

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF ST. PIUS X'S DECREE ON FREQUENT COMMUNION

JOHN A. HARDON, S.J.

West Baden College

THE highest tribute to the apostolic genius of St. Pius X was paid by his successor on the day he raised him to the honors of the altar: "In the profound vision which he had of the Church as a society, Pius X recognized that it was the Blessed Sacrament which had the power to nourish its intimate life substantially, and to elevate it high above all other human societies." To this end "he overcame the prejudices springing from an erroneous practice and resolutely promoted frequent, even daily, Communion among the faithful," thereby leading "the spouse of Christ into a new era of Eucharistic life."¹

In order to appreciate the benefits which Pius X conferred on the Church by his decree on frequent Communion, we might profitably examine the past half-century to see how the practice which he advocated has revitalized the spiritual life of millions of the faithful. Another way is to go back in history over the centuries preceding St. Pius and show that the discipline which he promulgated in 1905 is at once a vindication of the Church's fidelity to her ancient traditions and a proof of her vitality to be rid of whatever threatens to destroy her divine mission as the sanctifier of souls. The present study will follow the latter method, with an effort to cover all the principal factors in this Eucharistic development which had its roots in the apostolic age but was not destined to bear full fruit until the present time.

FROM APOSTOLIC TIMES TO THE FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL

While there is no certain evidence of daily Communion among priests or laity in the first two centuries of the Christian era, we are not to conclude that the practice was simply unknown. Some writers argue to the custom from the passage in the Acts of the Apostles which describes the early Christians as "continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread in their houses."² However, there is

¹ Pius XII, *Quest'ora di fulgente* (AAS 36 [1954] 311).

² Acts 2:46.

complete certitude that weekly reception of the Eucharist was customary and even prescribed already in Apostolic times. In the *Didache*, "the most ancient of Christian rituals," written between 80 and 110 A.D., the faithful are admonished that, "having come together on the Lord's Day, you are to break bread and give thanks, after you have confessed your sins, so that your sacrifice might be undefiled. But anyone who is estranged from his friend should not join us, until both have become reconciled, lest your sacrifice be polluted."³ Equally clear is the description of the Sunday morning service given by St. Justin in the middle of the second century: "On the day which is called Sunday, we have a common assembly of all who live in the cities or in the outlying districts... The Eucharistic elements are distributed and consumed by those present, and to those who are absent they are sent through the deacons."⁴

Consistent with this testimony is the statement of Pliny the Younger, writing to the Emperor Trajan (112 A.D.) about his method of passing judgment on the Christians in Bithynia:

I interrogated them whether they were Christians. If they confessed it I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment. If they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed . . . Yet they affirmed that the whole of their guilt or error was that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day (*stato die*) before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath.⁵

From the end of the second century there are numerous indications that priests and laity received Holy Communion every day. Tertullian mentions that Christians daily extend their hands, according to the prevalent custom, to receive the Body of Christ.⁶ St. Cyprian states that in Africa "we who are in Christ, daily receive the Eucharist as the food of salvation."⁷ From Egypt we have the witness of Clement of Alexandria, and also of Origen, who says that "the Lord hates those who think that only one day (Sunday) is a festival of the Lord. Christians partake of the flesh of the Lamb every day, that is, they daily

³ *Didache* 14, 1; *Patrum apostolicorum opera* (Lipsiae, 1906) 221.

⁴ *Apologia* 1, 67:5 (PG 6, 430).

⁵ *Epistula* 96, 2-7; *Selected Letters of Pliny* (Oxford, 1923) 93-94.

⁶ *De idololatria*, 7 (PL 1, 669).

⁷ *De dominica oratione*, 18 (PL 4, 531).

receive the flesh of the Word of God."⁸ For Asia Minor we have the statement of St. Basil, writing to the Patriarch of Caesarea: "It is commendable and most beneficial to communicate and partake of the Body and Blood of Christ every single day."⁹

Regarding the European practice, St. Ambrose wrote of Northern Italy that Mass was celebrated every day, at which priest and people received of the "food of saints."¹⁰ St. Jerome says the same for Spain.¹¹ The custom in France, at least among the hermits, was "to feed daily on the most pure flesh of the Lamb."¹² Likewise at Rome, besides other witnesses, there is the well-authenticated story of St. Melania, who "never took bodily food until she had first communicated the Body of the Lord."¹³

As might be expected, the practice varied among the different churches. St. Augustine noted that while in some localities the faithful receive Holy Communion every day, in others they communicate only on Saturday and Sunday, and in still others on Sunday alone.¹⁴ Even among the Christians of one locality there were considerable differences. St. John Chrysostom, for example, complained that some of the faithful approached the sacred banquet not more than once or twice a year, while others received frequently. He deplored the fact that while Mass is celebrated every day, yet people will assist at the Sacrifice without partaking of the sacrament.¹⁵ At Milan, too, Ambrose rebuked the Christians for allowing laxity to creep into the diocese: "If this is the daily Bread," he asked, "how is it you wait a full year before receiving it, as the Oriental Greeks are in the habit of doing? You should receive daily what is to your daily benefit. So live that you may deserve to communicate every day."¹⁶

⁸ *Quis dives salvetur*, 23 (PG 9, 628).

⁹ *Epistula 93* (PG 32, 484).

¹⁰ *De benedictionibus patriarcharum*, 9, 38 (PL 14, 686).

¹¹ *Epistula 71*, 6 (PL 22, 672).

¹² Cassianus, *De coenobiorum institutis*, 6, 8 (PL 49, 277).

¹³ M. Rampolla del Tindaro, *S. Melania giuniore Senatrice romana* (Roma, 1905) 205.

¹⁴ *Epistula 54*, 2 (PL 36, 200).

¹⁵ *Homilia 17*, 4, "In Epistulam ad Hebraeos" (PG 63, 131).

¹⁶ *De sacramentis*, 5, 24 (PL 16, 452). According to some authorities, this work properly belongs to the sixth or seventh century. In that event we have evidence of a serious decline in frequent Communion well before the ninth century, as Rauschen and others believe was the case.

From the beginning of the ninth century we see a notable decline in the frequentation of the sacraments. Thus the Council of Tours, in A.D. 813, had to make this decree: "If not more often, at least three times each year the laity must receive Holy Communion, unless someone be prevented by reason of a major crime."¹⁷ In the same year the Council of Chalons sur Saône regretted that "the reception of the Eucharist is neglected by some persons on Holy Thursday. Whereas on this day the sacrament should be received by all the faithful, except those who are laden with some grievous crime."¹⁸

Instead of improving, however, the situation became worse, until finally in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council enjoined at least annual Communion at Easter time: "Everyone of the faithful of both sexes, after reaching the age of reason, should in private faithfully confess all his sins at least once a year . . . reverently receiving the Sacrament of the Eucharist at least at Easter time. . . . Otherwise, while living he shall be forbidden entrance into the Church, and at death shall be deprived of Christian burial. Let this salutary decree be published frequently, lest anyone try to excuse himself on the score of complete ignorance."¹⁹

FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL TO THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

During the four centuries following the Lateran Council spiritual writers strongly recommended the practice of frequent Communion, even, on occasion, its daily reception. Moreover popular preachers among the Franciscans and Dominicans helped to promote the frequentation of the sacraments. Nevertheless, "the response which this evoked among the clergy . . . and consequently among the laity, was in general very slight. . . . For the most part they succeeded in bringing the people to receive at least on the three major feasts of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost."²⁰ In order to understand this anomaly it is necessary to examine the ascetical principles that were currently in vogue, from the early thirteenth century to the Council of Trent. It is easy to trace these principles because they were substantially those of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure, who dominated theological thought in the Middle Ages.

¹⁷ Mansi, 14, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁹ Mansi, 22, 1007-10 (*DB* 437).

²⁰ *Enciclopedia cattolica*, 4, 135-36.

St. Thomas praises daily Communion, but only for those in whom frequency of reception increases the fervor of charity without decreasing reverence and respect. He proposes the question: "Whether it is lawful to receive this Sacrament daily," and answers in the affirmative, quoting St. Augustine: "This is our daily bread; take it daily, that it may profit you daily."²¹ Then he adds a distinction:

There are two things to be considered regarding the use of this sacrament. The first is on the part of the sacrament itself, the virtue of which gives health to men; consequently it is profitable to receive it daily so as to receive its fruits daily.

The second thing to be considered is on the part of the recipient, who is required to approach this sacrament with great reverence and devotion. Consequently, if anyone finds that he has these dispositions every day, he will do well to receive it daily.²²

In practice, however, he believes that few people satisfy these requirements:

Many persons are lacking in this devotion, on account of the many drawbacks both spiritual and corporal from which they suffer. Therefore it is not expedient for all to approach this sacrament every day; but they should do so as often as they find themselves properly disposed.²³

St. Thomas' friend and contemporary, St. Bonaventure, likewise extols the practice of frequent Communion. Yet the conditions he lays down would make daily reception something of a rarity. He asks himself, "Whether a man who is free to do so, does better to communicate more often than occasionally," and replies:

If a person were always prepared, it would always be beneficial for him to receive this sacrament; provided, that is, that the abode of his soul is pure and he can receive this food with reverence and devotion. In the early Church, therefore, when Christians were clean through baptismal innocence and fervent with charity through the gift of the Holy Spirit, it was proper for them to communicate every day. But later on, as charity grew cold and many lost their baptismal innocence by sin, it was left to the judgment and conscience of each individual to receive when he felt himself suitably disposed, lest otherwise he receive to his damnation.²⁴

²¹ An approximation of this text occurs in *Sermo 58, De oratione dominica* (PL 38, 395). After giving other interpretations of the text, St. Augustine says: "This petition, 'Give us this day our daily bread,' may also be properly understood to mean, 'Give us Thy Eucharist, our daily food.'"

²² *Sum. theol.* 3, q. 80, a. 10.

²³ *Loc. cit.*

²⁴ *In Quartum Lib. Sent.* dist. 12, pars 2, a. 2, q. 2 (*Opera omnia* 5, Paris, 1866) p. 535.

