communions we must be diligent in preparation. We owe this duty, also, out of respect for and gratitude to Jesus Christ. When Our Lord once dined with a Pharisee named Simon, He drew attention to the fact that His host had not given Him any of the signs of respect and courtesy commonly shown to guests. We must take care that we do not merit the same reproach when He comes to us in Holy Communion, and must be ready to show Him all the respect and love of which we are capable. It requires an effort in order to excite within us the dispositions of faith, humility, and desire with which we should receive Holy Communion, but if we think of the dignity and the generosity of the Guest Who is coming to us, surely the effort will not be so hard to make.

Our thanksgiving after Holy Communion we should regard as a sacred duty. It is not right, in ordinary circumstances, to leave the church immediately after a Mass at which we have received Holy Communion. Our first thoughts should be for Our Lord Himself, as we adore Him, thank Him, humble ourselves before Him, renew our loyalty to Him, and make acts of self-surrender. Then we may recall what wonderful results the sacrament is meant to produce in our souls, and excite our desires and our confidence. This time immediately after Holy Communion is very precious, for never in this life shall we have Our Lord closer to us.

But our preparation for Holy Communion and our thanksgiving afterwards should not be confined to a short period immediately before and after the reception of the sacrament. The more we can extend them, the better will be our dispositions and the greater our profit. When going about our ordinary duties, and at our ordinary prayers, we can look forward to our next Holy Communion with sentiments like these: "O Jesus, I am going to receive You tomorrow (or next Sunday, or whatever the day may be). I long to be united to You. I need You. Prepare me to receive You." In the same way, we can look back to our last Communion and try to realise better Our Lord's great love for us, and the graces He has given us, and resolve to do our part to bring about the fulfilment of His promise, "He that eats Me shall live by Me."

## THE ABIDING PRESENCE.

The Blessed Eucharist differs from other sacraments in that the others are passing actions which leave only their effects behind, whereas in the Blessed Eucharist there is something permanent, the abiding presence of Our Lord — Emmanuel, God with us. As God, Jesus Christ is everywhere, but as Man He is in heaven and wherever the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. We believe this, of course, but we must make sure that our belief has an influence on our life and actions. We may sometimes be inclined to envy the shepherds who came and found the Infant God in a stable at Bethlehem, or the people Who lived near the Holy Family in Nazareth, or those who listened to the teaching of Jesus Christ on the hill-slopes and by the Lake of Galilee, or the sick who were carried to Him that He might lay His hands upon them. But we need not envy them. The same Jesus Christ lives with us, hidden indeed, but really present — with the same loving heart and the same divine power to bless and help. Should our faith not impel us to visit the Blessed Sacrament frequently, with love and confidence? Think of how people flocked to Him while He was on earth in visible form. We cannot see Him, of course, as they did, but He has told us Himself that we are all the more blessed on that account, because of the merit which faith brings us.

## SUMMARY.

The excellence of this divine food.

The difference it should make in our lives.

The effects of food.

It maintains life.

It makes us grow.

It gives health and protection against disease.

It makes good the wastage that goes on in our organs.

It promotes a feeling of well-being.

The Blessed Eucharist brings us into closest touch with Jesus Christ, and increases love.

How often should we receive Holy Communion?

A difficulty and its answer.

Frequent Communion at school.

Preparation and thanksgiving.

The abiding presence of Our Lord with us in the Blessed Sacrament.

#### THE ADMINISTRATION OF HOLY COMMUNION.

Holy Communion is an integral part of the sacrifice of the Mass. The priest must consume the Sacred Host and the Precious Blood when offering the sacrifice, and in early times, all those who assisted at Mass partook of the Victim there offered. The normal time for receiving Holy Communion, therefore, is during Mass, and in this way, we share most intimately in the Holy Sacrifice.

