

THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 2—XV. Of the worthy receiving of the Sacrament

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[0 : 00] and homily of the worthy receiving and reverent esteeming of the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ. The great love of our Saviour Christ towards mankind, good Christian people, doth not only appear in that dear bought benefit of our redemption and salvation by his death and passion, but also in that he so kindly provided that the same most merciful work might be had in continual remembrance, to take some place in us, and not be frustrate of his end and purpose.

For his tender parents are not content to procure for their children costly possessions and livelihood, but take order that the same might be conserved and come to their use. So our Lord and Saviour thought it not sufficient to purchase for us his Father's favour again, which is that deep fountain of all goodness and eternal life, but also invented the ways most wisely whereby they might redound to our commodity and profit.

Amongst the which means is the public celebration of the memory of his precious death at the Lord's table, which although it seem of small virtue to some, yet being rightly done by the faithful, it doth not only help their weakness, who be by their poison nature readier to remember injuries than benefits, but strengtheneth and comforteth their inward man with peace and gladness, and maketh them thankful to their Redeemer with diligent care of godly conversation.

And as of old time God decreed his wondrous benefits of the deliverance of his people to be kept in memory by the eating of the Passover with his rites and ceremonies, so our loving Saviour hath ordained and established the remembrance of his great mercy expressed in his Passion in the institution of his heavenly supper, where every one of us must be guests and not gazers, eaters and not lookers, feeding ourselves and not hiring other to feed for us, that we may live by our own meat and not perish for hunger while others devour all.

To this his commandment forceth us, saying, Do ye thus, drink ye all of this. To this his promise enticeth us. This is my body, which is given for you.

[1 : 57] This is my blood, which is shed for you. So then, as of necessity we must be ourselves partakers of this table, not beholders of others. So we must address ourselves to frequent the same in reverent and due manner, lest, as physic provided for the body, being misused, more hurteth than profiteth.

So this comfortable medicine of the soul, undecently received, tend to our greater harm and sorrow. As St. Paul saith, He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh his own damnation.

Wherefore, that it be not said to us, as it was to the guest of that great supper, Friend, how camest thou in not having the marriage garment? And that we may fruitfully use St. Paul's counsel, let a man prove himself, and so eat of that bread and drink of that cup.

We must certainly know that three things be requisite in him which would seemly, as becometh such high mysteries, resort to the Lord's table. That is, a right and a worthy estimation and understanding of this mystery.

Secondly, to come in a sure faith. And thirdly, to have newness or pureness of life to succeed the receiving of the same. But before all other things, this we must be sure of specially, that this supper be in such wise done and ministered, as our Lord and Saviour did and commanded to be done, as his holy apostles used it, and the good fathers in the primitive church frequented it.

[3 : 17] For as that worthy man St. Ambrose saith, He is unworthy the Lord, that otherwise doth celebrate that mystery than it was delivered by him. Neither can he be devout, that otherwise doth presume than it was given by the author.

We must need then take heed, lest of the memory it be made a sacrifice, lest of a communion it be made a private eating, lest of two parts we have but one, lest applying it for the dead we lose the fruit that be alive.

Let us rather in these matters follow the advice of Cyprian in the like cases, that is, cleave fast to the first beginning, hold fast the Lord's tradition, do that in the Lord's commemoration which he himself did, he himself commanded, and his apostles confirmed.

This caution or foresight if we use, then may we see to those things that be requisite in the worthy receiver, whereof this was the first, that we have a right understanding of the thing itself.

As concerning which thing, this we may assuredly persuade ourselves, that the ignorant man can neither worthily esteem, nor effectually use those marvellous graces and benefits offered and exhibited in that supper, but either will lightly regard them to no small offence, or utterly condemn them to his utter destruction, so that by his negligence he deserveth the plagues of God to fall upon him, and by contempt he deserveth everlasting perdition.

[4 : 37] To avoid then these harms, use the advice of the wise man, which willett thee, when thou sittest at an earthly king's table, to take diligent heed what things are set before thee.

