

# Holy Communion

The Sacrament of the Altar



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Josef Imberg

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In this little book about Holy Communion we follow the teaching given in the Lutheran confession, particularly in Martin Luther's Large Catechism /LC/ and the Formula of Concord /FC/.

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## 1. Holy Communion is a sacrament

The word "sacrament" is not found in the New Testament. But it is used to describe *holy actions, instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ himself*. But after having stated that we can count in different ways. This is easily seen, if we compare Holy Communion and Penance (in the following called "Confession" and meaning confession of sins + Absolution). Both Holy Communion and Confession go back to a clear institution and command by our Lord Jesus Christ himself (Mt 26:26-29, 1 Cor 11:23-26, Mt 18:18, Jn 20:23). So far the two holy actions are similar, since they promise invisible spiritual gifts. But the two holy actions are also different. In Holy Communion we have to use bread and wine, but in Confession there is no outward visible thing. Through the use of such outward things in Holy Communion, together with the Word of God, we receive invisible spiritual gifts together with the body and blood of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

To explain what a “sacrament” is Christian scholars have tried different ways. A short explanation reads: “A visible form of invisible grace”. Another short explanation reads: “A sign of a sacred thing”. But both explanations are insufficient, since it would be possible then to include among the sacraments of the Church rather many holy actions. Therefore a somewhat longer explanation is better: “An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, ordained by Christ himself.” The main points here are three: The holy action must have been ordered (“ordained”) by Jesus Christ himself; there must be some outward and visible thing (things), also ordered by Christ, and to be used in such a way that it is essential for the holy action itself; and through this outward and visible thing something inward and spiritual is given.

If we explain “sacrament” in this way there can be only two sacraments: Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. But if that condition is dropped, that there should be an outward, visible thing, Confession can also be counted as a sacrament, since it is instituted by Christ himself and gives inward and spiritual gifts. Such a way of counting the sacraments is sometimes practised in the Lutheran documents of confession, but mostly they count with only two sacraments: Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

## Holy Communion has several names

Some of the names are given already in the New Testament, but some have been found later to explain what this Sacrament is and what it gives. In the New Testament we find the names "The Lord's Supper" (1 Cor 11:20) and "The Lord's Table" (1 Cor 10:21). Sometimes we call this Sacrament "The Sacrament of the Altar". So it is called in some of our confessions. Sometimes we call it "Holy Communion" or "Eucharist". Although these names are not given exactly in that way in the Bible, such teaching is given there about this Sacrament as to make the names very suitable. When it is written "participation" about this Sacrament, meaning a sharing of the bread and the wine and a sharing of Christ (1 Cor 10:16), we can quite as well say "communion", and so the word has been translated many times and in many languages. Such translation has given us one of the most common names of this Sacrament: "Holy Communion". The name "Eucharist" goes back to the thanksgiving, performed by our Lord Jesus Christ himself when he instituted this Sacrament (Lk 22:17, 1 Cor 11:23-25). "To give thanks" and "Eucharist" are two forms of the same word in Greek, the latter form therefore meaning both "thanksgiving" and, after that, "The holy Meal, where we perform thanksgiving". Thus, when we say "Eucharist", we always remind

ourselves of the thanksgiving at the first Holy Supper, but also how necessary it is for ourselves to carry on the thanksgiving at the Lord's Table.

### What is typical of a sacrament?

Typical is the correspondence between the outward thing and the inward, invisible gift. In Baptism we can see the water, but we cannot see the cleansing from sin, which is one of the great gifts in Baptism. We know that ordinary, visible water can cleanse us from filth and dirt, but we have to be told by the Word of God that the water of Baptism can cleanse us from our sins.

It is in a similar way with Holy Communion. Bread and wine can be used at an ordinary meal to satisfy the hunger of the body. In Holy Communion the hunger of man is satisfied by our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only one who can do that. He has said: "I am the bread of life" (Jn 6:35, 41, 51). But when we receive him in Holy Communion it is not a matter of believing only. It is a matter of receiving him truly, since he has told us about his presence in Holy Communion: "This is my body, this is my blood" (Mt 26:26-28).

Thus it is typical of a sacrament that the outward and inward things correspond. And therefore the Sacrament of the Altar can be described in this way: *"It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, in and under the bread and wine which we Christians are commanded by the Word of Christ to eat and to drink ...* The Sacrament is bread and wine, but not mere bread and wine, such as are ordinarily served at the table, but bread and wine comprehended in, and connected with, the Word of God" (LC).