[Father Johnston, of course, refers to the rubrics of the Mass as it was celebrated in 1938, which were the rubrics of Saint Pius V. Vatican II and Pope Paul VI have reformed and modified the rubrics somewhat since then.] When Holy Communion is to be distributed during Mass, after the priest has consumed the Precious Blood, the server bows down and recites the Confiteor (I Confess to Almighty God) in the name of those who are to receive the sacrament. The priest then takes the ciborium from the tabernacle and, turning towards the people, says:

May Almighty God have mercy on you, and forgiving you all your sins, lead you to eternal life. Amen.

May mercy, absolution, and remission of your sins be granted you by the almighty and merciful Lord. Amen.

(Then, taking the ciborium and holding up a Host, that it may be seen by all, the priest says:)

Here is (behold) the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world.

Lord, I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof, but only say a word and my soul shall be healed (three times).

(When placing the Host on the tongue of the recipient, the priest says:)

May the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ guard your soul for everlasting life.

(If Holy Communion is not being distributed during Mass, but immediately before or after, or at some other time, the following prayers are added:)

O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received, the memory of His Passion is recalled, the soul is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given us.

You have given them bread from heaven. (Answer) Having in it all kind of delight.

O Lord, hear my prayer. (Answer) And let my cry come to You.

The Lord be with you. (Answer) And with you (your spirit).

Let us pray.

O God, You have given us under a wonderful sacrament a memorial of Your Passion; grant us, we pray, so to venerate the sacred mysteries of Your Body and Blood that we may constantly experience in us the fruit of Your redemption, living and reigning for ever and ever. Amen.

(When the tabernacle door has been closed, the priest gives the following blessing:)

May the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, come down upon you and remain always. Amen.

#### SPIRITUAL COMMUNION.

Besides sacramental Communion, there is what is called "spiritual Communion," which means receiving Holy Communion in desire when it is not possible to receive it actually. A spiritual Communion can be made at Mass when it is not possible to receive sacramentally, when one is visiting the Blessed Sacrament, or at any other time. No particular form of words is required. This may serve as an example: "O Jesus, I believe that You are really present in the Blessed Eucharist; I wish I could now receive You sacramentally; come into my soul and fill it with Your grace." Just as with sacramental Communion, so with spiritual Communion, we profit the more by it the better are the dispositions which we excite within us. Spiritual Communion is a good preparation for sacramental Communion, and an excellent way of carrying on our thanksgiving afterwards. It is a particularly useful practice for those who have few opportunities of sacramental Communion.

#### REQUISITE DISPOSITIONS.

Food cannot benefit the dead, and Holy Communion can be profitably received only by one who is in the state of grace. To receive Holy Communion deliberately in the state of mortal sin is to commit a great sacrilege. Furthermore, if mortal sin has been committed, sacramental confession must precede reception of the Blessed Eucharist; an act of perfect contrition, though restoring sanctifying grace, would not suffice as preparation for Holy Communion.

Nothing whatever in the nature of food or drink must have been taken during the prescribed fast if a person wishes to receive Holy Communion. It does not matter whether it is taken intentionally or unintentionally. This law is to be interpreted strictly, but not in a foolish or scrupulous manner.

Where there is a difference between local time, true solar time and standard time, we may follow whichever we like in estimating midnight. [In 1938, the obligatory fasting time was 'from midnight'. Today the fast is only for one hour. Water is always permitted.]

In certain circumstances, Holy Communion may be received by one who has not kept the fast. Two practical cases are:



1. When Holy Communion is received as Viaticum the law of fast does not bind. It should also be noted that Viaticum may be received by one who has already received Holy Communion in the ordinary way the same day.
2. If a person has been laid-up for a month, and has no certain expectation of speedy recovery, Holy Communion may be received — on the prudent advice of the confessor — once or twice a week, even if medicine (liquid or solid) or liquid food has been taken. [Since Vatican II, these restrictions have been considerably liberalized, and Holy Communion can be administered to the sick and their attendants after only 15 minutes of fasting, or even less if the pastoral situation warrants it.]