So now much more, at the king of kings' table, thou must carefully search and know what dainties are provided for thy soul, whither thou art come, not to feed thy senses and belly to corruption, but thy inward man to immortality and life, not to consider the earthly creatures which thou seest, but the heavenly graces which thy faith beholdeth.

For this table is not, saith Chrysostom, for chattering jays, but for eagles, who flee thither, where the dead body lieth. And if this advertisement of men cannot persuade us to resort to the Lord's table with understanding, see the counsel of God in the like matter, who charged his people to teach their posterity, not only the rites and ceremonies of his Passover, but the cause and end thereof, whence we may learn that both more perfect knowledge is required at this time at our hands, and that the ignorant cannot with fruit and profit exercise himself in the Lord's sacraments.

But to come nigh to the matter, St. Paul, blaming the Corinthians for the profaning of the Lord's supper, concludeth that ignorance both of the thing itself and the signification thereof was the cause of their abuse, for they came thither unreverently, not discerning the Lord's body.

Ought not we then, by the munion of the wise man, by the wisdom of God, by the fearful example of the Corinthians, to take advised heed, that we thrust not ourselves to this table with rude and unreverent ignorance, the smart whereof Christ's church hath rude and lamented these many days and years.

[6 : 12] For what hath been the cause of the ruin of God's religion, but the ignorance hereof? What hath been the cause of this gross idolatry, but the ignorance hereof? What hath been the cause of this mummish massing, but the ignorance hereof?

Yea, what has been, and what is at this day, the cause of this want of love and charity, but the ignorance hereof? Let us therefore so travail to understand the Lord's supper, that we be no cause of the decay of God's worship, of no idolatry, of no dumb massing, of no hate and malice, so may we the boldier have access thither to our comfort.

Neither need we to think that such exact knowledge is required of every man, that he be able to discuss all high points in the doctrine thereof, but thus much he must be sure to hold, that in the supper of the Lord there is no vain ceremony, no bare sign, no untrue figure of a thing absent, but as the scripture saith, the table of the Lord, the bread and cup of the Lord, the memory of Christ, the annunciation of his death, yea, the communion of the body and blood of the Lord, in a marvellous incorporation, which by the operation of the Holy Ghost, the very bond of our conjunction with Christ, is through faith wrought in the souls of the faithful, whereby not only their souls live to eternal life, but they surely trust to win to their bodies a resurrection to immortality.

The true understanding of this fruition and union, which is betwixt the body and the head, betwixt the true believers and Christ, the ancient Catholic fathers, both perceiving themselves and commending to their people, were not afraid to call this supper, some of them, the salve of immortality, a sovereign preservative against death, others a deifical communion, others the sweet dainties of our Saviour, the pledge of eternal health, the defence of faith, the hope of the resurrection, other than the food of immortality, the healthful grace, and the conservatory to everlasting life.

All which sayings both of the Holy Scripture and godly men truly attributed to this celestial banquet and feast, if we would often call to mind, oh how would they inflame our hearts to desire the participation of these mysteries, and oftentimes to covet after this bread, continually to thirst for this food, not especially regarding the terrene and earthly creatures which remain, but always holding fast and cleaving by faith to the rock, whence we may suck the sweetness of everlasting salvation.

[8 : 34] And to be brief, thus much more the faithful see, hear and know, the faithful mercies of God sealed, the satisfaction by Christ towards us confirmed, the remission of sin established.

Here they may feel wrought the tranquillity of conscience, the increase of faith, the strengthening of hope, the large spreading abroad of brotherly kindness, with many other sundry graces of God, the taste whereof they cannot attain unto, who be drowned in the deep dirty lake of blindness and ignorance.

From the which, oh beloved, wash your souls with the living waters of God's word, whence you may perceive and know both the spiritual food of this costly supper, and the happy trustings and effects that the same doth bring with it.

