

PREPARATION FOR HOLY COMMUNION

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THE Mass is both sacrifice and sacrament. As sacrifice it consists principally in man's activity, Christ's and ours, inspired and aided by grace, and of God's approval and acceptance of what we do. Christ as man and Head of his Mystical Body represents that sacrifice of himself and us in him which he offered on Calvary. We his members endorse and ratify this, associating our own offering with his. It is in Christ's name as well as his own that the priest says: 'Brethren, pray that *my sacrifice and yours* may be acceptable to God'. And God's reply is to receive and accept this offering as if saying once more: 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'.

It is needful to be quite clear about the nature of our activity. The priest says words and makes gestures which are essential to the offering of the sacrifice. There would be no Mass without them. But though essential, they are not its essence. In our case, they are not even essential. Actually we do express our association with the action of the priest by gestures and movements: standing, kneeling, bowing, making the sign of the Cross and the like. Ideally the congregation should also have its allotted prayers and responses which would not be repeated by the priest. But it would be possible to do all that and still to remain aloof from the real action, to have no part in Christ's sacrifice. The Mass is Calvary made present in our midst. Christ on Calvary said little and did nothing external save surrender himself unresistingly to the violence of his executioners and hang until he died on the cross to which they had nailed him. Mary who represented us spoke not a word. Her standing by the cross was the only outward expression of an interior identification with her Son's offering that it is beyond our powers to conceive. The heart of the sacrifice of Calvary, which is also the heart of the Mass, is Christ's utter surrender to the Father's will, expressed through obedience unto death, even the death of the cross. On Calvary the outward expression of this inner act took one form, in the Mass it has another.

Words and gestures are now the means whereby Christ's offering is made present and our association with it is proclaimed. But blind, dumb, paralysed, afar off, we can still be one with Christ in the Mass, vitally active offering and offered, by a single act of the will. 'Charity keeps you from the altar, but unites you to the sacrifice', wrote Fr Vincent McNabb, O.P., to a nurse who was unable to get to church.

Then God accepts Christ's offering and ours, and taking the bread and wine which symbolises them, he transforms it and the sacrifice becomes sacramental. The emphasis begins to change. God takes over, as it were, and it is our turn to receive, accept, 'endure'—unfortunately we have no word which adequately describes the '*patis*' in the mystical sense. The Sacred Humanity acts now not as man's mouthpiece but as God's instrument. Christ has taken man to God in the movement of his self-offering, now he brings God to man in the encounter of Holy Communion. First our gifts were transformed into Christ's Body and Blood, now they are given back to effect a spiritual transformation in us. He comes as the life of our souls, the food whereby that life is sustained; the mind is filled with grace and a pledge of future glory is given. He inflames us with the fire of that love which burns in his own Heart and, by uniting each one of us to himself, binds in a closer union all the members of his Mystical Body.

All this is the culmination, the necessary completion of the Mass. It is the climax to which all the other Sacraments and even the Sacrifice of the Mass itself are directed, the climax, that is, on earth, one might say, of the whole economy of the Incarnation; though turning to heaven, Christ looks to restore to the Father what man had attempted to wrest from him. He has come that we may have life and have it more abundantly, and here is that life become the life of our souls, here is the supreme means by which it is made available to us. This sacramental union is at once the symbol and means of that spiritual marriage of Christ with his Church, and of the Blessed Trinity with each individual creature of which heaven is only the glorious consummation and perfection. Holy Communion is necessary for the integrity of the Mass, just as it is in a sense necessary for salva-

tion. That is why the priest *must* communicate at every Mass and why the faithful are strongly urged to do so.