#### PART OF THE DECREE ON FREQUENT COMMUNION (December 20th, 1905.)

Frequent and daily Communion, as a thing most earnestly desired by Christ Our Lord and by the Catholic Church, should be open to all the faithful, of whatever rank and condition of life; so that no one who is in the state of grace, and who approaches the Holy Table with a right and devout intention, can lawfully be hindered therefrom.

A right intention consists in this, that he who approaches the Holy Table should do so, not out of routine, or vainglory, or human respect, but for the purpose of pleasing God, of being more closely united with Him by charity, and of seeking this divine remedy for his weaknesses and defects.

Although it is most expedient that those who communicate frequently or daily should be free from venial sins, at least from such as are fully deliberate, and from any affection thereto, nevertheless it is sufficient that they be free from mortal sin, with the purpose of never sinning in future; and if they have this sincere purpose, it is impossible but that daily communicants should gradually free themselves even from venial sins, and from all affection thereto.

But whereas the Sacraments of the New Law, though they take effect of their own intrinsic power, (Father Johnston's footnote: \*The technical expression is, *ex opera operato*) nevertheless produce a greater effect in proportion as the dispositions of the recipient are better, therefore care is to be taken that Holy Communion be preceded by careful preparation, and followed by a suitable thanksgiving, according to each one's strength, circumstances, and duties.

That the practice of frequent and daily Communion may be carried out with greater prudence and more abundant merit, the confessor's advice should be asked. Confessors, however, are to be careful not to dissuade any-one from frequent and daily Communion, provided that he is in the state of grace and approaches with a right intention.

But since it is plain that, by the frequent or daily reception of the Holy Eucharist, union with Christ is fostered, the spiritual life more abundantly sustained, the soul more richly endowed with virtues, and an even surer pledge of everlasting happiness bestowed on the recipient, therefore parish priests, confessors, and preachers, in accordance with the approved teaching of the Roman Catechism, are frequently, and with great zeal, to exhort the faithful to this devout and salutary practice.

#### POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION OR DISCUSSION.

If I were allowed by God to choose food for my soul, could I find anything better than the food He has actually given me?

In what part of the Gospels does Our Lord tell us of the Blessed Eucharist and its effects?

We do not neglect our bodily food. Are we as careful to attend to the nourishment of our souls? Is it more important to have a healthy body or a healthy soul?

There are many virtues hard to practice. Do I think it will make a difference if I often bring Our Lord into close union with my soul in Holy Communion?

Am I really convinced of the value of the Blessed Eucharist to my soul? Do I show it by receiving Holy Communion as often as I can?

"But I don't feel any better when I receive Holy Communion." What have I to say in answer to this objection?

Could I quote from the Gospels examples to show that Our Lord requires certain dispositions in the recipients of His favours?

My preparation and thanksgiving — are they in accord with what I believe about the Blessed Eucharist?

It is often found that many in our congregations who have received Holy Communion leave the church immediately after Mass is over. What do I think of such conduct?

Do I frequently — or ever — make spiritual Communions?

Am I clear about the law of fasting before Holy Communion, and do I know any common exceptions?

The six paragraphs quoted from the Decree on Frequent Communion all provide useful matter for consideration. They give the authoritative teaching of the Church on the subject.

Do I see any connection between the Blessed Eucharist — where the children of God eat the same food at the same table — and the virtue of charity?

I can reflect on the following verse of one of the Eucharistic hymns of Saint Thomas Aquinas. It is a summing up of what Our Lord is to us:

At birth, He gave Himself as our companion,

at table, as our food,

in death, as the price of redemption,

in glory, He gives Himself as reward.

Se nascens dedit socium,

Convalescens in edulium,

Se moriens in pretium,

Se regnans dat in praemium.

The Sacrifice of the Mass.

Note: The Blessed Eucharist is a sacrament; but it is a sacrament which comes to us through the sacrifice of the Mass; and the reception of the Blessed Eucharist is an integral part of that sacrifice. Hence it is, that a talk on the sacrifice of the Mass naturally finds a place among these talks on the Sacraments.

