

ENCYCLICAL LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS POPE LEO XIII.

THE MOST HOLY EUCHARIST.

LEO XIII., POPE.

*To the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops and other Ordinaries in peace and communion with the Apostolic See.*

VENERABLE BRETHREN,

*Health and Apostolic Benediction:*

THE wonderful zeal for the salvation of men of which Jesus Christ has given us so bright an example we, in accordance with the sanctity of our office, strive to study and imitate unceasingly, and, with His help, we shall continue to follow the same Divine model as long as life remains in us. As it is our lot to live in times bitterly hostile to truth and justice, we have endeavored to supply abundantly as far as lay in our power, by teaching, admonishing and working, whatsoever might seem likely to avert the contagion of error in its various forms or strengthen the energies of Christian life. In this connection there are two things within the memory of the faithful, intimately connecting one with the other, the accomplishment of which fills us with consolation in the midst of so many sorrows. One is that we declared it most desirable that the whole human race should be consecrated in a special manner to the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ the Redeemer; the other that we most earnestly exhorted all bearing the Christian name to adhere steadfastly to Him who by divine authority is for all men the Way, the Truth and the Life.

And now, in truth, watching with vigilance over the fortunes of the Church in these evil days, we are impelled by the same apostolic love to add something which will crown and finish the project we had in mind; namely, to recommend to the Christian world by a special act of our authority the Most Holy Eucharist.

The Blessed Eucharist is the most divine gift, given to us clearly from the inmost heart of the Redeemer, with the desire of one desiring this singular union with man and instituted chiefly for the generous disposal of the fruits of His redemption. In this matter we have hitherto manifested by our authority and zeal not a little solicitude. And it is pleasant to remember, among other things,

that we, by legitimate approval and privileges, largely increased the number of institutes and sodalities devoted to the perpetual adoration of the Divine Host; that we also took care to have Eucharistic congresses held with suitable splendor and corresponding usefulness, and that we made patron of those and similar works, the heavenly Paschal Baylon, who stood out in his day as a most devout worshiper of the Eucharistic mystery.

Therefore, venerable brethren, it is well to fix our minds on certain features of this mystery in defending and illustrating which the zeal of the Church has constantly been manifested and not infrequently crowned by the palm of martyrdom, whilst the doctrine itself has called forth the learning and eloquence of the greatest men and the most noble masterpieces in various arts. Here it will be our duty to point out clearly and expressly the power that is in this mystery to cure the evils and meet the necessities of the present age. And surely, as Christ, at the close of His mortal life, left this sacrament as the great monument of His love for men, as the greatest support "for the life of the world" (St. John vi., 52), so we, who are likewise soon to depart, can desire nothing more eagerly than to excite and nourish in the minds of all men feelings of grateful love and religious devotion towards this most wonderful sacrament, in which, we believe, are to be found the hope and assurance of salvation and peace.

It may be a cause of surprise to some that we should think this age, so universally disturbed and groaning under so great a burden, should be best aided by such remedies and helps, and persons shall not be wanting, perhaps, who will treat our utterances with fastidious indifference. This comes chiefly from pride, and pride is a vice which weakens Christian faith and produces such a terrible darkness about divine things that of many it is said: "Whatever things they know not, they blaspheme." (Judea x.) But so far are we from being averted from the purpose we have in view that we believe more firmly than ever that it will bring light to those who are well disposed and obtain, by the brotherly intercession of the devout, pardon from God for those who revile holy things.

To know with full and perfect faith what is the virtue of the Most Holy Eucharist is to know what God, made Man, accomplished for the salvation of the human race in His infinite mercy. For as it is a duty of true faith to proclaim our belief in Christ and worship the Supreme Author of our salvation, who by His wisdom, laws, example and the shedding of His blood renewed all things, it is a duty of equal obligation to worship Him who is really present in the Eucharist, that so He may abide among men to the end of the world, and by the perennial communication of Himself make them sharers in the blessings of His redemption.