Holy Communion might therefore be described as the most favourable opportunity for God's action on our souls. Yet it depends on us in two ways. First we must give him this opportunity by receiving the Sacrament. He begs, invites, commands us to come. Come and eat, come and drink, come and be refreshed and strengthened. Notice that he never says: come and adore. The love and worship with which the Blessed Sacrament has come to be surrounded is a good and wholesome thing. It is right and fitting that our Emmanuel should receive the honour which is his due, that this Lover of souls should be shown gratitude and appreciation and affection by those for whose sake he is here: fitting, too, that all this should be done in reparation for the many slights and insults and blasphemies which he has to endure. But all this is secondary and the tendency to overstress it may come from a faulty conception of the whole theology of the Incarnation. The Creed says quite definitely: 'Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was made man'. That purpose remains the same. Christ becomes present on our altar, in our souls, for the same reason as he was born in the stable at Bethlehem and hung on the cross at Calvary: for our sake, not for his. He went around the towns and villages of Palestine seeking, not to receive, but to give, to give to all who would come and receive. No one was to be turned away, not even the little children who were too small to benefit from his teaching and whom the apostles thought would be rather a nuisance to the Master. He has not changed. Jesus Christ yesterday, today and the same forever. For centuries men were kept away from Holy Communion on the pretence that they were not fit or worthy enough to receive It frequently. Did those who propounded this theory ever stop to think of the presumption implied: viz. that anyone could at any time be really fit or worthy for such a privilege? God didn't become man because man deserved it but because he needed it. And so at last, through the voice of Blessed Pius X, our Lord cried out once more: If *any man* thirst, let him come to me and drink. No one able to benefit from Holy Communion

was to be kept away: the use of reason, a state of grace, the correct dispositions—of which more will be said in a moment—that was all that was required. Is there anything that I could have done for my vineyard that I have not done? Some of the invited guests found obstacles or excuses in the Church's fasting laws, fashioned long ago in the interests of reverence and decorum. These, too, then must give way before Christ's longing desire to be with the children of men. So he speaks again through our own Holy Father, and once more man's need and not any accidental honour given to God is shown to be the primary purpose of the Holy Eucharist. He has made it so easy, almost too easy some might think, for us to come to him. Is no effort, no sacrifice, to be asked of us in return for this privilege which is the fruit of his sacrifice on the cross?

Here we return to the question of those 'proper dispositions' of which Blessed Pius made mention in his decree and to which perhaps too little attention has been paid—a neglect which may perhaps explain why frequent Communion does not always produce the effects one would expect. Although our Lord is the chief agent in Holy Communion, so that it is what he does in our souls and not what we say to him that really matters, yet it is not enough for us to give him his opportunity by receiving him in Holy Communion. We must further see to it, so far as in us lies, that there are no obstacles placed in the way of his activity; like John the Baptist, we must prepare the way of the Lord. In what, then, does this preparation, far more important than our thanksgiving, consist? From some of the pious manuals one might get the impression that it means chiefly preparing triumphal arches and illuminated addresses, strewing flowers and presenting bouquets. Is that what he wants from us? Once more the Gospels supply the answer. Only once while on earth did Christ allow himself to be fêted—on Palm Sunday—and the proceedings ended in a sad anti-climax. Usually he fled from such demonstrations, as when the crowd tried to make him king after the multiplication of the loaves. When he went out to dine, he appreciated special marks of honour such as the anointings (though was not this because of the inner love which inspired them?), and when the ordinary

courtesies shown to any guest were denied him, he drew attention to the omission. But he was quite ready to walk in unannounced as he did to Zaccheus; and Martha's over-fussiness about entertaining him did not meet with the approval she expected. He was at ease anywhere, but humanly speaking he must surely have been more at home in Peter's fisherman's cottage than in the banqueting hall of the wealthy Pharisees.

Once more we need to remind ourselves that he has not changed. The only courtesy which he insists on is freedom from grave sin, since that is a state of enmity wholly incompatible with communion, hatred quite opposed to the love he comes to inflame. He does not come because he seeks entertainment but because we need his help, as did the blind, the lame, the deaf, the lepers, the paralysed, the possessed of Israel. These did not hide their diseases or put on a false show of health. Rather did they parade their miseries, the better to arouse his sympathy and compassion. Conscious of and confessing their need, they were equally confident in his power to succour it. Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me whole. Lord, I am not worthy . . . but only say the word and my servant shall be healed. By using this prayer and pointing out our Lord as the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world immediately before administering Holy Communion, the Church leaves no room for doubt as to the dispositions in which she wishes us to receive It. In one of the prayers of preparation for Mass St Thomas expresses them at greater length. 'I come sick to the physician of life: unclean, to the fountain of mercy: blind, to the light of eternal brightness: poor and needy, to the Lord of heaven and earth. . . . Therefore do I ask thee to heal my sickness; clothe my nakedness; wash away my uncleanness; enrich my poverty; and clothe my nakedness; so that I may receive the Bread of angels . . . with such reverence and humility, such sorrow and love, such purity and faith, such purpose and intent as shall further my soul's salvation.' Selfish though it might sound, our soul's salvation is the reason for receiving this bread of angels, and it is to further this that we ask our Lord to prepare our souls and produce the virtues which we need.