St. Bonaventure then recalls the three stages in the Church's discipline: daily, tri-annual, and annual Communion, and allows each person to judge for himself how often he should approach the altar:

If he sees himself in the condition of the primitive Church, he is to be praised if he receives daily. If he finds himself in the state of the present-day Church, namely, cold and torpid, he does well to receive rarely. And if he believes he is in mid-way, he should act accordingly, that is, at times stay away from Communion in order to restore his devotion. For this guest is to be received with due honor and love. So that as a man finds himself inclined in one direction or the other, he should act accordingly—which is to be learned by experience. Consequently all the reasons given in favor of the first class (daily reception) are to be understood with the proviso that worthy dispositions are present—a condition which is generally fulfilled in very few cases.²⁶

It was in this spirit that the author of the *Imitation*, writing in the early fifteenth century, described the ideal religious as one “who so lives and keeps his conscience in such purity as to be prepared and well disposed to communicate every day.” Yet only provisionally, “if it is permitted to him and he might pass without observation.”²⁶

PERIOD OF THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

Not until the middle fifteen-hundreds do we find what may properly be called a renaissance of Eucharistic piety. Moreover it is possible to identify the main source of this resurgence, and even the persons who brought it about. It was in Spain that the greatest impetus was given to promoting frequent reception of Holy Communion; in Spain too the first signs appeared of a theological defence of the devotional practice.

In view of the subsequent major role which his followers were to play in promoting the cultus of the Eucharist, St. Ignatius of Loyola should be regarded as the pioneer apostle of frequent Communion in modern times.²⁷ In 1540, a few weeks before the Institute of the Society of Jesus was formally approved by Paul III, Ignatius wrote to the

²⁶ *Loc. cit.*

²⁶ Book 4, chap. 10.

²⁷ The most authoritative witness is Benedict XIV, who wrote: “Ignatio utique et Societati ab eo institutae debet Ecclesia propagationem usus frequentis Confessionis et Communionis” (*De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione* 3, 28; *Opera omnia* 3 [Venezia, 1767] 140).

citizens of his native town of Azpeitia, exhorting them to establish a confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament:

A great work presents itself, which our Lord has brought about with the help of a friar of St. Dominic, a great friend of ours, one whom we have known for many years. The purpose of this work is to honor and promote devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.

I beg and beseech you by the love and reverence of God our Lord, to make every effort to honor, support and serve His only begotten Son, Christ our Lord, in so great a work as the Blessed Sacrament, in which His divine Majesty is present both in His divinity and His humanity, as entirely, as powerfully, and as infinitely as He is in heaven. This you can do by adopting constitutions in the confraternity which will oblige you to monthly confession and Communion.²⁸

St. Ignatius laments the sad state to which Christianity has come in its attitude towards the sacrament of the altar:

In the early Church members of both sexes received Communion daily as soon as they were old enough. But soon devotion began to cool, and Communion became weekly. Then after a considerable interval of time, as devotion became still more cool, Communion was received on only three of the principal feasts of the year And finally, because of our weakness and indifference, we have ended with once a year. You would think we are Christian only in name, to see us so calmly accepting the condition to which the greater part of mankind has come.

Let it be our glory, then, out of love for so good a Lord and because of the immense benefit to our souls, to restore and renew in some measure the holy practices of our forefathers . . . to the extent of monthly confession and Communion. Should one wish to go oftener than this, there is no doubt he would be acting in conformity with the wish of our Creator and Lord.²⁹

Three years later he wrote to a woman religious, expressing himself in favor of daily Communion, and briefly laying down the rules that should guide her in this matter:

As to daily Communion, we should recall that in the early Church everybody received daily, and that up to this time there has been no written ordinance of

²⁸ *Monumenta historica S.J., Monumenta Ignatiana*, 1 (Matriti, 1903), 162-64. Sent from Rome, the letter is dated by the editors "sometime in August or September, 1540." The Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament to which St. Ignatius refers was founded by Fra Tomás Stella at the Dominican Church in Rome, La Minerva, and approved by Paul III on November 30, 1539. The English version of this and the following letter is from the MS translation of Rev. William J. Young, S.J.

²⁹ *Loc. cit.*

Holy Mother Church, nor objection by either positive or Scholastic theologians against anyone receiving daily Communion, should his devotion move him thereto.

Even if the indications are not so good, or the inclinations of the soul so wholesome, the witness on which we can rely is our own conscience. What I mean is this. It is lawful for you in the Lord if, apart from evident mortal sins or what you judge can be such, you think that your soul derives help and is inflamed with love for our Creator and Lord, and you receive with this intention, finding by experience that this spiritual food soothes, supports, settles, and preserves you for His greater service, praise and glory—you may without doubt receive daily, in fact, it would be better for you to do so.³⁰

Not long after the above letters were written, the Council of Trent passed a decree on the Holy Eucharist, urging "all who bear the Christian name . . . mindful of the boundless love of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that they may believe and venerate these sacred mysteries of His Body and Blood, with such constancy and firmness of faith, with such piety and worship, that they may be able to receive frequently that supersubstantial bread."³¹

This document placed in the hands of St. Ignatius the authority he needed to propagate frequent Communion among the faithful, not only in private correspondence but officially, on as wide a scale as the resources of his newly founded Institute permitted. Shortly after the Tridentine decree, he instructed Alphonsus Salmerón, a theologian at Trent, to compose a formal treatise in defence of frequent confession and Communion, to answer those who opposed the practice as contrary to Christian tradition. This became the first in a series of apologies for frequent Communion which the Society of Jesus was to publish in the next three hundred years.³²

Salmerón immediately sent to Rome a set of notes which reviewed the main testimonies of the Fathers of the Church in favor of frequent Communion. Although Ignatius sent copies of these notes to other members of the Society, he wanted a finished treatise on the subject, and so ordered another Spaniard, Cristóbal de Madrid, to produce a

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 275-76; written in Rome, the letter was addressed to Theresa Rejadella who was living in Barcelona.

³¹ *DB* 882.

³² Up to the year 1899 Sommervogel gives the names of 220 Jesuit authors who published one or more ascetical books on the Eucharist. Sixteen of these wrote volumes exclusively on the subject of frequent Communion. *Bibliothèque de la Comp. de Jésus*, 10 (Paris, 1899) 554-64.

work which was published at Naples in 1556 under the title, *De frequenti usu sanctissimi Eucharistiae Sacramenti libellus*. Cristóbal seems to have made generous use of Salmerón's notes, since the *libellus* agrees with them not only in general doctrine but often in the very form of expression and even identical words. The Neapolitan printing was suggested by the storm of opposition raised against those who went to Communion every week, under encouragement from the Jesuits.

De Madrid sets out to prove that for those who are in the state of grace it is more profitable to communicate through love of Christ at least once a week, than to keep away from the Sacrament for fear of irreverence. His first principle is that to communicate holily, even every day, it is sufficient to be free from mortal sin and to have a right intention. If the Fathers and Doctors of the Church sometimes require more perfect dispositions, this must be understood only as conducive to obtaining greater grace and not as strictly indispensable:

If in some passages of their writings they seem to make excellence in virtue a necessary condition, it is my opinion that they lay this down, not as absolutely necessary but as profitable; since the more perfect the dispositions of the communicant the more readily does our munificent Master pour out His graces. It follows from this that a lack of piety and devotion, and a want of reverence, such as shall not be incompatible with the state of grace, do not make a man unworthy to receive the Sacrament. He may even receive it with fruit and with profit, notwithstanding this want of reverence and devotion, for the effect of receiving the sacraments is frequently to supply this defect.³³

Before the turn of the century, among others who defended the same doctrine were St. Robert Bellarmine and a Jesuit ascetical writer by the name of Androzio. Bellarmine wrote a short treatise, *De communione frequenti*, in which he listed and answered all the current objections against the practice. "Experience bears out," he stated, "that those who receive frequently with a desire to grow in holiness make wonderful progress in the spiritual life."³⁴ It was his conviction that "this is the unique and infallible way of reforming the Church of Christ."³⁵ To the objection that "it is more respectful to Christ not to

³³ *Ad candentis salamandrae insigne* (Venezia, 1574) 9. Translated into a number of languages, Madrid's brochure of 92 pages in duodecimo was often added as an appendix of Polanco's *Directory* for the Spiritual Exercises.

³⁴ *Opera oratoria postuma* 4 (Roma, 1943) 247.

³⁵ *Loc. cit.*

receive Him so often," he replied: "It is precisely in receiving the Holy Eucharist even daily that we show forth the reverence which the Lord expects of us."³⁶ Androzio's book of 300 pages, entitled *Considerationes de frequentanda communione*, went through many editions and was translated into several languages.³⁷

It was not long, however, before this teaching was challenged in high circles. In 1569 the Bishop of Piacenza questioned the authority of a simple confessor to allow his penitents frequent Communion. He therefore ordered that no one in his diocese should approach the Eucharist oftener than every ninth day.³⁸

Shortly after, in 1587, a more formidable resistance came from another diocese in Italy, when the Bishop of Brescia sought to prevent married men, tradesmen, and even unmarried women from receiving Holy Communion on more than three days a week. Unable to cope with the situation, he appealed to the Holy See in a graphic document that is worth quoting at some length:

Frequency of Communion has become so common during the last few years in the diocese of Brescia that laymen, simple people, and even married men, in a word, persons whose minds are entirely taken up with the things of this world, not satisfied with the weekly reception of this sacrament, dare to receive it every day. In consequence of this practice, reverence towards the Blessed Sacrament on the part of those who communicate is lessened, and on the other hand many are scandalized to see that married men, men of business, and others not particularly conspicuous for their religious piety approach daily the holy table.³⁹

The prelate went on to explain that he had tried several methods to remedy the evil. He proposed to fix certain times as feast days, Wednesdays and Fridays, on which alone Holy Communion for nuns, laymen, married men and unmarried women might be permitted. Finally he asked, "May a bishop, in view of the decrees of the Council

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

³⁷ While extolling the great benefits of frequent Communion, Androzio was careful to stress the necessity of approaching the sacrament with a right intention. Paraphrasing St. Bonaventure, he gives eleven motives "which we can profitably place before us" in communicating; the first two practically summarize the rest, namely, "Ut arctius copulemur cum Deo. . . Ut hoc Sacramento, quasi medicina, ab animi morbis convalescamus" (*Considerationes de frequentanda communione* [Moguntiae, 1598] 93).

³⁸ Antonio Astrain, *Historia de la Asistencia de España* 2 (Madrid, 1914) 495.

