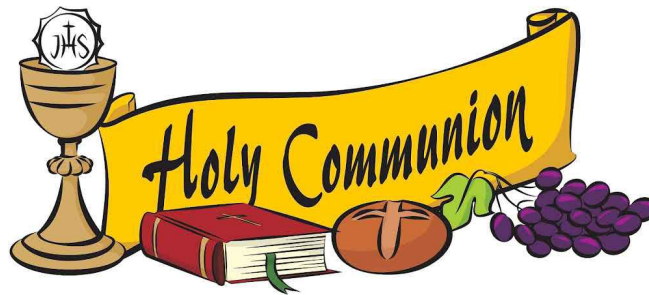


How Often Should Catholics Receive Holy Communion?

By John Rziha



One Holy Saturday sometime in the 10th century, a married couple dressed in sackcloth and covered themselves in ashes. They went to their parish priest, barefoot and weeping, begging to be able to receive holy Communion with the rest of the parish on Easter. The priest, although appalled by their audacity, given their sins, accepted their repentance and gave them absolution. However, he did not grant them permission to receive Communion. The couple was completely distraught and rushed to a nearby parish in hopes of receiving a different verdict from the neighboring priest.

What horrible action could this married couple have done that kept them from receiving Communion, and why were they so unhappy at being unable to receive on Easter Sunday? Let us first take a look back at some church history.

In the centuries before this couple's plea, Catholics had been receiving Communion less and less often. By the 10th century it was customary to receive only once a year, at Easter (even many members of religious communities received only three times a year). Furthermore, to ensure worthy reception, laypeople were required to fast and abstain from sex for a lengthy period of time before receiving. In this era, preparation to receive holy Communion began on Ash Wednesday, when people confessed their sins and did penance by fasting, wearing penitential garb and abstaining from sex. On Holy Thursday, they were reconciled with the church, but they still had to continue their practice of fasting and abstaining to receive the Eucharist on Easter.

This brings us back to the married couple, whose story was recorded in the monastic chronicle written by Ekkehard IV of St. Gall. They had successfully fasted and abstained all the way up until Holy Saturday, when, overcome by temptation, they had sexual intercourse. They knew the harsh penalty for breaking their Lenten obligation, but they also knew that if they missed receiving the Eucharist on Easter, they would likely have to wait until next year to receive. Hence, they tried in vain to convince the priest at the neighboring parish to give them permission to receive Communion; but they were again denied. Filled with sorrow, they returned to their home parish and went to Mass on Easter but did not present themselves for Communion.

Then, according to the story, the priest from the neighboring parish appeared and gave them Communion. The tale finishes by noting that the priest from the neighboring

parish never left his parish, leaving the reader to assume it was instead an angel who gave them holy Communion.

Although this story reflects local customs around a particular Swiss monastery, its description of the preparation and reception of the Eucharist correspond with other records from this time, which confirm that the Catholics of medieval Europe received Communion rarely and only after extreme acts of penance.

In the first four centuries after Christ, Christians would normally receive Communion every time they went to Mass. St. Augustine comments on this practice in his letter to Januarius, written around the year 400. He notes that whereas some partake daily, others receive only once or twice a week.

Augustine reports, however, that many are beginning to oppose this practice of frequent Communion out of fear that people are receiving unworthily. He responds by recalling the Gospel stories of Zaccheus and the centurion. Both were sinners, and, while Zaccheus welcomed the Lord into his home because of his love, the centurion did not feel that he was worthy for the Lord to visit his home because of his fear. Augustine argues that both of these biblical figures venerate the Lord. Likewise, both those who abstain from Communion out of fear of the Lord, and those who receive it out of love, venerate the Lord. Augustine gives an enduring theological justification for not receiving the Eucharist: veneration of the Lord out of fear.

This growing opposition to frequent reception of Communion was a reaction to monumental changes taking place in the church. In the year 380, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, resulting in the conversion of millions, who became lax and poorly educated Christians. Devout Christians were skeptical of the devotion of these new converts and questioned whether they should be receiving the Eucharist. Furthermore, many of these new converts had believed in powerful gods who punished those who were unfaithful to them. Even after conversion, they continued to view the Christian God as a powerful judge who rewarded the good and punished the bad. Hence, to use the terminology of Augustine, because of their fear of God, ordinary Christians venerated the Lord by not receiving him in Communion.

Within a century, few Catholics beyond the priests received Communion frequently. In the year 506 a synod in Gaul had to require laypeople to go to Communion at least three times a year. But as the centuries passed, the penitential requirements for receiving Communion became so strict that even if someone wanted to, it was nearly impossible to receive more than once or twice a year, as illustrated by the story of the couple who failed to abstain before Easter.

