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THE
CHURCHMAN

DECEMBER, 1905.

ABOUT OURSELVES.

WITH the January number THE CHURCHMAN will enter not only upon a new volume, but also on a new series, which will be enlarged in size and produced in different type. With this enlargement will be associated some other changes which we believe will be regarded as distinct improvements. In the prospectus, which will be found enclosed with this number, our new plans are stated in greater detail, and we will only add here that nothing shall be wanting to make THE CHURCHMAN appeal as widely as possible to the life and interests of the large central body of Church of England clergy and laity. We feel sure that we may confidently appeal to our readers to second these efforts to increase the circulation and extend the influence of THE CHURCHMAN. Further copies of the prospectus will gladly be sent on application to the publisher, and we hope it is not too much to ask that each reader will endeavour to obtain at least one additional subscriber.

IS FASTING COMMUNION THE LAW OF THE
CHURCH ?

THERE are few questions of Church order which need more careful consideration than this by English Churchpeople at the present time. Many clergymen answer it without hesitation in the affirmative. They go so far as to say that it is better not to communicate at all than to do so after receiving even the smallest amount of food. And they maintain that this is no new opinion, but a rule dating from primitive, even

from Apostolic times, and therefore one with which no branch of the Christian Church is entitled to dispense. If this position can be sustained, it is clear that our whole system of public worship requires reconstruction. The Holy Communion cannot be the principal service of Sunday morning, except by regarding *presence* at it as equivalent to *participation* in it. The inevitable result will be either to relegate that Holy Sacrament to a position of less prominence than that of Morning Prayer, or to encourage an entirely wrong view of its nature in the minds of Churchmen in general. This is why the prevalence of rigorist teaching on this subject has excited so much alarm amongst many besides Evangelicals. The views of such Churchmen found expression in the able book written more than thirty years ago by the present Bishop of Fredericton. No adequate answer to that book has ever appeared, but the teaching whose fallacy it exposes continues to be widely given. The present writer does not claim to add anything to Bishop Kingdon's powerful arguments, but hopes to show their bearing on the present state of the question, and to induce other readers to study the matter for themselves.

The first thing to be clear about is what the question really is. It is not one of the relative merits of early or late Communion, nor of the propriety of receiving the Holy Communion before ordinary food. It is whether there is a rule of the Church so clearly ordering such a practice that to act otherwise is disloyal. There is such a rule in the Church of Rome. What we have to consider is whether it binds the Church of England. If it does, it must be because it is one of those very few customs which can claim to have been observed "everywhere, always, and by all Churches"; or because it has been enacted by one of those General Councils which the Church of England recognises, or by that Church itself. I shall try to show that neither of these conditions is fulfilled.

I.

The first point to be considered is the origin of the rule itself. This involves two inquiries—first, as to how the practice arose; secondly, how the *practice* passed into a *rule*. For though there is no evidence of a rule of Fasting Communion before the very end of the fourth century, the practice probably existed at a somewhat earlier date. And its history sheds a good deal of light on the reason and meaning of the subsequent rule.

1. The practice of fasting before Holy Communion was reached by three well-marked steps.

The first of these was the change of the time of the celebration. In the Apostolic age the Holy Communion was certainly celebrated in the evening, in close connexion with a solemn meal known as the "Agapé," or "love-feast." But the two were soon separated, the celebration of Holy Communion taking place in the early morning, while the Agapé was taken in the evening, and a little later was dropped altogether. It is not certain when this change was made. If we could be sure that *sacramentum* in Pliny's famous letter to Trajan refers to the Holy Communion, we might conclude that when it was written (about A.D. 110) the change had already taken place. But the reference is not certain; and there are expressions in the nearly contemporary "Didaché" and in Ignatius' letter to the Smyrnæans which point to the connexion being still maintained. Justin Martyr, in the well-known description in his first "Apology" (A.D. 165), says nothing as to the hour of the celebration, but implies that it was a separate rite. In the time of Tertullian (A.D. 200) it was certainly so, for he says: "The Sacrament of the Eucharist, which was delivered by our Lord at the time of food, we receive in assemblies before daybreak" ("De Corona," Cap. III.). In another work ("Ad uxorem," ii. 5) he asks a wife "whether her husband will not know what it is that she tastes in secret before all food" (*ante omnem cibum*). These two passages are relied on by rigorists as proving the antiquity of Fasting Communion. But the first only refers to *early* Communion, and says nothing about fasting. The second—even if the last three words do not mean "before every meal"—refers to a practice of reserving the consecrated Sacrament for private reception at home. It therefore has no bearing on the present aspect of the question, since there is no suggestion of the revival of such a practice amongst ourselves. The evidence shows that *early* Communion became the custom before the end of the second century, and possibly during its first half, but is conclusive as to nothing more.

