

Christus Dominus

Concerning the Discipline to be Observed with Respect to the Eucharistic Fast

Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII, 1953

Pius, Bishop, Servant of the Servants of God for an everlasting remembrance.

Christ the Lord “on the night in which He was betrayed”[1] when for the last time He kept the Pasch of the old law, after He had supped[2] took bread, and giving thanks broke, and gave to His disciples, saying:

This is My Body which shall be given up for you[3];

and He likewise presented the chalice to them saying:

This is my blood of the new covenant, which is being shed for many;[4] Do this in remembrance of me.[5]

From these passages out of Holy Scripture it is completely obvious that our Divine Redeemer wished to substitute, in place of this final Passover ceremony in which a lamb was eaten according to the rite of the Hebrews, a new Pasch which would endure until the end of the world, that is, the eating of the Immaculate Lamb who was to be immolated for the life of the world. Thus the new Pasch of the new law put an end to the old Passover and the truth emerged from the shadow.[6]

But since the conjoining of the two suppers was so arranged as to signify the transfer from the old Pasch to the new, it is easy to see why the Church, in renewing the Eucharistic Sacrifice at the command of the Divine Redeemer and in commemoration of Him, could depart from the custom of the ancient love-feast and introduce the Eucharistic fast.

From the very earliest time the custom was observed of administering the Eucharist to the faithful who were fasting.[7] Towards the end of the fourth century fasting was prescribed by many Councils for those who were going to celebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice. So it was that the Council of Hippo in the year 393 issued this decree:

The Sacrament of the altar shall be offered only by those who are fasting.[8]

Shortly afterwards, in the year 397, the Third Council of Carthage issued this same command, using the very same words.[9] At the beginning of the fifth century this custom can be called quite common and immemorial. Hence St. Augustine affirms that the Holy Eucharist is always received by people who are fasting and likewise that this custom is observed throughout the entire world.[10]

Doubtless this way of doing things was based upon very serious reasons, among which there can be mentioned first of all the one the Apostle of the Gentiles deploras when he is dealing with the brotherly love-feast of the Christians.[11] Abstinence from food and drink is in accord with that supreme reverence we owe to the supreme majesty of Jesus Christ when we are going to receive Him hidden under the veils of the Eucharist. And moreover, when we receive His precious Body and Blood before we take any food, we show clearly that this is the first and loftiest nourishment by which our soul is fed and its holiness increased. Hence the same St. Augustine gives this warning:

It has pleased the Holy Ghost that, to honor so great a Sacrament, the Lord's Body should enter the mouth of the Christian before other food.[12]

Not only does the Eucharistic fast pay due honor to our Divine Redeemer, it fosters piety also; and hence it can help to increase in us those most salutary fruits of holiness which Christ, the Source and Author of all good, wishes us who are enriched by His Grace to bring forth.

Moreover, everyone with experience will recognize that, by the very laws of human nature, when the body is not weighted down by food the mind more easily is lifted up and is by a more ardent virtue moved to meditate upon that hidden and transcendent Mystery that works in the soul, as in a temple, to the increase of divine charity.

The solicitude of the Church for the preservation of the Eucharistic fast may be perceived also from the fact that the Church, in decreeing this fast, imposed serious penalties for its violation. Thus the Seventh Council of Toledo in the year 646 threatened with excommunication anyone who should say Mass after having broken his fast.[13] In the year 672 the Third Council of Braga,[14] and in the year 685 the Second Council of Macon[15] had already pronounced that anyone who incurred this guilt should be deposed from his office and deprived of his honors.

As time went by however, on careful consideration it was sometimes judged opportune because of particular circumstances to relax in some measure this law of fasting as it affected the faithful. So it is that the Council of Constance, in the year 1416, while confirming the venerable law of fasting, somewhat moderated it:

...the authority of the sacred canons and the praiseworthy and approved custom of the Church have observed and do observe the following: that Mass should not be said after the celebrant has taken food, nor should Holy Communion be received by the faithful without fasting, unless in case of illness

or of some other necessity conceded or admitted by right or by the Church.[16]

It has pleased Us to recall these things so that all may understand that We, despite the fact that new conditions of the times and of affairs have moved Us to grant not a few faculties and favors on this subject, still wish through this Apostolic Letter to confirm the supreme force of the law and custom dealing with the Eucharistic fast; and that We wish also to admonish those who are able to observe that same law that they should continued diligently to observe it, so that only those who need these concessions can enjoy them according to the nature of their need.

