

The Gift Divine

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist

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I. THE BREAD OF LIFE.

ONE day more than nineteen centuries ago a man was preaching to an attentive group in the Jewish synagogue at Capharnaum, a city situated near the Lake of Genesareth in Palestine. He was Jesus, well known to the people of that region as a prophet who taught sublime doctrines and a lofty code of morality, proclaiming them to be the revelations of God Himself. To support His claim, He performed wondrous deeds which evidently could be accomplished only with the miraculous assistance of the Almighty. Even now, as He was speaking, His listeners recalled that two days previously He had fed a multitude of five thousand persons with five barley loaves and two fishes, and some even knew that afterwards He had walked upon the waters of the storm-tossed sea to meet His disciples struggling in their tiny boat. With these thoughts in mind to persuade them that when a man exercised such extraordinary power it must be that the God of truth was attesting the correctness of His statements, the people listened to an astounding promise from the lips of Him whom Catholics acknowledge as the Son of God made man.

“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 eat of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread that I will give is My flesh, for the life of the world... Amen, amen, I say unto you: Except 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 in the last day. For My flesh is meat indeed and My blood is drink indeed. He that eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him” (John 6:35-57).

Thus did Jesus Christ promise to give His flesh and blood to be the food and drink of men. Evidently His listeners on this occasion took His words literally, for they asked one another in astonishment: “How can this man give us His flesh to eat?” And when Christ repeated His wondrous promise in even more explicit language, many who had been His followers up to that time complained: “This saying is hard, and who can hear it?” and departed from Him forever. Then our Lord turned to the little band of twelve chosen disciples, and put the pathetic question: “Will you also go away?” With unwavering faith the loyal Peter answered: “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed and have known that You are the Christ, the Son of God” (John 6:53-70).

A year rolled by, and the feast of the Pasch was at hand. Christ had expressed an ardent longing to eat the ceremonial banquet ushering in that feast with His Apostles. “With desire I have desired to eat this Pasch with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15). Evidently, He intended to do or to say something of great importance on this occasion. What this was He revealed after the ritual supper

was ended on that memorable Thursday evening. He then took bread, rendered thanks to God, and breaking the bread gave it to His disciples with the words: "Take all you and eat; this is My body." Then taking a cup of wine, He gave it to them to drink, with the words: "Drink all you all of this. For this is My blood of the new testament which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins." Finally our Lord commanded that the rite which He had performed should be continued in His Church, for He said: "Do this for a commemoration of Me" (Matthew 26:26-28; Luke 22:19).

Thus did Jesus Christ institute the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist — a sacrament venerated by Catholics as the greatest of the sacraments. Moreover, in most of the other Christian denominations a rite of this nature is administered, known among Protestants as the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. However, there is a vast difference of belief between Catholics and the majority of Protestants as to what this sacrament really contains. The usual Protestant view is that the Eucharist is nothing more than bread and wine, symbolizing our Lord's body and blood. Catholics believe that this sacrament contains the living, physical flesh and blood of our Savior; and this is known as the doctrine of the Real Presence. The Oriental churches separated from the Catholic Church such as the Greek Orthodox Church, also accept this doctrine, as do some Lutherans and Anglicans. Of course, the crucial point is the significance of Christ's words when He promised and when He instituted this sacrament. For, since He empowered His Apostles to do whatever He had done at the Last Supper, and since their power has been transmitted to their successors in the sacred ministry, it follows that if Christ promised to give, and later actually gave His real body and blood to the little group around the supper table, the Holy Eucharist consecrated by the bishops and priests who have inherited the powers of the Apostles also contains the living Christ.