Now, he who studiously and religiously considers the blessings flowing from the Holy Eucharist sees at once that in it are contained in the most eminent degree all other blessings of every kind; for from it that life flows which is truly life: "The bread which I will give is My flesh for the life of the world." Not in one way alone is Christ the life—Christ, who assigned as the cause of His coming among men that He might bring them a sure fullness of life that was more than human: "I come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly." For as soon as "the goodness and compassion of God our Saviour" appeared upon earth, a power at once came forth that almost created a new order of things and influenced every department of civil and domestic society. Thence new relations between man and man; new rights, public and private; new duties; a new direction given to institutions, laws, arts and sciences. The thoughts and studies of men were drawn towards the truth of religion and the sanctity of morals, and hence a life given to men truly heavenly and divine. All this is frequently commemorated in the sacred writings; the tree of life, the word of life, the book of life, the crown of life, and, expressly, the bread of life.

But this life about which we are speaking bears an express resemblance to the natural life of men, and so, just as the one is nourished by food and grows strong, so does the other likewise require to be supported and strengthened by food. And here it is well to recall the time and manner in which Christ moved the minds of men and excited them to receive suitably and righteously the living bread which He was about to give them. For where the fame had spread abroad of the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves which He had wrought on the shore of Tiberias, many people followed Him so that their hunger, too, might be appeased. Then Jesus, seizing the opportunity, just as when He infused into the Samaritan woman at the well a thirst for the water "springing up into life everlasting," similarly disposes the minds of the eager multitude to desire more eagerly another bread, the bread "which endureth unto life everlasting." But this bread, as Jesus continues to show, is not that heavenly manna given to their fathers wandering through the desert, nor is it that which they themselves had lately received from Him in astonishment; but He Himself is the true bread which He gives: "I am the bread of life." He inculcates still further the same lesson both by council and by precept: "If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread that I will give is My flesh for the life of the world." And the gravity of the command He thus shows clearly: "Amen, amen, I say unto you: Except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you." Away, therefore, with that common and most pernicious

error of those who believe that the Holy Eucharist is only for those who, free from business and troubled in mind, resolve to seek repose in some design of a more religious life. For the Holy Eucharist, than which there is nothing more excellent or salutary, is for all, whatsoever their employment or dignity, who wish (and there is no one who should not wish) to nourish in themselves the life of Divine Grace, of which the ultimate end is the attainment of life eternal.

Would that those whose genius or industry or authority could do so much to guide the men and affairs of the age would think rightly of eternal life and impart the knowledge of it to others. But, alas! we see with regret that most of these arrogantly believe that they have given to the world a life prosperous and almost new, because they urge it forward to strive in its excited course for utilitarian objects and the mere gratification of curiosity. Look where you will, human society, alien though it is from God, far from enjoying that tranquillity of affairs which it seeks, labors in great anguish and trepidation like one tossing in a fever; it strives vainly to obtain that prosperity in which alone it puts its trust, ever vainly pursuing it and clinging desperately to what is slipping from its grasp. For men and states come necessarily from God, and therefore in no other can they live or move or do good but in God through Jesus Christ, from whom men have received and still receive the best and choicest gifts. But the chief source and fountain head of all these gifts is the Holy Eucharist, which, while it nourishes and supports that life for which we strive so ardently, exalts in the highest degree that dignity of human nature which seems to be so highly valued in these days. For what can be greater or more desirable than to be made as far as possible participators and partners in the Divine nature? But this is what Christ does in the Eucharist, raising man up to divine things by the aid of grace and uniting Himself to him by bonds so close. For there is this difference between the food of the body and the food of the soul, that the former is converted into us, but the latter converts us into itself, and it is to this that Augustine refers when he puts the words into the mouth of Christ: "You shall not change Me into thee as food of thy flesh, but thou shalt be changed into Me."