The next step was the discovery of a religious reason for this change. It had been adopted on purely practical grounds, and probably to avoid unnecessary interference with social customs, by holding religious services at a time when attendance at them would interfere with ordinary duties. But during the third century it acquired a religious significance as a commemoration of our Lord's resurrection in the early morning. A plain and early reference to this is found in Cyprian, who, in a letter to Cæcilius, says: "It behoved Christ to offer about the beginning of the day that the very hour of the sacrifice might show the falling and the evening

of the world. . . . But we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord in the morning."¹ Similar language is used about a century later by Gregory Nazianzen ("Orat.," xl., § 30). Neither of these great Fathers lays any stress on *Fasting Communion*; but their language is significant, as showing that a religious value was already attached to Communion at an early hour.

The first exhortation to fasting before Communion that I have been able to find was made by St. Ambrose. It occurs in his eighth sermon on Ps. cxix. (§ 48, on verse 62). The passage is too long for quotation here, and its meaning is not quite clear. Bishop Kingdon understands it as an exhortation to Communion preferably before food, but afterwards if that is impossible. But it seems to the present writer to be a definite injunction to communicate fasting, even if so doing entails some personal inconvenience. The fact that St. Ambrose makes such an exhortation surely shows that there was in his time (*circa* A.D. 370) no recognised rule. And it is significant that St. Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 350), whose catechetical lectures are the standard patristic authority on the Holy Eucharist, says nothing whatever about fasting before Communion, though he does mention it as a devout preparation for Baptism. This is the more remarkable, because his teaching on the Real Presence approaches more nearly than that of any other of the great Fathers to the materialism of the Middle Ages. The attitude of St. Chrysostom is noteworthy. One of the charges made against him by his enemies was that he had celebrated the Holy Communion after taking food. He denies this, and says that, if he did so, his name may be struck off the roll of Bishops, and out of the Book of Life. But he goes on to say that the same course will have to be taken with regard to St. Paul, and even to our Lord Himself—an addition which considerably modifies the meaning of the first part.² Elsewhere he lays stress on the propriety of fasting *after* receiving,³ and in another place repudiates with much warmth the charge of having *baptized* persons after food.⁴ The upshot of these passages is that the great Archbishop fasted before Communion himself, thought it a highly desirable and reverent practice, and did *not* regard its omission as a deadly sin.

St. Augustine is even more decided in his opinion. In his

¹ Ep. lxii., Ante-Nicene Libr.

² Ep. cxxv. (vol. iii., 668, Paris edition).

³ Ep. i., Cor. Hom. xxviii.

⁴ Orat. ant. Exil., iii. 421.

letter to Januarius he says: "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost that, in honour of so great a Sacrament, the Lord's Body should enter the mouth of a Christian before other food, for on that account this custom is observed throughout the world."¹ This is decisive as to the opinion of the greatest of uninspired theologians, and as to the practice of the Church in his time. But it does not prove, as it is sometimes said to do, that he held it to be a practice dating from Apostolic times. The words *placuit spiritui sancto* probably allude to the "placet" of the Canon passed by the Council of Hippo a few years before this letter was written (A.D. 373).

II.

This Canon marks the first step by which the prevailing *practice* became a *law* of the Church. It was made to stop the disorders which had become scandalously common, especially at celebrations in commemoration of the dead. It runs: "The Sacraments of the altar shall be celebrated only by fasting men" (*a jejunis hominibus*), "except on the anniversary on which the Supper of the Lord is celebrated. For if the commendation of any dead person . . . has to be made in the afternoon, let it be made by prayers only, if those who make it are found already to have had luncheon" (*jam pransi inveniantur*). It will be seen that the contrasted terms are "jejunus" and "pransus," and this contrast has an important bearing on the interpretation of the Canon. A person would be within its meaning if he had not taken the "prandium"—the first full meal of the day. It was the practice at that time—as it still is in many parts of Europe—to take light refreshment, called the "jentaculum," at the beginning of the day, and two full meals—"prandium" and "cœna"—afterwards. Bishop Kingdon perhaps overstates the case in comparing the "jentaculum" to "the usual light English breakfast"; but he is probably right in saying that the Canon of Hippo, and those of some later Councils, would not have been broken by partaking of it.

In the two following centuries several Canons were passed ordering Communion to be received fasting. Their tendency was to make the rule more strict. One of the Council of Auxerre (A.D. 578) has a significant development. It runs: "It is not lawful for a priest, or deacon, or subdeacon, after partaking of food or drink, to take Masses, or to remain in Church while Masses are being said." This Canon goes a good deal farther than most rigorists would care to go now,

¹ Ad. Januar., Ep. cxviii.

forbidding, as it does, not only Communion, but presence at the Celebration, after partaking of food.

In England both the practice and the rule were later. The first clear evidence of the former is in Bede, who alludes to Fasting Communion as a custom of the universal Church. But the rule does not appear till the reign of Edgar, when a Canon was issued (assigned by Spelman to A.D. 967) ordering "that no one who is not fasting shall receive the Eucharist, unless on account of excessive illness." There are notices during the episcopates of Sudbury and Peckham which point to the rule of Fasting Communion, and the evidence certainly warrants the belief that it was enforced in England during the Middle Ages.