### This Sacrament goes back to a holy action in the Old Testament

Both Baptism and Holy Communion have replaced holy actions which had been instituted and practised in the Old Testament. In the same way as Baptism has replaced circumcision as a way of entering fellowship with God, Holy Communion has replaced Passover, or the Paschal Lamb (Ex 12). This is also confirmed by what happened in "the upper room" in Jerusalem, where Jesus instituted Holy Communion (Mt 26:17-29). The purpose first mentioned for preparing that room for the evening was the customary celebration of the Passover. In fact, that evening they celebrated the last Passover ever held in the Christian Church, and at that very evening and meal the Lord instituted



Holy Communion, which was celebrated the first time ever in the Christian Church. It was soon to become clear that the two could not exist together. But the connection between the two holy actions was to remain for ever. The Passover was “but a shadow of the good things to come” (Heb 10:1). “The true form of these realities”, i.e. the fulfilled sacrifice of the Lamb of God (Is 53), is the Holy Communion. There we receive him who offered himself up once for all (Heb 7:27).

### What do we receive in this Sacrament?

This can be explained in two ways or in two stages. We have already said that *we receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ*. But he has also told us about his blood that it is “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28). How are these explanations to be joined or related to each other? When we receive his body and blood, *we also receive the inward and invisible gifts, which are forgiveness of sins, and thereby eternal life and eternal bliss* (Mt 26:26-29). Therefore it can be said that Jesus gives himself to us, body and blood, as a pledge or guarantee that his gifts are given also.

In this way his purpose when giving us this Sacrament becomes clear. He has given it to us for the same reason as giving us Holy Baptism and Confession. They are all means of giving us forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal bliss.

But there is a great difference between these holy acts. About those who become baptized it was stated that they will become disciples (Mt 28:18-20) or "enter the Kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). It is never said that a baptism should or could be repeated. With Confession and Holy Communion this is totally different. Sins must be forgiven many times, much more than seven times, if they are repeated (Mt 18:15-22). In connection with Holy Communion a repetition of this holy action has also been mentioned: "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). So Baptism means admission to the Kingdom of God and entrance into that Kingdom, whereas Confession - Absolution and Holy Communion will give the forgiveness of sins to those who already belong to that Kingdom but have fallen in sin and need forgiveness and peace in their hearts.

## **2. What is the working power in this Sacrament?**

“It is the Word which makes and distinguishes this Sacrament, so that it is not mere bread and wine, but is, and is called, the body and blood of Christ ... The Word must make a Sacrament of the element, else it remains a mere element. Now, it is not the word or ordinance of a prince or emperor, but of the sublime Majesty, at whose feet all creatures should fall, and affirm it is as He says, and accept it with all reverence, fear, and humility” (LC).

From the words quoted it must be clear that the working power in this Sacrament is the Word of God. The forgiveness of sins, life, and peace with God are obtained in this Sacrament. But these treasures can be conveyed to us only through the words “Given and shed for you”. “For herein you have both truths, that it is the body and blood of Christ, and that it is yours as a treasure and gift. Now the body of Christ can never be an unfruitful, vain thing, that effects or profits nothing. Yet, however great is the treasure in itself, it must be comprehended in the Word and administered to us, else we should never be able to know or seek it” (LC).

But why do we say that so much depends on the Word of God? It is easy to prove that it must be so. The work to save us and the whole world was completed on the cross and by the resurrection of the Lord. But how can we know that? "How are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?" (Rom 10:14). The answer is: Only through the Word of God!

And how can that work come to us, that we may get help and benefit and become saved? Only through the Word of God! When we believe in God and what he has done for us in Jesus Christ, that belief is a work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. Jesus says: "It is the spirit that gives life ... The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (Jn 6:63). But if we believe what God has said and worked on all these points, through his Holy Word and his Holy Spirit, shouldn't we believe, then, what he says and what he wants to do and to give us in his Holy Communion? It is the same Word which is at work there as in all other matters concerning our salvation. It is the same Spirit working through the Word of God. And now it is stated in this way in the Word of God: when we receive the bread and the wine in the Holy Communion, then we receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But how is it possible? It is beyond all human understanding, but since God has told us so in his Word we must believe it. "For as the lips of Christ say and speak, so it is, as He can never lie or deceive" (LC).

