

Fasting Communion.

UNTIL the last fifty years the subject of Fasting Communion attracted very little attention, even among devout and well-instructed Churchpeople.

Fasting reception does not appear to have been regarded as a duty by the early leaders of the Oxford Movement. In the long tract on Fasting by Dr. Pusey, which was published as No. 18 of the "Tracts for the Times," although the writer insists on the duty of observing the Church's rule of fasting, and states in considerable detail the times and seasons prescribed for fasting, and although he also speaks of the importance of more frequent celebrations of the Holy Communion than was the general custom at the time at which he wrote, he never so much as mentions a fast before reception. In a supplement to this tract, published in the following year, he does refer to the practice, but in such a way as to make it quite clear that at that time he did not regard it as a rule of universal obligation. In answering the objection that fasting was dangerous to health, he wrote: "A poor woman mentioned, with much respect, her father's practice never to taste food before receiving the Lord's Supper (adhering unconsciously to the practice of the universal Church in its better days, and indeed of our own in Bishop Taylor's time); she added: 'I never heard that his bodily health suffered from it.'"

Although it is highly probable that at the time of the publication of the "Tracts for the Times" there were some who observed the custom of Fasting Communion, it was not until somewhat later that the practice was recommended as one for general adoption by members of the Church of England. The recommendation was made mainly on two grounds: (1) Because, as it was urged, the practice was in accordance with the mind of the Church Universal; (2) because it was regarded as an act of special reverence to the Holy Sacrament. It is now frequently asserted that the practice is a law of the

Church, the observance of which is obligatory upon all Church-people.

To some of those who were not brought up so to regard the matter this insistent assertion is a cause of some uneasiness. They are quite prepared to obey the law of the Church themselves, and to teach it to others, as soon as they can be quite clear in their own minds what the law of the Church in this matter really is. Insistent assertion is not proof. In fact, the very insistency of the assertion gives rise to the suspicion that it is based upon imperfect evidence. To a reasonable person, a clear and temperate setting forth of the evidence upon which a statement is based would be far more convincing than any amount of insistent assertion.

There have not been wanting learned clergy, of unimpeachable orthodoxy, who have expressed it as their opinion that there is no sufficient evidence that Fasting Communion is a rule of universal obligation. The late Bishop Webb, formerly of Grahamstown and afterwards Dean of Salisbury (whom the late Canon Body once called one of the greatest religious teachers of our time), was one of these. In the preface to a little volume of Ordination addresses, he wrote :

“In the course of the last address I have deprecated the well-meant, but, I am bound in conscience to add, for ourselves, unauthorized insistence upon fasting as a condition of worthy Communion. I have seen much evil resulting from this burden being laid upon some not able to bear it, and from the materialistic and irreverent notions resulting. For some communicants it would mean either very infrequent Communion or ‘slow suicide.’”

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“It requires some courage to lay oneself open to the charge of condoning laxity in these self-pleasing times, and making light of an ancient universal custom. The question, however, is not what an individual Bishop or priest may suppose to be right or necessary, but what are the conditions laid down by the Church in which we minister, and the principles upon which she has thought good to act. She could not dispense with the law of marriage within the forbidden degrees, but she can allow a matter of discipline to fall into desuetude in such a case as this, as has been done in other matters, and in reference to the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.”

These words were written in 1888. Shortly after this, the Upper House of the Canterbury Convocation appointed a

Committee of its own body to report on the question of Fasting Communion. The Committee consisted of Bishop Temple of London, Bishop Wordsworth of Salisbury, Bishop King of Lincoln, Bishop Ellicott of Gloucester, Bishop Stubbs of Oxford, Bishop Ridding of Southwell, Bishop Bickersteth of Exeter, and Bishop Davidson of Rochester. The Report of this Committee was presented to the Upper House of the Canterbury Convocation, discussed and adopted on May 5, 1893. The Report as adopted was as follows :

“ 1. That in the Apostolic Age the Holy Communion was administered in connection with the gathering together of Christians to share in an appointed evening meal.