Eventually, reception became so uncommon among the laity that the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 decreed that all the faithful must communicate at least once a year during the Easter season. Failure to receive (unless given permission by the pastor) would result in the ultimate penalty of denial of a Christian burial. This practice of rarely receiving the Eucharist would continue among most of the laity until at least the 18th century.

The Eucharist was still a key part of the spirituality of the laity at this time. Great emphasis was placed on observing the consecrated host when it was elevated during the Mass, and spiritual communion became common. Eucharistic processions on the feasts of Palm Sunday and Corpus Christi often involved the entire community. Finally, because Communion was rarely received, when it was received, the laity received it with great appreciation, and the entire community came together in celebration.

Nonetheless, great theologians like Thomas Aquinas (1224-74) argued that this practice of rarely receiving Communion came from a misunderstanding of the Mass and the Incarnation. He believed that frequent reception of the Eucharist was as essential for spiritual health as corporal food was for physical health. If the faithful eat every day, those who are properly disposed should also communicate every day. In response to Augustine's statement that both those who receive out of love and those who do not receive out of fear venerate the Lord, Aquinas replies, "Love and hope are preferable to fear."

A 16th-Century Renewal

Despite these extraordinary statements by Aquinas, a more concerted call for frequent reception was not raised until the 16th century. St. Ignatius Loyola and the Spanish mystics especially contributed to this renewal. St. Ignatius encouraged all Catholics to go to confession and receive Communion at least once a month and preferably every Sunday. In his letter to Sister Theresia Rejadella, he informs her that as long as she is not conscious of mortal sin, and is inflamed with love for her Lord, and is filled with sustenance, peace and tranquility upon reception, then she should receive the Eucharist every day, just as they did in the early church.

Following the practice of their founder, the Jesuits then started confraternities and sodalities throughout the world that encouraged the laity to venerate the Eucharist and receive weekly. More than anyone else, the Jesuits prepared the church for the current practice of frequent reception of Communion.

At about the same time, the Spanish mystics, such as Teresa of Ávila (1515-82) and John of the Cross (1542-91), focused on the idea of Christ as the bridegroom of their souls. They further recognized that their mystical marriage to Christ was renewed each time they received the Eucharist. Their understanding of the reception of Communion as a spiritual marriage was then popularized in some of the Eucharistic plays performed on the feast of Corpus Christi. These plays made deep theological truths about the Eucharist accessible to the common people.

On the feast of Corpus Christi during the early 17th century, thousands of people lined the streets as the consecrated host was carried to the local cathedral. Following the procession, a cart with an elaborate stage was rolled in front of the cathedral and one of the Eucharistic dramas, like "The Phoenix of Love," by Jose de Valdivielso, was performed. This "romantic comedy" about the love story between Christ and a character called Soul drew upon popular themes in Spanish theater to educate the laity.

Throughout the play, Christ, as a valiant suitor, constantly professes his deep yearning to make Soul his wife. At one point Christ proclaims, “I am such a suitor that I draw near to Soul concealed, dressed with the red of flesh and the white of bread.” However, the audience is filled with alarm when a rival suitor, Lucifer, attempts to lure Soul away from Christ. A few minutes later, cheers erupt as Christ, the victorious lover, takes Soul to the wedding ceremony of the Eucharist, and Soul cries out, “Let me eat, sacred Spouse, so that I may see you more clearly.” The play is meant to inspire the faithful to then enter the church and worthily receive their lover, Christ, in the Eucharist.

The beautiful message of Christ yearning for the faithful to receive him in holy Communion, coupled with encouragement from theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Ignatius and the Spanish mystics, should have gradually led to the practice of frequent reception throughout the church. Unfortunately, within a century or so, the Eucharistic plays were rejected as an inferior form of theater as an art form, and the ultra-rigorous religious movement of Jansenism swept across Europe. Frequent reception of Communion by the laity was once again discouraged, and only after a great deal of work by Jesuits and other members of the clergy did frequent reception become more common during the 19th century.

Finally, in 1905, Vincenzo Cardinal Vannutelli issued a decree approved by Pius X, called “Sacrosancta Tridentina”; it discussed the frequent and daily reception of holy Communion. It was specifically written because of the confusion among both laity and clergy within the church regarding reception of the Eucharist. It urges all within the church who are in a state of grace and have proper intentions to come “frequently and with great zeal to this devout and salutary practice.”

Today, Catholics are blessed to be able to receive Christ, the bridegroom, daily in the Eucharist and venerate Christ out of love, which is “preferable to fear.” And reminiscing on the 1,300 bleak years of infrequent Communion should show us how truly blessed we are.

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