### Some conclusions from this

When we have heard how much depends on the Word of God, we can come to some conclusions on this ground. One conclusion must be this one: It is impossible to think that this Sacrament has been invented by man. Who could ever think of doing such a thing? And who could ever think of giving his body and blood by means of bread and wine?

Another conclusion will also follow: When so much depends on the Word of God, what will happen, if we remove the Word of God from this Sacrament? If the Word of God, i.e. the words of institution, is not used, the bread will remain bread, and the wine will remain wine. That would be all. That means to say, there would be no sacrament at all, and those taking part in the sharing of bread and wine would not receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

A third conclusion can be made also. It concerns our faith or worthiness. Is it our faith or worthiness that makes it possible for us to receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ at his Table? That is what many believe, but it is all wrong. We cannot accomplish such great things, nor can it be done by our faith. We are not worthy, nor can we become worthy. But even if we were worthy, or had all faith, we couldn't make it possible for ourselves or anybody else to receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ through bread and wine. "It is not founded upon the holiness of men, but upon the Word of God. And as no saint upon earth, yea, no angel in heaven, can make bread and wine to be the body and blood of Christ, so also can no one change or alter it, even though it be misused ... For He does not say: If you believe or are worthy, you receive My body and blood, but: *Take, eat and drink; this is My body and blood.* Likewise: *Do this* ... That is as much as to say, No matter whether you are worthy or unworthy, you have here His body and blood by virtue of these words which are added to the bread and wine" (LC).

## A sacramental union

In our confession some words are often used to describe what happens when we meet our Lord Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. These words are “with”, “in”, and “under”. These words are both useful and necessary. The teaching must be upheld that the bread and the wine are still there. But how can that be said properly? It is done in this way: According to the words, spoken by Jesus Christ himself, his body and blood are present, and are given “with” i.e. “together with”, bread and wine. We can see the visible elements all the time, when celebrating Holy Communion, but *together with these elements, under this cover, in the use of these elements*, we also receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ. His body and blood are the pledge and guarantee that while receiving him in that way we also receive the spiritual gifts, which are forgiveness of sins, life and eternal bliss.

By using these words, “with”, “in”, and “under”, we uphold the teaching that in the Holy Communion *two things can be together without changing their nature*. To understand this fact a comparison can be made with Christ’s person. In him there are two distinct, unchanged natures, the divine and the human nature. These natures are inseparably united in him, although there is only one Christ. But how did this union

between the two natures occur? It happened in the "incarnation", when the Son of God became man: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). "God was with him" (Acts 10:38). "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). Now, according to a certain expression, which is "sacramental union", *Christ's real presence in Holy Communion* can be explained in the same way. In this Sacrament he is present "with", "in", and "under" the bread and wine, which are there all the time as outward and visible elements. Therefore there are two substances in Holy Communion: on the one side the natural and visible bread and wine, on the other side the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Before the Holy Communion is celebrated, only the natural and visible elements are there. But after the blessing and consecration of the elements, Christ's body and blood are there also, *together with the bread and the wine*. That means that through the sacramental union two substances are present in this Sacrament, together with each other.

In one way this can never be understood by us or explained to us. But the comparison with Christ's own person will help us a lot, as we have already said: In Christ's person there is *a personal union* between God and man; in Holy Communion there is *a sacramental union* between the elements (bread and wine) and Christ's real body and blood.



### **3. The consequences of the true teaching about Holy Communion**

We know Holy Communion only through the teaching given by Jesus Christ himself and some further explanations given by S:t Paul. We have also seen that the power working in this Sacrament is the Word of God. But by "word" we do not mean any kind of words which we might select from Holy Scripture. Instead we are bound to use the words spoken by Jesus Christ himself at the time when he instituted this Sacrament. "For the true and almighty words of Jesus Christ which He spake at the first institution were /effective/ not only at the first Supper, but they endure, are valid, operate, and are still /effective/, so that in all places where the Supper is celebrated according to the institution of Christ, and His words are used, the body and blood of Christ are truly present, distributed, and received, because of the power and /efficiency/ of the words which Christ spake at the first Supper. For where His institution is observed and His words are spoken over the bread and cup /wine/, and the consecrated bread and cup /wine/ are distributed, Christ Himself, through the spoken words, is still /working/ *by virtue of the first institution*, through His word, which He wishes to be there repeated" (FC).