What reasons have Catholics for believing that our Savior gave the Apostles His real body and blood? In the first place, we point to the undeniable fact that His words, both on the occasion of the promise and at the Last Supper, if taken literally, denote a true, and not a merely symbolic presence of Himself in the Holy Eucharist. He could not have expressed this more clearly or more forcibly than He did: "He that eats My flesh and drinks My blood has everlasting life... For My flesh is meat (food) indeed, and My blood is drink indeed... This is My body... This is My blood." Now, it is a universally accepted principle of interpretation that words are to be taken in their literal sense unless there are good reasons to the contrary. Are there any such reasons in the present instance? Those who deny the doctrine of the Real Presence do indeed adduce numerous arguments against the literal acceptance of Christ's statements, but an honest examination of these arguments will show that they all have one common basis — the difficulty of understanding how our Lord's real body and blood can be simultaneously present in thousands of places in a manner imperceptible to human senses. Now, this is only a repetition of the argument brought up by those who listened to Christ Himself at Capharnaum: "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?... This saying is hard, and who can hear it?" The weakness of this argument is that it measures divine power by human standards. He who has assured us that the Holy Eucharist contains His body and blood is the all-powerful, all-truthful God. Shall we twist His assertions to suit our ideas just because our puny intellects cannot understand how the miracle of the Real Presence takes place? Should we not rather exclaim with St. Peter: "You have the words of eternal life," and humbly acknowledge as divine truth the sublime doctrine which the Son of God has made known to us with His own lips?

Secondly, the attitude of those who heard Christ's promise and His reaction furnish an argument for the Real Presence. It is very evident that they understood our Lord to be referring to His own body and blood, and not to a mere symbol. Now, from Christ's manner of acting on other occasions we

can conclude that if they had interpreted Him wrongly He would have set them right. Thus, when the disciples understood literally His announcement: "Lazarus sleeps," He told them plainly: "Lazarus is dead." Again, when He spoke of meat which He had to eat, and they thought He referred to material food, He told them: "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me" (John 11:11-14; 4:32-34). But on the present occasion, when it was evident that His followers were accepting His words literally, He did not say: "I intend merely to give you bread and wine as a symbol of My body and blood." On the contrary, He repeated His promise even more explicitly; and though He saw many departing from His company, He uttered not a single word implying that He had been speaking in figurative language.

Thirdly, with His supernatural knowledge Christ foresaw that in the course of future ages millions of devout Christians, relying on His words, would accept the doctrine of the Real Presence, and adore Him as truly contained in the Holy Eucharist. With this realization before His mind, how could our Savior have been free from the grossest deception if He did not intend His words to be taken literally and yet gave no further explanation? Indeed, if the Holy Eucharist contained nothing more than bread and wine, Christ would be responsible for innumerable sins of idolatry.

From the earliest days of its existence the Catholic Church has firmly proclaimed the doctrine of the Real Presence, as is clearly attested by the writings of the first centuries. St. Justin, who wrote in the second century, said: "We receive (the Holy Eucharist) not as common bread or as common drink. We have been taught that this nourishment is the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus" (Apologia, I, 66). Tertullian, writing in the third century, stated: "Our flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that our soul may be nourished by God" (De Resurrectione Carnis, 8). Such quotations from the early writers could be multiplied almost indefinitely. It was only in the eleventh century that the doctrine of the Real Presence was first denied explicitly by one claiming to be a Christian — a certain Berengarius. Very few followed his teaching until the sixteenth century, when a large number of those who accepted the new creed of Protestantism, especially as proclaimed by Calvin and Zwingli, rejected the traditional belief of Christians in the reality of Christ's sacramental presence. However, Martin Luther and his disciples upheld the Real Presence in the Holy Eucharist, although they dissented from the Catholic Church as to the manner in which Christ takes up His abode in this sacrament.

In the Catholic Church the Holy Eucharist is the very center of worship and devotion, and as the most excellent of the sacraments is often known as "The Blessed Sacrament." In view of the sublimity of the doctrine of the Real Presence it is not surprising that Catholic poets and painters and musicians have devoted the best efforts of their artistic genius toward expressing veneration and affection for the Son of God, ever dwelling in our midst in the Holy Eucharist and thus fulfilling in a wonderful manner His consoling promises: "Behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" (Matthew 28:20).

II. THE THEOLOGY OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST.

Although our Savior has told us clearly that He is truly present in the Holy Eucharist, He has not explained fully the manner of His presence. Nevertheless, from a careful study of what He has told us, the Church and Catholic theologians under the guidance of the Church have compiled a systematic and fairly extensive explanation of the mode in which Christ is present in the Blessed Sacrament. We can divide the Church's doctrines and the teachings of theology on this subject into

two classes — those concerning the manner in which our Lord becomes present, and those concerning the manner in which He remains present.

