

Theological and Pastoral Reflections on the History of Frequent Communion

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I propose here to present a few brief reflections on a point of vital importance for the Christian life of every baptised person: what does the God of revelation teach us, through the Scriptures, the Fathers and the Magisterium of the Church, regarding the frequency of Eucharistic communion and its temporal and eternal fruits? What pastoral conclusions does the Church draw from this at present, and what might she draw in the future?

I - A brief historical overview of the Church's past teaching:

Our aim here is not simply to consider the history of a practice and the various ways of understanding it, but also, and above all, to ask ourselves what the revealing Christ wishes to tell us about the nature, meaning and purposes of the frequency of Eucharistic communion.

1- *Scripture*

The decree *Sacra tridentina synodus*, published in 1905 by the Congregation of the Council with the approval of Saint Pius X, admirably summarised the revealed teaching in a concise presentation that is worth quoting. Referring to Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life, the text tells us : "Through this comparison (Jn 6:59) with bread and manna, the disciples could easily understand that, just as bread is the daily food of the body and manna was the daily food of the Hebrews in the desert, so too the Christian soul could be nourished daily by the heavenly bread. Furthermore, when Jesus Christ commands us to ask in the Lord's Prayer for our daily bread, this is to be understood, as almost all the Church Fathers teach, not so much as material bread, the food of the body, but as the Eucharistic bread which must be received every day." (*Acts of Pius X*, Bonne Presse, Vol. 2, p. 253).

In the light of the Gospel of John, this text summarises in a highly condensed manner, first the teaching of the God of the First Covenant through the figure of the daily manna of the Hebrews in the desert, and then that of the God of the New Covenant, of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels, instilling the request for daily bread, the Eucharistic meaning of which is clearly set out by the moral consensus of the Church Fathers. The text therefore affirms, in a

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how the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and subsequently the Fathers, converge to indicate the divine will: that the Eucharistic bread should be eaten daily by the members of the Church of Christ.

The discourse on the Bread of Life, by presenting manna to us as a foreshadowing – albeit a negative one – of the living bread that came down from heaven, makes us understand that this living bread must be eaten for as long as the earthly exile lasts, every day, until we enter the Promised Land.² The text from the Holy See added the account from the Acts of the Apostles (2:42–46) according to which the newly baptised “devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. [...] Day after day they broke bread in their homes”. Many exegetes recognise the Eucharistic meaning of this double reference, itself illuminated by the discourse on the Bread of Life.

However, exegetes have been divided on the meaning—whether Eucharistic or not—of the daily bread requested in the *Lord's Prayer*. Some have held that the literal meaning refers to material bread, the Eucharistic meaning constituting an interpretation.

Nevertheless, the exegetical criteria recognised by the Second Vatican Council allow us to retain with certainty the Eucharistic meaning; the CCC (§ 112 ff.) cites three: to be attentive to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, because of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ is the centre; reading Scripture within the living tradition of the whole Church, of which the Fathers are the privileged witnesses, and in fidelity to the analogy of faith, that is, to the coherence of the truths of the faith amongst themselves and with the total content of revelation, for God never contradicts himself.

Applying these criteria, the CCC (§ 2835–2837) sets out what it calls “the specifically Christian meaning” of the petition for daily bread: “It concerns the word of God to be received in faith, the body of Christ received in the Eucharist”.

The CCC then analyses at length the dual temporal allusion contained in the two versions (Matthew, Luke) of the fourth petition: “Give us this day our daily bread”, *epiousos*, recalling the Eucharistic significance of the word *epiousos*, which has no other usage in the New Testament. Let us quote:

"- Taken in a temporal sense, *epiousos* is a pedagogical repetition of the adverb ‘today’ (Ex 16:19–21), to confirm us in unreserved trust;

- taken in a qualitative sense, *epiousos* signifies all that is necessary for life, all that is sufficient for sustenance;

- taken literally (in the literal sense), the word *epiousos* (“superessential”) directly refers to the body of the

² Cf. J. DANIELOU, *Bible et liturgie, Lex orandi* 11, Paris, 1951, ch. IX, pp. 194–219; P. DUMOULIN, *Between the Manna and the Eucharist*, Study of Wis 16:15–17, An al. Biblica no. 132, Rome, 1994, ch. 7–11.