The humility to admit our misery and to seek its cure, the realisation that even our best efforts can help us little but that he can and will do all that is required; these are the basic dispositions which prepare us to profit to the full from Christ's Eucharistic action. But we need, too, in order to receive the fullness of this grace, to be supple and pliable, offering no resistance to the movement of his grace. This means the repudiation of all deliberate venial sin and even imperfections, the freeing of both mind and will of all attachment to everything save the will of God. If Christ is to transform us into himself, the mind must be free to be possessed by his Spirit of Truth, the will to be inflamed by his Spirit of Love. All pride and ambition and self-seeking, all attachment to our own ideas, everything which tends to put self in the place of God; then every form of selfishness and uncharitableness which puts self before one's fellow-men—these things are the great obstacles to the Christ-life in our souls and therefore their removal, so far as in us lies, is the best remote preparation for Holy Communion.

Our ancestors often spent three days in preparation and thanksgiving for their rare Communion. Their fervour and reverence must surely have pleased their Lord, yet he seeks something other of us. If our daily or weekly sacramental union with him is, as it should be, the high spot in our lives, then instinctively during the day our thoughts and longing will often turn to him as to an eagerly expected lover, and this remembrance together with the desire to please him which it will certainly inspire, will do much towards preparing us for his coming. The longing for union will produce a readiness to do and endure anything which will help to remove the obstacles which keep us at a distance and deny him full freedom of action. Then in the Mass, the Holy Spirit prepares our minds and hearts by the instructions and prayers which suggest the appropriate attitude and arouse fitting desires. All these are summed up and swallowed up in the complete surrender of all we have and are and have been and would like to be, which we make by willingly associating ourselves with Christ's sacrifice, placing ourselves as it were on the paten and in the chalice, as docile and unresisting under the action of God as are the bread and

wine in the hands of the priest. After such a surrender, even if only in desire, we can confidently leave the rest to God. Christ, when he comes, has a free hand. Deliberate restraints on his action there are none, and such as exist because of our inevitable weakness and sinfulness his love will gradually purge away—that is one of the effects proper to this sacrament. If he wants our acts and aspirations he will show us. If he holds us unfeeling and unseeing in the darkness of faith, there is nothing to fear. When the lover asks from the beloved only an unresisting surrender to his embrace there is nothing more that she can give. Mary's *Fiat mihi* at the Annunciation, his own *Pater in manus tuas* on the cross, are the unchanging pattern for man's highest response to the wooing of his God. Simple it may sound, easy it is not. Yet it includes all and he is satisfied with nothing less.

For many centuries the fullness of union with God on earth which the mystics describe in terms of the Spiritual Marriage was considered too exalted and the purifications which must precede it too terrible for it to be within the reach of any save a privileged élite. During that same period frequent Communion also was confined to a select few. The return almost in our own day to the belief that all are called to holiness and that the fullness of contemplation should be the normal flowering of the life of grace, has coincided with a revival of the primitive practice of frequent and daily Communion. Would it be legitimate to see more than mere coincidence here? The bliss of heaven is the joy flowing from the vision of God in the Word, but it is reached only through incorporation in the Word made Flesh. Union with the Blessed Trinity is the perfection of the life of the spirit, but the Sacred Humanity is the instrument by which it is fashioned, and It is physically present with us in the Holy Eucharist. Holy Communion is not the end, but it symbolises that end to which it is the surest and most effective means. But can one hope to attain to the end if the proper means are neglected, to reach the goal if the way is barred? And conversely, when the means are placed so freely at our disposal and Christ through his Vicar pleads with us to make use of them, is it not because he longs so earnestly for the fulfilment of the end: that they may be made perfect in one?