Under the first heading the most important point is the doctrine, taught by the Catholic Church as an article of faith, that our Lord becomes present in the Holy Eucharist by that process of change of the bread and wine known as transubstantiation. We could imagine various ways in which the Real Presence could take place. Doubtless Christ could enter into the substances of the bread and wine and coexist with them, somewhat as fire exists in and with a mass of molten metal. This view of the sacramental presence, known as the doctrine of consubstantiation, was defended by Martin Luther, and is accepted by many present-day Lutherans. Or, perhaps the soul of Christ could be united to the substance of the bread or wine in each host or chalice, making out of each a body. But in this latter case our Lord would not have the same body in the Holy Eucharist that He has in heaven, but would have a new body wherever the Holy Eucharist would be consecrated. However, all such modes are excluded by the clear teaching of the Catholic Church that our Lord becomes present by transubstantiation — that is, the change of the entire substance of the bread and of the wine into the same body of our Savior that was born of the Virgin Mary and is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father.

Every material thing is made up of substance and accidents. The accidents are those elements which are perceived by our senses, such as color and taste and quantity. The substance is the thing beneath the accidents, supporting them in existence, yet itself imperceptible. Thus, we refer to the whiteness of the bread, the sweetness of the wine, the height of the tree, thus indicating that whiteness or sweetness or height is distinct from that which constitutes the substance of bread or wine or wood. Now, at the consecration of the Mass it is the substance of bread or wine that is changed into the body or blood of our Savior, not the accidents. Moreover, the entire substance of bread or wine is changed, and thus this process differs essentially from any of the substantial changes that take place according to the laws of nature. For in the case of a natural substantial change — such as the change of wood into carbon or the change of hydrogen and oxygen into water — something of the previous substance is carried over into the ensuing substance, while only the element that determines each substance to be what it is differs in the two substances involved. The element common to both is called the matter, the distinctive element of each is called the form. Accordingly, a natural substantial change is called a transformation, because only the form of the previous substance passes away and only the form of the ensuing substance is new. But in transubstantiation both matter and form of the bread or wine pass away, the substance of our Lord's body or blood being entirely different. All this is implied in our Lord's own words: "This is My body." For these words indicated that the substance of the bread was no longer present, but had been changed into the substance of Christ's body. Furthermore, it was a change of the entire substance of the bread, because what was then present was the identical body which the Apostles saw before them, and that differed both as to matter and as to form from the substance of the bread which Christ had taken from the table.

The accidents of the bread and wine remain unchanged. These accidents — also called appearances or species — could not naturally continue to exist without a material substance to support them, but in the Holy Eucharist they are miraculously sustained in being by the direct power of the Almighty. There is no more difficulty involved in this than if God were to support a stone in the air without any created cause to hold it up. Consequently, the eucharistic species continue to act in the same manner as they would if the substance of bread or wine were still upholding them. Our senses

perceive the color, the taste, the odor of bread and wine. When the Blessed Sacrament is consumed in Holy Communion, the same process of digestion and nutrition ensues as if bread had been eaten. All this is quite normal, since the accidents continue to exist unchanged. For a material substance is not of itself perceptible or active; it is perceived and it acts only through its accidents. Hence, the consecrated species, being preserved in existence by the power of God, function in the same manner as if the substances of bread and wine were still present.

Under the doctrines concerning the manner in which our Lord remains present in the Holy Eucharist comes first the truth of His permanent abiding. This means that after the consecration Christ remains present under the sacramental species as long as they retain the appearances proper to them as the accidents of bread and wine. It is only when the process of digestion or disintegration produces such a change in the consecrated species that they no longer have the taste, color, etc., of bread and wine that the Real Presence ceases. Some ancient writers held that Christ leaves the sacred host when it is given in Communion to a sinner; and the Lutherans believe that our Lord is present only during the Communion service. The Catholic Church on the contrary teaches the permanence of the Real Presence in the sense just explained. This doctrine is the basis of the many devotions practiced in the Catholic Church in honor of the Holy Eucharist outside the time of Mass and Holy Communion, such as Benediction, the Forty Hours' Devotion and visits to the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle.

