

Holy Communion, Life, Nourishment, Strength and Perfection ¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament
Angers, Tuesday, October 24, 1865

I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly (cf. Jn. 10:10). My Sisters, these are our Lord's words, defining his entire mission. [...] *I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly*, that is, a greater holiness and happiness.

What then is this life? This does not refer to this passing temporal life with this suffering. This life is the true life of our Lord Jesus Christ. As he himself tells us, *I am the life* (cf. Jn. 14:6), since he has come to give us this life. Through what means does he share it with us? **The first means** is through a life of faith; **the second** is through the Eucharistic life. The first is intuitive faith, a practical faith and the faith of love. I will not speak about this, since it is only the first step. The life of simple faith is the Christian life; our Lord never placed life in this, but in the Eucharistic life. God had said in the old law: *The one who is righteous by faith will live* (Hab 2:4; Gal 3:11), but our Lord said: *Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you* (cf. Jn 6:53). Until then, it was only a guide, an angel who stops at the threshold, but the Eucharist is the beginning of life. Let us examine this life carefully.

Life consists of three elements, the first of which is freedom from illness. One who is constantly weary and exhausted can hardly be called healthy. Such a one is to be pitied as a sick person, having no strength. Anyone who is constantly frail is in a morbid state leading toward death, unless God provides a cure. One must be in good health, able to work and take food, and in control of his physical state.

Only the Eucharist can provide this healthy state. The other sacraments do not feed life. Baptism confers life but does not nourish it, the person herself must preserve that life. It is the same for Confirmation which confers the Holy Spirit but does not in fact confirm anyone in grace, the person herself must maintain the grace of Confirmation. While Penance is a great help and gives grace, it cannot preserve and nourish that grace. The Eucharist has no need of the other sacraments to preserve and nourish grace, since it is life itself. Our Lord seems to say, I have given you not merely a stream but the spring itself, a hearth that I kindled unto eternal life, a flame that will never be extinguished because I myself have lit it (cf. Lk 12:49).

The Eucharist is not meant for recuperation like the other sacraments; rather it is the power, the strength of life. But [you will say] the sacrament of Penance gives life; an adult who is baptized is born again. This is true, but as the liturgy says, the Holy Eucharist must follow immediately after Baptism. The Eucharist gives strength to children and to the sick, this is the nourishment that gives us the strength to preserve grace for a while, it is the Eucharist that will give us life. A soul that has not received Communion may work and say all kinds of prayers, yet is not satisfied. Why? The fact is she became weary while working.

Our Lord has reserved sweetness and strength to Communion. At other times he gives himself through angels. **Communion is like a good meal.** When someone who has worked hard eats a hearty meal, his eyes take on new brightness and he is now fully revived. Communion restores courage to the soul. I'm not saying that the other sacraments leave us wearied. Sometimes, confession seems to wear us down, as

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we need to forget our sins. While confession and sins bring on tension, Communion is a time to eat, to be seated at the table of God: *Taste and see how good the Lord is* (cf. Ps 33: 9), says the psalmist. People eat to nourish and increase their strength. The saying goes, “*Life is what you eat*”. That’s why people who strive for Christian perfection without Communion are trying to fly without wings. After all, one arrives at perfection only through our Lord.

You can readily practice the negative virtues, like penance and mortification. This is very good, but one cannot unite oneself to an abstraction. It is impossible to be united with our Lord without Communion, to remain always in the state of grace without Communion. If we don’t receive Communion, we become like a plant that will not flower, we cannot bear the fruits of eternal life. There may be roots and vigorous sap, but there is no life.

Do we want to make a liar of our Lord who said: *Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you* (cf. Jn 6:53)? We must tear out this page from the gospel if Communion is no longer our daily bread. My dear Sisters, it is so true that our Lord has placed in Communion the strength of virtue, that if we abandon our regular communions for which we have permission, then our strength diminishes. The sun hides itself, its light becomes weak.