³⁹ *Analecta juris pontificii* 7 (Rome, 1864) 782.

of Trent, fix definite days . . . on which alone Holy Communion may be allowed . . . in order to prevent the abuses which are likely to follow from the daily reception of the Holy Eucharist?"⁴⁰

The answer of the Sacred Congregation of the Council, to be repeated almost verbally in a similar case one hundred years later, is unique in canonical history. While commending the Bishop on his vigilance for the honor due the Blessed Sacrament, it plainly disapproved of his policy of regimentation. Since the Council of Trent refrained from giving any prescriptions on the matter, we should not presume to do otherwise: "The manifold recesses of the human conscience and the distractions of those occupied with the things of this world are veiled from us, nor are the supernatural gifts which God bestows on His children revealed to human eyes. Consequently, as we cannot pronounce on the worthiness or integrity of the faithful, so we cannot legislate on their frequent or even daily reception of the bread of life."⁴¹ The Congregation painstakingly went through all the proscribed people in the Bishop's elenchus, and concluded that in each case the best course to follow was to encourage frequent reception and exhort the people to fervent preparation, but the actual frequency should be left to the judgment of the confessor or spiritual director.⁴²

During the first half of the seventeenth century the Society of Jesus was not alone in promoting the cultus of the Eucharist through frequent reception. Following the lead of Salmerón, de Madrid, and Androzio, treatises of like mind were published by the Carthusian Antonio de Molina (1607),⁴³ the Benedictine Pedro Marzilla (1611),⁴⁴ and the Franciscan Joseph de Santa Maria (1619).⁴⁵ Marzilla had been

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 783.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 789. The letter of the Congregation to the bishop is dated January 24, 1587.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 789-90.

⁴³ *Instrucción de sacerdotes* (Barcelona, 1746). Molina's doctrine on the requisite dispositions is in close agreement with that of St. Pius X, when he says, ". . . to ascertain when a person may be said to be properly disposed to receive Communion . . . we declare it to be the teaching of saints and theologians that whoever is not conscious of mortal sin, or if he is so, has confessed with contrition and a purpose of amendment, is in a fit state to communicate, and can do so lawfully, laudably and profitably" (p. 531).

⁴⁴ *Memorial Compostelano* (Madrid, 1611).

⁴⁵ *Apología de la frecuencia de la sagrada comunión* (Madrid, 1619).

educated by the Jesuits, who taught him that every Christian should communicate as often as possible. Fired with this zeal, he composed his *Memorial Compostelano*, "which the monks who are confessors of the monastery of San Martin de Santiago of the Order of St. Benedict presented to the most illustrious Prince Maximilian of Austria, Archbishop of Santiago." In his presentation the author declares that he undertook to write the book as an answer to certain unmentioned characters who have sought to poison the bishop's mind:

I, Friar Pedro de Marzilla, an unworthy monk and confessor of San Martin de Santiago, in my own name and the name of the other confessors of this convent, declare that it has come to our knowledge that certain persons, secretly and without daring to make themselves known, urge your illustrious Lordship to put a stop to a practice that certain devout laymen of this city have taken up and diligently carry out, I mean, the practice of receiving the most Holy Sacrament of the altar every day, or, at least on most days of the week.⁴⁶

Two years later Marzilla published the *Adiciones al Memorial* in which was included a letter, under date of April 7, 1613, addressed to Father Claudius Aquaviva, General of the Society of Jesus, requesting him to change the twenty-sixth of the Jesuit rules for confessors, which read: "Though it is a devout practice to exhort the faithful to frequent Communion, yet they should warn those whom they perceive inclined to it not to communicate oftener than once a week, especially if they are married persons."⁴⁷ This rule remained in force until 1906, at which time it was changed to read that the priests are to encourage the faithful to daily Communion. It is important to stress this point in order properly to evaluate the real character of Jansenism in its attack on the Society of Jesus. Individual Jesuits might on occasion, even publicly, counsel daily reception; but the Society as a body was committed to frequent Communion only in the sense of receiving once a week, at least for the laity, and certainly for married persons.

JANSENIST OPPOSITION TO FREQUENT COMMUNION

Modern historians are agreed that Jansenism should be conceived as largely if not essentially an organized opposition to the dogmatic and

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.*

⁴⁷ The *Adiciones* were printed for the first time at Saragossa in 1613. Following Marzilla's complaint to the Jesuit General is a letter from Louis de Ponte, answering Marzilla, followed in turn by the latter's reply to de Ponte.

ascetical teaching of the Society of Jesus.⁴⁸ Personal motives may have played a part in this. Jansenius is said to have sought admission to the Order and to have been rejected; hence he joined the ranks of its enemies. What is beyond question is the aversion he felt for the sons of St. Ignatius. On the occasion of the Saint's canonization in 1622, he scoffed and derided the Jesuit founder. In 1624, and again in 1626, he made a trip to Spain to prevent the Jesuits from opening a university in Madrid, and to restrain their teaching privileges. Back in France, he continued the assault, writing to a confidant, "It seems to be God's will that I should exert myself everywhere against the Jesuits."⁴⁹ This was in 1627, when he "initiated against the hated adversaries the paper war which, continued by his friends and admirers, has not yet come to an end after all these centuries."⁵⁰ The masterpiece which emanated from this virulence was the *Augustinus*, published in 1640, two years after the author's death, in which the Jesuit doctrine on grace was equated with Pelagianism, and Jansenius' own theory of the supernatural order was given to the world.⁵¹

Antoine Arnauld

The co-founder of Jansenism was Antoine Arnauld, the protégé of Jansenius' collaborator, du Vergier de Hauranne, more popularly known as the Abbot of St. Cyran. Where Jansenius was heavy and speculative, Arnauld had a consummate mastery of his native tongue and was eminently practical. But he was at one with the master in his hatred of the Jesuits, which he crystallized in his *De la fréquente communion*, first published in 1643, and destined to become, with *Augustinus*, the arsenal of Jansenist theology for subsequent generations.

De la fréquente communion is a stout volume of more than 700 pages in duodecimo, yet so engagingly written that the first edition was sold

⁴⁸ "An observer as dispassionate as Vincent de Paul has said in so many words that Jansenism was born of the desire to discredit the Jesuit Order, and historically the new heresy can best be understood if Jansenius is viewed as the antithesis of Ignatius of Loyola, as the contradiction of, and a reaction against, the Jesuits' teaching on grace, their ascetical and moral theology, their principles on the frequent reception of the Sacraments, and their strong attachment to Rome" (Pastor, *The History of the Popes* 29 [London, 1938] 152).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁵¹ The five basic propositions taken from the *Augustinus* were first condemned by Innocent X (May 31, 1653), and subsequently condemned twice by Alexander VII (Oct. 16, 1656 and Feb. 15, 1664). The final condemnation was under Clement XI (July 16, 1705).

out in a couple of days. Within six months a fourth edition became necessary, and this was followed by many more. An eleventh edition was printed at Lyons before the middle of the eighteenth century. The most consequential feature of this popularity was the favorable reception which the book found among the clergy. From its first appearance it was presented to the world with splendid letters of commendation from fifteen bishops and twenty-one doctors of theology.

The history of the composition of *De la fréquente communion* is well known. A lady belonging to the upper circles of Parisian society, Princess Anne de Guémené, was a penitent of St. Cyran, while the Marquise Madeleine de Sablé had taken a Jesuit for her spiritual guide. After some discussion with Princess Anne on the relative merits of their confessors, Mme. de Sablé persuaded her director, Fr. Sesmaisons, to set down on paper a summary of the benefits of frequent Communion. Sesmaisons obliged by supplying an excerpt from the work of the Carthusian Molina previously mentioned. St. Cyran was shown these notes, which he transmitted to Arnauld with the encouragement to write an extensive refutation.

In the first part of the book Arnauld discusses the teaching of the Fathers and in the third part the requisite preparation for Holy Communion. Between the two sections he inserts a lengthy dissertation on the penitential system of the early Church. His real aim, to check frequent Communion, is nowhere expressly stated by the author. On the contrary, where Sesmaisons stated that all the Fathers were in favor of frequent reception of the sacrament, he asks: "Who does not join in this approval?"⁵² If only it were possible, he would encourage the faithful to communicate more than once a day.⁵³ Once he has taken this position, he can dispense with the patristic evidence which tells against his case and concentrate on his main thesis. To this end he distorts what the Fathers have to say about the subjective dispositions of the communicant. What they considered as desirable he makes out to be necessary, which leads to the logical conclusion that with rare exceptions no one can ever presume to approach the Blessed Sacrament. Thus in the central chapter of the book he inquires: "Is any other disposition required to communicate fruitfully than to be, or believe oneself to be, in the state of grace?" The answer is affirmative:

⁵² *Oeuvres* 1 (Paris, 1793—) 197.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 88.

After seeing all sorts of people communicating very often, without a thought of necessary preparation for such an important action, as though they had no need of preparing themselves, in the present article I will give some directions in this matter, and explain the disposition which is necessary to communicate fruitfully.⁵⁴

After a long quotation from St. Augustine, exalting the dignity of the Holy Eucharist, Arnauld uses the reference to suit his own purpose:

We see, therefore, that as the Eucharist is the same food that is eaten in heaven, so the purity of heart of the faithful who receive it on earth must necessarily—in due proportion, as far as possible—be that of the blessed in heaven. Consequently the only difference in disposition between those who partake of this food on earth and those who receive it in heaven, is that the first are still living by faith while the latter enjoy the vision of God.⁵⁵

Typical of his handling of patristic authorities is the citation from Pseudo-Dionysius, anonymous writer of the late fifth or early sixth century. Dionysius is quoted to the effect that in his day only saintly people were allowed to approach the holy table, whereas the following classes were forbidden access to the Eucharist:

Those who have fallen from a holy and Christian way of life, that is, those who have lost the grace of their baptism by committing a mortal sin.

Those who have an inveterate weakness and susceptibility to terrors and visions, which are induced by the enemy.

Those who have sincerely returned to the practice of virtue, that is, the penitents, but whose imagination has not yet been cleansed by the pure and undefiled love of God, of all the hallucinations which remained as the result of former bad habits.

Finally, those who are not yet perfectly united to God alone, or, to use the words of Scripture, who are not entirely perfect and perfectly irreproachable.⁵⁶

Arnauld failed to point out, however, that this rigorism was a later innovation which was unknown in the first three centuries; that even in the late patristic period it was not the rule but an exception; and most important, that it ran counter to the established tradition handed down from the Apostles. St. Jerome had denounced this misdirected reverence for the Blessed Sacrament.⁵⁷ And Cassian wrote a lengthy refutation, seeing that in certain Eastern monasteries the monks went to Communion only once a year, out of respect for the Holy Eucharist.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ *De la fréquente communion* (Lyon, 1683) 729.

