

**THE HOLY COMMUNION
ITS PHILOSOPHY,
THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE,
VOL. II, PP. 199-480**

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The Holy Communion its philosophy, theology and practice, Vol. II, pp. 199-480 by John Bernard Dalgairns & Allan Ross

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JOHN BERNARD DALGAIKNS & ALLAN ROSS

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THE HOLY COMMUNION

ITS PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, & PRACTICE

BY JOHN BERNARD DALGAIRNS

Priest of the Oratory of St Philip Neri

EDITED BY ALLAN ROSS

Priest of the same Congregation

Διψῶ τὸ διψᾶσθαι ὁ Θεός.

Sitit sitiri Deus.

ST GREGORY NAZIANZEN.

VOLUME II

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PART III. THE PRACTICE OF HOLY COMMUNION

CHAPTER I. HISTORY OF COMMUNION

WE have now finished the theoretical part of our task, and we may proceed at once to lay down practical rules to guide us in the administration or reception of the Blessed Sacrament. There is, however, an intermediate process, which cannot fail to help us very much in this further part of our labours. Nothing can be of such assistance to us in assigning a criterion for the frequency of Holy Communion as to trace its history, and to see according to what standard the varying discipline of the Church on the subject was regulated. We know, of course, that the Church desires her children to approach frequently, even daily, to receive the Bread of Life, if they are fit for it; yet we know also that saints have at various times counselled and adopted in their own persons very different rules for the reception of the Holy Eucharist. Let us see, then, whether we can make out, from the actual practice of the faithful in different ages, any principles for our own guidance in this matter. I believe, after a careful consideration of the facts of the case, we shall come to the conclusion that in measuring the rate of frequency of communion, spiritual directors in practice have not considered exclusively the amount of sanctity in the faithful, but also the amount of the dangers and temptations in which, from the circumstances of the time, they were placed.

All history has lately become more living and familiar. Circumstances which, in ancient times, were considered beneath the dignity of history, are now continually found in the pages of the historian. No one is now satisfied with records and descriptions of battles and sieges, of treaties and partitions of territory, of the public life of kings and emperors. Now we all long to look into the living heart of the generations which are gone, to treat them as beings of flesh and blood like ourselves, and to know how they lived and how they felt and suffered. Something of the same sympathy with the past ought surely to be found in the ecclesiastical historian. We cannot help desiderating in the pages of Fleury or of Orsi some notice of the intimate life of Christians of old. Above all, I believe every one would feel a breathless interest in any revelation of the interior life of the early Christians. Who, for instance, would not wish to evoke out of his long sleep any one of the martyrs, brought from the catacombs into our churches, and to ask him to reconstruct for us the life of those who bled and died with him for the cause of CHRIST? What were their devotions? what their method of prayers? had they any method at all? did they make their meditation every morning? did they go to confession every Saturday? how far were they like, how far unlike us in their trials and temptations, in their feelings and views? I at least confess to such a curiosity, and I believe I am not alone. I have known a good old Jesuit father at Rome shed tears of joy when a rudely-painted Madonna was found in the catacombs, with her hands lifted up in the attitude of a

priest at Mass, telling a touching tale of the devotion to Mary of the saints of old. No geologist has ever gloated over the leaf of a bygone flora or the footprints of some extinct kind of bird in the old red sandstone, with half the eagerness that we gather up the least echo of a hymn sung at the lighting of lamps, in primitive times, when the Church was growing dark, or the smallest indication, in some fragment of a Father, as to how the early Christians lived their daily life.

It is not often that we can satisfy our curiosity. As the records of living things in the first period of the young earth, if there were any, are said to have been destroyed in the heat of its primeval fire, so many a document which would tell us of the life of the first Christians perished in the times of persecution. There seems to be a providential reason for this destruction of ancient records. Our LORD would seem to wish to avert the eyes of Christians from dead tradition to living authority. While enough is left to show that the early Christians were Catholics, not enough remains to base our faith solely on the history of the past. More than sufficient remains to prove the identity of the ancient and modern Church; yet the attempt to make the Church of the Fathers the only standard of Christian truth becomes simply absurd, when there are too few Fathers to enable us to construct out of them a complete account of the faith and practice of the first centuries.

One thing, however, if nothing else, is perfectly clear in the lives of the early Christians. A whole revelation of their interior is contained in the fact of their intense devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. The

records of primitive times point to their daily Mass and Communion. Many a long year passed over before the touching description of the early Church, in the Acts of the Apostles, ceased to apply to Christians, that their chief characteristics were their perseverance in prayer and their breaking the Eucharistic bread. The one thing which can be made out with certainty from the catacombs is, that the centre and object of all devotion is the altar. For miles and miles under Rome extend the tortuous galleries, excavated with incredible labour out of the volcanic tufa, for the purpose of being able to offer up the Adorable Sacrifice. Not the costly pyramids, built by the hands of tens of thousands of captives, or the elaborately painted sepulchres of Egypt, prove more clearly that the people on the banks of the Nile had a religious reverence for the dead, than the immense catacombs, dug out under the throne of the Cæsars, by the spade of the poor worker in the sandpits, prove that the Christian's love all centres round the Adorable Sacrifice. If they could not have their daily Mass above ground, they must burrow under the earth to find it. Besides which, the daily Communion was an indispensable accompaniment to the Mass. There are documents which prove that all present at the Holy Sacrifice received the Holy Communion. A canon in the Apostolical constitutions pronounces censures against all who do not communicate at the Mass at which they assist. A council of Antioch, held under Pope Julius, enacts the same decree. And, even if it were proved that these canons only apply to the sacred ministers, still a well known passage of St Jerome points to