

Evening Communion.

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THIS paper has no partisan motive; the practice with which it deals is one which has, to our shame be it spoken, become little more than a party badge in the eyes of many; and there are those who would judge of a man's loyalty to the school of thought to which they belong by the simple test as to whether or no he is willing to accept this use. Surely this is nothing less than desecration; this Sacrament of our Salvation is far too holy a thing to be degraded into a mere partisan test. But, on the other hand, can it be a true honouring of the rite and of the Lord who ordained it to hedge it about with such restrictions and regulations as, under the circumstances of modern life, practically put it out of the reach of many to whom it must be an inestimable boon? This paper attempts partly to meet certain objections to this practice which seem to be invalid, and partly to vindicate Christian freedom in the matter.

“We have, I hope, got beyond the notion that the early Church objected to afternoon and evening celebration. The early Church in no sort of way objected to evening celebration *per se*.” With this explicit statement Father Puller brings to a head his investigations into the hour of celebrations in the pre-Reformation period. The most important evidence, much of which is owed to his paper,¹ must be briefly indicated. There is, of course, the fact that the institution of the rite took place in the evening; and it is not unworthy of notice that the most definite mention of the fact, “the Lord Jesus the same night in which He was betrayed” (1 Cor. xi. 23), occurs in the same epistle and the same chapter (xi. 34) as those words “the rest will I set in order when I come,” from which it was deduced, as early as the time of St. Augustine (“Ep. ad Januarium I.”), that St. Paul

¹ “On the Fast before Communion.”

transferred the celebration in the Corinthian Church to the morning (in order that it might be received fasting).

It cannot, indeed, be argued from the fact of the institution that evening celebration should be obligatory ; it cannot even be argued that the Church may not, for definite reasons, forbid evening celebration ; but I think that it is not unfair to conclude that there is nothing wrong in "evening celebration *per se*." Moreover, as long as the Eucharist was associated with the Agape, it must have been in the evening ; and Bishop Lightfoot argues from a passage in Ignatius (" Ep. ad. Smyrn.," c. viii.), in which βαπτίζειν and ἀγάπην ποιεῖν are placed side by side, as requiring the presence of the Bishop, that such association still persisted at Smyrna and Antioch down to A.D. 117. Pliny's letter (A.D. 112) shows that in Pontus the Eucharist and the Agape were already separate, the Eucharist apparently being celebrated in the morning, and the Agape being held at night, until the latter was discontinued at the Governor's own request.

But there is further clear evidence that under certain circumstances—*i.e.*, on fast days—the Eucharist was long celebrated in the afternoon or evening. The "Peregrinatio Silvix" (A.D. 386) shows that at Jerusalem celebrations on Wednesdays and Fridays were always at 3 p.m. (except in Lent, during which season there were no weekday celebrations, and Eastertide—*i.e.* Easter to Whitsuntide—when there were no fasts). The Capitulare of Theodulf of Orleans (c. A.D. 800), dealing with the Lenten Fast runs : "Men ought to come to Mass, and when they have heard Mass and Evensong, and have given their alms, then they may sit down to their meal" (Cap. Article 39), which makes it clear that Mass was said just before Evensong—*i.e.*, before sundown. Peter of Blois, Archdeacon of Bath (c. 1200), says in one of his sermons : "At fasting times the Office of the Mass is put off until after midday, in order that the abstinence from food may not be protracted till a later hour than 3 p.m. But in Lent the Altar Office is put off until after 3 p.m., in order that the refectio may be postponed until after Evensong"; while in the Eastern Church to the present day the great vigil service of Easter Eve

commences about 9 p.m., and the actual celebration takes place shortly after midnight, the Gospel being timed to be read just before twelve o'clock. "This varying of the hour of the celebration according to the character of the day," says Father Puller, "was undoubtedly the rule of the Church for at least twelve hundred years."

Enough has been said to show that, as far as the question of the time of the celebration is concerned, there can be no objection to afternoon or evening celebration on the score of Catholic use; for many opponents of the practice seem to take their stand upon the ground that evening celebrations *per se* are contrary to Catholic custom.