Now it followeth to have with this knowledge a sure and constant faith, not only that the death of Christ is available for the redemption of all the world, for the remission of sins, and reconciliation with God the Father, but also that he hath made upon his cross a full and sufficient sacrifice for thee, a perfect cleansing of thy sins, so that thou acknowledgest no other saviour, redeemer, mediator, advocate, intercessor, but Christ only, and that thou mayest say with the apostle that he loved thee and gave himself for thee, for this is to stick fast to Christ's promise made in his institution, to make Christ thine own, and to applicate his merits unto thyself.

Herein thou needest no other man's help, no other sacrifice or oblation, no sacrificing priest, no mass, no means established by man's invention. That faith is a necessary instrument in all these holy ceremonies we may thus assure ourselves, for that, as St. Paul saith, without faith it is impossible to please God.

[10 : 14] When a great number of the Israelites were overthrown in the wilderness, Moises, Aaron, and Phineas did eat manna, and please God, for that they understood, saith St. Augustine, the visible meat spiritually.

Spiritually they hungered it, spiritually they tasted it, that they might be spiritually satisfied. And truly, as the bodily meat cannot feed the outward man, unless it be let into a stomach to be digested, which is healthsome and sound, no more can the inward man be fed, except his meat be received into his soul and heart, sound and whole in faith.

Therefore, saith Cyprian, when we do these things, we need not to wet our teeth, but with sincere faith we break and divide that holy bread. It is well known that the meat we seek for in this supper is spiritual food, the nourishment of our soul, a heavenly refection, and not earthly, an invisible meat, and not bodily, a ghostly sustenance, and not carnal, so that to think that without faith we may enjoy the eating and drinking thereof, or that that is the fruition of it, is but to dream a gross carnal feeding, basely objecting and binding ourselves to the elements and creatures, whereas by the advice of the Council of Nicene we ought to lift up our minds by faith, and leaving these inferior and earthly things, there seek it where the sun of righteousness ever shineth.

Take then this lesson, O thou that art desirous of this table, of Emacenus, the godly father, that, when thou goest up to the reverend communion to be satisfied with spiritual meats, thou look up with faith upon the holy body and blood of thy God, thou marvel with reverence, thou touch it with thy mind, thou receive it with the hand of thy heart, and thou take it fully with thy inward man.

Thus we see, beloved, that resorting to this table we must pluck up all the roots of infidelity, all distrust in God's promises, we must make ourselves living members of Christ's body, for the unbelievers and faithless cannot feed upon that precious body, whereas the faithful have their life, their abiding in him, their union, and as it were, their incorporation with him.

[12 : 19] Wherefore, let us prove and try ourselves unfaignedly, without flattering ourselves, whether we be plants of that fruitful olive, living branches of the true vine, members indeed of Christ's mystical body, whether God hath purified our hearts by faith to the sincere acknowledging of his gospel and embracing of his mercies in Christ Jesus, that so at this his table we receive not only the outward sacrament, but the spiritual thing also, not the figure, but the truth, not the shadow only, but the body, not to death, but to life, not to destruction, but to salvation, which God grant us to do thorough the merits of our Lord and Saviour, to whom be all honour and glory forever.

Amen. In the homily of late rehearsed unto you, ye have heard, good people, why it pleased our Saviour Christ to institute that heavenly memory of his death and passion, and that every one of us ought to celebrate the same at his table in our own persons and not by other.

You have heard also with what estimation and knowledge of so high mysteries we ought to resort thither. You have heard with what constant faith we should clothe and deck ourselves, that we might be fit and decent partakers of that celestial food.

Now followeth the third thing necessary in him that would not eat of this bread, nor drink of this cup unworthily, which is newness of life and godliness of conversation. For newness of life as fruits of faith are required in the partaker of this table.

We may learn by the eating of the typical lamb, whereunto no man was admitted, but he that was a Jew, that was circumcised, that was before sanctified. Yea, St. Paul testifieth that although all the people were partakers of the sacraments under Moses, yet for that some of them were still worshippers of images, whoremongers, tempters of Christ, murmurers, and coveting after evil things, God overthrew those in the wilderness, and that for our example, that is, that we Christians should take heed we resort unto our sacraments with holiness of life, not trusting in the outward receiving of them, and infected with corrupt and uncharitable manners.

