

## HOLY COMMUNION

### [Intention. Disposition. Thanksgiving]

Excerpted from R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ways of The Spiritual Life*

The soul tending to Christian perfection ought to live more and more by the Eucharist, not only by assistance at Mass but by frequent and even daily Communion. This is our reason for speaking of this living bread and of the conditions of a good and then of a fervent Communion.

### **THE EUCHARIST, THE LIVING BREAD COME DOWN FROM HEAVEN**

For the salvation of all of us in general, our Lord could not have given Himself more than He did on the cross; and He cannot give Himself to each one of us in particular more than He has done in the Eucharist. Because He knew our deepest spiritual needs, He said to us in His promise of the Eucharist: "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 living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread that I will give is My flesh, for the life of the world. For My flesh is meat indeed. He that eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him." (more John 6: 22-59)

The Eucharist is thus the greatest of the sacraments, for it contains not only grace, but the Author of grace. It is the sacrament of love, because it is the fruit of love that gives itself and because it has for its principal effect to increase in us the love of God and of souls in God.

The reception of the Eucharist is called Communion, or the intimate union of the heart of God with the heart of man. This union nourishes the soul and supernaturally vivifies it more and more and, so to speak, deifies it, by increasing in it sanctifying grace, which is a participation in the inner life of God: "For My flesh is meat indeed."

All created life needs to be fed: plants draw their nourishment from the secretions of the earth; animals feed on plants or other living creatures; man nourishes his body with material and appropriate food; he nourishes his mind with truth, especially divine truth; he should nourish his will with the divine will to be accomplished daily in order to reach eternal life. In other words, man ought to find his nourishment especially in faith, hope, and love. The acts of these virtues obtain for him, through merit, an increase in supernatural life.

But the Saviour offers him still another and more divine food; He offers Himself as the food of souls. To St. Augustine, Christ said: "I am the food of the strong; grow and you will feed on Me. But you will not convert Me into thyself as the nourishment of your body, but you will be changed into Me."

In Communion, the Saviour has nothing to gain: it is the soul that receives, that is vivified, supernaturalized; the virtues of Jesus Christ pass into it; it is, as it were, incorporated in Him and becomes a more living member of His mystical body.

How is this incorporation and transformation effected? Especially because Christ, present in the Eucharist, leads the soul to a purer and stronger love of God.

The effects of this food are well explained by St. Thomas, who says: “This sacrament works in man the effect which Christ’s passion wrought in the world.” Then he adds: “This sacrament does for the spiritual life all that material food does for the bodily life, namely, by sustaining, giving increase, restoring, and giving delight.”

First of all, it sustains. He who in the natural order does not take food or who takes insufficient food, declines; in the spiritual order the same is true of the man who refuses the Eucharistic bread which the Lord offers us as the best food for our soul. Why deprive ourselves, without reason, of this “supersubstantial bread,” which is the daily bread of our souls?

As material bread restores the organism by repairing its losses, the results of labour and fatigue, so the Eucharist repairs the gradual loss of strength which results from our negligences. As the Council of Trent says, it frees us from venial sins, restores to us the fervour which we lost because of these sins, and preserves us from mortal sin.

Moreover, ordinary nourishment increases the life of the body in a growing child. Now, from the spiritual point of view, we ought always to grow in the love of God and of our neighbour until death; thus we advance in our journey toward eternity. That we may grow in this way, the Eucharistic bread always brings us new graces. Thus supernatural growth does not stop in the saints as long as they continue on their way toward God: their faith becomes daily more enlightened and more lively, their hope more firm, their charity more pure and ardent. Little by little they advance from resignation in suffering to the esteem and love of the cross. Through Communion all the infused virtues grow with charity; and through ever more fervent Communions, they may reach a heroic degree. The gifts of the Holy Ghost, being permanent, infused dispositions connected with charity, also grow with it.

Lastly, as material bread is pleasant to the taste, the Eucharistic bread is sweet to the faithful soul, which draws from it a comfort and sometimes a spiritual well-being that is more or less felt.

The author of *The Imitation* says: “Confiding, O Lord, in Thy goodness and in Thy great mercy, I come as a sick man to my Saviour, hungry and thirsty to the fountain of life, needy to the King of heaven, a servant to my Lord, a creature to my Creator, and one in desolation to my loving Comforter.” “Give Thyself to me, and it is enough; for without Thee no comfort is of any avail. Without Thee I cannot exist; and without Thy visitation I am unable to live.”