⁵⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁵⁷ *Epistula* 48, 15 (*PL* 22, 506).

⁵⁸ *Collatio* 23, *De velle boni et agere malum* (*PL* 49, 1277–80).

It is also significant that Pseudo-Dionysius, who is emphasized by Arnauld, while admirable in many ways, is at least suspected of Monophysitism, and on the very point at issue, namely, the Church's attitude towards the remission of sin, is clearly in error. According to the Areopagite, priests who lead godless lives have lost the sacerdotal power because, as they themselves remain in darkness, they cannot enlighten others, nor forgive sins. This is Donatism, whose net effect was to enhance the prestige of the ascetical monks to the detriment of the Christian priesthood. People would go to the monks, without orders, to have their sins forgiven, on the principle that great austerity conferred the power of absolution.⁵⁹

In the judgment of contemporary observers, Arnauld's book came to be looked upon as a fifth gospel and a revelation from heaven. To many people it was a welcome excuse for delaying the irksome duty of confession; in fact, abstention from the sacraments became invested with the halo of a higher perfection. St. Vincent de Paul reported that in one parish alone, St. Sulpice in Paris, the number of Communion decreased by hundreds shortly after the appearance of *La fréquente communion*.⁶⁰ Even in the first period of Jansenism, people were so influenced by this book that they omitted their Easter duty and refused Viaticum because they were not sufficiently detached from creatures.⁶¹ Jansenist priests were known never to say Mass; others considered it a matter of principle to reduce the reception of the sacraments to a minimum, so that Catholics were found who had not made their First Communion by the age of thirty.⁶²

Opposition to Antoine Arnauld

Arnauld's book was no sooner off the press than it provoked a spirited opposition, particularly among those against whom it was expressly written. The Jesuit Jacques Nouet, subsequently known as a popular ascetical writer, was the first to dare attack Arnauld in a course of six sermons. He was promptly accused of having spoken disrespectfully of the hierarchy who had praised Arnauld. The Assembly of the Clergy in 1643 compelled Nouet to make a retractation,

⁵⁹ Gerhard Rauschen, *Eucharist and Penance in the First Six Centuries* (St. Louis, 1913) 248.

⁶⁰ Nigel Abercrombie, *The Origins of Jansenism* (Oxford, 1936) 204.

⁶¹ Pastor, *op. cit.*, 149.

⁶² *Loc. cit.*

which meant that he assured the bishops of his obedience, and explained that he had not made use of the alleged expressions of disrespect to episcopal authority.⁶³

Soon there appeared a whole series of polemical writings against the book on frequent Communion, of which the most influential came from the pen of Denis Petau (Petavius), "the father of the history of dogma." Although Petavius was no match for his adversary in point of style, theologically he undoubtedly crushed Arnauld. His refutation, *De la pénitence publique et de la préparation à la communion*, first printed at Paris in 1644, went through three editions in two years. It has since been incorporated into Petavius' *Dogmata theologica*, where it is appended in a Latin translation of 250 pages in octavo. Typical of the critical analysis to which Arnauld's treatise was subjected, are the subheadings of a number of chapters:

The book on frequent communion is filled with the obscurity and evasion in the presentation of doctrine which are common to those who try to introduce something novel into the Church.

Arnauld's error in charging that the current usage of the Church tends to a disturbance in discipline and a corruption of morals.

Astute subterfuge of the book on frequent communion regarding the authority of the Council of Trent.

The opinion of St. Bonaventure in no way favors the doctrine of Arnauld.

Arnauld's doctrine is absurd. Its logical consequence is that all Christians must keep away from Communion; and therefore bishops and priests who celebrate Mass often are guilty of sacrilege.

The book on frequent communion teaches that only works of charity, produced by the penitent, can restore him to the state of grace; and that sacramental absolution or internal contrition do not confer justification unless accompanied by the observance of the divine precepts . . . For teaching this doctrine, the author falls under the censure of the Council of Trent.

St. Thomas is misinterpreted by Arnauld, who erroneously believes that the highest perfection of charity is a matter of precept.⁶⁴

Among others than Jesuits who wrote against Arnauld were the Bishop of Lavaur, Abra de Raconis; Henri de Bourbon, the Prince de Condé; and unwittingly a Protestant divine, Brachet de la Milletière,

⁶³ Arnauld, *Oeuvres* 28, 618.

⁶⁴ *Dogmata theologica* 8 (Paris, 1867) 197-442. Petavius' answer to Arnauld is now in two parts. Sections I to VII are the original refutation, Section VIII is his rebuttal to Arnauld's defence of himself against Petavius.

who used Arnauld's book as the basis for his theology of mediation between Catholicism and Calvinism.⁶⁶ But the outstanding opponent of Arnauld, in action if not in writing, was St. Vincent de Paul. Arnauld figured prominently in Vincent's correspondence during this period. Entire letters were given to the Jansenist controversy, in which the Saint deplores the harm done to souls by *La fréquente communion*:

No longer do we see persons frequenting the sacraments, not even at Easter, in the way they formerly did. Several parish priests here in Paris are complaining that there are far fewer communicants now than in years past. Saint Sulpice has 3000 less; the parish priest of Saint Nicholas du-Chardonnet, after having visited his families in the parish after Easter, in person and by proxy, told us recently that he discovered 1500 of his parishioners who had not been to Holy Communion; and the same is true of others. Scarcely anyone, or, at any rate, very few, can now be seen in the churches going to Holy Communion on the first Sunday of the month and on feast days . . . unless a few at the Jesuits.⁶⁶

St. Vincent goes on to describe Arnauld's first reaction when he saw the opposition which his book encountered "on all sides on the matter of public penance, and the penance which he wished to introduce before Communion." He countered with "an explanation of his view that the form of absolution is simply declaratory";⁶⁷ the actual remission does not take place until after, and is conditioned upon, the performance of the extraordinary penances in vogue in the early Church. Regarding Arnauld's demand that the Church must return to this ancient practice if she would vindicate herself of the charge of falling into error, Vincent de Paul observes that this is tantamount to heresy:

Is not his contention that the Church which in the beginning observed the practice of public penance before absolution has always desired to re-establish this custom and that, if she did not do so, she would not be the pillar of truth, ever consistent with herself, but a synagogue of errors; is not that statement baseless? Cannot the Church, which never alters where matters of faith are in question, make changes in matters of discipline; and has not God, who is immutable in Himself, altered His ways in regard to men? Did not His Son, our Lord, sometimes act differently towards His own followers, and the Apostles towards theirs? What, then,

⁶⁶ Pastor, *op. cit.*, 143.

⁶⁸ *Letters of St. Vincent de Paul* (London, 1937) 238; letter to John Dehorgny, sent from Paris, June 25, 1648.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

does this man mean when he says that the Church would err if she did not hold fast to a desire to re-establish those forms of penance which she employed in the past? Is that orthodox teaching?⁶⁸

The most detailed of St. Vincent's letters on the subject was addressed to a priest of the Mission, M. Dehorgny, resident in Rome, who was being seduced by the Jansenist propaganda. The painstaking care with which Vincent answered Dehorgny gives us an insight into the conflict which Arnauld's book had produced in the contemporary Catholic mind. Dehorgny had objected that Arnauld was only following in the footsteps of St. Charles Borromeo who in his day had stirred up a spirit of penance in his diocese and took care that the penitential canons were observed. As Borromeo had been opposed by the men of his time, so Arnauld is now being persecuted in the same way. But, Vincent answers,

[Borromeo] did not say that penance or, if you like, satisfaction, consists in abstaining from holy confession or the adorable sacrament of the Eucharist, except in cases laid down by the canons . . . He is very far indeed from saying what has been attributed to him, namely, that he enjoined public penances for private sins, and that satisfaction should be performed before absolution, as the book in question pretends to prove.⁶⁹

Vincent's correspondent had other ideas; so he was told, "notwithstanding whatever you may say about this book *On Frequent Communion*, it was primarily written to restore the practice of the ancient penitential discipline, as a necessary condition for being restored to God's favor."⁷⁰ The reason why Dehorgny called it calumny to accuse Arnauld of this purpose was because he did "not know the basic principle of the maxims of this author, and of all his doctrine, which was to bring the Church back to her ancient usages, combined with the assertion that the Church has ceased to exist since those primitive times."⁷¹ To substantiate this charge, Vincent recalls the fact that two Jansenist leaders had told the Mother Superior of St. Mary's in Paris, whom they hoped to win over to their cause, that "there has been no Church for the last five hundred years." He adds, "she told me so herself, both verbally and in writing."⁷² Vincent de Paul admits it is not

⁶⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 246; letter sent from Orisigny and dated September 10, 1648.