One who does not receive Communion becomes weak. Such a person becomes apathetic, a condition that leads to death. Some may object that the Church requires Communion only once a year, yet the Church hopes for more. If she made frequent Communion obligatory, she would be condemning half of her children. She does desire it, however. Our Lord did not force his apostles to follow him; he left them free to choose. – What about those who don’t receive Communion? – I am not concerned if they continue to progress. Can you remain in the state of grace with one Communion a year? Then you have what you need, and that is sufficient for you. But when people stay away from Communion, they tell me that their holiness fades away.

As for us priests and you religious sisters, if we were not given Communion, the expectations upon us would be impossible. Therefore, the Church desires it. In a regular lay life, in the religious life, if you want to be more powerful in prayer, arm yourselves with our Lord. Sadly, many do not want to understand this; understanding will come only when too late. Our Lord places himself at our disposal in order to share his life, his graces, but people do not live with their royal king. There is laziness in this.

Anyone who has attained a routine piety may experience a certain natural comfort by omitting to receive Communion. Without admitting it, when one omits to take Communion, there is no need to thank our Lord, to humble oneself and openly acknowledge one’s poverty. This is like students who omit their homework. A worldly person prefers to avoid the sword of sacrifice. Yet other practices of piety will remain. One will not lie down before reciting the rosary, for sleep would not come. Why then would one not hesitate to put aside Communion? It may be that such a good visit would require an act of thanksgiving. One can never welcome a king without expressing gratitude. Without it one does not feel obligated. Sadly, my Sisters, self-love enters even into this deprivation.

How is Communion a spiritual life? It is life for the spirit more than for activity. I wish I could help you understand this clearly. In Communion, our Lord educates us by infusing into us his spirit of holiness and prayer. Actually, his spirit is everything, it is he himself.

Whoever receives Communion benefits more from this Christian and religious Communion than from all the efforts she might make during a whole year, because she would have to work on the details of the virtues. Were she obliged to take all the virtues one by one, she would need a thousand years to finish them all. By ourselves, we progress only gradually to reach heaven – a long process. Through Communion, our Lord himself fills us with his grace and perfection. We cannot take in the whole of him,

since our hearts are too small, but the seed is sown, this spirit is sown for our supernatural well-being. Body and soul become the property of our Lord. It is like a crystal in the sun; placed squarely in sunlight, it has all perfections. Remove it from the sunlight, a thousand years will pass before it becomes a lens. Although we are not perfect, we will reach perfection only through Communion.

Usually, our Lord makes us work more after Communion than before, don't you know that a Christian soul will enjoy the benefit of Communion only later. When our Lord is within us he lets us work with feelings of poverty and humility, gathering up [a little strength] at his feet, so that he will be the goal of it all. When he withdraws, only his soul does so, while his spirit remains. His souls leaves us like honey melting in the rays of the sun. The master wants to teach us the following: Why do you seek for joy? That is why those who receive Communion only once a year seem happier. Since our Lord has them only once, he wants to leave them with feelings that they will remember: I was so happy! But this is not yet a grace of holiness, since they are finding such enjoyment in it. This is why they seem happier than do his spouses and faithful friends.

Consider the parable of the prodigal son. The older son complained because he merely had the joy of obedience. As he complained, his father told him, *We must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was lost and has been found* (cf. Lk 15:32). Therefore, you must not judge your piety by means of your Communions; you will not see it, but we will. As we multiply Communions, they seem to be more difficult and the soul becomes upset. – I was well prepared; I expected to make a good Communion! In spite of a good preparation, I became, as the prophet said, *like a brute beast before God* (cf. Ps 72:22). I then began to examine if I had sinned, if I had been the cause, and I became afraid. – Poor soul! That's not what you should have done. You should have said: Good Master, you want me to work, to struggle with virtues. I'm pleased simply to be with you. Allow him to cut and wound. This is working with our Lord. Notice what happens: when there has been some suffering in Holy Communion, the evening will find us wonderfully at peace, if not, our Lord is continuing his work.