This “repetition” can be done in two ways. *It has to be done in the communion service*, where the bread and the wine are consecrated by the repetition of the same words as Jesus himself used at the first Holy Supper. But *every Christian also ought to know these words*. This knowledge has a twofold purpose. It serves to refresh our faith in the words and promises which Jesus has given us in his Sacrament, but it will also help us to know what we have come for, when we receive bread and wine at the Holy Communion. If we do not know that, how can we get the proper help and blessing from it, then?

The proper use of the words of institution are, therefore, the task of the Church and of the pastors who celebrate this Sacrament: “In the administration of the Holy Supper the words of institution are to be publicly spoken or sung before the congregation distinctly and clearly, and should in no way be omitted in order that obedience may be rendered to the command of Christ: *This do*, and /secondly/ that the faith of the hearers concerning the nature and fruit of this Sacrament ... may be excited, strengthened, and confirmed by Christ’s Word, and that the elements of bread and wine may be consecrated or blessed for this holy use, in order that the body and blood of Christ may therewith be administered to us to be eaten and to be drunk, as Paul declares (1 Cor 10:16): *The cup of blessing which we bless*, which indeed occurs in no

other way than through the repetition and recitation of the words of institution" (FC).

### To take the words as they read

In one way it is very easy to know what Jesus has taught us about this Sacrament and then continue to teach and believe the same. But there are so many different opinions about this Sacrament that it is very easy to be confused. What should we do then? First we have to remember that it does not help us to come even one step forward, if we try to argue with those who deny or blaspheme this Sacrament. Secondly we have to remember that our knowledge and understanding will fail to grasp the full truth and secrets of this Sacrament. It is always dangerous, if we try to go beyond what Jesus Christ himself has told us in order to find out "the truth" or "the secrets" which are hidden to us. "We are certainly in duty bound not to interpret and explain these words of the eternal, true, and almighty Son of God, our Lord, Creator, and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, differently ..., according as it seems agreeable to our reason, but with simple faith and due obedience to receive the words as they read, in their proper and plain sense, and allow ourselves to be diverted therefrom /from this express testament of Christ/ by no objections or human contradictions

spun from human reason, however charming they may appear to reason" (FC).

From this quotation it is clear that there are some plain and easy things that we can understand and also that we must hold fast to these. One thing is the institution performed by Christ himself, another thing the words he spoke at that time. Whatever we might think or teach besides that is very likely to be wrong and false. Therefore we must hold fast what our Lord Jesus has told us. "Thus we, too, are simply to *believe* with all humility and obedience the plain, firm, clear, and solemn words and command of our Creator and Redeemer, without any doubt and disputation as to how it agrees with our reason or is possible. For these words were spoken by *that Lord* who is infinite Wisdom and Truth itself, and also can execute and accomplish everything which He promises" (FC).

## The worthiness of the pastor administering this Sacrament

There are some common dangers in connection with Holy Communion. Such a danger occurs, if we rely on the belief or worthiness of the pastor who is administering the Sacrament to us. But if we rely on what Jesus himself has told us and ordered us to do, we can avoid that danger. We have already seen that Jesus Christ is present with his body and blood through the power of his own word, and it is not through the power of the pastor serving us. If we consider this for a while we must understand that it must be in that way. The word, by which this Sacrament was instituted, cannot be made false by the unworthiness or disbelief of an individual. We must remember that the Lord did *not* say: If you believe, or if you are worthy, or if the pastor believes and is worthy, you will receive my body and blood in this Sacrament. Instead he said in this way: What I am doing, what I am instituting, *take it, and it is what I am saying*. If you are worthy or unworthy, if you believe or do not believe, *my words are still true*.

There is a deep blessing in this teaching. At first we might be somewhat shocked to hear that even a bad and disbelieving pastor may administer this Sacrament to us, and that it will be valid in spite of

his unworthiness. But how could it be otherwise? What about if, before going to the Lord's Table, we were to check up on this and find out if the pastor has a living faith and is worthy to serve the Lord? Could that help us and strengthen our faith? And when could we know that we had checked properly? No, in the end we would be running about in despair, not trusting anybody. Now we can stand on firm ground, since we can trust the Lord. The word and ordinance came from him. His promises are valid, even if his servants are unworthy or fail.

"Hence it is easy to reply to all manner of questions about which at the present time men are disturbed, as, for instance, whether a wicked priest can administer and distribute the Sacrament, and such like other points. For here conclude and reply: Even though a knave take or distribute the Sacrament, he receives the true Sacrament, that is, the true body and blood of Christ, just as truly as he who receives or administers it in the most worthy manner. For it is not founded upon the holiness of men, but upon the Word of God" (FC).