Christ, the remedy of immortality without which we have no life within us (Jn 6:53–56);

- finally, linked to the previous meaning, the heavenly meaning is evident: this day is the Lord's day, the day of the feast of the kingdom, anticipated in the Eucharist, which is already a foretaste of the kingdom to come. This is why it is fitting that the Eucharistic liturgy should be celebrated every day."

The CCC can therefore conclude: the Eucharist is our daily bread.

Bock and Carmignac have shown the profound meaning of the request, in the *Lord's Prayer*, for daily bread, seen as an extension of the daily manna; in this land of exile, we ask for the daily manna, the new manna of the new and eternal covenant, that manna which the Jews of the intertestamental period were awaiting. Carmignac even specifies, in his *Recherches sur le Notre Père* (Paris, 1969, p. 198): "Talmudic and midrashic literature, though certainly written well after the time of Christ, also contains various ancient traditions showing that the manna continued to be regarded as the special food of the messianic age."

From this perspective, it would be worthwhile to study the Eucharistic perspectives of the Church Fathers regarding the manna given daily to the chosen people on their pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

2) The Fathers

The Fathers' commentaries on the daily significance of the petition for Eucharistic bread continue to enlighten the Church and our lives.

Let us mention here Cyprian, Basil, Ambrose and Augustine.

With regard to the Fathers, it is important to distinguish, on the one hand, what they say about the actual practice of a specific frequency of Eucharistic participation in their own time and in their respective regions, and, on the other hand, how they interpret the will of Christ as revealed in the New Testament.

Whilst their historical accounts reveal a wide variety of Eucharistic practices, their testimony in favour of daily participation in the Eucharist is striking for the depth and number of the reasons given. In the third century, Cyprian, in his treatise on *the Lord's Prayer*, warned that "by abstaining from the body of Christ, one must fear being cut off from salvation: 'unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will have no life within you' (Jn 6:54). And consequently we ask that our daily bread be given to us, that is to say, Christ, so that we may not stray from sanctification and from the body of Christ, we who dwell and live

in Him” (§ 18). Let us bear in mind the statement: *Christum dari nobis cotidie petimus*. The daily Eucharist is seen here as a means of persevering in the grace of Christ.

Around the year 372, Saint Basil, writing to a woman, told her: “To receive Communion every day, to participate continually in Life, is to live in fullness” (Letter 93, RJ 916). The saint then adds: “We receive Communion four times a week (Sunday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday).” This Father was therefore aware of a difference between the ideal and its practical realisation. Pope John Paul II quoted this text by Basil of Caesarea in his letter dedicated to this saint on 2 January 1980.

Shortly afterwards, Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, in his *Treatise on the Sacraments*, expressed himself in these terms: “What does the Apostle say to you? Whenever we receive Him, we proclaim the Lord’s death (1 Cor 11:25–26). If we proclaim the Lord’s death, we proclaim the forgiveness of sins. His blood is shed for the forgiveness of sins. I must always receive Him so that He may always forgive my sins. I, who always sin, must always have a remedy. You hear it said that every time the sacrifice is offered, we represent the Lord’s death as well as the forgiveness of sins, and yet you do not receive this bread of life every day! He who has a wound seeks a remedy. The remedy is the venerable and heavenly sacrament” (*De Sacramentis*, IV.6.26. and V.4.25-26).

Let us understand Ambrose’s thought. The sacrifice of the death of the Risen One obtains the remission of sins. Now, it is this sacrifice that we make our own and offer by receiving the Eucharist

. Knowing that we need to obtain the remission of our daily sins every day, how can we not receive Communion every day, as the Lord invites us to do by asking us “every day for this bread of eternal life which sustains the substance of our soul”, as Ambrose expressly states?