The offering of the sacrifice of the Mass is the most important action which takes place on this earth. Yet this is a fact which often is not recognised. Let us, therefore, make an effort to understand the Mass and its importance.

#### THE NATURE OF SACRIFICE.

A sacrament, as we have seen, is an outward sign which indicates and produces a spiritual effect — namely, the sanctification of souls. A sacrifice is an outward rite which indicates a consecration or dedication of ourselves to God. Sacrifice is the greatest act of worship which men can offer to God. We are bound, as creatures, to make open acknowledgment of God's unique position as Creator, which involves His supreme rights over us and our entire dependence on Him, and to pay Him honour as the one self-existent Being, infinitely perfect and the source of all reality and all good. In sacrifice man takes something that he prizes and surrenders it or makes it over to God, meaning by the surrender and consecration of his gift to symbolise his own consecration to God and thus to acknowledge that man, with everything that he has, belongs entirely to God, and is completely at His disposal, and also to make reparation for offences which he has committed against God.

Footnote: Properly speaking, sacrifice is a public act of external worship, offered by a duly appointed and authorised official, a priest.

We see, therefore, that sacrifice is an act of worship which can be paid to God alone. There is only one God, Creator and Lord of all things, and to Him alone this supreme act of worship can be offered. We can admire and praise creatures; we can ask their help and express gratitude to them; but we offer sacrifice and adoration to God alone.

#### ANCIENT SACRIFICES.

Going back in history, we find that sacrifice has always been offered, even among those who had only an imperfect knowledge of God and of His nature. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, all had temples and altars of sacrifice. As soon as men realised, however imperfectly, the existence and rights of a Supreme Being, at once nature impelled them to offer to this Being a peculiar mark of homage and respect, which took the form of sacrifice. The offering of sacrifice, therefore, is something that is natural to man.

The very first pages of Holy Scripture show us men offering sacrifice. When, later in human history, God had chosen one particular people as the guardian of the revelation which He made to mankind, Sacrifice occupied a most important place in the organised worship of God. Very precise instructions were given by God concerning the sacrifices to be offered by the Jews, the rites which were to accompany them, and the priests who were to offer them.

These sacrifices of the Old Law — oxen, sheep, and goats, and the fruits of the field — were, of course, very imperfect, and far from worthy of the God to Whom they were offered. But they were the best that man could offer, and when they were offered with the right dispositions, God accepted them, partly out of consideration for the good-will of those who offered them, but chiefly because these sacrifices looked forward to and prepared the way for another, a perfect sacrifice, that was to come.

#### A PERFECT SACRIFICE.

A perfect sacrifice! Could this ideal be realised? Could man, with all his limitations and imperfections, ever hope to offer a perfect sacrifice to his Creator? Yet a worthy sacrifice was

needed. Through original sin, the human family had been estranged from God, and had lost the very precious supernatural gifts which He had bestowed. How could that sin be atoned for and the lost heritage regained? Man by himself was powerless to recover what had been lost.

"O the depth of the riches and of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How inscrutable are His judgments, and how untraceable His ways!" (Romans 11:33.) God had a plan by which mankind should be able to offer a perfect sacrifice to God's majesty, and thus make complete reparation for sin and bring about peace between the creature and his Creator.

The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity became Man in order to offer to Almighty God, as high-priest and representative of the human race, a perfect sacrifice, the sacrifice of Himself, the Lamb without spot. He was Man, and therefore could speak and act for us; He was also Son of God, and therefore all His actions were supremely acceptable to His Father. His sacrifice was an absolutely perfect sacrifice, and of infinite value, because the priest who offered it was God as well as Man, and because the Victim offered was divine.