Lastly, we come to the existing rule in the Roman Missal. It is found in "De Defectibus," § ix., and certainly has the merit of being explicit. It runs: "If anyone has broken his fast since midnight, even by the taking of water only, or of any food or drink, even by way of medicine, and in however small a quantity, he can neither communicate nor celebrate." The origin of this rule is not certain. It is not in the Sarum Missal, though there are provisions in the "Cautelæ" which are nearly as strict. It has been ascribed to Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1270), and he certainly uses language strongly resembling it.¹ It may be remarked that in these he is answering supposed objections in a way that looks as if the rigorous rule was not fully accepted in his time. It was probably his immense authority that finally settled the question. At all events, this rule can lay claim to no greater antiquity. And it is this *Roman* rule of the *later Middle Ages* which is now declared in some quarters to be of Apostolic authority, and for ever binding on the whole Church!

III.

The question we have now to consider is how far, if at all, this claim can be admitted.

We may dismiss at once the stringent rule just quoted from the Roman Missal, though it is for nothing less than this that some of our rigorists contend. There is not a scrap of evidence to show that such a rule existed in the undivided Church. The reason for its adoption by the Church of Rome is clear enough. It is closely connected with the grossly material doctrine of the Real Presence in the Holy Eucharist known

¹ See especially Summa iii., Qu. lxxx., art. vii., §§ 4 and 5; and cf. Qu. lxxx., ver. 4, and II. 2, Qu. cxlvii. vi. 2.

as transubstantiation. If that doctrine be accepted, the Roman rule of Fasting Communion is reverent and reasonable. When that doctrine is rejected—as it is explicitly by the Church of England—this rigorous rule becomes unmeaning. The rule and the doctrine stand or fall together.

The much more moderate rule of the Council of Hippo stands on a different footing. It was made long before transubstantiation was heard of; its object was practical, not doctrinal, and its requirements were much less. So far from claiming to embody an unalterable custom of the primitive Church, it had direct reference to the evils then existing which it was intended to correct. It did indeed embody a most important principle, and one that is of perpetual obligation—viz., the need of approaching the Holy Sacrament in the condition most calculated to promote reverence. In the circumstances of the time, this was best secured by forbidding anyone to communicate after taking “prandium.” In its strictest interpretation, and supposing it to be still valid, it would only forbid Communion after a substantial meal.

But there remains the question as to the obligation even of this moderate rule in the Church of England at the present day. It has been argued that a very similar rule was made by more than one English Council, and has never been definitely repealed. It is therefore urged that some rule of Fasting Communion is still in force in the English Church. This is the line generally taken by the more moderate advocates of the practice amongst ourselves. The argument is a reasonable one, but there are two considerations which seriously diminish its weight.

The first of these is the principle generally accepted by canonists—that a Canon which has fallen into general disuse for forty years, and has not been enforced by authority, becomes obsolete. This, of course, applies only to Canons affecting *discipline*, for *doctrine* can never be obsolete, but must either be false or true. Nor can it be applied to rubrics in a book which is in legal use. These are binding on all those on whom the use of the book is enjoined. So the omission of a rubric at a revision of the book is a strong argument against the obligation of the practice which it enjoined. So the fact that the rubrics in the old service books ordering Fasting Communion were not inserted in the Prayer-Book goes a long way to show that they were not intended to be in force.¹

The second point is that, if these Canons are valid, they prove a good deal too much. For they have, of course,

¹ On this whole subject, see Kingdon, cap. iii.

exactly the same force as other Canons passed by the same Councils. There are just as clear prohibitions of Communion without Confession to a priest, or of two Celebrations by the same priest on the same day, as there are of Communion after food. And one of the very Canons of the reign of Edgar to which reference has been made forbids anyone in Holy Orders to "grow a beard, or allow himself to be incorrectly shaved if he hopes for the blessing of God." A rigorous insistence on the observance of this Canon might be inconvenient to many clergy at the present day. And it is very doubtful how far these Canons apply to the laity at all. In most cases they deal with matters concerning the clergy alone.

Our inquiry, therefore, leads us to this result—that there is no law or custom having the force of law which requires members of the Church of England to communicate fasting. This is a very different thing from the condemnation of such a practice. There are certainly persons to whom it does appear—as it did to Jeremy Taylor¹—to be a reverent custom, increasing the sanctity of the Sacrament. These are certainly right to communicate fasting when they can do so; and they deserve respect rather than reproach for persisting in a practice which may entail much inconvenience on themselves. It is a rule which they have a perfect right to make for themselves, but which they must not attempt to force on others. The duty of coming to the Holy Communion in a fit state of body as well as of mind is too obvious to need statement. But whether that fitness is increased or impaired by the previous partaking of food is a point which each communicant must determine for himself. And we have higher authority than that of Councils or Fathers for the law of Christian liberty—even the words of the inspired Apostle: "Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him that eateth not despise him that eateth. . . . Let every man be persuaded in his own mind."

BARTON R. V. MILLS.

¹ "Worthy Communicant," cap. vii.; "Life of Christ," discourse xiii.