His spiritual son Augustine pursues the same aim. Thus, in his Sermon 227,1, addressing those who had been baptised the previous night on Easter Day, Augustine tells them: “You must know what you have received, what you will receive, what you ought to receive every day: this bread which you see on the altar, sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ.” The text is very powerful: “What you ought to receive every day: *quid quotidie accipere debeatis*”.³

Admittedly, as Saint Pius X would later clarify, this duty of daily reception does not correspond to a divine precept but only to a very ardent desire of Christ and his Church, of which the local community of Hippo was already becoming aware, at the end of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century, thanks to the words of Augustine.

³ St Augustine, *Sermons for Easter*, trans. and notes by S. Poque, Sources chrétiennes, 116, in particular Sermon 227, Paris, 1966.

For Saint Augustine, as for the Fathers in general, the Eucharistic symbolism of daily bread is not the only one: together, the body of Christ and his word constitute the bread of Life eaten in faith; the Word makes the Eucharist known and kindles love for it. Together, they are the bread of the soul, that bread received only by the children of God, whereas material bread, the food of the mortal body, God gives not only to those who sing his praises, but also—as Augustine reminds us—to blasphemers (Sermon 56). The same Church, which recommends daily communion with the Body of Christ, also advises the daily hearing or reading of his Word, precisely offered as food in the Eucharistic liturgy. One could multiply the patristic quotations on the Eucharistic meaning of daily bread. This is not necessary. Let us therefore now turn to the past magisterium of the Church. We mean the papal and conciliar magisterium, for the Fathers, the vast majority of whom were bishops, were already expressing its ordinary and universal magisterium.

3) *The Church's past magisterium*

After the patristic period – and this is well known – the fervour of charity nourished by the frequent reception of the Eucharist waned, and its practice became so rare that in 1215 the Fourth Ecumenical Council of the Lateran had to rule on the obligation of a minimum frequency: all members of the Church, in order to persevere in divine grace, should receive Communion at least once a year.

The Council of Trent, whilst not explicitly encouraging daily communion, implicitly proposed it to all Catholics by expressing the “desire that the faithful should receive communion not only spiritually but also sacramentally at every Mass at which they are present, in order to receive more abundantly the fruits of the most holy sacrifice of the Mass” (DS 1747, text of 1562).

This text takes on its full significance in the context of an earlier declaration by the same council, summarising patristic and medieval theology concerning the effects of sacramental communion; indeed, in 1551, the council had recalled (DS 1638) that Eucharistic communion “frees us from venial sins, preserves us from mortal sins, binds us by very close ties of faith, hope and charity to the body of the Church, of which Christ is the head, and constitutes the pledge of our future glorification as well as of our perpetual happiness”. In other words, every sacramental communion received in a state of grace thus affects our sinful past, strengthens our present in grace, preserves our earthly future and merits our eternal future: such are the intentions with which the Christian must receive communion, according to the Council, so that his

Communion, far from being that sacrilegious consumption of one's own condemnation denounced by Saint Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians (ch. 11, vv. 27–32), may instead be an inseparably sacramental and spiritual communion (DS 1638, 1646 and 1648).

From these Tridentine teachings, as from the whole of Catholic theology, it is clear that the communicant, through each new sacramental and spiritual communion, receives a fresh increase in sanctifying grace, a fresh remission of his venial sins, fresh and powerful help to avoid sin in the future, new merits, and is prepared to receive, during eternal life, new and wonderful degrees of glory, that is to say, of knowledge and love of the Triune and One God, as well as of all and each of his elect.

Despite the openings of the Council of Trent, Jansenist rigour continued to make access to frequent and daily communion difficult, particularly for merchants and married couples. There was debate over the dispositions required for communion, and even reputable theologians believed that communion should be rare and subject to numerous preconditions.

Hence the liberating interventions of two popes, Blessed Innocent XI in 1679 and Saint Pius X in 1905 and 1910.

Saint Pius X settled the controversy⁴: drawing on the Church Fathers, he recalled “that no precept required greater dispositions from those receiving daily Communion than those required for weekly Communion” and proclaimed a principle now largely forgotten: “The fruits of daily Communion are far more abundant than those of weekly Communion”.