#### OUR SACRIFICE.

Through that perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary atonement was made for the sin of mankind, peace was restored between God and man, the treasures of divine grace were opened to us, and we obtained a right to eternal life with Jesus Christ in the kingdom of His Father. Our Lord might have wished His sacrifice to end there (for nothing could be added to that perfect sacrifice), and leave us the memory of it, together with the graces it had won for us. But, in His great love for us, He determined to make it possible for His children throughout all time to associate themselves in the most intimate way with the great sacrifice of redemption. And so, having made Himself a Victim on the Cross, it was His plan to remain a Victim always, and to continue to offer Himself in sacrifice every day through the priests of His Church, to whom He gave the power of doing what He, the great high-priest, had done.

#### THE MASS AND CALVARY.

It was at the Last Supper that this sacrifice of the New Law was instituted. There Jesus Christ changed bread and wine into His body and blood, using expressions that were associated with the offering of sacrifice: "This is My body which is given for you," and "This is My blood of the New Covenant which is poured out for you for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28; Luke 22:19). Thus, He looked forward to the actual shedding of His blood, which was to take place next day, and made then, in anticipation, the bloodless offering of the Victim which would be immolated on the Cross. At the same time, He charged His Apostles to do what He had done — that is, to make the same offering in the same way, in memory of Him. In obedience to that command, the sacrifice of the Mass is offered daily on our altars, and will be offered without cessation till the end of time. From this, it will be clear that the Mass is not a different sacrifice from that of the Supper and Calvary. Just as that offering at the Last Supper of the Victim to be immolated next day made one sacrifice with Calvary, so our offering of the same Victim at Mass, in the same way as Christ offered and at His command, makes one sacrifice with Calvary. The Mass presupposes the immolation on the Cross, and as a sacrifice would be meaningless and profitless without it.

For the same reason, there is no question of adding anything to the sacrifice of Calvary; that would be both unnecessary and impossible. But Our Lord has put it in our power to offer this same sacrifice again and again, by remaining always our Victim, and being really present on our altars as a Victim, in order that we might be able to get closer to our Redeemer and share more fully in the

merits of redemption. Just as there is only one sun, but it must shine every day, so there is only one sacrifice of redemption, but that we offer and make our own every day.

#### THE MEANING OF THE MASS.

The first thing, then, about the Mass which we have to realise and keep clearly before us is that it is a sacrifice, and consequently the greatest and holiest act of religion which we could perform. We must guard against the mistake of looking upon it merely as a devotional exercise, as a set of prayers, or even as an opportunity for adoring and honouring Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. This would be to misunderstand its real meaning and value. The mention of sacrifice sends some people's minds back immediately to the Old Testament, as if sacrifices belonged only to it and came to an end with it. Those sacrifices were only types and promises; we have the great reality to which they were leading. If someone stopped me on the way to Mass and asked me, what I was going to do, the right answer would be, "I am going to offer sacrifice to God."

Even a sympathetic Protestant writer (Augustine Birrell) was struck by the grandeur and helpfulness of this doctrine. "If," he once wrote, "the Incarnation be indeed the one divine event to which the whole creation moves, the miracle of the altar may well seem its restful shadow cast over a dry and thirsty land for the help of man, who is apt to be discouraged if perpetually told that everything really important and interesting happened, once for all, long ago, in a chill historic past."

Secondly, the sacrifice which we offer is the one great sacrifice by which Christ redeemed us. We could not all be on Calvary when Christ died for us (and perhaps it is as well that we were not there, for most of those present were there to scoff), but we can all be at Mass — and not once but many times. When we are at Mass, it is just the same, in reality, as if we were kneeling beneath the Cross on which Christ died for us. The surroundings are different; the reality is the same. The same Victim is being offered to God, and the same great Priest is offering the sacrifice through the hands of the Church and of the human priest, whom He has appointed to carry on His work in His name. We have, therefore, in the holy sacrifice of the Mass a treasure which we could never exhaust, and one whose value, in spite of all our efforts, we shall never fully appreciate.