St. Thomas admirably expresses the mystery of Communion: “O res mirabilis, manducat Dominum Pauper, servus, et humilis!”: Communion is the sublime union of supreme wealth and poverty. And yet, how sad it is that habit, degenerating into routine, often prevents us from being attentive to the supernatural splendour of this infinite gift!

## CONDITIONS OF A GOOD COMMUNION

The conditions of a good communion are indicated in the decree (December 20, 1905) by which Pope Pius X exhorted all the faithful to frequent Communion. This decree recalls first of all this principle: “The sacraments of the New Law, while acting *ex opere operato* (the validity of the sacrament itself), nevertheless produce a greater effect by reason of the more perfect dispositions of those who receive them. Care must be taken, therefore, that an attentive preparation precedes Holy Communion and that a suitable thanksgiving follow it, taking into consideration the faculties and condition of each person.”

According to the same decree, the first and indispensable condition for drawing profit from Communion is an upright and pious intention. On this point His Holiness declared: “Frequent and daily Communion, greatly desired by Jesus Christ and by the Catholic Church, should be so accessible to all the faithful of every rank and condition, that anyone who is in the state of grace and approaches the holy table with an upright and pious intention, may not be separated from it by any prohibition. Upright intention consists in this: that he who approaches the holy table is not influenced by custom, by vanity, or by any human reason, but desires to satisfy the good pleasure of God, to be more closely united to Him by charity, and by means of this divine medicine to remedy his infirmities and defects.”

Evidently the upright and pious intention mentioned here must be supernatural, that is, inspired by a motive of faith; it is the desire to acquire the strength to serve God better and to keep from sin. If, with this principal intention, a person had a secondary intention of vanity, such as the desire to be praised, this secondary and no determinant motive would not prevent the Communion from being good and would not render it bad, but it would diminish its fruit. This fruit is so much the greater as the upright and pious intention is purer and stronger. These principles are positive. One very fervent Communion is, therefore, more fruitful in itself alone than many, tepid Communions.

## THE CONDITIONS OF A FERVENT COMMUNION

In her Dialogue, St. Catherine states the conditions of a fervent Communion by using a striking figure:

If thou hast a light, and the whole world should come to thee in order to take light from it, the light itself does not diminish, and yet each person has it all. It is true that everyone participates more or less in this light, according to the substance into which each one receives the fire. Suppose that there are many who bring their candles, one weighing an ounce, others two or six ounces, or a pound, or even more, and light them in the flame; in each candle, whether large or small, is the whole light, that is to say, the heat, the colour, and the flame; nevertheless, thou wouldst judge that he whose candle weighs an ounce has less of the light than he whose candle weighs a pound. Now the same thing happens to those who receive this sacrament. Each one carries his own candle, that is, the holy desire with which he receives this sacrament, which of itself is without light, and lights it by receiving this sacrament.

How is this desire shown? The holy desire, which is the condition of a fervent Communion, should manifest itself first in removing all attachment to venial sin, slander, jealousy, vanity,

sensuality, and so on. This attachment is less reprehensible in poorly enlightened Christians than in those who have already received much and are ungrateful. If this negligence and ingratitude were to become accentuated, they would render Communion less and less fruitful.

That Communion may be fervent, attachment to imperfections must be combated; that is, attachment to an imperfect manner of acting, such as characterizes the actions of one who, possessing five talents, acts as if he had only three, and only struggles feebly against his defects. Attachment to imperfections may also be found in the seeking after permissible but useless natural satisfactions, such as taking some refreshment which one can get along without. The sacrifice of these satisfactions would be agreeable to God; and the soul, by thus evidencing greater generosity, would receive many more graces in Communion. It ought to remember that it has as a model Christ Himself, who sacrificed Himself even to the death of the cross, and that it ought to work for its salvation and that of its neighbour by means similar to those which the Saviour employed. The removal of venial sin and imperfection is a negative disposition.

The positive dispositions for a fervent Communion are humility (Lord, I am not worthy), a profound respect for the Eucharist, a living faith, an ardent desire to receive our Lord, the bread of life.

All these positive conditions may be summed up as hunger for the Eucharist.

All food is good when we are hungry. A rich man, accidentally deprived of food and famished, is happy to find black bread; he thinks it is the best meal of his life and he feels refreshed. If we hungered for the Eucharist, our Communion would be most fruitful. We should recall what this hunger was in St. Catherine of Siena; so great was it that one day when she had been harshly refused Communion, a particle of the large host became detached at the moment when the priest broke it in two, and was miraculously brought to the saint in response to the ardour of her desire.