More specifically, to be able to receive Communion every day, it is sufficient to be in a state of grace and to have a right intention, that is to say, to approach the Eucharist, not out of habit, but to combat one's faults, to grow in charity and to satisfy the divine will.

It is therefore not necessary, in order to receive Communion fruitfully, to be free from deliberate venial sin, though this is highly desirable. Moreover, according to Saint Pius X, it is impossible for those who receive Communion daily not to gradually overcome their attachment to venial sins, implying that they grow in grace each day. Thus, at the time, commentators rightly emphasised that people who received Communion only once a week, even though they had the opportunity to do so more often, were receiving it rarely. This point seems to have been forgotten today by a number of clergy, who tend to

⁴ St Pius X, *Acts*, B. Presse, Paris, vol. 2, pp. 255 ff.

to regard those who receive Communion every Sunday as frequent communicants. It sometimes happens that those who oppose a certain current laxity regarding the Eucharist—of which those who go to confession too rarely are victims—fall into a form of neo-Jansenism by remaining silent on the Church’s invitation to daily Communion: even if some abuse it, everyone has the right to be aware of it.

The Tridentine declarations and those of Saint Pius X on the effects of Eucharistic Communion were magnificently taken up and developed by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Mediator Dei et hominum* in 1947. I say ‘elaborated upon’, for Pius XII, following in the footsteps of Benedict XIV, introduced a concept—not present at the Council of Trent—concerning the very nature of Eucharistic communion: it is a participation in the sacrifice. In other words, to receive Communion is to become one single victim with Christ crucified and risen for the salvation of the world. To eat and drink the divine victim is not merely to partake of a divine meal; it is also to become part of the sacrificial offering that this victim makes of itself for the eternal happiness of every human person; it is therefore, in it and with it, to be prepared to offer one’s own body and shed one’s own blood in order to merit for others the grace to partake of the one and only sacrifice.

Let us note in passing that Pius XII’s encyclical on the liturgy remains the most beautiful and profound of all the Church’s official documents on the sacrifice of the Mass, and the most useful for helping people to grasp and understand its inner nature. This is why its influence on the official documents of the Second Vatican Council was so explicit and so great: the encyclical is, in fact, cited eight times, including five times in the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* (10, 11, 28 and 50). In particular, Pius XII deals explicitly with daily communion: “May God grant that Christians may participate in the divine sacrifice by receiving, in sacramental communion—even daily if they can—the body of Jesus offered for all to the eternal Father.” By emphasising Christ’s offering for us in the context of communion, Pius XII invites us to conceive of it as a participation in Christ’s sacrificial offering for the world. The Real Presence is not only that of God made man, but also that of God the Victim, enabling us to share in his state as a glorified victim. To receive Communion every day is to become more and more a victim in Christ, through Him, with Him and for Him. This is what the Second Vatican Council taught in the constitution *Lumen gentium*, quoting Pius XII’s encyclical.

We thus come to the Church’s most recent magisterium, the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

Whilst it is true that the Constitution on the Liturgy does not explicitly mention daily Communion, this is nevertheless strongly emphasised by the conciliar decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches (§ 15). Thus we read: “It is strongly recommended that the faithful

receive the Holy Eucharist even daily: *inexe quotidie*” (*Inexe*: with all their strength). This text is in perfect harmony with another conciliar recommendation, this time addressed to priests: they are indeed recommended to celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice every day, the supreme act of their priestly ministry.

Here, then, we have the first explicit recommendation of daily communion by an ecumenical council. How can one fail to notice the magnificent doctrinal progress concerning Eucharistic practice in the history of the ecumenical councils? This crescendo in the consoling exhortation of a Church ever more concerned with enabling us to participate in the Eucharist?