We are most effectively consoled—and it is right to speak of this here, even though briefly—when We see that devotion to the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar is increasing day by day, not only in the souls of the faithful, but also in what has to do with the splendor of the divine worship, which has often been made evident in public popular demonstrations. The careful directions of Sovereign Pontiffs have doubtless contributed a great deal to this effect, and especially that of the Blessed Pius X who, summoning all to renew the primitive custom of the Church, urged them to receive the Bread of Angels very frequently, even daily if possible.[17] Inviting the little ones to this heavenly food, he wisely decreed that the precept of holy Confession and Holy Communion has reference to every one of those who have reached the use of reason.[18] This same rule is prescribed in the Code of Canon Law.[19] The faithful responding generously and willingly to these directions of the Sovereign Pontiffs, have approached ever more frequently to the sacred Table. May this hunger for the heavenly Bread and the thirst for the Sacred Blood burn in all men of every age and of every walk of life!

It should nevertheless be noted that the times in which we live and their peculiar conditions have brought many modifications in the

habits of society and in the activities of common life. Out of these there may arise serious difficulties which could keep men from partaking of the divine mysteries if the law of the Eucharistic fast is to be observed in the way in which it had to be observed up to the present time.

In the first place, it is evident to all that today the clergy are not sufficiently numerous to cope with the increasingly serious needs of the faithful. Especially on feast days they are subject to overwork, when they have to offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice at a late hour and frequently twice or three times the same day, and when at times they are forced to travel a great distance so as not to leave considerable portions of their flocks without Holy Mass. Such tiring apostolic work undoubtedly weakens the health of priests. This is all the more true because, over and above the offering of the Holy Mass and the explanation of the Gospel, they must likewise hear confession, give catechetical instruction, devote ever-increasing care and take ever more pains in completing the duties of the other parts of their ministry. They must also diligently look after those matters that are demanded by the warfare against God and His Church, a warfare that has grown so widespread and bitter at the present time.

Now our mind and heart go out to those especially who, working far from their own native country in far distant lands, have generously answered the invitation and the command of the Lord:

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.[20]

We are speaking of the heralds of the Gospel who, overcoming the most difficult and multitudinous labors and all manner of difficulty in traveling, strive with all their might to have the light of the Christian religion illumine all, and to nourish their flocks, who but very recently received the Catholic faith, with the Bread of Angels which nourishes virtue and fosters piety.

Almost in the same situation are those Catholics who, living in many localities cared for by Catholic missionaries, or who, living in other places and not having among them their own priests, must wait until a late hour for the coming of another priest that they may partake of the Eucharist and nourish themselves with the divine Food.

Furthermore, since the introduction of machines for every sort of use, it very often happens that many workers-in factories, or in the land and water transportation fields, or in other public utility services-are employed not only during the day, but even during the night, in alternate shifts. As a result, their weakened condition compels them at times to take some nourishment. But, in this way, they are prevented from approaching the Eucharist fasting.

Mothers also are often unable to approach the Eucharist before they take care of their household duties, duties that demand of them many hours of work.

In the same way, it happens that there are many boys and girls in school who desire to respond to the divine invitation: ‘Let the little children come to me.’[21] They are entirely confident that “He who dwells among the lilies” will protect their innocence of soul and purity of life against the enticements to which youth is subjected, the snares of the world. But at times it is most difficult for them, before going to school, to go to church and be nourished with the Bread of Angels and then return home to partake of the food they need.

Furthermore, it should be noted that it often happens, at the present time, that great crowds of people travel from one place to another in the afternoon hours to take part in religious celebrations or to hold meetings on social questions. Now, if on these occasions it were

allowed to offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which is the living Fruit of divine grace and which commands our will to burn with the desire of acquiring virtue, there is no doubt that strength could be drawn from this by which all would be stirred profoundly to think and act in a Christian manner and to obey legitimate laws.