How can we have this hunger for the Eucharist? The answer lies in our being firmly convinced that the Eucharist is the indispensable food of our soul and in generously making some sacrifices every day.

For those who are feeble, substantial food is sought which will restore their health; efforts are also made to raise the morale of the discouraged. The food par excellence, which renews spiritual strength, is the Eucharist. Our sensible appetites, inclined to sensuality and to sloth, need to be vivified by contact with the virginal body of Christ, who endured most frightful sufferings for love of us. We, who are always inclined to pride, to lack of consideration, to forgetfulness of the greatest truths, to spiritual folly, need to be illumined by contact with the sovereignly luminous intellect of the Saviour, who is "the way, the truth, and the life." Our will also has its deficiencies; it lacks energy, it is cold because it lacks love. This is the cause of all its weaknesses. Who can restore to it the ardour, the flame necessary to its life so that it may ascend instead of descending? The answer is contact with the Eucharistic heart of Jesus, ardent furnace of charity, immutably fixed in the good, and source of merits of infinite value. Of its plentitude we must all receive, and grace for grace. We have great need of this union with the Saviour, which is the principal effect of Communion.

If we were profoundly convinced that the Eucharist is the necessary food of our souls, we would have the spiritual hunger which is found in the saints.

To recover it, if we have lost it, we must “take exercise,” as they say to people who are stricken with a languorous illness. Spiritual exercise in this case consists in daily offering sacrifices to God; in particular, we should give up seeking ourselves in what we do; gradually, as egoism disappears, charity will take the first, uncontested place in our souls. We will cease to be preoccupied with the little nothings that concern us in order to think more of the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Then the hunger for the Eucharist will return. To make a good Communion, we should also ask Mary to make us share in the love with which she herself received the Eucharist from the hands of St. John.

The fruits of a fervent Communion are proportionate to the generosity of our dispositions. We read in Holy Scripture: “He that hath, to him shall be given, and he shall abound.” In the Office of the Blessed Sacrament, St. Thomas relates that the prophet Elias, who was being persecuted, stopped worn out in the desert and lay down under a juniper tree to await death. He fell asleep; then an angel of the Lord wakened him, showed him a loaf of bread under the ashes, and a jug of water. He ate and drank, and with the strength that this food gave him, he walked for forty days, even to Mount Horeb, where the Lord was waiting for him. This is a figure of the effects of fervent Communion.

We should remember that each of our Communions ought to be substantially more fervent than the preceding one, since each ought not only to preserve charity in us, but to increase it, and consequently dispose us to receive our Lord on the following day with an even greater love than on the preceding day. As a stone falls so much the more rapidly as it approaches the earth which attracts it, so, says St. Thomas,<sup>1078</sup> souls ought to advance so much the more rapidly toward God as they approach nearer to Him and are more drawn by Him. This law of acceleration, which is at one and the same time a law of nature and a law of the order of grace, ought to be verified especially by daily Communion. It would be verified if some attachment to venial sin or to imperfection placed no obstacle to it. We see it realized in the lives of the saints, who make much more rapid progress during the last years of their lives than during the earlier years. This is notably true of the end of St. Thomas’ life. Such acceleration in progress toward God was realized above all in Mary, the model of Eucharistic devotion; each of her Communions was certainly more fervent than the preceding one.

God grant that there may be in us at least a remote resemblance to this spiritual progress, and that, if sensible fervour is lacking, substantial fervour, which is the promptness of the will in the service of God, may not fail.

The author of *The Imitation* says: “For who, humbly approaching the fountain of sweetness, does not carry thence some little sweetness? Or who, standing by a great fire, does not derive therefrom some little heat? And Thou art a fountain ever full and overflowing; Thou art a fire always burning and never failing.”

This source of graces is so lofty and so fruitful that the properties of refreshing water and the opposite qualities of burning fire may be compared to it. What is divided in material things is

united in the spiritual life, and especially in the Eucharist, which contains not only abundant grace, but the very Author of grace.

In our Communion let us think of St. John, who rested his head on the heart of Christ, and of St. Catherine of Siena, who more than once drank long draughts from the wound of His heart, which is ever open in order to show us His love. These extraordinary graces are given by God from time to time to draw our attention to what is most intrinsic and fruitful in daily Christian life, to what would exist in ours if we only knew how to answer God's call with generosity.

### **EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE: COMMUNIONS WITHOUT THANKSGIVING**

“If you know the gift of God!” John 4: 10

A number of interior souls have told us of the sorrow they feel when they see, in certain places, almost the entire body of the faithful leave the church immediately after the end of the Mass during which they have received Holy Communion [...].