Another Catholic doctrine explanatory of the manner of Christ's presence asserts its totality. This means that our Lord is present in His entirety — that is, with His body, blood, soul and divinity — under each of the two consecrated species. It is true, the words of consecration spoken over the bread signify and effect of themselves the presence of His body only; but since the body that becomes present is the same body that is now enthroned in heavenly glory, and that body is inseparably united to the blood, the soul and the divine personality, the entire Christ becomes present under the accidents of bread. In theological language we say that the body of our Lord is present in the host by the power of the words of consecration, while His blood, soul and divinity are present by concomitance. Similarly we conclude that under the accidents of wine the blood of Christ is present by the power of the words of consecration, while His body, soul and divinity are present by concomitance.

Moreover, Christ is entirely present in each portion of the consecrated host and of the consecrated species of wine. We cannot, of course, fully understand how a complete human body can be truly present in so small a compass, and can be simultaneously present in many thousands of consecrated hosts and chalices; yet we can acquire a limited conception of these marvels by analyzing the idea of quantity. When we think of a body as having quantity, the first thing we attribute to it is a number of parts, each related to the others and distinct from them. This aspect of quantity we call internal extension. Next we conceive the body as occupying a definite space, so that the whole body fills the whole space, and each part fills a distinct part of the space. This we call external extension. Now, we believe that while our Lord's body in the Blessed Sacrament has the first element of quantity, it does not possess the second in relation to the place occupied by the consecrated species. The various parts of His body — head, trunk, limbs, etc. — are present in their full perfection and proportion, entirely distinct from one another. But, by a miracle, His body is not contained in the place where the Blessed Sacrament is present in such wise that each part of the body occupies a different part of the place, as is the case with our bodies. On the contrary, it is present somewhat after the manner in which a person's soul is present in his body — wholly and entirely in every part.

And since our Lord's body is not restricted by the space-boundaries of any particular host, it can exist simultaneously in any number of consecrated hosts throughout the entire world.

Since the body of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is the same body that is present in heaven, it performs on the altar the same actions that it is eliciting with its faculties in the kingdom of the blessed — for example, gazing on the radiant beauty of our Lady and speaking to her. The question naturally arises, whether our Lord with His bodily eyes sees those who kneel in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament and with His bodily ears hears their prayers and hymns of praise. It seems that He does not, since His senses have no external extension in the Holy Eucharist, and so are not adapted to receive impressions from what goes on around them. Doubtless by a miracle His body could be rendered capable of such sense-perception, but such a miracle is not called for, since in the vision of the divine nature which His human intellect always possesses Christ dearly beholds the thoughts and actions of all men. And so, when we kneel before the Blessed Sacrament we can be assured that our every act of adoration and of love, our every manifestation of devotion, are perfectly known by Him whom we venerate beneath the Eucharistic species. And the realization of the wonderful miracles wrought by divine omnipotence to give us the living Christ for our strength and consolation should prompt us to exclaim from the depths of our hearts:

O Sacrament most holy, O Sacrament divine,
All praise and all thanksgiving be every moment thine.

III. THE LITURGY OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST.

The ceremonies centered about the Holy Eucharist are of two types — those established by Christ and those established by the Church. The former were performed by our Lord at the Last Supper, and consisted of the consecration — that is, the change of the bread and wine into His body and blood by the words: "This is My body... This is My blood of the new testament which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins" — and the distribution of Holy Communion to His disciples.*
{Footnote: * Although the scriptural narrative does not state that our Savior Himself received Holy Communion at the Last Supper, it is probable that He did so.}

This ceremony which took place at the Last Supper was not only the institution and the administration of a sacrament but also the offering of a sacrifice. By a sacrifice is meant a religious rite designed to honor God and to atone for sin by offering to the Almighty a victim, and destroying or slaying it. That Christ offered a sacrifice at the Last Supper with His own body and blood as the victim is evident from His own words. For He said of His body, present under the species of bread, that it was being given for you (Luke 22:19), and of His blood, present under the species of wine, that it was being shed unto remission of sins (Matthew 26:28). Such expressions clearly indicate that He was performing a sacrificial rite.