## The worthiness of the communicants

We have already seen that the worthiness of the pastor is not the power that makes Christ present with his body and blood. The same also applies to the communicant. It is not his/her belief that makes Christ present. The Sacrament is valid in itself, either the one who receives it is worthy or not, either he believes or not. Thus we must repeat what we have said before: The bread and the wine of this Sacrament are the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and this true body and this true blood are given to all those partaking at this Table, either they are believing or not, either they are pious Christians or disbelievers.

Can we do as we like, then? Will it be the same, either we believe or not? No! Here we can compare with the pastor serving at the Lord's Table. Is it the same, either he is worthy or not, if he believes in the Lord or not? It depends upon what we are talking about. Of course it is a great pity to himself and to the congregation, if he is unworthy, and if he does not believe. But it does not alter the real presence of the Lord. So it is with the individual communicant also: Of course it is a great pity to himself and to the congregation, if he comes in an unworthy manner or without faith in the Lord, but even so he receives the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Of course all

Christians coming to the Lord's Table ought to be sincere believers, confessing their sins and praying for God's help to lead a good, Christian life. But even if we wish that from the bottom of our hearts, is it the ground we stand on? Do we have to check up on all fellow-Christians before we join them at the Lord's Table, or before we allow them to join us? No, by all means no! If those people fail, does it mean that the Lord is not really present at his Table? If most of them fail, does it mean that the repenting sinners coming there fail to receive what Christ has promised? No, by all means no! Christ cannot speak a lie. Even if people deceive us, he will remain faithful.

This explanation can help us in a similar difficulty. That's the question about *the strength of our faith*. How strong must our faith be, when we wish to receive the invisible spiritual gifts? Many people have worried themselves with this, and also tried to improve their faith in order to be sure. That is a wrong way. It does not help us in the least. We cannot improve our faith. We do not add power to the Lord's promises or gifts by trying to help him. Instead it is a great consolation to all those who feel they are weak in faith, that they obtain what Christ has promised, not according to their faith, but *according to the strength of his Word and promises*. "We believe, teach, and confess that no true believer, as long as he retains living faith, however weak he may be, receives the Holy Supper to his



judgment, which was instituted especially for Christians weak in faith, yet penitent, for the consolation and strengthening of their weak faith" (FC).

## Consequences with regard to false teaching

There are many ways of performing false teaching about Holy Communion. We have already shown that the validity of the Sacrament is not based on the worthiness of the pastor or the worthiness of the communicants. It will follow, then, that to demand the worthiness of the pastor, or to demand the worthiness of the communicants as a condition for a "true" communion, must be considered as wrong and false teaching. But in all times and in all types of Christian churches and denominations this kind of false teaching is most likely to appear. But it might appear irregularly, locally, and anywhere. But there are also two main streams of false teaching about the Holy Communion. They do not appear locally or irregularly. Instead they are usually covering whole churches and denominations. Since every Christian might come upon such teaching it is necessary to know these points and why they are wrong.

When following the first of these streams people argue in this way: *The bread and the wine, after having been consecrated, cease to exist as bread and wine.* Through the consecration the bread and the wine leave or lose their own natural substance, and there remains only the appearance and taste of bread and wine. This means: what remains is not true bread and wine, it only looks and tastes like bread and wine. This way of teaching is called the "doctrine of transubstantiation". The word itself means "change of substance", i.e. a change of the elements so as to *become a new substance.* - This teaching must be refuted as wrong, since it is not at all founded in Scripture. According to the teaching of Scripture there is, and remains, real bread and wine even after the blessing and consecration, as S:t Paul says: "The bread which we break" (1 Cor 10:16). That means that he calls the thing bread, also when it has become consecrated. And when he says: "Let a man ... eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor 11:28), his words clearly show that we can still speak of bread and wine in connection with the eating and drinking in Holy Communion. There is no "change" in the substance of the bread or the wine.

The true teaching about the elements of the Holy Communion is given if we use the words "sacramental union", as explained above (p. 14-15).