Formerly to show the necessity of thanksgiving, people were told how St. Philip Neri had two altar boys, carrying lighted candles, accompany a lady who left the church immediately after the end of the Mass during which she had received Holy Communion. How many times this well deserved lesson was told, and how often it bore fruit! But nowadays people have acquired the habit of treating almost everybody, superiors as well as equals and inferiors, and even our Lord Himself, with easy familiarity. If this abuse continues, there will be, as someone has said, many Communion and few real communicants. If zealous souls do not set to work to stop this habit of unconcern, it will go on increasing, gradually destroying all spirit of mortification and of true and solid piety. And yet Christ Himself is ever the same, and our duty of gratitude toward Him has not changed.

Is not thanksgiving for a favour received a duty, and ought it not be proportionate to the value of the favour? When we give something valuable to a friend, we are rightfully grieved if that person does not take the trouble to send us a word of thanks. Yet this fault is frequent today. And if this easy carelessness, which borders on ingratitude, wounds us, what must be said of ingratitude toward our Lord, whose gifts are incomparably more precious than ours?

When, after the miraculous cure of the ten lepers, only one of them returned to thank our Lord, He asked: “And where are the other nine?” They had been miraculously healed, but did not return to express their thanks.

In Communion we receive a gift far superior to the miraculous cure of a physical disease; we receive the Author of salvation and an increase of the life of grace, which is the seed of glory, or eternal life begun. We receive an increase of charity, the highest of the virtues, which vivifies, animates all the others, and is the very principle of merit.

Christ often gave thanks to His Father for all His benefits, in particular for that of the redemptive Incarnation; with all His soul, He thanked His Father for having revealed its mystery to little ones. On the cross He thanked Him while uttering His *It is fulfilled* (John 19:30). In the Sacrifice of the Mass, of which He is the principal Priest, He does not cease to

thank Him. Thanksgiving is one of the four ends of the sacrifice, always united to adoration, petition, and reparation. Even after the end of the world, when the last Mass has been said and when there will no longer be any sacrifice, properly so called, but only its consummation, when supplication and reparation have ceased, the worship of adoration and thanksgiving will endure forever, expressed in the Sanctus, which will be the song of the elect for all eternity.

With these thoughts in mind, we can easily understand why for some time many interior souls have been having Masses offered in thanksgiving, particularly on the second Friday of the month, in order to make up for the ingratitude of men and of many Christians, who scarcely know any more how to give thanks, even after receiving the greatest benefits.

If there is one favour, however, which demands a special act of thanksgiving, it is the institution of the Eucharist, through which Christ willed to remain substantially among us that He might continue in a sacramental manner the oblation of His sacrifice, and that He might give Himself to us as food to nourish our souls in a better and more substantial way than the best of food can nourish our body. Here it is not a question of feeding our minds on the thought of a St. Augustine or of a St. Thomas, but of feeding ourselves on Jesus Christ, on His humanity, on the plenitude of grace in His holy soul, personally united to the Word and to the Divinity. By the Eucharist, He gives Himself to us that he may assimilate us to Himself. Blessed Nicholas of Flue used to say: "Lord Jesus, take me from myself and give me to Thyself." Let us add: "Lord Jesus, give Thyself to me, that I may belong entirely to Thee." The Blessed Eucharist is the greatest gift we can receive; surely it deserves a special thanksgiving. This is the purpose of the devotion to the Eucharistic heart.

If an author who offers you a good book is rightly offended when he receives no expression of thanks from you, much more painful is the ingratitude of one who fails to return thanks after Communion, by which Christ gives Himself to us.

Have the faithful who leave the church almost immediately after receiving Holy Communion forgotten that the Real Presence subsists in them as sacramental species for about a quarter of an hour after Communion, and can they not keep their divine Guest company for this short time?<sup>1080</sup> Christ calls us, He gives Himself to us with infinite love, and yet we have nothing to say to Him and are not willing to listen to Him for a few moments.

Bossuet used to recall that the saints, in particular St. Teresa, have often told us that sacramental thanksgiving is the most precious moment in our spiritual life. The essence of the Sacrifice of the Mass is indeed in the double consecration, but it is by Communion that we ourselves share in this sacrifice of infinite value. As a result of our Communion, contact is established between the holy soul of Jesus, personally united to the Word, and our soul, an intimate union of His human intellect, illumined by the light of glory, with our intellect, which is often darkened, clouded, forgetful of our great duties, in some measure obtuse in regard to divine things. A no less profound union of the human will of Christ, immutably fixed in the good, is also established with our wavering, inconstant will; and finally, a union of His most pure sensibility with ours, which at times is so troubled. In Christ's sensibility are the two virtues of fortitude and virginity (chastity, innocence), which strengthen and render virginal (chaste, innocent) the souls that draw near to Him.