Since then our Savior offered a sacrifice at the Last Supper, the rite in which the Holy Eucharist is consecrated — the Mass, as we call it — is also a sacrifice. For the Mass is the repetition of what He did at the Last Supper, in compliance with His command: "Do this for a commemoration of Me." The supreme sacrifice of the Christian dispensation is indeed our Savior's death on the cross. By the efficacy of this sacrifice the Eternal Father received infinite honor and thanksgiving, and all men received sufficient means for the pardon of their sins and for the attainment of eternal life. The Mass does not add any merit or satisfaction to the sacrifice of the Cross; it merely applies to men the merits and satisfactions of this sacrifice. Nevertheless, the Mass is a true sacrifice, giving honor and thanks to God, renewing the Sacrifice of the Cross, and having as its victim and principal priest

the same Christ who was the victim and the priest in the sacrifice of the first Good Friday. The chief difference between the two is that whereas on the cross our Lord's blood was really shed and He really died, in the Mass His blood is separated from His body only figuratively, by the twofold consecration of the bread into His body and the wine into His blood. *{Footnote: Although our Lord is present wholly and entirely under each of the two species, as far as the words of consecration are concerned only His body becomes present under the species of bread and only His blood under the species of wine. Hence, in the twofold consecration there is a vivid representation of Christ's death.}*

We say that on Calvary Christ was immolated in a bloody manner, in the Mass in an unbloody manner; or, that on Calvary He really died, in the Mass He dies only mystically.

Some theologians believe that the Last Supper and the Cross were two distinct sacrifices, while others think they were the two parts of one and the same sacrifice — the offering and the immolation respectively. However, this question is very secondary to the important doctrines on which all Catholics agree — that both at the Last Supper and on Calvary Our Lord performed a sacrificial function, and that the Mass is a true sacrifice renewing the sacrificial death of Christ in a mystical manner, just as the rite of the Last Supper in a mystical manner anticipated it.

As was said above, Christ is the principal priest in the offering of every Mass, inasmuch as He instituted this sacred rite and commissioned the Apostles and their successors in the ministry to continue it in His name. Perhaps, too, He takes a direct and immediate part in the celebration of every Mass, invisibly exercising His priestly power in union with the visible priest when he says the words: "This is My body... This is My blood." Only those can offer Mass as officiating priests who have received the priestly power through the sacramental rite of ordination from bishops who in turn have received their power in an unbroken line of succession from the Apostles. However, in this group are included not only Catholic priests but also the priests of the non-Catholic Oriental churches, in which bishops have been properly consecrated and priests properly ordained even after these churches separated from Catholic unity. But the Catholic Church does not recognize the power to offer the Holy Sacrifice in the clergymen of the Anglican Church, because in the sixteenth century this denomination changed the rite of ordination so that it was no longer able to confer the priesthood.

The second class of Eucharistic ceremonies, those established by the Church, are numerous and inspiring. Thus, the simple form of sacrificial act established by Christ — the consecration and Communion — has been enhanced in the course of time by the Church's legislation adding the reading of portions of the Old and New Testament, prayers of praise, thanksgiving and petition, the use of incense, vestments, music, etc. In these matters there is considerable diversity in different parts of the Church, especially between the Western (or Latin) church and the Eastern (Oriental) churches. Thus, at the present day [1939] the Holy Sacrifice is offered by Catholics in eleven different languages and seventeen different rites, or ceremonial usages. Among Eastern Christians the term Liturgy is used to designate the Eucharistic sacrifice, which Latin Catholics call the Mass. Although the additions made by the Church to this sacred rite are not necessary to make it a sacrifice, priests are strictly obliged to employ them, apart from very extraordinary circumstances. For example, in lands where the Church is being persecuted the Pope sometimes permits priests to offer Mass in an abbreviated form and without the use of vestments. But there never can be any dispensation from the essential features of the Holy Sacrifice instituted by Christ — the consecration of both bread and wine and the Communion (at least of the priest).