[14 : 21] For this sentence of God must always be justified, I will have mercy and not sacrifice. Wherefore, saith Basil, it behoveth him that cometh to the body and blood of Christ in commemoration of him that died and rose again, not only to be pure from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, lest he eat and drink to his condemnation, but also to show out evidently a memory of him that died and rose again for us, in this point, that he be mortified to sin and the world, to live now to God in Christ Juju our Lord.

So then we must show outward testimony in following the signification of Christ's death, amongst the which this is not esteemed least, to render thanks to Almighty God for all his benefits briefly comprised in the death, passion, and resurrection of his dearly beloved Son.

The which thing, because we ought chiefly at this table to solemnize, the godly fathers named it Eucharistia, that is, thanksgiving, as if they should have said, Now, above all other times, ye ought to lord and praise God, Now may ye behold the matter, the cause, the beginning, and the end of all thanksgiving.

Now, if ye slack, ye show yourselves most unthankful, and that no other benefit can ever stir you to thank God, who so little regard here so many, so wonderful, and so profitable benefits.

Seeing then that the name and thing itself doth monish us of thanks, let us, as St. Paul saith, offer always to God the host or sacrifice of praise by Christ, that is, the fruit of the lips which confess his name, for as David singeth, he that offereth to God thanks and praise honoureth him.

[15 : 55] But how few be there of thankful persons in comparison to the unthankful. Lo, ten lepers in the gospel were healed, and but one returned to give thanks for his health. Yea, happy it were if among forty communicants we could see too unfaindely to give thanks.

So unkind we be, so oblivious we be, so proud beggars we be, that partly we care not for our own commodity, partly we know not our duty to God, and chiefly we will not confess all that we receive.

Yea, and if we be forced by God's power to do it, yet we handle it so coldly, so dryly, that our lips praise him, but our hearts dispraise him, our tongues bless him, but our life curseth him, our words worship him, but our works dishonour him.

O let us therefore learn to give God here thanks aright, and so to acknowledge his exceeding graces poured upon us, that they, being shut up in the treasure house of our heart, may in due time and season in our life and conversation appear to the glorifying of his holy name.

Furthermore, for newness of life, it is to be noted that St. Paul writeth that we being many are one bread and one body, for all be partakers of one bread, declaring thereby not only our communion with Christ, but that unity also wherein they that eat at this table should be knit together, for by dissension, vainglory, ambition, strife, envying, contempt, hatred, or malice, they should not be dissevered, but so joined by the bond of love in one mystical body as the corns of that bread in one loaf, in respect of which straight knot of charity the true Christians in the tender time of Christ's church call this supper love, as if they would say none ought to sit down there that were out of love and charity, who bore grudge and vengeance in his heart, who also did not profess his kind affection by some charitable relief for some part of the congregation, and this was their practice, O heavenly banquet then so used, O godly guests who so esteem this feast, but O wretched creatures that we be at these days, who be without reconciliation of our brethren whom we have offended, without satisfying them whom we have caused to fall, without any kind thought or compassion toward them whom we might easily relieve, without any conscience of slander, disdain, misreport, division, rancor, or inward bitterness, yea, being accumbered with the cloaked hatred of Cain, with the long-covered malice of Esau, with the dissembled falsehood of Joab, dare yet presume to come up to these sacred and fearful mysteries,

[18 : 25] O man, whither rushest thou unadvisedly? It is a table of peace, and thou art ready to fight. It is a table of singleness, and thou art imagining mischief. It is a table of quietness, and thou art given to debate.

It is a table of pity, and thou art unmerciful. Dost thou neither fear God, the maker of this feast, nor reverence his Christ, their affection and meat, nor regardest his spouse, his beloved guest, nor weighest thine own conscience, which is sometime thine inward accuser?