The First Council of Nicaea, in 325, recommended facilitating access to Communion for the dying. The Fourth Lateran Council, in 1215, called for the kind and loving, yet serious, obligation of annual Communion. The Council of Trent implicitly and effectively recommends daily communion in the context of recalling the Eucharistic interpretation of ‘daily bread’ given by the Church Fathers ⁵. The Second Vatican Council finally crowns it all by explicitly recommending daily communion to all the baptised. But this is undoubtedly one of the least cited pieces of advice, perhaps the least commented upon of the last council! Yet it is no less important, insofar as it concerns the daily life of the Christian far more than the—albeit useful—declarations on religious freedom and episcopal collegiality!

Although the petition for daily bread also refers to material bread and the word of God, its Eucharistic meaning, united with the other two, upheld by the Fathers, by the catechisms of the Councils of Trent and Vatican II, and thus by the ordinary and universal Magisterium of the Church, is contained in the revelation to which the Catholic faith adheres and could be defined as such by the Church ⁶.

Two subsequent documents have supplemented, on a pastoral level, the emphasis placed by the Second Vatican Council on daily communion:

- in 1967, the Holy See, in the instruction *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, asked, following in the footsteps of Saint Pius X, parish priests, confessors and preachers to frequently exhort the Christian people to daily communion. The instruction also recalled – a point often overlooked today – that Communion should be given even outside Mass to the faithful who were prevented from attending due to inconvenient timings. Finally, it emphasised the need to make daily Communion accessible to the sick and the elderly at any time, even if there

⁵ DENZINGER-SCHÖNMETZER, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, ed. 35, Rome, 1963, nos. 1648 and 1649.

⁶ J.P. BOCK, *Le Pain quotidien du Pater*, Paris, 1912, p. 485.

there was no danger of death;

- in 1973, the Holy See published a ritual for the distribution of Communion outside Mass, providing for a longer rite and a shorter one. These two rites had one thing in common: the proclamation of the Word had to enlighten and accompany the reception of the Eucharistic bread, which constituted a specific application of a general principle of the recently implemented liturgical reform: the bread of the Word and the bread of the Eucharist together constitute the specifically Christian bread of the New Covenant.

II - Towards the future of a fully Eucharistic Church

Whilst the Second Vatican Council's declaration on daily communion, which is strongly recommended, marks a significant step forward in the Church's awareness of Christ's call to give himself ever more fully to the Church, it calls us above all to an urgent and radical renewal of our pastoral care towards this end. I would like here to outline some fundamental aspects of this: it is nothing less than the development of a pastoral approach entirely centred on the supreme evangelical counsel, offered to all, of daily communion.

1) Henceforth, preparation for each of the sacraments—particularly those of adult baptism, first confession, confirmation and marriage—must be inseparable from preparation for Mass and daily communion. It is pointless to object that many places lack a priest, since the Code of Canon Law provides for the possibility of appointing laypeople as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion (CIC, § 230). The Eucharist is the *raison d'être* of all the other sacraments and very especially of Holy Orders: our silence regarding daily Mass deprives many young people of an overflowing sacramental strength, in the face of the divine call to a chaste marriage, the priesthood or religious life; a renewal in the fervent proclamation of the daily Mass largely determines the solution to the most serious problems facing families and the Church. Without it, any true comprehensive pastoral care is impossible.

2) The revival of the call to daily Mass signifies, in the most concrete way, the vocation of each person to the perfection of charity, so strongly emphasised by the Second Vatican Council, for the Eucharist is the sacrament of the fervour of charity, the bond of perfection. How could one wish to be perfect, as the heavenly Father is perfect, whilst disregarding the principal means of achieving this, namely daily Eucharistic union with Christ the Mediator?

3) It is paradoxical to think that, nearly a century after Saint Pius X's liberating charter, no religious institute, dedicated first and foremost to the propagation of the practice of the Mass and

daily Communion among the laity, has yet to be established, whilst numerous institutes have been founded to promote other aspects, certainly useful, but less fundamental.

Similarly, none of the associations of the faithful currently in existence seems to have this aim. It is reasonable to think that the third millennium will be marked by the emergence of such associations and institutes, for whose intentions we must therefore pray.