#### THE FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH.

This wonderful sacrifice of the New Law had been foretold long before. Malachy, the last of the prophets, about 400 years before the birth of Christ, had reproached the Jewish people, in God's name, for their ingratitude and infidelity, and their priests for negligence in offering the prescribed sacrifices. He foretold that a new sacrifice, a bloodless oblation, would be offered to God among the Gentiles (that is, outside the Jewish race), in every part of the world, from the rising to the setting of the sun (Mal. 1:11). The sacrifice of the Mass is the fulfilment of that prophecy.

We could at this point turn to the early Christian writers and find evidence that the sacrifice of the Mass was the chief act of worship of the Church from the very beginning. We could, as in the case of the doctrine of the Real Presence, point to the fact that the Nestorians and Monophysites, for example, who left the Church in the first half of the fifth century, hold the same doctrine about the Mass as the Catholic Church. But once more, I want to insist — for it is a point of supreme importance — that the ordinary Christian cannot be expected to be able to weigh arguments from early Church history or be a learned Scripture scholar. If, in order to find the truth which Christ taught, everyone had to decide for himself the correct interpretation of Scripture texts, and investigate such questions as the history of the Monophysites and Nestorians, most of us would have to reconcile ourselves to remaining in ignorance.

Why is there so much confusion in the religious world today? Simply because people have been deceived by the introduction of the false principle of private judgment. God's plan for teaching us the truth is different. He established a Church to which He gave the commission, "Teach all nations to observe the things which I have commanded"; and this commission was to hold good till the end of the world. Since Christ was God, and able to do what He promised, you may be sure that you will find His Church today speaking with one voice and with authority, and conveying to us the clear, definite, and unchanging truth which Christ taught. Therefore, it is on the teaching of Christ's Church that we chiefly rely when we believe that the Saviour of the world at the Last Supper instituted the Mass as the sacrifice of the New Law.

#### WHY SACRIFICE IS OFFERED.

Sacrifice is offered for four main ends: to adore and praise God, to thank Him for His infinite goodness, to make satisfaction for our sins, and to obtain from God all that we need. As creatures, our first duty is to adore and reverence God, our Creator. But since no effort of ours could ever show the honour and reverence which are really due to the Divine Majesty, Jesus Christ, our Saviour, comes to our assistance in the holy sacrifice of the Mass. Every act of worship He offers is infinitely pleasing to His Father; and thus in the Mass we have the means of honouring God as He deserves to be honoured, when we offer to Him in sacrifice a Victim fully worthy of His acceptance.

We have also to thank God for all His goodness and mercy. But how can we possibly pay the debt of gratitude which we owe? Our weakness and poverty are again an obstacle. But in the Mass, Jesus Christ offers to God, and we offer a gift, that is precious enough to pay all our debt. It is, of course, through God's own bounty that we are able to offer a gift,\* but yet He takes what Christ has enabled us to offer as coming from us.

Footnote on 'gift': \*Compare the prayer which immediately follows the Consecration at Mass: "We offer to Your Supreme (Glorious) Majesty, of Your own gift and granting, (this) a pure Victim, (this) a holy Victim, (this) an unspotted (spotless) Victim. . . ."

Again, we have insulted and dishonoured God by disobedience and sin. The distance between Creator and creature, which magnifies the enormity of the sin, at the same time prevents us making due reparation. Nothing we could do would make adequate satisfaction to God for our wickedness and ingratitude. Once more Jesus Christ has come to our help. He has always done His Father's will most perfectly, and has no sin of His own to atone for; and in the Mass He continues the offering of Himself, begun in His earthly life, as a Victim of reparation for our sins. He asks His Father, out of regard for the perfect obedience and submission which He always showed, to pardon us all our offences. We all have, indeed, much to atone for, and much reparation to make before we could be worthy to be admitted to the presence of God; but in the sacrifice of the Mass we can rejoice in having the opportunity of making complete satisfaction to God for all our misdeeds.