My Sisters, you should rather be suspicious of a Communion full of delights. Don't you think the martyrs suffered before going into combat? They kept motivating themselves in the struggle. You know very well that you must motivate yourselves in times of work and fatigue. You might say: it was my fault. Our Lord treated you as a ten-year-old child. You might say: formerly I was better. But, are you sure? You are fully aware that when one cuts a branch to graft its sap with a foreign sap, the tree would cry if it could – it really suffers. It's the same with a diseased organ that is cut away, or if a foreign body is taken from a bleeding wound. Our Lord is working in our Communions, sometimes due to our own fault, he works in grace and mercy. Communion is the life of grace, that is life and mercy.

Where then is happiness? The happiness of the body consists in feverish and exasperating sensations that make men like animals; the stronger they are, the weaker man becomes. It's like a fireplace that burns everything given to it. Spiritual delights are not like that, however. The body may suffer, while the soul is completely uplifted. What does happiness consist in? It is a deep experience of union with our Lord. One who goes to receive Communion uniquely to be united with him becomes aware of a true happiness. There flows a peace that cannot be described. One would like to do something great to express one's gratitude. O God, yes, there's a happiness, a love that suffers more than it rejoices, followed by the peace of Communion that nothing can replace.

Observe a soul that experiences the happiness of Communion. You cannot console her by any religious means, prayer or reading. Nothing works. How can you ever hope to console her, once she has the joy of living in Jesus Christ? How can you make her happy with the bread of travelers, when she has been feasting on the living bread, the bread of angels? In the past our Lord wanted her to live on desires and hopes, but nothing can replace Communion, *the bread of Asher* (cf. Gn 49:20), the bread of kings, the feast of angels – **our Lord himself dwells in us and we in him.**

People claim that when there is deep empathy there is perfect union. They will exclaim: How happy this person must be! While this is true, we have reached a union with our Lord, who is beauty, goodness, and perfection. While we are on earth this union is little more than a betrothal; it is a union that will continue unto eternal life. We can be sure that it will always keep on growing. **It is important, then, that one's heart be wounded, and wounded by the Eucharist.** Everyone has a passion; without that, one would already be dead. If this passion is divine, this is fullness of life. One may at times wonder why the Good Lord allows one to suffer a lot. Poor soul! If you did not suffer, how could you prove your love for him? Besides, God loves you.

Is it enough to offer a prayer? Is it enough to pray for a poor person or for a friend with whom we share everything? Personal suffering is far more meaningful. During the incarnation or his years at Nazareth, our Lord did not yet claim to love us; even during his public ministry he did not make that claim, since he had not yet suffered. The daily weariness of his evangelical work was not yet enough. However, when it came time for him to die, his love for souls revealed itself – I will give my life for you. Just so for us, since we do not always have suffering [to offer], our Lord allows us to experience Communion as a Calvary of humiliation and poverty. For this reason, my Sisters, do not esteem your Communion by the joys you feel but rather by sacrifices.

How was our Lord bound to the cross? By three nails, so let suffering do the same for us. Did you notice that before communion, the priest tells you: *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*, and that he had to die to become living bread? Could the grain of wheat become the living bread if it did not die? First, it has to pass through fire. You cannot call yourself the Lamb of God, but you can call yourself the nourishment of God. **To do this, you must become a host; to become a host, you must die and rise. That is the grace that I wish for you.**



Points for reflection:

1. The Eucharist is a source of life shared through faith. It nourishes the life received in baptism and confirmation. At the same time, the Eucharist calls us and holds us in the truth. It is an active grace of holiness in us. Can you identify concretely God's action in your heart?

2. In this conference Father Eymard discusses the feelings of consolation and desolation that can be present in our Communion. What do you remember? What insight do you find here?