But Christ speaks only to those who listen to Him, only to those who are not voluntarily distracted. We should not only reproach ourselves for our directly voluntary distractions, but also for those which are indirectly so, as a result of our negligence in not considering what we ought to consider, in not willing what we ought to will, in not doing what we ought to do. This negligence is the source of a multitude of sins of omission, which pass almost unseen in our examination of conscience, because they are not something positive, but rather the absence of what should be. Many persons who find no sin in themselves, because they have committed no grievous sins, are full of sins of omission, sins of indirectly voluntary and consequently culpable negligence.

Let us not neglect the duty of thanksgiving, as is so often done today. What fruits can be derived from Communions received with so little respect?

Unfortunately, in some countries many priests themselves make, so to speak, no thanksgiving after their Mass. Others confound their thanksgiving with the obligatory and more or less recollected recitation of a part of the Office, with the result that they no longer have enough personal piety to vivify from within the official piety, as it were, of the minister of God. The results are sad indeed. How can the priest who no longer sufficiently nourishes the life of his own soul with the divine life, give it to others? How can he relieve the profound spiritual needs of souls that are famished, and who, after having recourse to him, sometimes go away sadder than ever, asking themselves anxiously where they can find what they require? Souls that hunger and thirst for God, souls that have received much and that, in the midst of great difficulties, should give abundantly to those about them in order to assist souls that are dying spiritually, are sometimes told: "Do not take so much trouble. You do more than is necessary." We may well wonder what is to become of zeal, of the ardour of Charity, and how Christ's words are to be verified: "I am come to cast fire on the earth: and what will I, but that it be kindled?" "I am come that they may have life, and may have it more abundantly."

A truly pious person who used to reproach himself for not thinking sufficiently during the day of Holy Communion which he had received that morning, once received this reply to his expressed concern: "We do not think of the meal that we had some hours ago." That was the reply of practical naturalism, which lost sight of the immense distance separating the Eucharistic bread from ordinary bread. The state of mind evinced by such a statement is manifestly the direct opposite of the contemplation of the mystery of the Eucharist: it springs from the habitual negligence with which one receives God's most precious gifts. In the long run, a person no longer sees their value, which he knows only in a theoretical manner, and the counsels that he gives in no way lead souls to intimate union with God; they do not go beyond the level of casuistry, which is concerned only with knowing what is obligatory in order to avoid sin.

This state of soul can lead far; one can thus forget that every Christian, each according to his condition, must tend to the perfection of charity in virtue of the supreme precept: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with all thy strength and with all thy mind." [...]

Casuistry tended to prevail over spirituality, which was considered a secondary matter. That day on which we consider intimate union with God as something secondary, we no longer tend

to perfection; we lose sight of the meaning and the import of the supreme precept: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind." Our judgment is then no longer the judgment of wisdom; it no longer proceeds in any way from the gift of wisdom; we have begun to descend the slope of spiritual folly. This is the goal progressively reached through negligence in making a proper thanksgiving.

Remissness in regard to thanksgiving becomes negligence in adoration, which would end by being only exterior, negligence also in supplication and in reparation. We would thus more and more lose sight of the four ends of the sacrifice in order to give ourselves often to secondary matters which, moreover, lose their true moral and spiritual value as soon as they are no longer vivified by union with God.

Every benefit calls for an expression of gratitude; a measureless benefit demands a proportionate acknowledgment. Since we are not capable of offering God gratitude proportionate to His gift, we should ask Mary to come to our help and to obtain for us a share in the thanksgiving she offered to God after the sacrifice of the cross, after the *Consummatum est*, a share in the thanksgiving she made after St. John's Mass, which truly continued in substance on the altar the sacrifice of Calvary. Negligence so frequent in thanksgiving after Communion springs from our insufficient knowledge of the gift of God: "If thou didst know the gift of God!" Let us ask our Lord humbly but ardently for the grace of a great spirit of faith, which will permit us daily to realize the value of the Eucharist a little better. Let us ask for the grace of the supernatural contemplation of this mystery of faith, that is, the experimental knowledge which proceeds from the gifts of understanding and wisdom, and which is the cause of a fervent thanksgiving in the measure in which we are more conscious of the greatness of the gift received.