We depend on the bounty of God, and must look to Him for all those gifts and graces which we so badly need. But we have, at the same time, little claim on God's goodness, since we have been ungrateful in the past and have misused many of God's gifts. But, again, in our daily sacrifice Jesus Christ takes our place and pleads for us. Though our prayers might well be ineffectual on account of our unworthiness, anything He asks will be granted. And on our altars He is at once Priest and Victim, "always living to make intercession for us" (Hebrews 7:25). The Mass is, indeed, a treasure, and an inexhaustible treasure. There is no limit to the graces we may receive through it if we offer

our sacrifice with the right dispositions, remembering what Jesus Christ is doing for us on the altar, and uniting our will and intention with His.

#### MASS AND HOLY COMMUNION.

Holy Communion is an integral part of the sacrifice of the Mass. In the Old Law, when the sacrifice was of the kind called a peace-offering, those who offered the sacrifice always ate part of the victim. In this way, they were identified more closely with the victim and became guests, so to speak, at God's table. It might be thought that in our great sacrifice such a thing would be impossible: But, though the Victim which we offer is such a holy one, we, too, are allowed, when we offer sacrifice, to approach the altar and partake of the Victim. In this way we share more fully in the sacrifice, identify ourselves more closely with the Victim offered, and are brought into closer union with God. That is why it is the wish of the Church that, when possible, we should receive Holy Communion when we hear Mass. And then, when we go away from Mass after receiving Holy Communion, we should remember that, as we have been not merely offerers of this great sacrifice along with Jesus Christ, but also victims, in a sense, with Him, our lives are, therefore, consecrated in a new way to God and to His glory. Through Mass and Holy Communion, we are drawn into closer fellowship with Jesus Christ — become more identified with Him; and it is for this that God has created us.

#### OBLIGATION OF HEARING MASS.

When we understand the nature of the sacrifice of the Mass, we can see why the Church imposes on Catholics as one of their chief obligations attendance at Mass on Sundays and Holydays. Let us suppose that a king took pity on a section of his people that gained a precarious living in a barren region of his dominions and transferred them to a fruitful island that had formed a part of the royal domains. He appointed his son their prince, and gave them their lands free. But each year, on the appointed day, they were to assemble, and through their prince do homage to the king and present a gift in token of their indebtedness. If any deliberately stayed away from this assembly, it would be taken as a refusal to acknowledge the king's authority and show the gratitude due to his generosity. So it is with Sunday Mass. We owe more honour and gratitude to God than we could tell. The Church bids us come together each Sunday and offer to the infinitely great and good God, through His Son, the homage of sacrifice. To be absent through our own fault is not only to disobey the Church but to fail in our chief duty of reverence and gratitude to our Creator.

#### WEEK-DAY MASS.

At the same time, we should not regard the hearing of Mass merely as an obligation to be fulfilled; nor should we be satisfied with doing merely what is of strict obligation. Since the Mass is such a treasure, and such a sublime and holy thing, surely it is natural that we should be anxious to be present at the offering of this great sacrifice as often as possible. It may cost us something; but if we realise the generosity of Jesus Christ in making Himself a Victim for us, and realise the sublimity of this sacrifice itself, we should think little of the trouble it may cost us to be present sometimes at week-day Mass.

If we can offer Mass every day, so much the better. There is nothing holier that we could do, and there is no other act that will bring such a blessing upon our lives. There are many, indeed, who do make use of their opportunities of attending daily Mass. But there are others who have opportunities, but never think of going to Mass except on Sundays. Why? It is because they have

never really understood, or have never seriously considered, what the Mass really is. Their faith is not real enough.

If we cannot be at Mass every day, but only occasionally, we should remember that every Mass is precious and we should not miss any opportunity. There are many who lead busy lives, but think nothing of staying up half the night, or longer, for purposes of amusement. Is it too much to expect them to get up three-quarters of an hour earlier than usual, occasionally, in order to join with Jesus Christ in the great act of worship which He is offering for them?

#### THE MASS IN OUR LIVES.

Those who find that they cannot hear Mass more frequently than they have been doing can at least make sure that in future they will hear Mass with more devotion, based on a deeper understanding and appreciation of its real worth. The Mass is the greatest thing in the world. A Catholic should, therefore, esteem the Mass above everything else. Whatever devotions we may cultivate as a help to our spiritual life, first of all must come a true devotion to the Mass.