This teaching can be summed up in this way: We teach and believe that the bread in Holy Communion is still bread, when we receive it, and the wine is still wine when we receive it, but *through the power of the word of Christ he is also present in these elements with his true body and his true blood.*

When following the second main stream of wrong teaching people say that, when celebrating Holy Communion *they just remember Jesus Christ to obtain more faith in him.* They say *his body and blood are not present in the elements,* but when seeing the bread and the wine and tasting them they remember his body and blood, and how he was crucified for them. They say that *the bread and the wine are only signs of the body and blood.* They also say that it is impossible for Christ to be present in the elements, since his real body is in heaven, and it cannot be here at the same time. They say that he is present only spiritually in this Sacrament, through his Word and Spirit. Therefore the bread is to be looked upon and received as *a sign (a picture, a symbol) of Christ's body, and the wine as a sign of his blood.* To people of this conviction these words are very important: "It is impossible." They think that they can decide what is possible and what is impossible to the Lord. Because of what seems impossible to them, Christ cannot give his body and blood to us in Holy Communion.

What can be said, then, to answer their remarks? Our confession answers in this way: "All the circumstances of the institution of the Holy Supper testify that these words of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, which in themselves are simple, plain, clear, firm, and indubitable, cannot and must not be understood otherwise than in their usual, proper, and common signification ... He does not speak concerning a sign of His body ..., but of His true, essential body, which He delivered into death for us, and of His true, essential blood, which He shed for us on the tree /altar/ of the cross for the remission of sins" (FC). This means to say: We have to take these words and understand them as they stand. We are not allowed to change them or to give them a different meaning, e.g. by saying that they contain "pictures", or that they should be understood "in a spiritual way".

## 4. The use of this Sacrament

*How* should this Sacrament be used? Everybody who is baptized and wishes to be a Christian ought to use the sacrament of Holy Communion. But nobody should use this Sacrament in a careless way. Therefore it is necessary that we *prepare ourselves* before we approach the Holy Table. To prepare oneself is to use the Word of God, together with prayer, and in that way examine oneself. If we do that we may find what we have sinned against God and man. To come to the Lord's Table should always be the same as coming to God to ask for forgiveness of sins. But we cannot get such forgiveness unless we are ready to confess what we have sinned against other people. Proper confession also means willingness to settle what we have done wrong against them. It is necessary that we prepare ourselves in this way, because it is very easy to become lazy and careless in our spiritual life, also in the way we use Holy Communion. Thus it happens that some Christians let a year or two, or even more pass away, without coming to the Lord's Table. How is that possible? Many of those do not stay away purposely for such a long time, but perhaps they have listened to arguments of this kind: "To go to the Lord's Table is a matter of liberty. Nobody should go

there without feeling hunger and thirst." And while they are waiting for such hunger and thirst to come to them, time is running away, and in the meantime they are carried farther and farther away from the Sacrament and the Lord. To such people it must be said, first of all that they are not expected to come to the Lord's Table by being forced, and secondly that it can be expected from them to see their own great need: Christ has instituted this Sacrament for their benefit, because *he knows what they need*. If they themselves look at their own need, how can they leave the Sacrament then, without using it for years?

We can also turn this argument round and ask: What happens, if we do not make any use of Holy Communion? To answer that question it is enough to have a look at the great number of Christians who never come to the Lord's Table: they grow colder and harder from day to day. How did it come that way? To start with they neglected the Sacrament. They ended up by despising it.

But when preparing ourselves to go to the Lord's Table, what happens if we find that we are *totally unworthy to come before the Lord*? This question is a very suitable one, particularly if it is answered in the right way: How can we ever examine ourselves without finding every time that we are sinners and totally unworthy of coming near the Lord's Table? Or

put the question this way: When could we become perfectly worthy of coming to the Lord's Table? The answer is: Never! But the Word of God has shown us that the responsibility for calling us, unworthy sinners, is not on our side. It is on his side who has instituted this Sacrament and called us to come there. He has said: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mt 9:13). "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). On this point people are generally divided into two groups. Those who feel the burden of their sins wish to have their burden lifted off, but those who do not care about their sins do not care about the Lord's Table either.

### When should this Sacrament be used?

We can answer that question by stressing again the word of Jesus Christ in Mt 11:28: When Christians feel the burden of their sins and are "heavy laden". When coming in that way they can be sure that Jesus is among them, in the midst of their sorrow, difficulties and conflicts. Whatever their feelings or anxieties, he is able to say: "Take heart, it is I; have no fear" (Mt 14:27).