To these special considerations it seems opportune to add some which have reference to all. Although in our days medical science and that study which is called hygiene have made great progress and have helped greatly to cut down the number of deaths, especially among the young, nevertheless conditions of life at the present time and the hardships which flow from the cruel wars of this century are of such nature that they have greatly weakened bodily constitution and health.

For these reasons, and especially so that renewed piety towards the Eucharist may be all the more readily increased, many Bishops from various countries have asked, in official letters, that this law of fast be somewhat mitigated. Actually, the Apostolic See has kindly granted special faculties and permissions, in this regard, to both priests and faithful. As regards these concessions, We can cite the Decree, entitled, *Post Editum*, given for the sick by the Sacred Congregation of the Council, December 7, 1906;[22] and the Letter of May 22, 1923, from the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office to the local Ordinaries in favor of priests.[23]

In these latter days, the petitions of the Bishops have become more frequent and urgent, and the faculties granted were more ample, especially those that were bestowed in view of the war. This, without doubt, clearly indicates that there are new and grave reasons, reasons that are not occasional but rather general, because of which it is very difficult, in these diversified circumstances, both for the priest to

celebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and for the faithful to receive the Bread of Angels fasting.

Wherefore, that we may meet these grave inconveniences and difficulties, that the different indulgences may not lead to inconsistent practice, We have deemed it necessary to lay down the discipline of the Eucharistic fast, by mitigating it in such a way that, in the greatest manner possible, all, in view of the peculiar circumstances of time, place, and the faithful, may be able to fulfill this law more easily. We, by this decree, trust that We may be able to add not a little to the increase of Eucharistic piety, and in this way to move and stir up all to partake at the Table of the Angels. This, without doubt, will increase the glory of God and the holiness of the Mystical Body of Christ.

By Our Apostolic authority We decree and command all the following:

Rule I. The law of the Eucharistic fast from midnight continues in force for all of those who do not come under the special conditions which We are going to set forth in this Apostolic Letter. In the future it shall be a general and common principle for all, both priests and faithful, that natural water does not break the Eucharistic fast.

Rule II. The sick, even when they are not confined to bed, can, on the prudent advice of a confessor, take something in the form of beverage or of true medicine. This does not hold for alcoholic beverages. The same faculty is given to sick priests who are going to say Mass.

Rule III. Priests who are going to say Mass at late hours, or after onerous work of the sacred ministry, or after a long journey, can take something by way of beverage. They cannot take alcoholic

beverages. They should abstain, however, for the space of one hour before they say Mass.

Rule IV. Those who say Mass twice or three times can consume the ablutions. In such cases, however, the ablution must be made with water alone, not with wine.

Rule V. Likewise the faithful, even those not sick, who by reason of some serious inconvenience—that is, by reason of tiring work, by reason of the late hours at which alone it is possible for them to attend Mass, or by reason of a long journey which they must take—could not approach the Eucharistic table completely fasting, can, on the advice of a prudent confessor, while the need lasts, take something to drink, to the exclusion of alcoholic beverages, but they must abstain at least for the space of one hour before they are nourished by the Bread of Angels.

Rule VI. If the circumstance calls for it as necessary, We grant to the local Ordinaries the right to permit the celebration of Mass in the evening, as we said, but in such wise that the Mass shall not begin before four o'clock in the afternoon, on holy days of obligation still observed, on those which formerly were observed, on the first Friday of every month, and also on those days on which solemn celebrations are held with a large attendance, and also, in addition to these days, on one day a week; with the requirement that the priest observe a fast of three hours from solid food and alcoholic beverages, and of one hour from non-alcoholic beverages. At these Masses the faithful may approach the Holy Table, observing the same rule as regards the Eucharistic fast, the presumption of Canon 857 remaining in force.

In mission territories, in consideration of the very unusual conditions there prevailing, on account of which it often happens

that there are only a few priests to visit the distant missions, the local Ordinaries can grant to the preachers of the Gospel faculties to celebrate evening Masses on other days of the week also.