⁷⁰ *Loc. cit.* ⁷¹ *Ibid.* p. 247. ⁷² *Loc. cit.*

always easy to recognize the latent errors in Jansenism, since they are frequently interlarded with otherwise orthodox statements of Catholic teaching. "It is not surprising if M. Arnauld sometimes speaks like other Catholics; in that he is only imitating Calvin, who in thirty different places denies that he makes God the author of sin, although in other contexts he does his utmost to establish that detestable doctrine, attributed to him by all Catholics." All heretical innovators do the same. "They sow contradictory statements through their books, so that, if found fault with on any point, they can escape by saying that they had said the contrary in other places."⁷³ The main theme at issue, according to St. Vincent, is whether the Church is to be regarded as falling into error in sanctioning what the Jansenists are pleased to call penitential laxity. The plain fact is that "throughout Europe the sacraments are administered in the manner condemned by M. Arnauld, and that the Pope and all the bishops approve of the custom." There is no question where the choice should lie, since it would be "intolerable blindness to prefer to the universal practice of the whole Christian world, and in a matter of such consequence, the ideas of a young man who was, when he wrote this book, without any experience in the guidance of souls."⁷⁴

Condemnation of Antoine Arnauld

Petavius had forwarded to Rome a summary criticism of the book on frequent Communion, and the Capuchin Yves did the same. However, the condemnation was not easy to secure. The Nuncio Grimaldi advised against condemning Arnauld on the grounds that this would also strike at his episcopal protectors. Within a year of publishing *La fréquente communion* Arnauld was in trouble with the French government, which decided to take strong measures against him. Queen Anne, who was not favorably disposed to the Jansenists, ordered Arnauld to give an account of his teaching in Rome. This was a signal for violent protests from the interested parties. The Parliament appealed to its Gallican liberties, the University declared it would have

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 248. Petavius made capital of these contradictions in his refutation of Arnauld, listing a series of eight propositions from the latter's writings which in one place are stated positively and elsewhere, even in the same book, the exact opposite is defended; *op. cit.*, 396-400.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 249.

to stand by Arnauld, and the Sorbonne protested against the supposed injustice to one of its doctors. What complicated the issue was the Jansenist claim, which was given wide publicity, that the Jesuits had put pressure on the Queen and her Prime Minister, Cardinal Mazarin, to have Arnauld condemned. Arnauld evaded the royal decree by going into hiding, explaining that "he would offend against the precept of the Gospel if he refused to flee from the violence of men in order to shelter in the arms of God."⁷⁵ Actually Arnauld had little to fear from the government, once he had given sworn assurance in writing, on March 14, 1644, that the book on frequent Communion was prompted only by love of truth, and that he submitted it to the judgment of "the Roman Church, the Pope, all Catholic Bishops, the Archbishop of Paris, and the Faculty of Theology."⁷⁶ The bishops who had approved Arnauld's book felt that an injury had been done to their authority when their protégé was summoned to Rome. A month after Arnauld's letter of submission, they addressed a collective epistle to the Pope in which they definitely sided with Arnauld against the Jesuits. They wrote:

Certain persons had laid down principles that were dangerous to papal and episcopal authority, turned the use of the sacraments into a harmful misuse, and instead of applying the true remedies to the decay of morals, had recourse to attenuations and palliatives. When the bishops sought to remedy these conditions, the persons in question had the impudence to speak disrespectfully of the bishops in the pulpit. This had occurred in particular in connection with the book on frequent Communion.⁷⁷

The bishops concluded by censuring in severe terms the conduct of the Jesuits with regard to Arnauld and defending his book against objections.

The net result of these protests was that the matter was indefinitely shelved, and not until almost fifty years later did the Holy See feel free formally to condemn the teaching of *La fréquent communion*. Under date of December 7, 1690, Alexander VIII, through the Holy Office, proscribed a list of thirty-one Jansenist propositions, eight of which were directed against the book by Arnauld. Six of the eight propositions deal with penance and satisfaction antecedent to Communion, and two immediately with the reception of the Eucharist:

⁷⁵ *Oeuvres* 26, xli.

⁷⁶ *Oeuvres* 28, 36.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 628-33.

I. *Jansenist Errors regarding Penance and Satisfaction for Sin*

1. It was not the policy or institution by the Church but the law and prescription of Christ, under a kind of natural necessity, which established the order of having satisfaction (for sins) precede absolution.

2. The practice of immediate absolution is an inversion of the order of penance.

3. A man ought to do penance all his life for original sin.

4. Confessions made to religious are generally either sacrilegious or invalid.

5. A pastor can rightly suspect that he has imposed too light and inadequate a penance or satisfaction for the sin of greed and desire of temporal aid, in the case of beggars who live on public charity.

6. The modern practice regarding the administration of the sacrament of penance, although supported by the authority of many persons and confirmed by long established custom, is nevertheless considered by the Church not as proper but as an abuse.

II. *Jansenist Errors regarding Holy Communion*

1. Those who pretend they have a right to Communion before having done condign penance for their sins are to be regarded guilty of sacrilege.

2. In like manner, those are to be forbidden Holy Communion in whom there is not as yet the purest love of God, unmixed with any lesser affection.⁷⁸

For the Jansenists the condemnation of their moral theories was a severe blow. They tried to soften its effect first by representing the censure as ambiguous, and then by saying it was purely theoretical and aimed at theses which no one actually taught. Yet all thirty-one propositions could be traced to specific Jansenists, and the eight against Arnauld were almost verbatim from his book. Arnauld was still living when *La fréquente communion* was condemned. His resentment against Alexander VIII vented itself in a bitter diatribe. "The Pope," he wrote to a friend, "has disgraced the Holy See and provoked the execration of all thoughtful men by his scandalous restoration of nepotism."⁷⁹ Other Jansenists were more explicit. Gerberon described the condemnation of 1690 as a shame for the Holy Office and a blot on

⁷⁸ DB 1306-13. The censure attached to these propositions ranged from "temerarious" to "heretical." However, antecedent to the condemnation of 1690, and within four years of the first edition of *La fréquente communion*, Innocent X had declared to be simply heretical one statement in the book which "placed a perfect equality between St. Peter and St. Paul, with no subordination and subjection of St. Paul to St. Peter in the supreme power and government of the universal Church" (DB 1091).

⁷⁹ Letter of January 26, 1694, *Oeuvres* 3, 733.

the pontificate of Alexander VIII; and Quesnel did not hesitate to say, after the Pope's death, that he had died an excommunicate.⁸⁰

LAXIST ERRORS REGARDING FREQUENT COMMUNION

While the Church was troubled with the encroachment of Jansenism in France and the Low Countries, a different and contrary tendency began to develop in Spain. The seed planted there by St. Ignatius had borne rich fruit, so that frequent Holy Communion became the established custom. Unfortunately in some places it went to extremes. Typical of the extremists was Juan de Vega who, in 1659, published his "Reply apologetic, moral, scholastic, on the frequent use of sacramental confession, wherein are treated conjointly . . . matters necessary to be known for the giving of advice as to the frequent reception of this sacrament and of the Holy Eucharist."⁸¹ While maintaining the doctrine of Salmerón, de Vega went beyond the Jesuit to introduce some innovations. Treating of frequent Communion, he declared:

It is not and never has ever been the intention of the Church to forbid one single Communion in the whole year, as she does not keep anyone from the reception of this sacrament either on Good Friday or on Holy Saturday. For this reason many prominent authors hold that it is laudable and lawful to receive Holy Communion on those days, since there is no law which forbids it.⁸²

More extreme and more influential was Antonio Velasquez Pinto, of the Order of Minor Clerks Regular. In 1662 he published at Madrid his *Tesoro de los Cristianos*, with the laudatory approbation of the Universities of Alcala, Valladolid, and Avila, as well as of outstanding theologians among the Benedictines, Franciscans, Carmelites, Dominicans, Augustinians, Bernardines, and Minims. At least the first edition was also approved by many bishops. Pinto not only encouraged daily Communion for everyone, clergy and laity alike, not excepting Good Friday and Holy Saturday, but he taught that reception of the Eucharist every day was a divine precept. "Obedience to divine law," he said, "obliges us to receive Holy Communion every day, and this doctrine has been expressly taught by St. Jerome, St. Cyril, St. Rupert,

⁸⁰ Pastor, *op. cit.*, 33, 558.

⁸¹ *Selectae practicae disputationes* (Madrid, 1659).

⁸² Quoted by Ferreres, *op. cit.*, 84.

St. Bonaventure, St. Justin, St. Cyprian, Paschasius, and many other Fathers.”⁸³

The immediate result of this teaching in Spain was to accentuate frequent and daily Communion to a point unknown in previous history. Praiseworthy in itself, the movement suffered from a number of defects, some doctrinal, as in the case of Pinto’s theory about a divine precept, and others disciplinary. Moreover, the aberrations spread outside the Spanish peninsula. Finally the matter was submitted by the bishops of Spain for judgment in Rome. Six theologians were appointed by Innocent XI to examine the complaints and draw up their individual reports, to be handed over to the Congregation of the Council for authoritative decision. The theologians were asked to report on five questions:

1. Should daily Communion be permitted or forbidden to lay people? Under what conditions?
2. The same questions regarding religious women.
3. The same questions regarding their women domestics.
4. Should Holy Communion, received daily in the home, be permitted or restricted?
5. How can the foregoing abuses best be dealt with?⁸⁴

The complete report of the theologians and later on of the Congregation runs to 41 columns and some 20,000 words in the text of the *Analecta juris canonici*. Among the theologians was one Jesuit, Father Esparza, and Lorenzo de Laurea, who was made cardinal by Innocent XI. De Laurea’s summation is the most detailed on the abuses which had to be corrected. “In some countries,” he pointed out, “notably in Spain, the practice of daily Communion has become so common and is so widespread among laymen as well as among nuns and their servants, that we fear esteem for the Holy Eucharist will be lessened, unless the Holy See takes active measures in the matter.”⁸⁵ He continued:

The evil is increased by the fact that confessors and preachers endeavor to impress upon the faithful the necessity of frequent Communion, both in their sermons and in their writings, and insist on it as though it were prescribed by divine

⁸³ *Tesoro de los cristianos* (Madrid, 1662), Disc. 4, c. 12, n. 2; quoted by Ferreres, p. 83.

⁸⁴ *Analecta juris pontificii*, coll. 792–93.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 798.

law, and go so far as to say that absence of mortal sin is the only preparation required.

Besides this, laymen receive the Eucharist at home or even in bed, and there are regulars who bring the Blessed Sacrament to them in their pockets, or take it from private oratories in which they celebrate Mass under the plea that, daily Communion being prescribed by divine law, any obstacle which prevents us from going to church renders such a proceeding lawful.⁸⁶

One of the cardinals on the commission noted also that among the abuses to be condemned is, "to receive two hosts at the same time in order that the Blessed Sacrament may remain longer with the communicant, such a practice being against the rites of the Roman Church."⁸⁷

After months of deliberation, a decision was handed down by the Congregation on February 12, 1679, in the Decree *Cum ad aures*, to which St. Pius X would later refer as indicative of the Church's vigilance in avoiding extremes. As the principal document on frequent Communion antedating the decree of St. Pius, it deserves careful analysis. First are narrated the various abuses that had crept in:

Our Most Holy Father and Lord has been informed by the testimony of trustworthy persons that the faithful in some dioceses receive the Eucharist every day, even on Good Friday, and maintain that daily Communion is prescribed by divine law. Likewise abuses have been introduced in the administration of this Sacrament. Some receive the Eucharist at home in their private oratories, or even in bed, though they are not dangerously ill, and they keep for that purpose the Blessed Sacrament in silver pyxes, or ask priests to bring it secretly to them. Others receive several particles at the same time, or hosts of unusual size, and finally many confess their venial faults to priests not approved by the Ordinary.⁸⁸

Then follow detailed norms to be used by confessors for different classes of communicants. With regard to frequent reception by business men:

It rests with the confessor to whom the secrets of their hearts are unfolded to give the final decision. He may advise in each individual case to married men and tradesmen what he thinks more suitable for their spiritual welfare according to their purity of conscience, the profit they derive from frequent Communion and the progress they make in virtue.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 817.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 829.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 830.