The real ground of objection, with which we must now deal, is the rule of the fast before Communion. With regard to its origin, St. Augustine claims the custom as universal and, apparently, apostolic. "For from that time (*ex hoc*) it has seemed good to the Holy Ghost that in honour of so great a Sacrament, the Body of the Lord should enter the mouth of a Christian before other food; and it is for this reason that the custom referred to is observed throughout the whole world" ("Epistle ad Januarium I."). As a witness for his own day, St. Augustine is unexceptionable, but traces of an earlier custom survived even to his day. Socrates ("Hist. Eccl.," v. 22), dealing with varieties of use, mentions that the Christians in the neighbourhood of Alexandria and in the Thebaid celebrated on Saturday evening (*μετὰ γὰρ τὸ εὐωχηθῆναι καὶ παντοίων ἐδεσμάτων ἐμφορηθῆναι, περὶ ἑσπέραν προσφέροντες, τῶν μυστηρίων μεταλαμβάνουσι*), and his only expression of disapprobation is the mild *οὐχ ὡς ἔθος Χριστιανοῖς*. This looks like a survival of the undoubtedly primitive practice of celebrating the Eucharist at the Agape, which clearly prevailed at Corinth in St. Paul's day (1 Cor. xi.), apparently at Antioch and Smyrna in the beginning of the second century, and in that Church (apparently Palestinian) to which we owe the Didache. Even granted that St. Augustine is right in his contention that St. Paul, among the things set in order at Corinth, did separate the Eucharist from the Agape, and

institute the fast, the rule cannot at first have been looked upon as of universal obligation, since half a century later Smyrna, which was in daily communication with Corinth, and Antioch, with little less frequent intercourse, had neither of them followed it. Stress must be laid on this point because, even if we grant what is only an inference of St. Augustine, that the fast before Communion was of apostolic initiation at Corinth, it is plain that in prominent centres of Church life, like Smyrna and Antioch, this rule only came to be looked upon as of binding validity at a considerably later date. Apostolic initiation of a custom in one Church passed not unnaturally into an apostolic injunction for the universal Church by a process common enough: reverence for such a figure as St. Paul would in the course of time elevate any advice or ruling of his in an individual case into a rule generally applicable; and this seems to be the utmost that can be safely asserted of the apostolic origin of the rule of fasting Communion. Moreover, it was always held possible to suspend the rule. Theophilus of Alexandria, when the Vigil of the Epiphany (a strict fast) coincided with Sunday, a festival, ordered that the Eucharist should be celebrated at 3 p.m., but that the faithful should partake of food in the morning in order to mark the day as a festival. Still more striking is the exception mentioned by St. Augustine himself; with a view to dramatizing the events of Holy Week, some of the Churches of North Africa celebrated the Eucharist on the evening of Maundy Thursday, and allowed Communion after receiving food.

What the primitive Church only gradually adopted, and what provincial Churches from time to time suspended, is a rule with which a national Church or province has power to dispense. "It seems to me," says Father Puller, "to be absolutely certain that our Bishops have full authority to dispense from the obligation of the rule of the Eucharistic fast. On the principles of the primitive Church, such an authority is inherent in the Episcopal office." And that which the individual Bishop may do for special cases in his diocese, the Bishops of a province may surely do for the general use of the province. As

far as the Province of Canterbury is concerned, this has been done. Eight resolutions dealing with the question were promulgated by the Upper House of Convocation of Canterbury at the Session of May 5, 1893. The first six deal with the history of the practice, recognizing (Resolution 4) "That from the close of the fourth century this regular and recognized usage was formulated in rules for the clergy and canons of local and provincial councils." Resolutions 7 and 8 are as follows: (7) "That at the Reformation the Church of England, in accordance with the principle of liberty laid down in Article XXXIV., ceased to require the Communion to be received fasting, though the practice was observed by many as a reverent and ancient custom, and as such is commended by several of her eminent writers and divines down to the present time." (8) "That, regard being had to the practice of the Apostolic Church in this matter, to teach that it is a sin to communicate otherwise than fasting is contrary to the teaching and spirit of the Church of England." These resolutions are sufficiently explicit; and they only proceed along the lines laid down by Roman casuists in dealing with one aspect of this very question—viz., the administration of the Easter Communion to non-fasting sick people who are not in danger of death. One such writer, in notes to Gury's "Compendium Theologiæ Moralis," published at Rome in 1877, writes, "Et quidem juxta doctissimos theologos Romæ interrogatos, *nullum dubium est*, quoad casum Communionis annuæ seu Paschalis, quæ non mero jure Ecclesiastico, sed etiam Divino præcipitur, *quia divinum mandatum humano præstantius est.*" Nothing further need be asked than the two frank admissions of the last clause—viz., that the rule of fasting Communion is a "mandatum humanum," and that as such it must give way before a "mandatum divinum."

Let us now return to the question of evening celebration. Nothing can be clearer than the hour of a celebration may be varied in strictest accord with Catholic custom, and that *per se* evening celebrations are in no way contrary to it; further, the position of the Church of England with regard to fasting Communion is clear—she does not exact it, but leaves the matter to the individual

conscience. On what ground, then, are those who under plea of urgency (and with that we will deal directly) celebrate in the evening to be condemned? It may be replied, on the ground of irregular introduction. But was the introduction so hopelessly irregular? In November, 1851, the Leeds Ruri-decanal Chapter, under the presidency of Dean Hook, adopted a report from which the following words may be quoted: "It has been deeply impressed upon us that the paucity of attenders at the Holy Communion is in a considerable degree due to its celebration at a time when it is most inconvenient to the humbler classes, and effectually prevents the attendance of the wives and mothers amongst our poorer brethren. Your committee do not believe that by such an arrangement (*i.e.*, evening celebration) any rule of the Church would be infringed, whilst it would allow many of the working classes who are now virtually debarred from that ordinance to approach the Table of the Lord."