Although only an ordained priest can celebrate Mass, the laity also participate in the offering of the Holy Sacrifice. For the act of sacrifice is a public function, performed in the name of a society; and so, it is in reality the entire Church that offers each Mass through the priest as a public official.

Accordingly, the laity assisting at Mass should realize that they are collaborating with the priest at the altar in offering the Divine Victim to His heavenly Father, and should join in the sacred rite as intimately as possible. For this purpose it is commendable to follow the prayers and ceremonies in a Missal. [The Second Vatican Council stressed the theological point that participation should be full, conscious and active. Thus, in the reforms of the liturgy allowance was generously made for the introduction of the vernacular.] To receive Holy Communion during the Mass is also a praiseworthy act, since it is not only the reception of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist but is likewise the partaking of the Victim of the Eucharistic sacrifice. And although strictly speaking only the priest who celebrates Mass is obliged to partake of the Holy Eucharist at the Communion, it is the wish of the Church that at every Mass some of the laity receive the body and blood of our Savior “in order that more abundant fruit of this most holy sacrifice may come to them,” as the Council of Trent expressed it (Denzinger, Enchiridion, n. 944).

In most of the Eastern rites the faithful communicate under the appearances of both bread and wine, and this was the custom in the Latin Church also in the early centuries. But since the fifteenth century, according to the general law in the Latin Church,* Holy Communion is administered under the species of bread alone, so that only priests celebrating Mass receive both species. [1939

Footnote: * There are some exceptions. For example, the deacon and the subdeacon at the Pope's Solemn Mass receive the Blessed Sacrament under both species.]

There are good reasons for this, such as the danger that the consecrated species of wine may be spilled. Ancient tradition justifies this practice, for although in the early days of Christianity both species were ordinarily administered, there were some exceptions. Thus, those who were confined to bed by sickness or were in prison (especially those suffering in prison for the crime of being a Christian) were given only the species of bread, while infants were sometimes communicated immediately after Baptism with the species of wine alone. The doctrinal basis of this restriction of Holy Communion to one species is the Catholic teaching that Christ is entirely present under each species, so that a person who receives only the species of bread receives the body, blood, soul and divinity of our Savior just as completely as a person who receives both species. It is worth noting that a Latin Catholic is permitted to receive Holy Communion under both species from an Oriental Catholic priest in whose rite the Blessed Sacrament is administered in this manner. [Since Vatican II, this disciplinary law has been considerably broadened by the Church.]

[The following paragraph applied in 1939. The discipline has been modified by the Church and now all that is demanded is a fast from food and liquids, excluding water, for a mere one hour before Holy Communion. Considerable dispensations are provided for those who are ill, or who look after them.] Out of reverence for the Holy Eucharist the Church prescribes that ordinarily one may not receive Holy Communion unless he has abstained from all food and drink since midnight. In reckoning midnight one may follow any system of time that may be to his advantage. Thus, when daylight saving time prevails, a person need not begin this Eucharistic fast until 1 A. M., which is midnight by standard time. However, one who is not fasting may receive Holy Communion as viaticum if he is in danger of death, and also may consume the Blessed Sacrament to preserve it from violation. Moreover, one who has been confined to bed by illness for a month and has no hope of a speedy recovery may receive Holy Communion once or twice a week, with the advice of his

confessor, after having taken medicine or liquid nourishment. Finally, the Holy See sometimes grants special permission to individuals or groups to receive Holy Communion after taking food or drink when it would be impossible or very difficult for them to observe the Eucharistic fast.

The Eucharistic ceremonies in vogue in the Catholic Church besides Mass and Holy Communion, such as Benediction, processions of the Blessed Sacrament, visits to our Lord in the tabernacle, are of ecclesiastical origin. They are of long standing use in the Church and are commended to the devotion of the faithful as a means of animating their faith and stimulating their love toward Him who for love of us dwells ever in our midst.

