

GOING TO MASS WITH MARMION

IV: HOLY COMMUNION

“In humble prayer we ask you, almighty God: ... that all of us, who through this participation at the altar receive the most holy Body and Blood of your Son, may be filled with every grace and heavenly blessing.” End of Roman Canon. As we discussed last week, Our Lord makes himself present on the altar, not only to give perfect homage to his Father through a mystical immolation which renews his oblation on Calvary, but in addition to this to make himself the food of our souls, under the sacramental species.

Fundamental point: Sacramental Communion, fruit of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, constitutes for the soul the most assured means of staying united to Jesus. It is in union with Christ that the true life of the soul, supernatural holiness is to be found. Jesus is the Vine, we are the branches, grace is the sap which goes up into the branches to make them – i.e. us – bear fruit. Above all, through the gift of himself in the Mass, Christ makes grace abound in us. So let us look ever so briefly at six ways in which Christ gives himself to us in Holy Communion.

1. Communion is the banquet in which Christ gives himself as the Bread of Life.

“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man... you shall not have life in you.” It is not only in order that we may adore him, that we may offer him to his Father, that Christ makes himself present, it is not only in order to visit us that He comes. It is in order that we may eat of him and that eating of him we may have life, BOTH the life of grace here below and the life of glory on high. Ordinary bread, not itself having life, preserves the life of our bodies. How much more wonderful will be the life which the living bread give us – we who eat Life itself at the table of the living God? Jesus is Life by nature; to eat him is to eat life. This is why in the old Mass the priest says to each and every Communicant “may the body of our Lord Jesus Christ preserve your soul to eternal life.” Sadly, that full form is only used once in the usual Mass we say – when the priest makes his own Communion. Never forget the older words: “... preserve your soul to eternal life.”

2. Through Holy Communion, Christ dwells in us and we in him.

Again in John’s Gospel we hear, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.” There is no greater union than the interior life of the Holy Trinity. To abide in Christ is to be one with him in being a child of God. This is the fundamental union which takes us back to the beginning and the saying about the vine: we are nothing less than the branches of the vine which is Jesus. To abide in him is to identify ourselves with him in everything that concerns our intellect, our will, our activity. Our intellects trust what he reveals to us. Our wills are called upon to prefer his desires to ours. It is the soul’s dream to be one with the one whom she loves. Holy Communion realises this dream by transforming the soul, little by little, into Christ.

3. Christ transforms us into himself.

In another prayer which is said by the priest silently at the end of the Lamb of God, the priest prays, “May the receiving of your Lord Jesus Christ be a healing remedy for my body and soul.” Christ is ever living, ever acting. In coming to us he unites us to him, he purifies, he

uplifts, he sanctifies, he transforms our faculties. So it is that the Fathers could remind us that we love God through the heart of God, we praise him with the lips of God, we live with his life. When Jesus permeates our souls and bodies we truly become “Other Christs.”

So let us think of a few practicalities. First, we should always prepare for such an incredible encounter. When was the last time you really made a proper preparation for receiving this most astonishing of gifts? When was the last time your parish priest did so before leaving the sacristy? Then you will sometimes hear people talk about modern liturgy having an element of “Chips with everything.” One of our local priests of a certain generation was talking the other day of the fact that we have lost a generation of people who, when he was young, would stand at the back of Mass, perhaps seldom coming up for Holy Communion. Our evening services used to be Vespers, Rosary, Benediction, Compline etc. Has evening Mass, good as it undoubtedly been in many respects, put these treasures from the Church’s praying resources into the shade? For Marmion, “Doubtless Christ Jesus grants his gifts to whomsoever he pleases, but can we doubt for a single moment that he looks with extreme kindness upon the efforts of a soul who desires to receive him with faith and love?”

This is, of course, not to make the bestowal of grace in any way connected to our efforts. That is heresy of an ancient form. But, in Marmion’s words, “A soul that remains habitually in the disposition of clearing from itself all that can affront to gaze of the Divine Guest, is admirably adapted to the sacramental action. ... Let us ask Our Lord himself to help us acquire little by little the fundamental disposition which can adapt our soul marvellously to the action of the sacrament of Divine union. And it is such a soul which is inevitably drawn to make the best possible thanksgiving after Communion. Goodness - the thing which we take for granted so easily and say Thank you so infrequently is the greatest gift in the universe.

Time draws on. We can end, for now, with Marmion quoting another great theologian and priest: St Augustine. The distinctive fruit of the Eucharist is the identification of ourselves with Christ, through faith and love. If we receive the Body of Christ well, as Augustine put it, we are what we receive. On Monday morning we will be at work, at school, in the supermarket, wherever. The act of receiving Holy Communion at Sunday Mass may suddenly seem transitory and passing; but the effects it produces – nothing less than union with Christ – is, of its very nature, permanent. It is a Living Bread we have received, a Bread of life, a Bread which makes us live. And it is works of life, works of a child of God, that we must do each day after we have been nourished by this Living Bread in order to be transformed into him. Through Holy Communion, Christ is ours. Amen.