“ 2. That the practice of communicating in the early morning appears to have arisen about the close of the first century, probably in order to secure a safer as well as a more reverent celebration, and, by the time of St. Cyprian, to have become so fully established that it was regarded, not only as the preferable, but as the proper practice, and as commemorative of the Lord's Resurrection.

“ 3. That the practice of communicating in the early morning, together with the common association of fasting with prayer, led to the practice of communicating only when fasting, and that fasting reception of the Communion became the regular and recognized usage of the Church about the end of the fourth century.

“ 4. That from the close of the fourth century this regular and recognized usage was formulated in rules for the clergy in canons of local and provincial councils.

“ 5. That fasting reception of the Communion was the prescribed rule of the Church of England during the Anglo-Saxon period, and continued to be so to the time of the Reformation.

“ 6. That these strict rules were, nevertheless, subject to relaxation in cases of sickness or other necessity.

“ 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.”

This Report was adopted, after an interesting debate, all the fifteen Bishops present voting for it, with the exception of Bishop Philpot of Worcester, who, in a learned argument,

which was evidently not considered convincing by his brother Bishops, had urged that there was no sufficient evidence for the historical statements in the second clause.

The pivot of the whole Report, as it affects our authoritative teaching, is in the 7th clause. If the "principle of Liberty laid down in Article XXXIV." is not sound, or if it cannot be rightly applied to the question under consideration, or if the principle is sound, and can be so applied, but if, at the same time, it is not true that "The Church of England . . . ceased to require the Communion to be received fasting," then the practical conclusion of the whole Report is valueless, and may be disregarded.

In considering the question before us, the whole of this Article should be borne in mind, for if the Church of England has not in point of fact changed or abolished the rule of Fasting Communion, anyone who ignores that rule "ought to be rebuked openly (that others may fear to do the like), as he that offendeth against the common order of the Church, and hurteth the authority of the Magistrate, and woundeth the consciences of the weak brethren."

A short time ago it became rather the fashion to belittle our Reformers, and to undervalue their work, including the Thirty-Nine Articles. It may not be unprofitable, therefore, to consider what Archbishop Benson had to say about this matter :

"I believe that it is of immense importance, never more so than now, to recognize that the Reformation of the Church of England was one of the greatest historical events—the greatest historical event, I think—in the history of the Church, and that it was conducted by persons of very high capacity and the very largest knowledge. Anyone who will look through almost any one of Cranmer's treatises and verify the quotations at the side, or anyone who will look over the volumes of his commonplace book in the Lambeth Library and in the British Museum, must see how extraordinarily stored they are with data and justifications of the principles of reformation from the literature of his own time and the ecclesiastical literature of all ages. He certainly was a most lucid reasoner; and he and his companions, if they had not taken their great stand as reformers, would have been accounted among the greatest schoolmen that the Church has ever known. If it had not been that they took a firmer and higher line for the sake of mankind, they would have been accounted, I say, among the greatest of schoolmen, and they

deliberately, not only in what is expressed in the Article, but in their whole treatment of subjects of the kind, asserted, and went on that principle which is laid down in Article XXXIV., the principle of liberty."

The rule of Fasting Communion has never been laid down in a Canon of a General Council. It has been laid down (*for the clergy*) in Canons of Provincial Synods, and it is arguable that, although a National Church has power to "ordain, change, and abolish ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority," yet until, by formal decree, a National Church definitely abrogates a rule laid down by a Provincial Synod, the Canon of the Synod remains in force. But, although such a principle may be advanced in argument, no one is prepared to act upon it, or to lay down a line of conduct, for himself or others, based upon it. To do so would lead to some remarkable results. Not only would the rule of fasting be obligatory upon everyone who either receives or administers the Sacrament of Baptism, but numerous regulations, as to conduct and dress, which no one professes to regard, would still have to be observed.

On the other hand, the argument that fasting reception cannot be necessary because the first Communion was after a meal, appears to me to be of no force whatever. The necessity of Fasting Communion is not urged on the ground that non-fasting reception invalidates the Sacrament, but that it violates a rule of the Church. If the Church has the right to direct that the Communion shall be received kneeling, although the Apostles received it reclining, she has also the right to direct that it shall be received fasting, although the Apostles were not fasting at the first reception.