IV. THE DIVINE GUEST OF THE SOUL.

When promising the Holy Eucharist our divine Savior said: "Amen, amen I say to you, except you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you" (John 6:54). From these words it is evident, that there is a grave obligation incumbent on all the members of Christ's Church to receive Holy Communion. However, it is not the same type of obligation as that which binds all men to receive Baptism, or that which binds those who have sinned grievously after Baptism to receive Penance. These obligations are concerned with a means necessary to salvation, whereas the obligation to receive the Holy Eucharist denotes only a precept to be fulfilled.

However, it is a divine precept, since it was imposed by the Son of God. Our Lord did not specify how frequently we must receive His body and blood, but left the determination of this matter to His Church. In the earlier centuries the faithful were commanded to approach the holy table at least three times a year — at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost; but in 1215 the Fourth Council of the Lateran decreed that those who have reached the age of discretion must receive Holy Communion at least once a year, and that at Easter. This legislation still prevails. {1939 Footnote: The Easter season, during which this precept can be fulfilled, by the general law of the Church lasts from Palm Sunday to Low Sunday, two weeks. For good reasons a bishop may extend this period in his diocese from the fourth Sunday of Lent to Trinity Sunday, eleven weeks. In the United States, by special dispensation, the Easter season lasts from the first Sunday of Lent to Trinity Sunday, fourteen weeks.} [The necessity of receiving Holy Communion at least once a year still obliges. In the U.S., the time for this to be done is from the First Sunday of Lent till Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost. In Australia, the period is from Ash Wednesday till Trinity Sunday.]

Moreover, Catholics old enough for Holy Communion are obliged to receive the Holy Eucharist as viaticum (literally "food for a journey") when they are in danger of death.

The Lateran Council mentioned above decreed that the obligation to receive Holy Communion should begin with "the years of discretion," and until comparatively recent times this phrase was generally interpreted as signifying the age of ten or twelve years. However, in 1910 a decree of the Roman Congregation of the Sacraments, approved by Pope Pius X, prescribed that the age of discretion is to be understood as synonymous with the age of the beginning of reason, which usually occurs about the seventh year. And so, in recent times little ones of tender years have been admitted to the holy table. Of course, children only seven years old cannot be expected to have an adequate understanding of the Holy Eucharist; yet, this does not prevent our Lord from lavishing His graces on these innocent souls, so dear to His Sacred Heart. Instructions in Christian doctrine are indeed given to children in preparation for their first Holy Communion, but only a limited knowledge is required of them, and still less is necessary in order that a child in danger of death may be given the viaticum.

Even though Christ had not explicitly commanded us to receive Holy Communion, we could conclude from the very nature of the Blessed Eucharist that we ought to partake regularly of this adorable sacrament. For Christ has established the Holy Eucharist to be the spiritual food of our souls. Now, just as our bodies need material nourishment to retain their strength and to ward off disease, so our souls need the supernatural food of our Savior's body and blood to preserve their spiritual vigor and to overcome temptation. And while the Church obliges her members by strict command to receive Holy Communion only once a year, she certainly recommends more frequent communion. Pope Pius X in 1905 invited all Catholics even to daily communion, and pointed out that the only conditions required are the state of grace and a right intention. And in view of the appalling dangers to faith and morals which modern times have witnessed, we cannot doubt but that the Holy Ghost inspired the saintly Pontiff to propose to the faithful this effective means of keeping their souls in the love and friendship of God.

Just as material food will be beneficial only to a living body, so the Holy Eucharist will produce its effects only in a soul that possesses the spiritual life of sanctifying grace. *{Footnote: It is probable that by exception Holy Communion received by a person in mortal sin will forgive his sins and confer sanctifying grace provided the recipient does not realize the wrong he is doing and has imperfect contrition, or attrition, for his sins. Such a situation, as is evident, could occur very rarely.}*

In other words, the Holy Eucharist is one of the sacraments of the living. However, one who has committed mortal sin since his last confession is not permitted to receive Holy Communion merely after making an act of perfect contrition. Such an act does indeed put the sinner in the state of grace; and it would suffice for the worthy reception of the other sacraments of the living. Of course, the person who would receive one of these sacraments in such circumstances must necessarily have the intention of confessing his sins subsequently. But there is a special law, frequently proclaimed in the official legislation of the Church, prescribing that one who is conscious of mortal sin may not receive the Holy Eucharist until he has first received the Sacrament of Penance. Only very extraordinary circumstances would exempt a person from this law. For example, if one had already taken his place at the communion-rail and only then realized that he was in mortal sin, he could make an act of perfect contrition and receive Holy Communion. But the mere fact that others will be surprised if one does not approach the holy table is not a sufficient justification for this manner of acting.

