

FAST AND FEAST

THE EDITOR

IT is now a year since the Holy Father published the Apostolic Constitution *Christus Dominus* modifying the legislation regarding the Eucharistic fast. He did so, as he said, in order to remove some of the difficulties, become more numerous of recent years, that prevent the faithful from receiving Holy Communion. For a year it has been possible for people unable to attend an early Mass to communicate at a later, after having taken liquid food to sustain them. The Pope had in mind, he tells us in the Constitution, not only priests with their laborious Sunday mornings, but the laity who have no early Mass available, workmen on night shifts, mothers of families, children on their way to school, as well as the sick unable to fast or needing medicine. All such people may now benefit by these regulations and share in the eucharistic meal to an extent that sheer physical barriers have prevented heretofore.

Yet the numbers of communicants at the later and often more frequented Masses seem during the year to have been unaffected. One diocesan bishop has urged the members of the St Vincent de Paul Society to communicate at the late Masses under these conditions in order to make the rest of the faithful more aware of the possibilities. For habit has unhappily turned the chief Sunday Mass—the High Mass with its full ceremonies and its chant—into a celebration in which the Communion of the faithful is virtually unknown. Converts who have been instructed in the power of love that is given in this Sacrament are often perplexed after their reception to find Sunday after Sunday that no one goes up to the Communion rails during the principal Mass. The habit has become ingrained over the centuries.

It has been said that very few indeed of the faithful have any idea of what *Christus Dominus* has offered them. It was explained to them when it first appeared. But the Mass is not a class and the congregation does not behave like a well-trained set of scholars, so that at the best of times a simple

announcement that the hour of Benediction has been slightly altered requires a dozen forceful repetitions from the pulpit before even half the flock has taken in the news. A complicated set of new regulations unclearly explained and even explained in quite different ways in different churches—perhaps three or four times at the most—has left little impression on the majority. To obviate this difficulty, Fr John C. Ford, S.J., published a few months ago in America a little handbook, *The New Eucharistic Legislation*,¹ in which he gives the Latin text with parallel English translation of *Christus Dominus* and of the subsequent instruction from the Holy Office, followed by a clear and practical commentary. This book, or one like it, is one that every priest should read, digest and act upon—it even includes a shorter and longer form for announcements from the parish pulpits. The author, as Archbishop Cushing says in his Foreword, ‘has written an explanation that is clear, scholarly, conservative and practical’. He is also benign in that he insists that the ‘impossibility’ of fasting, or the ‘difficulty’ of observing the laws of the eucharistic fast, should be interpreted as ‘a moderately grave inconvenience’.

This is not the place to enter into the details of the legislation—the book will be required for that. It may not, however, be out of place to insist once more on the need to reintegrate the Eucharist as the source of the life of the Spirit. The fact that so many people feel that Communion during a High Mass is distracting and that their own ‘prayer life’ can be led apart from this common meal indicates the lack of the sense of the Eucharist as effecting a common love, and an active and fervent common love which is the Christian life in its essence and its fullness. We have even forgotten the full significance of any eating together. We still have our ‘parties’ for birthdays and similar occasions, when we sit round a common table and eat the same food, slices from one great ham or a big fruity cake. The old and good instinct remains, but it is not often given an opportunity of exercise save perhaps in pleasant country public houses. Even in public houses the common talk is over a common cup, but without the common meat or loaf, and among a rather

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exclusive set of men. The Holy Father points out in the Constitution that the fast was early introduced to break with the love feast of the old dispensation. It was necessary in those days when everybody was so drawn to 'love feasts' that the Supreme and Unique feast was in danger of being eclipsed by the others. But now the weekly or daily feast at the altar is in danger of another kind of eclipse because people do not know how to feast, nor look for its life-giving properties. The physical life is preserved by food, a biological process we think. The intellectual life is preserved by thought, reading and certain special types of lectures or conversations. And the spiritual life is preserved by the secret flow of divine grace, drawn off on occasion from some vast divine ocean by the channels called the sacraments, but definitely drawn off or drawn away into these hidden little pools in the centre of the soul. All three lives have been separated by the scientific view of things and turned thus almost into mechanical processes.

We have to realise once again the 'love feast' of the wedding breakfast or the birthday party, or indeed of the daily family dinner when bodies are nourished together with the same food and drink, minds by the happy flow of stories and lively conversation, and souls by the free flow of divine love, the charity that binds the assembly—bodies, souls, words, laughter, food and drink—in one single bond of life. Then we shall find the same reality, transposed and transformed, round the altar—words, conversation and song, food and drink—a gathering at first regretting that they have not been more together or that they have allowed themselves to drift apart from their host and their fellows (the *Confiteor* and the *Kyrie*), but concluding in the greatest and most joyful union that human heart can grope for. Until the people have all eaten together of the fruit of Mary's womb they will never be able to sing with really full voice and heart the chorus to the deacon's farewell refrain; the fire of love should be fanned by the *Deo gratias* so that the Eucharist may continue in the prayers and lives of all that assembly for the rest of the week.

The prayer, then, which is not born and nourished at the Common Table will never be more than half alive.