A special counsel is given for married persons:

In dealing with married people, he should warn them that if the Apostle did not allow them to 'defraud one another except, perhaps, by consent for a time that they may give themselves to prayer,' how much more reverence towards the most Holy Eucharist requires them to observe continency that they may with greater purity of soul approach this heavenly banquet.⁹⁰

Religious women are to abide by the rules of their respective Institutes:

As regards those nuns who desire to receive daily Holy Communion, they are to be advised to communicate on the days appointed by the rules of their Order. But if there are some so conspicuous by purity of conscience or fervor of soul that they are considered worthy of daily reception of this Sacrament, it may be permitted to them by their Superiors.⁹¹

Undoubtedly "the bishops have to thank God that devotion towards the Blessed Sacrament has become so widespread in their cities and dioceses, and they should encourage such sentiments"; nevertheless, they must "refute those who declare that daily Communion is prescribed by divine law."⁹² A number of ordinances are then set down to check the practical consequences of the doctrinal error:

Priests are in no wise to carry the Eucharist secretly in their pockets to those who are confined to their beds, but when Communion is to be administered to the sick who cannot go to church to receive it, it must be carried publicly and solemnly according to the prescriptions of the Roman Ritual . . . No priest is allowed to give the same person several particles at the same time, nor hosts of unusual size.⁹³

In conclusion, priests and especially regulars are cautioned that unless approved by the Ordinary, they "may not hear the confessions of

⁹⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁹¹ *Loc. cit.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, 831. In his preliminary report De Laurea gave the reasons why the Congregation should declare that daily Communion is not of divine precept. "Neither the Gospel nor the other canonical writings of the New Testament prescribe it. The Church would be in great error in not observing this precept, supposing it to exist. None of the Fathers and no council has said that daily Communion was of divine right. It is also not an ecclesiastical precept, since there is no evidence of such obligation in any council or constitution which has been approved by the Pope. Moreover, since priests themselves are not obliged to sacrifice or communicate every day, a fortiori none of the faithful is bound to do so. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that daily Communion was practiced in the primitive Church; for even lay-persons in every walk of life used to communicate at all the Masses which they heard" (*ibid.*, 794).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 831.

venial sins." It is not clear from the preliminary documents why the Jesuits were singled out for special mention. Prior to the decree, one of the consultors suggested deleting the name, saying that "the Society of Jesus does not deserve anything extraordinary in this matter: which makes this addition either too honorable or prejudicial, as though Jesuits were more eminent or more contumacious than others."⁹⁴ In spite of this remonstrance, however, the final draft of the decree concluded with the warning that "bishops do not lack powers to inflict rigorous punishments" on those who would hear confessions of venial faults without faculties from the local Ordinary, "although they be regulars, even of the Society of Jesus."⁹⁵

Less than a month after the above decree, the Holy Office condemned a series of sixty-five propositions which fell under the general ban of moral laxism. Number 56 in the sequence states: "Frequent confession and Communion, even in those who live pagan lives, is a sign of predestination."⁹⁶ The source of this doctrine is shrouded in obscurity. "In its condemnation, the Congregation confined itself to saying that the propositions, as formulated, were false and reprehensible, without considering whether or no they were actually taught in the form now condemned."⁹⁷ They were all textually taken from a letter of accusation submitted to Rome by the University of Louvain.

CONDEMNATION OF MICHAEL MOLINOS AND QUIETISM

Quietism as an ascetical system was born with the publication in 1675 of *The Spiritual Guide*, by Michael Molinos, a Spanish priest then living in Rome. Although dangerous, the book was susceptible of an orthodox interpretation; but the letters of spiritual direction which Molinos wrote, presented total passivity as the Christian ideal of perfection. After several years of sifting this correspondence, which amounted to 20,000 pieces of mail sent to persons in every walk of life and rank in the Church, Molinos was finally arrested and found guilty of teaching erroneous and heretical doctrine. On September 3,

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 827.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 831.

⁹⁶ *DB* 1206; the decree is dated March 4, 1679.

⁹⁷ Pastor, *op. cit.*, 432. According to Reusch and Avrigny, many of the censured propositions had been taken by the prosecution from the *Lettres provinciales* of Pascal. When a controversy arose about the precise authorship of particular questions, a number of dissertations dealing with the point were prohibited by Rome (*loc. cit.*).

1687, he made a solemn abjuration of his errors, after which he was taken back to prison, where he died towards the end of 1696.

Originally 263 false propositions were extracted from Molinos' letters, and acknowledged by him as his in their objectionable sense. These were subsequently reduced to 68, and condemned by Innocent XI on November 20, 1687. Among the proscribed statements is no. 32, which was labeled by the Holy Office as "temerarious, scandalous, dangerous in practice, erroneous, and in many ways savoring of heresy." It reads:

Neither before nor after Communion is there required any other preparation or thanksgiving than to remain in one's customary passive resignation. This passivity more perfectly supplies for all the acts of virtue which can be and are produced in the ordinary way. Moreover if at the time of Communion there arise feelings of humiliation, petition, or gratitude, they should be suppressed, unless recognized as coming by a special impulse from God. Otherwise they are movements of a nature which is not as yet dead.⁹⁸

Thus frequent Communion was advocated with literally no moral requirements before, during, or after reception, beyond the quietistic passivity which demanded no voluntary effort on the part of the communicant. The effect of this teaching on Molinos' followers, especially religious women, was that they considered themselves sinless, offered no resistance to temptation, and communicated without confession, even when they had every reason to fear they had committed some grievous sin.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ DB 1252. Molinos derived this strange doctrine by an appeal to the decree *Cum ad aures*, addressed to the Bishop of Brescia in 1587. In 1675 he published his *Breve tratado de la comunión cuotidiana* (Rome: Miguel Hercules), in which he summarized the decree and concluded that its doctrine corresponded perfectly with his own position, that no one should be forbidden daily Communion, even though he was a layman and engaged in worldly business. From this general principle Molinos proceeded to make a particular application: "Experience will always induce the confessor to approve daily Communion for everyone who desires it for the good of his soul . . . since Communion received in the state of grace is always profitable" (P. Dudon, *Le Quietiste Espagnol Michel Molinos* [Paris, 1921] 91-92). Unfortunately his concept of being in the state of grace was entirely quietistic.

⁹⁹ "For Molinos, perfection of the interior life consists in a perfect passivity of soul; this is the secret of peace, union with God and sanctification. One's own activity, one's own desires, one's own thoughts are the great enemies of the divine life. Whoever puts this doctrine into practice simplifies not only his prayer but the whole conduct of his life. . . . To resist temptations, gain indulgences, practice penances, recite vocal prayers, all of this is useless in the state of perfection" (*ibid.*, 201).

RESURGENCE OF JANSENIISM IN ITALY: THE SYNOD OF PISTOIA

In spite of repeated condemnations by the Holy See, the Jansenist heresy not only continued in existence but spread to other countries outside of France. Under pressure from Louis XIV, Arnauld took refuge in Holland, the birthplace of Jansenius, where his followers were supported by the sympathetic Calvinist government. They elected one of their number, Cornelius Steenhoven, as bishop, and had him receive episcopal consecration from a Catholic bishop at that time under suspension. The schismatical sect established a diocese at Haarlem in 1742, and their organization, known as the Old Roman Catholic Church (*De Oud-Roomsch-Katolieke Kerk*), has survived to the present day.

Another and more significant group of Jansenists was established in Italy. Here the movement was along aristocratic rather than popular lines, as in France, and consequently its impact on the masses was less effective. Clerics in the highest ranks of society in Italy either openly or sympathetically espoused the principles of Jansenius and Arnauld. Among these, the most famous was Scipione de Ricci, nephew of the last Jesuit General before the suppression of the Society, and subsequently Bishop of Pistoia.

Born at Florence in 1741, he died in the same city in 1809, having ruled the diocese of Pistoia from 1780 until his forced resignation in 1791. Although related to the Jesuit General, Ricci conceived a hearty dislike for the Society already in his student days in Rome, where he came under the influence of the Jansenist sympathizers. Returning to his native city, he wrote and spoke openly in favor of the Jansenists in France and Holland, and within a year of his ordination was publicly expounding Jansenius' doctrine on grace. Not long after his elevation to the See of Pistoia, he joined the Grand Duke of Tuscany in an overt attempt to Jansenize the dioceses under his jurisdiction, if need be at the cost of severance from Rome.

Ricci's extant sermons breathe the unmistakable spirit of Jansenius and Antoine Arnauld. It is a principle of faith, he held, that very few adults will be saved. Priests must ever keep this fact before the minds of the people, in order to draw them away from evil and move them to salutary repentance. Consequently, it is contrary to this established

truth to give absolution freely, or admit to Holy Communion the majority of penitents.

Ricci was eloquent in exalting the dignity of the Blessed Sacrament by contrasting it with the weakness and unworthiness of man. Even good men, unless they attain to the sanctity of the primitive Church, cannot partake of this heavenly Food, even at Easter time. For it is a mark of greater holiness to receive the Eucharist more rarely than frequently. It is more in accordance with the spiritual nature of the sacrament, and therefore preferable, to receive Communion in spirit and charity, instead of sacramentally. In fact, sacramental Communion requires in the soul an immunity not only from mortal sin, but even from venial faults, scruples, and aridity of spirit.¹⁰⁰

The climax in Ricci's effort to reform his diocese was reached at the Synod which opened at Pistoia on September 18, 1786, in the Church of St. Leopold, under the presidency of the bishop. There were 234 participants, including 171 parish priests and thirteen religious. The theologian Tamburini, known for his Jansenism, was appointed "promoter" of the Synod. As Ricci remarked in his memoirs, Tamburini was to be the leading spirit in this movement against "the old machine of papal monarchy."¹⁰¹ After ten days of session, the Synod published its decrees which, together with the Acts of the Council, fill two volumes in the modern edition.