Wherefore, O man, tender thine own salvation, examine and try thy goodwill and love towards the children of God, the members of Christ, the heirs of the heavenly heritage, yea, towards the image of God, the excellent creature thine own soul?

If thou have offended, now be reconciled. If thou have caused any to stumble in the way of God, now set them up again. If thou have disquieted thy brother, now pacify him.

If thou have wronged him, now relieve him. If thou have defrauded him, now restore to him. If thou have nourished spite, now embrace friendship. If thou have fostered hatred and malice, now openly show thy love and charity.

[19 : 33] Yea, be pressed and ready to procure thy neighbour's health of soul, wealth, commodity and pleasure as thine own. Deserve not the heavy and dreadful burden of God's displeasure for thine evil will towards thy neighbour, so unreverently to approach to this table of the Lord.

Last of all, as there is here the mystery of peace and the sacrament of Christian society, whereby we understand what sincere love ought to be betwixt the true communicants, so here be the tokens of pureness and innocency of life, whereby we may perceive that we ought to purge our own soul from all uncleanness, iniquity and wickedness, lest when we receive the mystical bread, as Origen saith, we eat it in an unclean place, that is, in a soul defiled and polluted with sin.

In Moises' law, the man that did eat of the sacrifice of thanksgiving with his uncleanness upon him should be destroyed from his people, and shall we think that the wicked and sinful person shall be excusable at the table of the Lord?

We both read in St. Paul that the church at Corinth was scourged of the Lord for misusing the Lord's Supper, and we may plainly see Christ's church these many years miserably vexed and oppressed for the horrible profanation of the same.

Wherefore let us all, universal and singular, behold our own manners and lives to amend them. Yea, now at the least let us call ourselves to an account, that it may grieve us of our former evil conversation, that we may hate sin, that we may sorrow and mourn for our offences, that we may with tears pour them out before God, that we may with sure trust, desire and crave the salve of his mercy, bought and purchased with the blood of his dearly beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to heal our deadly wounds withal.

[21 : 12] For surely, if we do not with earnest repentance cleanse the filthy stomach of our soul, it must needs come to pass that, as wholesome meat received into a raw stomach corrupteth and marroth all, and is the cause of further sickness, so we shall eat this healthsome bread and drink this cup to our eternal destruction.

Thus we, and not other, must thoroughly examine, and not lightly look over, ourselves, not other men, our own conscience, not other men's lives, which we ought to do uprightly, truly, and with just correction.

O Seth St. Chrysostom, let no Judas resort to this table, let no covetous person approach. If any be a disciple, let him be present. For Christ saith, With my disciples I make my Passover.

Why cried the deacon in the primitive church, If any be holy, let him draw near. Why did they celebrate these mysteries, the choir door being shut? Why were the public penitents and learners in religion commanded at this time to avoid?

Was it not because this table receiveth no unholy, unclean, or sinful guest? Wherefore, if servants dare not presume to an earthly master's table whom they have offended, let us take heed we come not with our sins unexamined into this presence of our Lord and Judge.

[22 : 26] If they be worthy blame who kissed the prince's hand with a filthy and unclean mouth, shalt thou be blameless, which with a filthy, stinking soul, full of covetousness, fornication, drunkenness, pride, full of wretched cogitations and thoughts, dost breathe out iniquity and uncleanness on the bread and cup of the Lord.

Thus you have heard how you should come reverently and decently to the table of the Lord, having the knowledge out of his word of the thing itself and the fruits thereof, bringing a true and constant faith, the root and wellspring of all newness of life, as well in praising God, loving our neighbour, as purging our own conscience from filthiness, so that neither the ignorance of the thing shall cause us to contemn it, nor unfaithfulness make us void of fruit, nor sin and iniquity procure us God's plagues, but shall, by faith in knowledge and amendment of life in faith, be here so united to Christ our head and his mysteries to our comfort, that after we shall have full fruition of him indeed to our everlasting joy and eternal life, to the which he bring us that died for us and redeemed us, Jesus Christ the righteous, to whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one true and eternal God, be all praise, honour and dominion for ever.

Amen.