Whatever our difficulties may be, there is no difficulty like sin. Only our sins can separate us from God. The strongest reason for coming to the Lord's Table must be to get the forgiveness of our sins. And that is what our Lord and Saviour has promised directly and in clear words: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28). This means that whenever we feel "heavy laden" because of our sins we should come to the Lord's Table in order to find consolation and help. There we can be assured in the most certain way that our sins are forgiven. But we do not obtain forgiveness only. Holy Communion will give us new willingness, power and strength to "fight the good fight of the faith" (1 Tim 6:12). Thus the use of this Sacrament will be one of our best ways of fighting the good fight of a Christian (Eph 6:10-20).

Many times people have asked *how often* it is suitable for them to receive the Holy Communion. First of all we have to consider the practice of the apostolic Church. There the Holy Communion was celebrated on "The Lord's Day" every week. Even if we cannot make it a law for all Christians to receive Holy Communion every week, we have to consider the state of affairs in our own churches in the light of the apostolic Church. Secondly, we ought to remember the meaning of the word "often" in connection with Holy Communion: "Do this, as often as you drink it,



in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:25). From these facts it must be found wrong to advise anybody to receive the Sacrament "at least four times a year". Even if we put a somewhat higher figure it will be a wrong way of advising. This means to say that it is always dangerous to give any figures whatsoever when advising about Holy Communion. The only result of such figures might be that we keep people either on the way of law or on a minimum standard of Christian life. Therefore it is better to advise them in this way: Every Christian should use this Sacrament *regularly* and *as often as possible*, and he should ask himself: *how often am I welcome* to the Lord's Table?

"Since we have now the true understanding and doctrine of the Sacrament, there is indeed need of some admonition and exhortation, that men may not let so great a treasure which is daily administered and distributed among Christians pass by unheeded, that is, that those who would be Christians make ready to receive this venerable Sacrament often" (LC).

## Who should come to this Sacrament, then?

Of course it is meant for all people, since all people are sinners and need it. But do all people come to receive it? If they do not come, what is their reason for not coming? The answer will be found, if we can manage to find what people are doing with their sins. Some do see their sins and become sad and worried. If they are prepared to confess their sins and ask for help, it will be rather easy to direct them to the Lord's Table. But what about those who know their sins but refuse to confess them or to repent? Can we tell them: "Just go to the Lord's Table, and perhaps your sins will be forgiven"? No, we cannot do that. "We must, therefore, make a distinction here among men. For those who are /wild/ and /morally lax/ must be told to stay away; for they are not prepared to receive forgiveness of sin, since they do not desire it and do not wish to be godly. But the others, who are not such /hard/ and wicked people, and desire to be godly, must not absent themselves, even though otherwise they be feeble and full of infirmities" (LC).

Here we must decide for ourselves to which group we belong, i.e. if we need the Sacrament or not. But we cannot prepare ourselves as much as to become "worthy". If we could do that, we would not need the Sacrament any longer. To prepare ourselves in the

true sense of the word, that is to examine ourselves and find that we are sinners, that we need help, and that we long for help. Then we are ready to search for help and to find it where it is offered to us: "Whoever would gladly obtain grace and consolation should /force/ himself, and allow no one to frighten him away, but say: I, indeed, would like to be worthy; but I come, not upon any worthiness; but upon Thy Word, because Thou hast commanded it, as one who would gladly be Thy disciple, no matter what becomes of my worthiness" (LC).

### Who is worthy?

This word, "worthiness", needs some explanation. Worthiness in connection with Holy Communion can be compared to our worthiness at other times. We do not become baptized on the ground that we are holy or worthy enough to become citizens of the Kingdom of God. Nobody is worthy to be born anew in Baptism. Nor do we go to Confession because we are pure and without sin. Instead quite the contrary is true: We come to Baptism and Confession because we are poor sinners, miserable and unworthy. Because of being that and by confessing it we get the help we need and which is offered to us. And so, with regard to the Lord's Table also, we ought to come with this

mind: "I know that I am unworthy, but I come upon your word, o Lord."

But our hearts and minds are very peculiar things. It is easy to swing from one side to another. Just as we have tried for some time to become "worthy" enough for the Lord's Table, it may happen a little later that we try to find in ourselves the proper feeling of "unworthiness". This is very peculiar: We wish to find in ourselves a certain feeling of "unworthiness" in order to be ready, "worthy", to come to the Lord's Table. When we do not find "unworthiness" enough we might take that as a hinder to come to the Lord's Table or as an excuse for not coming. What are we to do then? First of all, let us find out if we are made of flesh and blood. If that is so, then we must know in ourselves the difficulties of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21). Then we will realize that we need much help to fight against the powers of the flesh. Secondly, we have to listen to what Scripture tells us. If we do not believe what we can see with our own eyes and feel in our hearts, then let the testimony of the Word of God prevail. It tells us very clearly and strongly that we are sinners. The more our own judgment fails, the more we need the testimony and judgment of the Word of God.