Local Ordinaries shall carefully see that every interpretation is avoided that would stretch these faculties and that all abuse and irreverence in this matter is prevented. For in granting these faculties which the conditions of persons, places and times demand today, We ardently desire to emphasize the force and the value of the Eucharistic fast for those who are to receive our Divine Redeemer hidden under the Eucharistic veils. Besides, as often as the inconvenience of the body is diminished, the soul must supply as far as it can, either by internal penance or by other means, in accordance with the traditional custom of the Church which is wont to command other works to be done when it mitigates the fast. Hence, those who may enjoy the faculties granted in this matter should raise fervent prayers to heaven to adore God, to thank Him, and especially to expiate for sins and beg Him for new heavenly aid. Since all must recognize that the Eucharist “has been instituted as the permanent memorial of the Passion,[24] let them from their hearts elicit those sentiments of Christian humility and Christian patience which meditation on the sufferings and death of our Divine Redeemer must arouse. Also, to our Divine Redeemer who, ever immolating Himself on our altars is repeating the greatest proof of His love, let all offer increased fruits of charity toward their neighbors. For this reason all shall cooperate toward daily fulfilling the words of the Apostle of the Gentiles:

Because the bread is one, we though many, are one
body, all of us who partake of the one bread.[25]

Whatever decrees are contained in this letter we wish to be stable, ratified and valid, notwithstanding anything to the contrary, even what may be worthy of most special mention. All other privileges

and faculties, in whatever way they may have been granted by the Holy See, are abolished, so that all may everywhere properly and equally observe this legislation.

All that has been decreed above shall be in force from the day of promulgation through the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*.

Given at St. Peter's in Rome, January 6, 1953, the Feast of the Epiphany, in the fourteenth year of our Pontificate.

POPE PIUS XII

**An Instruction on the Discipline to be Observed
With Reference to the Eucharistic Fast**

Issued by the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office
January 6, 1953

The Apostolic Constitution *Christus Dominus*, issued today by the Sovereign Pontiff Pius XII happily reigning, grants several faculties and dispensations with respect to the observance of the law of the Eucharistic fast. It also confirms, in great measure and substantially, the rules of the Code of Canon Law[26] for the priests and the faithful able to observe that law of the Eucharistic fast. Nevertheless, the favorable first order of this Constitution, according to which natural water (that is, without the addition of any element) no longer breaks the Eucharistic fast (Const., Rule I), is extended to these also. But, with regard to the other concessions, these can be used only by priests and by the faithful who find themselves in the conditions described in the Constitution, or by those who say evening Masses or receive Holy Communion at such Masses authorized by the Ordinaries within the limits of the new faculties granted to them.

And so, in order that the rules with regard to such concessions may be observed uniformly everywhere, in order to avoid any interpretation which would make these faculties appear more extensive than they really are, and in order to prevent every abuse in this matter, this Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, at the direction and by the command of the Sovereign Pontiff himself, has issued the following:

With Regard to the Sick, Either the Priests or the Faithful

Constitution, Rule II

1. The faithful who are sick, even though not confined to bed, may take something in the form of beverage, though not an alcoholic beverage, if, by reason of their sickness they cannot, without real inconvenience, observe a complete fast up to the time they receive Holy Communion. They can also take something in the line of medicine, either liquid (but not alcoholic), or solid, as long as what they take is real medicine, prescribed by a physician or commonly esteemed as such. It must be noted that any solid taken as nourishment cannot be considered as medicine.

2. The conditions under which a person may be able to take advantage of this dispensation from the law of fasting for which no time limit preceding Holy Communion is prescribed must be judged very prudently by the confessor. Without his advice no one can use this dispensation. The confessor, however, can give his advice either when he is hearing confessions or privately apart from the confessional. He may also give this advice once so that the person to whom he gives it may always act upon it as long as the conditions of this same sickness last.

3. Sick priests, even though they are not confined to their beds, may use a like dispensation if they are going to say Mass or receive the Holy Eucharist.