It may be admitted that a Ruri-decanal Chapter is not the highest ecclesiastical authority. Strictly speaking, it would have been more orderly to wait for the action, shall we say, of Convocation in the matter; but is it quite beside the point to ask whether the reintroduction of customs, contrary to the existing use of the Church, and contrary to one interpretation of the law of the Church—as, for example, the use of the Eucharistic vestments—had the authority even of a Ruri-decanal Chapter? Or, further, to inquire in how many churches their use would now prevail if the sanction of Convocation to such an innovation upon the existing use of the Church had been awaited?

It is sometimes alleged that the practice is contrary to the intention of the Prayer-Book as expressed in its rubrics and arrangements; but such strictness of interpretation, applied in a slightly different direction, tells with equal force against early celebrations. What can be more obvious from the relation of the Second Lesson at Morning Prayer to the Gospels on Palm Sunday and Good Friday than that it is the intention of the Church that Morning Prayer shall precede the celebration, an arrangement which is dislocated by an early celebration. But

few would be found to press this clear argument against the practice of early celebration.

Let us now turn to the question of urgency, on which alone must rest the justification or the introduction of the practice. No reasonable man would willingly break with the past, save under the pressure of a real need ; and while it has been shown that there are precedents for late celebration in pre-Reformation times, it must be frankly admitted that there are features about Evening Communion which constitute it, from some points of view, an innovation. But it may fairly be claimed that there is here real urgency. The Bishop of Oxford in a recent utterance exhorted Church-people to set their faces against late hours on Saturday night. That this is sound advice to people of leisure, and people who are more or less masters of their own time, we freely admit ; but can the majority of those to whom most of us are called upon to minister be truly so described ? We often fail to recognize the change which has come over the habits of the whole of Western Europe, as the result of the introduction of cheap and effective illuminants—a change, which, little less than a revolution, has proceeded so quietly and gradually that it is only perceived when a considerable period of years is passed under review. The change is reflected in matters ecclesiastical. Sixty years ago Evensong was almost invariably said on Sunday afternoon ; to-day such a practice is confined to the remoter country districts, or to the dignified and conservative leisure of our great cathedrals ; and these cathedrals, when their chapters desire to make them minister to the needs of the populations in which they stand, have been driven to supplement the choir service of the afternoon by an evening nave service. And this revolution must surely be taken into account by the Church in the provision which she makes for the wants of her members. The discipline and self-denial demanded in rising for an early celebration is a very excellent thing ; but there are considerations of health, in the case of the shop-assistant who has been up till midnight and even later through no fault of her own ; there are considerations (not to be put on one side without thought) of convenience, in the case of young communicants

drawn from homes in the ordering of which religion plays but a very small part ; there are considerations as to what best conduces to the calm and devotional frame of mind in which the holy rite should be approached. To most of us the early morning seems obviously to present the required conditions, before the work of the day has brought distraction ; but is this the case with the mother of a large family, on whom devolve all the cares and duties of a working-man's house. If the testimony of such, both explicitly given and implicitly shown by their habits, be admitted, the evening, when the day's work is done, and the little ones are in bed and asleep, is the time when the mind is freest from care and distraction. There are considerations due to the exhaustion produced by pressure of daily life and work. The head of a large firm (I speak of no imaginary case) who is working fifteen hours a day all through the week is not at his freshest at 8 a.m. on Sunday morning, nor is his plea of the need of bodily rest to be lightly set on one side. The plea of "beginning the day with God" is after all a purely sentimental one, and the idea which it presupposes that a man is at his freshest and best in the early hours of Sunday morning is one which is sadly out of accord with the hard facts of modern life. The beauty of the ideal may be admitted, the value of the principle of self-denial which underlies it must be recognized ; but an ideal which is made binding by external authority, a principle which is imposed from without, loses its essential character and value, which consist in the call that it makes to the free choice of those before whom it is set ; they cease to be ideals or principles, and become a law.

Those who minister in holy things have to be very watchful lest, by lack of sympathy and understanding of the very varied lives of those whom they serve, they incur the condemnation of binding upon men burdens hard to be borne ; and lest, by their very anxiety to honour that which they hold sacred, they hedge it about with restrictions so exacting that by them they hinder men from obeying the Divine command, and keep those who most need its sustenance from partaking of the spiritual food of the Bread of Life.