The effects of a worthy Holy Communion are many and sublime, and may be aptly compared to the effects produced in the body by nourishing food. In this latter case the first effect is that the food unites itself with the body and becomes one with it. So, too, Holy Communion produces a spiritual union between Christ and the soul, in accordance with our Lord's words:

“He that eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him” (John 6:57).

We say “spiritual union,” for although Christ's body and blood are physically present in the communicant, they do not mingle physically with his body, but remain unchanged until the disintegration of the accidents. However, as long as our Lord is present, there is so intimate a spiritual union between Himself and the devout communicant that the two can be said to be one in affection.

The effects of this spiritual union in the soul are analogous to those resulting in the body from material nourishment, and are classified by the Council of Florence under the four headings of sustenance, growth, refreshment and joy.

The Holy Eucharist sustains the strength of the soul by imparting graces to overcome temptation, especially temptations to impurity.

It helps the soul to grow in sanctifying grace and in love for God.

It refreshes the soul by inspiring it to acts of divine charity and contrition, whereby venial sins and the punishment due to sins already forgiven are remitted.

It also brings joy to the soul — sometimes sensible consolation, but always that more stable and more profound happiness which consists in an eagerness to do God's will.

Holy Communion also produces a social effect, in that it unites all Catholics into one great family, irrespective of national and educational and economic distinctions. It is true, Baptism fundamentally constitutes the bond between the members of the Church, but the Holy Eucharist fosters this unity so effectively that it is sometimes called "the sacrament of unity." For, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, Europeans and Africans and Americans and Asians all gather at the same banquet table to partake of the same food, the body and the blood of Christ, the Savior of all mankind. And greater aid toward the promotion of peace and friendliness among men is provided by this common participation in the Holy Eucharist than by man-made pacts and International laws.

The effects of Holy Communion are proportionate to the fervor of the recipients. Hence, it is most important that we prepare devoutly and attentively for each Holy Communion. It is sometimes stated that a single Holy Communion can make the recipient a saint; and the statement is no exaggeration, for as far as the power of the Blessed Sacrament is concerned, there is no limit to the graces it can bestow. The only limitations are those set by the dispositions of mind and heart found in the communicants. Besides a devout preparation, we should also make a fervent thanksgiving, for our Lord is truly present within our breast for about fifteen minutes after the actual reception of Holy Communion, and this amount of time at least should be employed in acts of ardent love and of petition for the graces we need.

We have been speaking of the benefits conferred on men by the Holy Eucharist as a sacrament. As a sacrifice the Holy Eucharist is intended primarily to adore and to thank God and to atone to Him for sin. However, it also obtains actual graces for those who share in its efficacy and obtains for them the remission of some of the debt of temporal punishment. The most practical way of benefiting by both the sacrificial and the sacramental power of the Holy Eucharist is to assist attentively at Mass and to receive Holy Communion devoutly.

The most common name of the great sacrament we have been studying — the Holy Eucharist — indicates the sentiment that should predominate in our heart when we think of this supreme gift of our Blessed Savior. For the word "Eucharist" means "Thanksgiving." This name is given to the sacrament of Christ's body and blood because at its institution He gave thanks to His Father (Matthew 26:27). It is a most appropriate title because through the Eucharistic sacrifice we can best thank the Almighty for His favors to us, and also because this name reminds us that we should ever be grateful to our Lord for giving us Himself in this sacrament. And the most suitable way to show our gratitude is to make the Holy Eucharist the very center of our lives, proving by our devout assistance at Mass, our frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament and our fervent reception of Holy

Communion that we are profoundly thankful to the Son of God for this most precious gift of His love.