With Regard to Priests Placed in Special Circumstances

Constitution, Rules III and IV

4. Priests who are not sick, but who are going to say Mass:
 - a. at a late hour (that is, after nine o'clock),
 - b. after onerous work of the sacred ministry (for example, from early in the morning or for a long time), or
 - c. after a long journey (that is, at least about two kilometers walking or a proportionally longer trip in terms of the classes of vehicles used, the difficulties of the journey, and the condition of the person), may take something in the form of drink, but not any alcoholic beverage.

5. The three cases indicated above are such as to take in all the circumstances in which the legislator intends to grant the above-mentioned faculty. Consequently every interpretation which would make these faculties seem more extensive must be avoided.

6. Priests who are in such circumstances can take something in the line of drink one or many times, but they must keep the fast for one hour before they say Mass.

7. Moreover all priests who are going to say Mass twice or three times the same day can, in the earlier Masses, consume the two ablutions prescribed by the rubrics of the Missal, but using only the water which, according to the new principle, does not break the fast.

The priest who says three Masses, one after the other, on Christmas or on All Souls Day is bound to follow the rubrics with regard to the ablutions.

8. If it should happen that a priest who is obliged to say Mass two or three times the same day should inadvertently consume wine in the ablution, he is not prevented from saying the second and the third Mass.

With Regard to the Faithful Placed in Special Circumstances

Constitution, Rule V

9. Likewise the faithful who are unable to keep the Eucharistic fast, not by reason of sickness, but because of some serious difficulty, can take something in the line of drink. They cannot, however, take any alcoholic beverage, and they must fast for an hour before the reception of Holy Communion.

10. The cases of serious difficulty (*gravis incommodi*) are these three. It is wrong to add any others.

- a. Work that weakens, started before Holy Communion. Such as the function of laborers in factories, transport and dock workers, or workers in other public utilities employed in day and night shifts; or those who, by reason of duty or of charity, must stay awake during the night (for example, nurses, night watchmen, etc.); and of pregnant women and mothers of families who must spend a long time on their household duties before they can go to Church, etc.
- b. The late hour at which Holy Communion is received. There are many of the faithful who can have a priest to say Mass among them only at a late hour. There are likewise many children for whom it would be too difficult, before going to school, to go to the Church, receive Holy Communion, and then to go back home to eat breakfast, etc.
- c. A long journey which must be made in order to reach the Church. As has been explained above (n. 4), a trip is to be considered long for this purpose if it covers a walk of about

a mile and a quarter, or a journey that is longer in proportion to the vehicles used, the difficulty of the journey itself, or the condition of the person making the journey.

11. The nature of such serious difficulty must be judged prudently by a confessor either while he is hearing confessions or in a private conversation with the one seeking advice. The faithful cannot receive the Holy Eucharist not fasting without the confessor's advice. The confessor can give his advice once and for all, to be effective as long as the cause of the serious difficulty remains.

With Reference to Evening Masses

Constitution, Rule VI

By the force of the Constitution the Ordinaries of places[27] have the faculty of permitting the saying of evening Masses in their own territory, should circumstances render this necessary. This holds true despite the command of canon 821, §1. The common good sometimes demands the saying of Mass after midday: For example, for the workers in some industries who work their shifts even on feast days, for those categories of workers who must be on the job during the morning hours of feast days, like dock workers, and likewise for those who have come in great numbers and from considerable distances for some religious or social celebration, etc.

12. Such Masses, however, may not be said before four o'clock in the afternoon, and may be celebrated only on the following definitely stated days. These are:

- a. Holy days of obligation according to the rule of Canon 1247, §1;
- b. Feasts which were formerly holy days of obligation but which now are not. These are listed in the index published by the Sacred Congregation of the Council on December 28, 1919.[28]
- c. First Fridays of the month.

- d. Other solemn occasions which are celebrated with great gatherings of the people.
- e. On one day of the week other than those enumerated above, if the good of special classes of persons should demand it.

13. Priests who say afternoon Masses, as well as the faithful who receive Holy Communion at these Masses, may, at the meal which is permitted up to three hours before the beginning of Mass or Communion, take with due moderation the alcoholic beverages which are ordinarily taken at meals, (for example, wine, beer, and the like). They may not take strong liquors. With regard to beverages, which can be taken before or after the above-mentioned meal, up to one hour before Mass or Communion, everything alcoholic is excluded.