4) We must go further and recognise that the Church becomes fully the Church, not only when its members gather around the sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated in the Eucharist, but also, and above all, when they do so every day. It is above all through daily Mass and Communion that the Church grows ceaselessly in being and in charity. The Second Vatican Council, quoting Saint John Chrysostom, tells us in its decree on ecumenism (§15) that it is through the celebration of the Eucharist that the Church of God is built up and grows.

Let us open an ecumenical parenthesis here. An Athonite monk of the Greek Orthodox Church, Nicodemus the Hagiorite, published a book on daily communion in 1783, introduced to the French-speaking public by the late Dominican theologian M.J. Le Guillou⁷. For this monk, whom both the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches have canonised, those with a clear conscience must receive communion every day and thus do God's will. According to him, the Eucharistic Christ is the daily bread we ask of the Father, and the liturgy is essentially a Eucharistic assembly. The Church's *raison d'être* is the Eucharistic union of each of its members with Christ, drunk and eaten after having been offered for the whole world. An ecclesiology is fully Eucharistic only when it recognises the need for each of its members to grow daily, through an ever more fervent participation in the Eucharist, in charity towards Christ and towards other baptised believers.

The Father wishes to gather us together every day, nourishing us together with his only Son. By accepting the invitation to daily communion, worthily prepared, we will allow the glorified Christ to continue building, through us, his local and universal Church.

Let us have the courage to say it: the simultaneous progress of Catholic and Orthodox believers towards the Mass and daily communion should constitute the secret and major factor that, through the power of humble love, wrests from God our common return to full hierarchical and mutual communion in the integral faith and in the shared partaking of the slain Lamb.

⁷ M.J. LE GUILLOU, O.P., "Communication on Athos and the Eucharistic Life", in the collective volume *Millénaire du mont Athos*, vol. 2, Paris, 1963, pp. 111–120; B. de MARGERIE, "The Eucharistic Mystery as a Source of Unity", paper presented at the symposium on Fr. Le Guillou held in Montmartre in December 1993, ed. Saint-Augustin, S. Maurice, Switzerland, 1995, pp. 93–106, in the collective volume: *A Man Captivated by the Mystery of the Church*.

To this end, we hope that our Orthodox brothers will hasten to translate Nicodemus the Hagiorite's treatise on daily communion into Western languages.

5) However, time is running out. Before Christ's return in glory, the Church must undergo a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers; is this the mystery of iniquity of the Antichrist that is already at work, that is to say, the mystery of man glorifying himself in the place of the Eucharistic Christ (cf. CCC, § 675, summarising numerous New Testament texts)? The Church will enter into the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, by following her Lord more and more each day in his death and resurrection (CCC 677). Yes, time is running out.

When, then, shall we see parish and presbyteral councils exchanging views on the best ways to draw all members of the local community to the daily Christ of the altar and the tabernacle? When, then, shall we see the bishops asking the Pope for an encyclical on Sunday Mass and daily Communion? When, then, shall we see a Pope convene an episcopal synod in Rome to address the supreme evangelical counsel, calling for the daily participation of all in the Eucharistic victory of the Lamb of God? When will this supreme evangelical counsel, that of daily Eucharist—the counsel which, unlike the others, not only removes the obstacles to the obligatory perfection of charity but also actively nourishes it—be recognised as structuring a way of life found only in the Church of Christ and founded on faith in Christ? Such was the brilliant insight of the great Spanish theologian Suarez⁸: the state of Christian life, the foundation of marriage and religious life, and itself founded on Baptism and Confirmation, is a state of perfection. This state demands the perfection of charity, bestowed by frequent and daily Eucharist. The counsel of daily Communion thus proves to be that of Eucharistic perfection in charity. It therefore constitutes the culmination of both evangelisation and the entire organic and sacramental economy of salvation. By encouraging daily sacramental participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice, the Second Vatican Council thus promoted a stable state of life—the Christian life—with a view to the eternal perfection of the baptised and confirmed.

⁸ SUAREZ, *De Religione*, tract. 7, Opera omnia, ed. Vivès, §§ 7–18; cf. B. de MARGERIE, *Daily Communion and Frequent Confession*, Résiac (Mayenne), 1988, pp. 35–36, §§ 42–43.