

Sunday Afternoon Readings

(By RIGHT REV. MGR. POWER for the *N.Z. Tablet*.)

XXI—THE BREAD OF LIFE.

We have seen that the Blessed Eucharist is God's crowning gift to us, the realisation of His desire for closest union with us. "He hath made a summing up of all His wondrous gifts, being a merciful and gracious God, He hath given food to them that fear Him." And now in our own generation we have to thank Him for a holy man, who extolled the beauty of this union and its effects in so striking a manner as to draw the people of God with new cords of love around the Holy Table. From the Chair of Peter Pius the Tenth looked out upon the world, and wherever he turned he saw a famishing multitude, and he knew what alone could satisfy the hungry heart: "My flesh is meat indeed and My blood is drink indeed"; and He tells men that their only remedy for the hunger and the ills of life is a daily approach to Jesus on the altar and a daily partaking of the Eucharistic Food.

He is not content with telling and exhorting; He knows that many will be afraid to make so familiar with the Holy Communion, and so he makes use of argument after argument to calm their fears and strengthen them with the courage that comes from holy fervor. He commands his priests to press these arguments in season and out of season until their people are imbued with them, and for this he has by special decree appointed a devotion of three days for Corpus Christi, during which the faithful must be gathered together to hear more solemnly proclaimed the importance and the efficacy of daily Communion. The Pope's first and great argument is that the Holy Communion was not instituted for the good of Christ, but for the good of the Christian; that it was not given as a reward for those already strong in grace, but as a help to strengthen sinners and those who are subject to daily falls. Quoting the Council of Trent, he says it is the antidote whereby we are delivered from daily faults and preserved from deadly sins.

Now, this antidote is given to us by Christ Himself in the form of food, in the form of a Bread of Life, which bread of life is Christ Himself, and is Christ Himself for this very reason, that it is His own Divine Life which He wishes to communicate to us: "I am the Bread of Life, the living bread which came down from Heaven. And He who eateth Me the same also shall live by Me." Here let us put ourselves under the guidance of St. Thomas, the prince of theologians. He tells us that the way to clearly understand what is the proper effect of any Sacrament is to consider first the matter of the Sacrament and the way in which it is given. Now the matter of the Blessed Sacrament is bread and wine, and it is given in the way of food. Therefore this Sacrament does for the spiritual life all that food does for the life of the body, namely, it sustains it and gives it increase, it restores it and gives it delight. And he quotes St. Ambrose who says: "This is the Bread of everlasting life which supports the substance of our soul." He also quotes St.

Chrysostom who says: "When de desire it, let us feel him, and eat him, and embrace him."

To understand the process of this spiritual growth, we must first see how material food does its work for our physical life. Our material food is not superior to us, but we are superior to it, we are of a higher order of being, and therefore we must have the power of assimilating, of transforming our food into ourselves, making it contribute to our needs—helping in our growth and development, repairing the losses the body sustains in the wear and tear of life, strengthening the nerves and renewing the tissues that have been weakened and wasted by the strain of labor, arresting the daily running down, and giving a fresh delight in labor and in life. Similar to this is the effect which the Blessed Sacrament works, or is intended to work in us, with this difference, that it is not we who transform it into ourselves, but it is it that transforms us into itself. It is the higher order of being and we are the lower, so that the assimilating process is reversed. Christ in the Blessed Sacrament comes to us, unites Himself with us, takes us up, assimilates and transform us. That is to say, He makes His thoughts our thoughts, His sentiments our sentiments, His virtues our virtues, His fire of love our love—our love not merely in habit but act also, so that His activities become our activities. In a word we share His Divine life, we are transformed into Him, gradually indeed, yet so really that we can truly say: "I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me." This, I repeat, is really the sacramental grace of the Holy Communion. Not merely grace, or the increase of grace, which can be secured through other Sacraments, but specifically a transforming grace. After an illuminating page on this very point, Abbot Marmion goes on to say:

"Without this, there is no real Communion. Without this, we receive Christ with the lips, it is true, but He means us to be united to Him with mind and heart and will and all our soul, so that we may share His Divine life as far as this is possible here below, and so that, by the faith we have in Him, by the love we bear towards Him, it may be really His life, and no longer our ego that is the principle of our life. This is very clearly shown in a prayer which the Church makes the priest recite after Communion: 'Grant O Lord, that the operation of Thy heavenly Gift may possess both our minds and bodies, that its effect, and not our senses, may ever have dominion within us.'"

If we take anything into our system that is not food, we do not assimilate it, it contributes nothing to our bodily life or growth. If also we ourselves have become so unhealthy, if our vitality has so run down that we cannot assimilate even good food, nothing can help us, we have only to wait patiently for death. Similarly, if there be anything in us to hinder our assimilation by Christ, there can be no spiritual growth, or as Abbot Marmion says, 'there is no real Com-

munion." This also is the clear and emphatic teaching of Bishop Hedley, the great writer on the Incarnation and the Blessed Eucharist.

It is not the soul only that is thus affected by the Holy Communion. The prayer just quoted from the fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, shows that the Eucharistic action overflows from the soul upon the body itself. We are given to understand this also from the prayer which the priest has to say every morning before he receives the Host: "Grant that the participation of Thy Body, O Lord, Jesus Christ, which I presume to receive, may be a safeguard and remedy, both to soul and body." And in the prayer after Communion on another Sunday we say: "Purify our minds, we beseech Thee, O Lord, and renew them with heavenly Sacraments, that by them, our bodies themselves may receive both present and future aids." This action, or curative contact of Christ with the body, is not merely indirect through the soul. The learned Suarez quotes several of the Fathers to the effect that Christ directly exercises a special solicitude over the flesh that has been so closely connected with His own, and that the body of the communicant, by its union with the body of Christ, has imparted to it a special quality that makes it worthy of a glorious resurrection. Simple contact with the Holy Humanity of Christ sufficed to heal the sick while He was visibly on earth, and asks Abbot Marmion: "Is this curative power to be lessened because Christ veils Himself under the Sacramental Species?"

Come therefore daily to the Heavenly Banquet and refresh your souls upon the Bread of Angels. Come ye little children whose hearts are still perfectly attuned to the heart of Jesus. Come all ye who labor and are heavily burdened. Come ye who are the sport of every temptation, and lay your hearts against the Heart of Jesus, and have their wild pulsations modulated into harmony with the Heart that was pierced on Calvary, and whose fragrance in the Holy Eucharist will preserve you from all corruption.

THE CRUCIFIXION.

The kingly head in agony is bent.

While 'neath fell mockery's desecrating thorn,

The red streams course for nations yet unborn,

And mutely crave the scoffers to repent.

His yearning arms, outstretched with eloquent

Appeal, no answer meet save hate and scorn.

Till when that bursting Heart by love is torn,

Hell's power is crushed and Heaven's portals rent.

The world has aged since Calvary's heinous crime;

Still from our altars pure the saving stream

Breaks forth to flood this earth with love sublime,

Still does that Sacred Face with pity beam,

Those arms are open still. Oh haste the time
When they may clasp each soul they would redeem!