The sole point at issue is whether this particular rule of the pre-Reformation Church is binding upon loyal members of the Church of England in the present day.

The late Bishop Collins discussed the authority of so-called "Catholic customs" in a learned pamphlet on "The Rights of a Particular Church in Matters of Practice," which was published as No. LXXXII. of the pamphlets of the Church Historical

Society. Every word of this pamphlet (like every other utterance of that saintly scholar) is worthy of careful attention. He wrote :

“ It is contended that a custom which has come to prevail throughout the whole Church is thenceforth stereotyped unless the whole Church should happen to agree to vary it. Such a contention practically means that the history of the Church is one of gradually increasing bondage, since it is plain that the difficulties in the way of such agreement on the part of the whole Church are and must be very great. Instead of being a growth into the liberty of the glory of the sons of God, it is a gradual deterioration into merely mechanical and lifeless uniformity, for the further the process goes, the less of liberty will there be.”

He then proceeded to show that every individual branch of the Church had in point of fact abandoned customs which had once been universal, and that even the unchanging East had not been free from innovations. Although some of the changes may not have been wholly desirable, no one would contend that they were all *ultra vires*.

“ In the face of facts such as these (and they are, after all, but specimens from a list which might be prolonged almost indefinitely) I fail to see how it is possible to contend that universal customs can only be abolished by the act of the whole Church.”

In the Convocation debate, the Bishops, one after another, expressed their strong conviction that the particular rule in question is not binding upon us now. Perhaps the clearest statement of their reasons for arriving at this conviction was that made by Bishop Creighton :

“ It would be an entire limitation of the practical power of the Church of England, as an independent branch of the Catholic Church, if we were to suppose or admit for a moment that the practice of the Church since the sixteenth century did not in itself establish an abrogation of customs which before that time had been in use. The real argument of those who maintain the view from which we dissent is an attempt to tie round us principles and usages of particular Churches in times of antiquity, and because they have not been by any formal decision of the Church of England abrogated, to suppose that they are still binding.”

The Bishops of the Church of England do not claim to be infallible. Although everyone would admit that all those who drew up the Report, and all the members of the Upper House

of the Canterbury Convocation who accepted it, were learned and pious men, they may have been honestly mistaken. But this at least must be said : we have no right to assume that they were mistaken, until we have individually gone through all the evidence ourselves.

What, then, would be the effect on our practice and teaching of a cordial acceptance of the Report? Obviously, so far as our own practice is concerned, it would have no effect whatever. If we have been in the habit of practising a rule of fasting reception, either as an act of personal reverence, or because it is an old-established custom, we are fully justified by the Report in continuing to observe the practice. But we are also justified, if we have been accustomed to take food before Communion, in continuing to do so. The effect of the Report on our teaching is an entirely different matter. It leaves us at liberty to recommend others to adopt the practice of fasting reception for either of the reasons which have led us to adopt the practice ourselves, if we have adopted it. But it does not justify us in teaching that Fasting Communion is a rule of the Church, which it is obligatory upon all loyal members of the Church of England to observe.

We must remember that the insistence on the universal obligation of fasting reception would have certain very serious practical results. If we have to tell farm labourers, who live, it may be, two or three miles from a church, and have to get up at five o'clock in the morning to milk the cows, that they must not receive the Holy Communion after having tasted food, we ought to be quite certain that we have the authority of our Church for the statement. There can be no question that it would practically prevent many of them from becoming Communicants.

But it seems to me that there is something more to be said. I say it in fear and trembling, both because in dealing with the mystery of mysteries, I am treading on very holy ground, and also because it is exceedingly difficult to use words which are approximately appropriate and adequate to express our deepest spiritual convictions. To each individual there are, or seem to

be, things which are certainties of spiritual experience. They pass man's understanding. They belong to the region in which spirit may hold converse with spirit, with no intermediary of human language. When we attempt to convey them to others, in the most carefully selected words, it is often only to "learn from vacant looks that we indeed are dumb." But I feel that I must at least attempt what I am fully aware is quite beyond my power.