In his correspondence with the Jansenist Church in Holland, Ricci expressed the hope of a similar establishment in Italy. Fortunately for the Catholic future of that country, "this full flowering of Italian Jansenism" was not supported by Ricci's fellow bishops in Tuscany; only two out of sixteen are known to have been in sympathy with his ideas. He was also opposed, with violence, by the Tuscan laity. "With his innovations, Ricci had outraged the most sacred sentiments of the people. . . . They gave full vent to their fury, which did not subside until Ricci had taken flight."¹⁰² When the cathedral chapter joined the popular demonstration, the bishop had no choice but to resign, which he did on June 3, 1791.

Efforts were made to forestall a formal condemnation of the Synod of Pistoia, but Pius VI, "to fulfill his apostolic and pastoral duty,"

¹⁰⁰ Benvenuto Matteucci, *Scipione de' Ricci* (Morcelliana, 1941) 138.

¹⁰¹ *Memorie di Scipione de' Ricci* 1 (Firenze, 1865) 490.

¹⁰² Pastor, *op. cit.*, 39, 149.

caused eighty-five tenets to be cited from the records and decrees, each one to be censured separately to avoid any possible misunderstanding. On August 28, 1794, the Pope issued the Constitution, *Auctorem fidei*, incorporating the cited passages and corresponding censures.

Two of the condemned propositions treat of Holy Communion. On the subject of the Eucharist as sacrifice, the Synod declared that "It does not condemn as illicit those Masses in which the congregation does not communicate sacramentally. The reason is that, although less perfectly, they nevertheless partake of the Victim by receiving Him spiritually."¹⁰⁸ The background of this statement was the Jansenist limitation of sacramental reception by the faithful when assisting at Mass. It was condemned by the Pope as "false, erroneous, suspect, and redolent of heresy," since it implied that at least spiritual Communion by the faithful was necessary for the validity, or at least the liceity, of the Holy Sacrifice.¹⁰⁴

More directly on the subject of frequent Communion was the synodal decree that a severe penitential probation must precede absolution and admission to the Eucharist after a person has fallen into grave sin. It was decreed: "Only when a man has given indubitable evidence that the love of God again reigns in his heart may he rightly be judged worthy of admittance to participation in the Blood of Jesus Christ, which is received in the sacraments."¹⁰⁶ However, since "supposititious conversions effected through attrition are generally neither lasting nor efficacious, it is the duty of the pastor of souls to insist on there being unmistakable signs of eminent charity, before he admits penitents to the sacraments (of confession and Communion)." Concretely, the pastor can deduce the presence of this charity "from the person's stable abstention from sin and persevering fervor in good works." These dispositions must "precede absolution," and consequent reception of Holy Communion.¹⁰⁶ The papal censure to this proposition was to call it "false, temerarious, disturbing the peace of souls, contrary to the safe and approved practice of the Church, detracting from and injurious to the efficacy of the Sacrament."¹⁰⁷

It was not until 1805 that friends induced Ricci to sign a statement

¹⁰⁸ DB 1528.

¹⁰⁴ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁰⁶ DB 1536.

¹⁰⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁰⁷ *Loc. cit.*

of submission to the Holy See. On sending it to Pope Pius VII, he wrote in typical Jansenist fashion that he was sure he never held any opinions other than those defined in the Constitution of Pius VI.¹⁰⁸

ST. ALPHONSUS LIGUORI AND THE THEOLOGIANS OF THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY

With both extremes duly corrected by the intervention of the Holy See, theologians in the nineteenth century set themselves to a systematic exposition of the conditions requisite for frequent Communion. It was inevitable that under the circumstances their opinions should be divided, inclining either towards greater strictness or leniency. Less obvious, however, is the historical fact emphasized by Pius X, that before the decree of 1905 "theologians of good repute judged that daily Communion should be allowed to the faithful only in rare cases and under many conditions."¹⁰⁹ In this they were "following with slight variations the rules laid down by St. Alphonsus," notably in his popular manual *Homo apostolicus*, for the use of confessors and spiritual directors. Since "the writings of St. Alphonsus have gone into several thousand editions in various languages,"¹¹⁰ it is not surprising that, following his lead, "the greater number of moralists" during the latter eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were opposed to the view that "daily Communion ought to be recommended to all those who are in a state of grace and have a right intention." They required "besides these, other dispositions for frequent access to the holy table."¹¹¹

To anticipate any misunderstanding, it is important to recognize Alphonsus Liguori as the implacable enemy of Jansenism:

By his whole nature and disposition Alphonsus seems to have been predestined to be the exact opposite of the Jansenistic spirit. While men of the type of Jansen, Saint-Cyran, Arnauld, Pascal and Quesnel, when they emerged from their narrow and confined studies to influence their fellow-humans, aimed above the heads of common folk at the educated, refined and well-to-do, Alphonsus, though a scholar too and one of outstanding worth . . . was first and foremost a minister of souls.

¹⁰⁸ In his own words, Ricci's submission to the Holy See involved only "un sacrificio grammaticale" (*Memorie*, 2, 269).

¹⁰⁹ *DB* 1983.

¹¹⁰ *Enciclopedia cattolica* 1, 872.

¹¹¹ Ferreres, *op. cit.*, 103.

Far removed from the straight-laced spirit of the Jansenists, who were really worried lest the number of the elect be too great, he lived and moved entirely in the spirit of love, he was filled with pity for the poor people whose distress and suffering he realized. He wanted to show the way of salvation and open the gates of heaven for as many as possible.¹¹²

Modern historians, therefore, properly believe that the voluminous writings of St. Alphonsus (260 separate works, original or revised) "exercised their principal influence by the refutation of Jansenism in the various countries of Europe."¹¹³

On the subject of frequent Communion the norms set down by Liguori represent the prevalent theological opinion before the rebirth of Eucharistic piety under St. Pius X. Writing for confessors, he first cites the directive of Benedict XIV: "It is undoubtedly wrong to allow frequent Communion to such as fall often into mortal sin, or to such as approach Holy Communion with affection to deliberate venial sin with no desire of amendment."¹¹⁴ Then he qualifies:

It is indeed proper at times to grant Communion to some who are in danger of falling into mortal sin that they may gain strength to resist; but in regard to those who are not in such danger, and who are in the habit of committing deliberate venial sin, and show no sign of improvement or desire of amendment, it is best not to allow them Communion oftener than once a week. It will, moreover, be good to deprive them of Communion sometimes for a whole week, so that they may gain a greater horror for their faults and greater reverence towards this Sacrament.¹¹⁵

However, under certain conditions frequent, even daily, Communion may be permitted:

To certain souls who desire it for their greater growth in the love of God, I judge the director can hardly without scruple deny Communion frequently and even daily, with the exception of one day in the week in accordance with the practice of some directors of experience, and with the exception also of the periods for which they may decide to deprive their penitents of Communion, as a proof of their obedience or humility, or for any other good reason. Such souls, however, should live free from affection to any venial sin, and should moreover be much

¹¹² Pastor, *op. cit.*, 368.

¹¹³ *Enciclopedia cattolica*, *loc. cit.*

¹¹⁴ *Opera omnia* 11, *De synodo diocesana* (Venezia, 1767) 140. The original text, written by Benedict XIV as Cardinal Lambertini, reads: "Monendi sunt Confessarii, ne frequentem ad Eucharistiam accessum iis aut suadeant, aut permittant, qui in gravia peccata saepe labuntur, nec de poenitentia peragenda, suaeque vita emendanda sunt solliciti; sicuti nec illis, qui etsi gravia evitant crimina, voluntatem tamen habent venialibus inhaerentem."

¹¹⁵ *Homo apostolicus* (Mechliniae, 1849) 146.

given to mental prayer and strive towards perfection, no longer falling into sin, even fully deliberate venial sin.¹¹⁶

This rule is not of universal application, but needs to be further qualified if certain contingencies arise:

If, however, it be afterwards noticed that, notwithstanding frequent Communion, a person makes no progress in the path of perfection, and does not free himself from deliberate faults, even though venial, but for example still clings to the pleasures of sense in sight, hearing, and taste, and is fastidious in dress, in this case it would be well to restrict the use of Communion deliberately, to the end that such a person may take serious thought of amendment, and look to his progress in spirit.¹¹⁷

If these regulations appear stringent, it should be added that St. Alphonsus was personally most in favor of frequent Communion as the talisman of high sanctity. After laying down the conditions, he concluded with the hope, "Would that there were many souls in the world . . . who, while detesting even lesser faults, desire to communicate not only frequently but even daily, with a true desire of amendment and of growth in the love of God. If this were the case, Jesus Christ would be far more loved in the world than He is at present."¹¹⁸

PAPAL LEGISLATION ON THE EVE OF ST. PIUS X'S DECREE

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and within a generation of the decree of St. Pius X the Holy See was asked to pass judgment on frequent Communion among religious women. Three documents were issued within five years, each testifying to the uncertainty still current among theologians and local ecclesiastics on the necessary dispositions for frequent reception.

Archbishop Hassley of Cambrai proposed the following *dubium* to the Congregation of Rites:

The nuns of St. Colette . . . and some others besides, authorized by the superiors of their churches, receive Holy Communion every day, although according to the rules and decisions given by many theologians such an extraordinary privilege may be granted only to individuals and under special circumstances. As the good sisters would regret very much to be deprived of this consolation, the Sacred Congregation is requested to decide what is to be done in the present case.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹¹⁹ *Decreta authentica Congregationis Sacrorum Rituum* 3 (Roma, 1900) 178.