14. Priests may not say a morning and an evening Mass on the same day unless they have the explicit permission to say Mass twice or three times the same day, according to the rule of canon 806.

Likewise the faithful cannot receive Holy Communion in the morning and the evening of the same day, according to the norm of canon 857.

15. The faithful, even though they may not be of the number of those for whom the offering of an evening Mass was decreed, may freely receive Holy Communion, at this Mass or immediately before it (cf. Can. 846, §1), or immediately after it, if they obey the directions given above with reference to the Eucharistic fast.

16. In places where the law for the missions rather than the general law is in force, the Ordinaries may permit evening Masses on all the days of the week under the same conditions.

Admonitions on the Observance of the Rules

17. Ordinaries must carefully see to it that every abuse and irreverence towards the Blessed Sacrament is entirely avoided.

18. They must also take care that the new discipline be observed uniformly by all their subjects, and they must teach these subjects that all faculties and dispensations, both territorial and personal, which have hitherto been granted by the Holy See, have been revoked.

19. The interpretation of the Constitution and of this Instruction must faithfully keep to the text, and must not in any way enlarge the highly favorable faculties which have been granted. With regard to customs which may differ from the new discipline, let the abrogating clause be kept in mind: “Notwithstanding any disposition whatever to the contrary, even those worthy of most special mention.”

20. The Ordinaries and the priests, who ought to take advantage of these faculties granted by the Holy See, should zealously stir up the faithful to assist at Mass and receive Holy Communion frequently. They should take advantage of every opportunity, especially by preaching, to promote the spiritual good for the sake of which the Sovereign Pontiff Pius XII has published the Constitution.

The Sovereign Pontiff, approving this Instruction, decreed that it should be promulgated by publication in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, together with the Apostolic Constitution. From the Palace of the Holy Office, on the 6th day of January, in the year 1953.

✠ JOSEPH CARDINAL PIZZARDO, SECRETARY
ALFREDO OTTAVIANI, ASSESSOR

Footnotes

- [1] I Cor., 11-23.
- [2] Cf. Luke, 22:20.
- [3] I Cor., 11:24.
- [4] Matt., 26:28.
- [5] Cf. I Cor., 11:24 f.
- [6] Cf. the Hymn *Lauda Sion* in the Roman Missal.
- [7] Cf. Pope Benedict XIV, *De synodo diocesano*, 6, cap. 8, n. 10.
- [8] Conc. Hipp., can. 28: Mansi, III, 923.
- [9] Conc. Carth. III, cap. 29: Mansi, III, 885.
- [10] Cf. St. Augustine, *Ep. 54, Ad Jan.*, cap. 6: Migne, PL, 33, 203.
- [11] Cf. I Cor., 11-21 ff.
- [12] St. Augustine, *loc. cit.*
- [13] Conc. Tolet. VII, cap. 2: Mansi, X, 768.
- [14] Con. Bracar. III, can. 10; Mansi, IX, 841.
- [15] Conc. Matiscon. II, can 6: Mansi, IX, 952.
- [16] Conc. Constant. sess. XIII: Mansi, XXVII, 727.
- [17] S. Congr. Concilii, *Decretum Sacra Tridentina Synodus*, Dec. 20, 1905: *Acta S. Sedis*, XVIII, 400 ff.
- [18] S. Congr. de Sac., *Decretum Quam singulari*, Aug. 8, 1910: AAS, II 577 ff.
- [19] CIC, can. 863; cf. can. 854, §5.
- [20] Matth. 28, 19.
- [21] Mark 10. 14.
- [22] *Acta S. Sedis*, XXXIX, p. 603 ff.
- [23] *S. S. Congregationis S. Officii Litterae Locorum Ordinariis datae super ieiunio eucharistico ante Missam*: AAS, XV, p. 151 ff.

[24] S. Thom., *Opusc.* LVII, Office for the Feast of Corpus Christi, 4th lesson: *Opera Omnia*, Rome, 1570, vol. XVII.

[25] I Cor., 10:17.

[26] Can. 808 and 858, §1.

[27] Cf. can. 198

[28] AAS, XII, 1920, 42 f.