In the Sacrament of the Holy Communion, there is God Who gives, and man who receives. From God, there is an outpouring of Himself. But this outpouring of God cannot be an inpouring into the soul of man, unless man does his part. Man's part in the vital reception of the outpouring of God is twofold. It is a reverent passive acceptance of God's unspeakable gift. It is also an active uplifting of the soul to God, because the soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God. The two are interdependent; the one cannot *permanently* exist without the other, although there are times, I suppose, with most of us at which our conscious desire for God is so weak as to be practically non-existent. God forbid that I should venture to suggest that at such times we are incapable of receiving spiritual gifts. But it is, at the very least, highly doubtful whether we could receive an inpouring of God in the Sacrament if there had *never* been a thirst for God in the soul. This appears to me to be the essential difference between the truths of Sacraments and the vain imaginings of magic.

The rigorous insistence upon the observance of bodily rules, by laying exclusive emphasis on the passive acceptance of God's favours, may tend to ignore the need for active spiritual effort. When the need for active effort is ignored, the character of the passive acceptance will inevitably be changed from the adoring self-surrender of true Christian worship to the terrified self-abasement of heathen idolatry. God stoops that man may rise, but if man makes no effort to rise, he will gain no spiritual advantage from God's condescension.

All this has a direct bearing upon our teaching about ecclesiastical rules and customs. They were not, in their origin,

arbitrary enactments, but are—so to speak—the crystallized results of individual spiritual experience. While, on the one hand, it would be most unwise to disregard the experience of holy men and women of old, yet, on the other hand, it is right and lawful to abrogate the rule and give up the custom, when they have come to be looked upon as mere arbitrary enactments. It seems to me in the highest degree important that if we insist upon fasting reception as, in any sense, a duty, we should treat it as a custom which arose from the spiritual experience of others, which should not be disregarded until its value had been tested by our own personal experience. For my own part, I could never teach it as a duty at all—

1. Because it might encourage the idea that Fasting Communion is the law of the Church (binding upon members of the Church of England), which I have shown to be erroneous, for,

(a) Although it is highly probable that this custom was once universal, Bishop Collins has conclusively proved that the universality of a custom does not make it unlawful for any particular Church to abandon it, and that every particular Church, in every part of the world, has exercised, and is exercising, its liberty to abandon customs which were once universal; and

(b) The Church of England, at the Reformation, in accordance with the principle of liberty laid down in Article XXXIV., did in point of fact cease to require the Holy Communion to be received fasting; and

(c) No individuals, however numerous, without authority from the Church to which they belong, have any right to select, according to their own judgment, certain old Church customs and proclaim them to be laws of universal and perpetual obligation.

2. Because, if some of the Communicants in a parish will never communicate except at an early Celebration, while others, on account of age, infirmity, occupation, or for other reasons, are never able to communicate except at mid-day, the Christian

family in the parish can never all meet together at their Father's Table.

3. Because a rigid insistence upon Fasting Communion lays a disproportionate emphasis on a mechanical act of bodily preparation.

JOHN P. WRIGHT.



Hymn for Use in Time of War.

LORD, we, Thy people, ask of Thee,
In this most trying hour,
That Thou wouldst our Defender be,
And shield us by Thy power.

Thou knowest, Lord, we do not fight
With any hope of gain ;
Thou knowest, too, we seek the right,
Nor take Thy Name in vain.

The wondrous workings of Thy Will
We seek not to divine.
Lord, we would trust Thee, and be still ;
Conform our will to Thine.

But Thee we ask, in humble faith,
That Thou wilt hear our prayer,
From men of wrath, from war's dread scathe,
Our island home to spare.

Our fathers trusted Thee of old,
In times of storm and stress ;
They proved Thy mercies manifold ;
E'en now Thy people bless.

Giver of Victory art Thou,
" Lord of all Power and Might " ;
In Freedom's cause, we pray Thee now,
O God, defend the Right !

ROBEY F. ELDRIDGE.