On December 11, 1885, the Congregation answered: "The practice in question is a laudable one; frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist is to be promoted according to the declarations of the Council of Trent."¹²⁰

A similar answer was given by the Sacred Penitentiary a year later: "The practice of Holy Communion among nuns is praiseworthy, although it rests with the confessor to allow it in each individual case, according to the rules given by approved authors, chiefly by St. Alphonsus."¹²¹

Finally in 1890 Pope Leo XIII, through the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, issued the Decree *Quem admodum*, "To remove certain abuses which have crept into religious institutes." Among the abuses was the practice of superiors in many congregations of women who take simple vows, and of men whose members do not go on for sacred orders, who "go so far as to prescribe by their own authority the days on which their subjects have either to abstain or to receive Holy Communion."¹²² Accordingly the Holy Father lays down specific rules that are to be observed by the superiors of these congregations:

All prohibitions or permissions in connection with frequency of Communion may come only from the confessor, either ordinary or extraordinary. The superiors have no power whatever to interfere in this matter, except in the case in which one of their subjects has been a cause of scandal in the community by committing a notoriously grievous sin after the last confession; in which case Communion may be forbidden until the delinquent approaches the tribunal of penance.¹²³

Then follow certain norms for the guidance of subjects in their attitude towards Holy Communion:

The Pope advises all to do their utmost to insure a due disposition for Holy Communion, and wishes them to receive it on the days appointed by their rules, and whenever the confessor judges that anyone, on account of his greater fervor or progress in virtue, is worthy of more frequent Communion, he may allow it. But he who obtains this permission is bound to manifest the same to his superior.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹²¹ Quoted in *DTC* 3, 539; here the date for the decree is given as November 19, 1885; but Ferreres, *op. cit.*, 99, and Berardi, *Praxis* 3, n. 973, believe it was given a year later, on December 23, 1886.

¹²² *Acta Leonis XIII* 3 (Brugis, 1894) 134.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹²⁴ *Loc. cit.*

Once the superiors are so informed, they "may put before the confessor their objections to such permission, but they must always acquiesce in his decision without the slightest hesitation."¹²⁵

ST. PIUS X AND FREQUENT COMMUNION

Several factors conspired to give to the world, under St. Pius X, the decree on frequent Communion, which for fifty years has been exercising "so extensive and beneficent an influence that it would be impossible to estimate it."¹²⁶ The Pope's own antecedents, his years of experience as a parish priest, and above all his personal devotion to the Eucharist, made him painfully conscious of the harm done to souls who only seldom approached the holy table. Furthermore he realized that the root of the problem lay not among the faithful but among those who were to guide the people in the way of salvation. Theologians were undecided on what precise conditions were required for frequent reception. In principle they agreed on the value of the Blessed Sacrament as a means of sanctification; but in practice they were divided on the proper dispositions that were needed. The majority held for stringent conditions, not excluding the conquest of inordinate affections. When occasionally an author would modify these conditions, he was accused of teaching "erroneous doctrine."¹²⁷ A bare list of the books and monographs written on the subject at the turn of the century shows how acute the issue had become. The last authoritative study before the decree was the treatise of Cardinal Gennari, *Sulla frequente comunione*, published in 1900, in which the author weighed the probabilities of both sides. Although personally in favor of daily Communion with minimum conditions, he hesitated to depart from the more common opinion.¹²⁸

Historical Elements in the Decree

The decree of St. Pius X, *Sacra tridentina synodus*, is a concentrated reflection of the Church's previous history on the reception of Holy Communion. Eminently practical, it poses four specific problems that had vexed theologians for centuries, and answers them with unambiguous clarity:

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 136-37.

¹²⁶ René Bazin, *Pius X* (London, 1928) 178.

¹²⁷ Ferreres, *op. cit.*, 104.

¹²⁸ Napoli, 1900, 26.

1) At the outset, in the very title of the decree, "De quotidiana sumptione," the question is settled, what exactly "frequent" Communion means. Without qualification the Pope explains that frequent means daily reception of the Blessed Sacrament. Arguing from the analogy of food used by Christ Himself, and the "all but unanimous interpretation" of the Fathers that "daily bread" in the Lord's Prayer means daily Communion, Pius X concludes that "the Eucharistic Bread ought to be our daily food."¹²⁹

2) But this is not enough. Granted that daily Communion is permissible, is it commendable to all classes of persons—priests and religious, lay people and children? Unequivocally, "the desire of Jesus Christ and of the Church [is] that all the faithful should daily approach the sacred banquet."¹³⁰ This is directly contrary to the Jansenist rigorism which excluded the majority of people from the holy table, "except once a week, or once a month, or even once a year."¹³¹ Although implicit in the decree of 1905, frequent Communion for children had to be explicitly promulgated in subsequent decrees: twice in 1906 to urge "frequent reception even for children,"¹³² and in 1910 to order that they might be admitted to first Communion "as soon as they begin to have a certain use of reason."¹³³

¹²⁹ *Acta sanctae sedis* 38 (Dec. 20, 1905) 400–405. Subsequent quotations from the decree are based on the English version in the London *Tablet*, used by the translator of Ferreres.

¹³⁰ Ferreres, *op. cit.*, 25.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³² The first decree was issued by the Congregation of Indulgences, and is dated February 14, 1906 (*Acta s. sedis* 39, 62). The second was a response from the Congregation of the Council, dated September 15, 1906. The question was asked of the Holy Father: "Quotidiana Eucharistiae sumptio in Catholicis ephebeis ne debet suaderi etiam pueris quibuscumque post susceptam primam Communionem?" He referred the matter to the Congregation, which answered: "Sacrae Communionis frequentiam commendari iuxta articulum primum decreti (1905) etiam pueris, qui ad sacram mensam . . . semel admissi, ab eius frequenti participatione prohiberi non debent, sed potius eos ad id hortari, reprobata praxi contraria alicubi vigente" (*ibid.*, 499). What occasioned the appeal to Rome was the meaning of *ephebeus*, as used in the decree of 1905, which stated: "Frequent and daily Communion should be promoted in all Christian establishments, of whatever kind, for the training of youth."

¹³³ Decree *Quam singulari*, issued by the Congregation of the Sacraments on August 8, 1910 (*AAS* 2, 577–83). Just as in the decree of 1905, so here a basic error is exposed. In the decree on frequent Communion the error was Jansenist rigorism. As regards the minimum age for first Communion, "The abuses we are condemning arise from the fact that those who distinguished one age of discretion for penance and another for the Eucharist were in error. . . . The age of discretion for confession is the time when one can distinguish

3) Still further, the question of necessary dispositions had to be settled. And here the Pope by-passed the more common opinion current for centuries to decide in favor of the minority school which required only the state of grace and a right intention. The two paragraphs on this point represent the heart of the decree.

Frequent and daily Communion, as a thing most earnestly desired by Christ our Lord and by the Catholic Church, should be open to all the faithful, of whatever rank and condition of life; so that no one who is in the state of grace, and who approaches the holy table with a right and devout intention, can lawfully be hindered therefrom.

A right intention consists in this: that he who approaches the holy table should do so, not out of routine or vainglory or human respect, but for the purpose of pleasing God, of being more closely united with Him by charity, and of seeking this divine remedy for his weaknesses and defects.¹³⁴

A valuable distinction is then drawn between dispositions which are strictly necessary and those which are only praiseworthy. Those who had opposed frequent Communion for all the faithful had failed to make this discrimination. Consequently:

Although it is most expedient that those who communicate frequently or daily should be free from venial sins, especially such as are fully deliberate, and from any affection thereto, nevertheless it is sufficient that they be free from mortal sin, with the purpose of never sinning mortally in the future; and if they have this sincere purpose, it is impossible but that daily communicants should gradually emancipate themselves even from venial sins, and from all affection for them.¹³⁵

Obviously, "since the sacraments of the New Law . . . produce a greater effect in proportion as the dispositions of the recipient are better," the faithful should be encouraged that "Holy Communion be preceded by serious preparation, and followed by a suitable thanksgiving according to each one's strength, circumstances, and duties."¹³⁶ Nevertheless, while exhorting the people to cultivate the best possible dispositions, "confessors must take care not to dissuade anyone

between right and wrong, that is, when one arrives at a certain use of reason, and in like manner, for Holy Communion is required the age when one can distinguish between ordinary bread and the Bread of the Holy Eucharist, which is also the age when a child attains the use of reason" (*ibid.*, 580).

¹³⁴ Ferreres, *op. cit.*, 30.

¹³⁵ *Loc. cit.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

(*ne quemquam avertant*) from frequent and daily Communion, provided he is in the state of grace and approaches with a right intention."¹⁸⁷

Dogmatic Basis of the Decree

Underlying the practical norms set forth by the decree of Pius X is a fundamental dogmatic principle which involves the nature and purpose of the Eucharist as a sacrament of the New Law. During the sixteenth century the remedial function of Holy Communion was so exaggerated by the Reformers that the Council of Trent had to anathematize "anyone who says that the principal fruit of the most Holy Eucharist is the remission of sins, or that other effects do not result from it."¹⁸⁸ A century later and into modern times the Jansenists went to the opposite extreme. So far from regarding the Eucharist as remedial, they considered it only remunerative. The subtitle of Arnaud's book on frequent Communion was, *Sancta sanctis*, meaning that no one but persons of high sanctity should receive the Eucharist, as a reward for their virtue.

St. Pius X followed the Church's tradition in avoiding both extremes. Quoting the Council of Trent, he exposed the Protestant error by means of an important distinction. The Blessed Sacrament is indeed an "antidote," but in two different senses. "By means of it we may be freed from daily (venial) faults"; but only "preserved from mortal sins."¹⁸⁹ Against the Jansenist error, he recalled the teaching of the early Church, in the words of St. Augustine, that "the primary purpose [of the Eucharist] is not that the honor and reverence due to our Lord be safeguarded, or that it may serve as a reward or recompense of virtue bestowed on the recipients."¹⁴⁰

The Pope recognized, however, that a negative condemnation was not enough; what needed clarification was precisely what the Protestants had overemphasized and what the Jansenists had tried to obscure almost to denial, namely, that the Eucharist is an extension of the redemptive work of Christ. He therefore made it plain that in removing the obstacles to frequent Communion by all the faithful, he was acting in conformity with the essential purpose for which the Blessed Sacrament had been given to the world:

¹⁸⁷ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁸⁸ DB 887.

¹⁸⁹ DB 875.

¹⁴⁰ *Sermo 57, De oratione dominica, 7 (PL 38, 389-90).*

The desire of Jesus Christ and of the Church that all the faithful should daily approach the sacred banquet is directed chiefly to this end, that the faithful, being united to God by means of this sacrament, may thence derive strength to resist their sensual passions, to cleanse themselves from the stains of daily faults, and to avoid those graver sins to which human frailty is liable.¹⁴¹

When explaining this doctrine in the decree, St. Pius X expressed the hope that daily Communion would be the Church's salvation, "when religion and the Catholic faith are attacked on all sides, and the true love of God and genuine piety are so lacking in many quarters."¹⁴² The experience of fifty years goes to prove that this hope has been fully realized.

¹⁴¹ Ferreres, *op. cit.*, 25-26.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 29.