But how long will that situation last? Every humble Christian will agree that he does not come any further

than that. As long as our life will last, we will remain weak and in need of help and strength for our spiritual life, and above all: forgiveness of our sins.

Thus our “worthiness”, when we come to the Lord’s Table, will not be founded on anything in us or on our side at all, only on what is found with our Lord and Saviour: “We believe, teach, and confess that all the worthiness of the guests of this heavenly feast /Holy Communion/ is and consists in the most holy obedience and perfect merit of Christ alone, which we appropriate to ourselves by true faith, and whereof /of the application of this merit/ we are assured by the Sacrament, and not at all in our virtues or inward and outward preparations” (FC).

### Where does faith come in, then?

The promises of Jesus Christ have not been spoken to stone or wood. Instead they have been spoken to human beings, to be heard and believed by them. Therefore the right way of accepting the promises and gifts is *to believe*. The one who takes to heart the words of this Sacrament and believes that what they declare is true, *he has* what the Sacraments offers: forgiveness of sins, peace with God, life, and eternal bliss. But the one who refuses to believe rejects the offer made to

him. He receives what all communicants receive, the body and blood of Christ, but because of not believing in the promise and offer of forgiveness, he does not receive any forgiveness at all. Thus it is clear that the treasure is opened and placed at every one's door. But when that is done it is also necessary to claim it for oneself by believing the promise and receiving the gift offered.

We have said before (p. 13) that faith does not make Christ's presence in the elements possible, nor is faith the foundation we stand on in Holy Communion. But faith is needed, because Christ is present through the power of his Word. Faith is also needed because through his body and blood Christ wishes to give us forgiveness of sins, peace, life, and eternal bliss. There is no other way of receiving these heavenly gifts than by faith. So we are told everywhere in God's Word: "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me" (Jn 14:1). "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11:6).

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up what we have said here about Holy Communion, let us ask again a few questions. First: Who will need this Sacrament? In one way it is needed by all Christians. In Baptism we were born anew, and if we wish to continue to live as Christians, we need the help and blessing that is given at the Lord's Table. This Sacrament can nourish and strengthen the new man. But this Sacrament is not needed once only. On the road of the reborn man there are so many obstacles and temptations that it will be easy to get tired, to stumble, or even to give up the travelling on that road. Therefore the help of this Sacrament is needed. It can give not only food and strength for the walk and fight, but also the willingness to walk and fight, and the patience and perseverance which are needed to win the fight of life. "Therefore /this Sacrament/ is given for a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh and strengthen itself so as not to fall back in such a battle, but become ever stronger and stronger ... Now to this end the consolation is here given, when the heart feels that the burden is becoming too heavy, that it may here obtain new power and refreshment" (LC).

Of course it is clear to everybody that all Christians do not make use of this Sacrament, and among those who use it there are many who use it only seldom and irregularly and sometimes in a rather careless way. Therefore we ought to encourage ourselves and all fellow-Christians to make a better and more regular use of it. But this matter should be looked after together with other important things, e.g. the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. If one of these things is well used and practised, it will also help and encourage the practising of the Christian confession and life all over the field.

This will apply to Christians of all ages. But it is well known that it is difficult to teach or to change old people, if they have already gone wrong and developed bad customs. This makes it very important to teach all Christian children and young people what is expected from them because they are Christians. Therefore they ought to know what they are offered by Christ in his Holy Communion: his body and blood as a pledge of forgiveness and peace, and strength for their fight as Christians. They should be taught and instructed as early as possible to follow this Christian way of life. Then these good customs, by the grace of God, may remain with them until the end of their life.



Therefore our rule should be: Every baptized young man and woman should be a communicant, coming regularly and humbly to Holy Communion in order to receive the heavenly gifts offered to us there:

*The body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ,  
with, in, and under bread and wine,  
for the forgiveness of sins,  
for peace with God,  
for encouragement and strength,  
to continue to fight the good fight of a Christian,  
which is at the same time the fight of the Lord,  
to win the crown of life.*

GLORY BE  
TO THE FATHER, AND TO THE SON,  
AND TO THE HOLY SPIRIT,  
AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING,  
IS NOW,  
AND EVER SHALL BE,  
WORLD WITHOUT END.  
AMEN