

Worthy Reception of the Eucharist (Fr. Denis Tameh)

Having seen the importance and centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the Church, realizing that it is the source and summit of the Christian life, the beating heart of the church, then we can understand why the Church is very diligent and careful that it be received with the utmost respect and care. That it be preserved and adored with the utmost adoration and veneration. All this concern for the worthy reception is rooted in the reality that what we receive is not just ordinary bread but the Lord himself. Thus, the Church has constantly taught that our reception of the Eucharist should be worthy and dignified as a sign of respect and adoration for who we receive (CCC, 1385). Because the Eucharist makes the Church this ceases to be only a private affair and now becomes a public universal affair in which the Church aims at showing respect and the holiness of the sacrament, thus safeguarding the salvation of the souls of the party present and also preventing scandal to the body of Christ which might arise from the unworthy reception of the body of Christ.

It is for this reason that the Canon Law of the Church states in canon 916 as follows: ‘*A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to celebrate Mass or receive the body of the Lord without previous sacramental confession unless there is no opportunity to confess; in this case the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition which includes the resolution of confessing as soon as possible.*’ Thus, the very first consideration in the reception of the Eucharist is repentance through an examination of conscience and recognition of the shortcoming of sins. Secondly, this applies not only to the lay faithful who receive but also to the ministers of the sacrament of the Eucharist, the priests, bishops who are not to celebrate Mass or receive the Eucharist in grave sin for this is tantamount to sacrilegious communion. However, for grave reasons such as the impossibility to go to sacramental confession before Mass, the priest can offer Mass in a state of grave sin or the faithful can receive communion with the intention to make use of the sacrament of confession at the nearest opportunity. This is the reason why before receiving the sacrament we can only echo with ardent faith the words of the Centurion: “*Domine, non sum dignus ut inters sub tectum meum, sed tantum dic verbo, et sanabitur anima mea.*” (Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul will be healed.) This worthy reception of the sacrament also requires that we observe the required communion fast (canon 919) which is one hour of no food before the reception of the Eucharist. The exceptions of course are taken into consideration (the sick, the elderly and those who take care of them). Also, our bodily demeanor, gestures, ought to show respect for he whom we receive.

The source of this canonical discipline is rooted in the word of God (1Cor 11:27-29) in which St. Paul addressed the question of unworthiness to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. He states: ‘Whoever, therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks of the cup without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself.’ What this makes us realize is that the unworthy reception of Holy Communion is a sin against Christ himself. A lack of respect for the God who gives himself to us and is also the King of our lives. The emphasis here is on self-examination in order to discover our preparedness or unpreparedness to receive the Lord. If one is not prepared because of serious sin, then one should simply not approach to receive the Lord. This self-examination of conscience should have as reference one’s relationship with God and others. In *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 36, Pope St. John Paul II reminded the Church that he who desires to participate in Holy Communion must be about the daily work of growing in holiness of life, that is, in the practice of the virtues of faith, hope and love. The seriousness of this consideration in the

life of the Church made Chrysostom lament: 'I too raise my voice, I beseech, I beg and implore that no one draw near to this sacred table with a sullied and corrupt conscience. Such an act, in fact, can never be called 'communion' not even were we to touch the Lord's body a thousand times over, but 'condemnation', torment and increase punishment.' The words of St. John Chrysostom provide a good catechesis for worthy reception of the sacrament: "O son of God, bring me into communion today with your mystical supper. I shall not tell your enemies the secret, nor kiss you with Judas' kiss. But like the good thief I cry, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'"

But what is the nature of sin which requires one to abstain from the reception of Holy Communion? To answer this question, we have to realize the two dimensions involved in the worthy reception of Communion as noted by the law of the Church. The internal disposition and the external circumstances. With regard to the internal disposition as seen above, the onus is on the Christian or the faithful to abstain from the reception of Holy communion after examining his or her conscience. But with regard to the external circumstances which arise as a result of grave manifest public sin, the Church has an obligation to prevent one from receiving communion reason being that she has the right to protect the dignity of the sacrament, to avoid scandal. This issue is tackled by canon 915 which states as follows: *'Those who have been excommunicated or interdicted after the imposition or declaration of the penalty and others obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to Holy Communion.'* Because this is a law that is restricting rights it has to be interpreted strictly and never broadly according to the principles of canon 18. Thus, for this norm to be invoked, all the conditions presented in the canon have to be fulfilled. That is, the sin in question has to be grave, manifest and one in which the sinner obstinately perseveres. It is only when these are present that the sinner in question can be denied communion. To obstinately persist or persevere in grave sin means that the sinner after numerous legitimate warnings of the wrongdoing persists in it. This contumacious behaviour warrants therefore the application of this canon to avoid scandal which the Catechism (2284) describes as an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil. The person who gives scandal becomes his neighbor's tempter. The Church as the guarantor of the salvation of souls has to protect her faithful from any injury to their sense of right and wrong. When the faithful see one who lives in manifest public grave sin receiving the eucharist, it becomes a source of confusion. To say an act is grave means it is an objectively evil act such as a sin against the ten commandments or objective mortal sin. It is manifest when it is in the external fora. That is, everyone can see it, it is public.

It is important to have these conditions in mind because the aim of the Church is not to use communion as a penal tool, denying those who go against Church teaching as a means of punishment. For communion is not and should never be a theater of conflict but rather a means of unity of faith and the faithful. Or as Pope Francis put it: 'The Eucharist is not the reward of saints, no, it is the bread of sinners.' When the Church talks about denying communion to those who persist in manifest grave sin it is not because the Church is interested in punishing the sinner but rather it is because the Church wants to protect the dignity of the sacrament, the true body and blood of Christ from sacrilegious reception, for the Eucharist is the heart of the Church, it is the central thrust of the living heart of the Church, it is the source and summit of the Christian life. The Church will do anything to defend the most august sacrament, she will die for it, because in the Eucharist we have life, in the Eucharist, God gives himself to us in a unique way. Therefore, the worthy reception of the Eucharist should be something each and every one of us take seriously. No wonder, its worthy reception is intimately linked with reconciliation and penance for God

always wants to give us an opportunity to approach him with pure and contrite hearts. For a humble contrite heart, the lord will not spurn (Ps 50:19).