It is because the Son of God made Himself a Victim for us and for our salvation that we now possess supernatural life and the blessings which accompany it, and can look forward to an eternity of happiness with God. From Jesus Christ and from His sacrifice comes every grace we have received and ever shall receive. Therefore, the Mass, being not the mere memorial of the sacrifice by which our redemption was accomplished, but that sacrifice itself perpetuated, should be the very centre of our lives. Through that holy sacrifice we can best fulfil our duty of worshipping God; through it we can best pay the incalculable debt of gratitude which we owe; through it we can best make reparation for ingratitude and sin; and through it we can best secure those graces which we need that we may faithfully do God's will and save our souls.

#### SUMMARY.

What sacrifice is.

Sacrifices of the Old Law.

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The sacrifice which we offer.

Relation between the Mass and Calvary.

What the Mass is.

Why we believe the doctrine of the Mass.

Why we offer sacrifice.

Relation between Holy Communion and Mass.

Obligation of hearing Mass.

Daily Mass.

#### THE OBLIGATION OF HEARING MASS. Further Reflections.

As the worship of God is the chief duty of a creature, and the offering of sacrifice is the chief expression of that worship, we are bound to take part in the offering of the sacrifice of the Mass. The Church makes the obligation more precise and determined by binding us to assist at Mass on



Sundays and on some other important festivals. This is our primary duty as Catholics, and it is one which we should fulfil with great fidelity, and even with enthusiasm.

While it is true that we substantially fulfil our obligation by hearing the main portion of the Mass, still it should be kept in mind that we are bound to hear the whole Mass. To miss even a lesser portion of Sunday Mass deliberately or through carelessness is a venial sin.

The law of hearing Mass on Sundays does not bind when there is a proportionately grave reason to excuse us. Illness, necessity of looking after the sick or young children, and distance, are some examples of excusing reasons. The distance that will excuse varies, of course, with circumstances. A journey that would be a serious difficulty if made on foot might be nothing at all in a motor car. A reasonable estimate is that in ordinary circumstances a walk of three miles or so, or a journey of about an hour, would be sufficient to excuse a person from going to Mass.

But a good Catholic, who regards the hearing of Mass not merely as an obligation but as the greatest of privileges, will not look eagerly for excuses for staying away from Mass. His spirit will be, not to calculate how little he need do in order to avoid breaking the law, but rather to do all he possibly can to avoid missing the chance of sharing in Christ's sacrifice.

POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION OR DISCUSSION.

Can I point out one notable difference between a sacrament and a sacrifice?

Have I a fairly clear idea of the meaning of sacrifice?

Was sacrifice a more important part of the religion of the Old Law than it is of that of the New?

How does it come about that it is possible for mankind to offer to God a sacrifice that is really worthy of Him?

Is the Mass merely a commemoration of Calvary?

"The Mass is the greatest act that takes place on earth." Do I believe that statement? Could I show that it is true?

If a non-Catholic asked why I believed in the sacrifice of the Mass, what is the chief reason I should give?

Let me take each of the four chief ends of sacrifice and consider how the sacrifice of the Mass fulfils them.

Have I got an appreciation of Holy Communion as a special participation in Our Lord's sacrifice, or do I consider only its sacramental character?

Is the obligation of hearing Mass merely a precept of the Church?

Have I any considered opinion about the value of daily Mass, or of hearing Mass oftener than on Sundays?

Am I less careful about being in good time for Mass than about being punctual at a social engagement?

Three men live at a considerable distance from the church. One has no means of conveyance, one has a horse-drawn vehicle, and one has a motor car. Are they in the same condition when the distance has to be considered as a reason for not going to Mass?

Do I think that peace in the world would be promoted if all peoples understood the meaning of the Mass, and joined with unanimity in its offering?

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