But this most excellent sacrament, which renders men participators of the Divine nature, also enables the soul of man to advance in every class of the higher virtues. And first in faith. At all times faith has had its assailants; for although it exalts the minds of men with knowledge of the most lofty things, yet, while it has revealed that there exist things above nature, it conceals their precise character, and so seems to depress the human mind. Formerly only this or that article of faith was attacked; afterwards war was waged much more widely, until it finally came to be affirmed that there was

nothing at all above nature. Now, for renewing in the mind the vigor and fervor of faith there is nothing more suitable than the mystery of the Eucharist, which is properly called the mystery of faith; for truly in this one mystery, by reason of its wonderful abundance and variety of miracles, is contained the whole supernatural order. "He has made a remembrance of His wonderful works, being a merciful and gracious Lord. He hath given food to them that fear Him." For if God acknowledged what He wrought above nature as due to the incarnation of the word, through whom the salvation of the human race was restored, according to that word of the Apostle: "He hath purposed . . . to reëstablish all things in Christ, that are in heaven and on earth, in Him;" the Eucharist, according to the testimony of the Holy Fathers, is a continuation and an expansion of the incarnation. For by it the substance of the incarnate word is united to men, and the supreme sacrifice of Calvary is renewed in a manner that is full of mystery. This the prophet Malachy signified in the words: "In every place there is sacrifice, and there is offered to My name a clean oblation." And this miracle, the greatest of all, is accompanied by innumerable others, for here all the laws of nature are suspended; the whole substance of the bread and wine is changed into the Body and Blood of Christ; the species of bread and wine are sustained without a subject by Divine power; the Body of Christ dwells at the same time in as many places as the sacrament is consecrated. But human reason is enabled the better to reverence so great a mystery by the prodigies which have been performed in its glory in past ages and in our own days, of which, indeed, there still exist renowned and public proofs, and that not in one place merely. We see, therefore, that by this sacrament faith is fostered, the soul nourished, the falsehoods of rationalists dissipated and the whole order of the supernatural made clear to our eyes.

But it is not pride alone, but depravity of mind as well, that makes faith in Divine things grow weak. For if it happens that the better the morals the clearer the intelligence, if even the prudence of the Gentiles perceived that the mind is blunted by the pleasures of the body, as Divine wisdom has already borne testimony, then so much more in Divine things do the pleasures of the body obscure the light of faith, and even extinguish it altogether in God's just punishment. And for these pleasures there is burning in those days an insatiable cupidity, a cupidity which, like the contagion of disease, widely infects all even from their first tender years. There is a remedy for this terrible evil in the Divine Eucharist. For, first of all, by increasing charity it checks voluptuous desire; as Augustine says: "The nourishment (of charity) is the lessening of lust; perfection, no lust."

Besides, the most chaste flesh of Jesus restrains the luxury of our flesh, as Cyril of Alexandria has said: "For Christ existing in us calms the law of the flesh raging in our members." But even more the peculiar and most precious fruit of the Eucharist is that signified in the saying of the prophet: "What is the good thing of Him (Christ), and what is His beautiful thing but the corn of the elect, and wine springing forth virgins?"—namely, the strong and constant resolve of sacred virginity, which, while the age slips away in pleasures, flourishes in the Catholic Church more widely and more fruitfully from day to day, and, indeed, what a great advantage and ornament this is everywhere to religion and even to ordinary human intercourse is well known. Moreover, this sacrament strengthens beyond conception the hope of immortal blessings and the confidence of Divine aid. For the desire of happiness which is in the minds of all is more and more sharpened and strengthened by the emptiness of all earthly goods, by the unjust violence of wicked men and by all the other troubles of mind and body.

Now the august Sacrament of the Eucharist is at once the cause and pledge of happiness and glory not only for the soul, but also for the body. For while it enriches the soul with an abundance of heavenly gifts, it also fills it with joys so sweet that they far surpass every thought and hope of man; in adversity it sustains; in strife of virtue it confirms; it leads to everlasting life as by an open pathway. But to the frail and perishable body that Divine Host gives a future resurrection, for the immortal Body of Christ implants the seed of immortality which is some time to bud forth. This advantage, both to soul and body, the Church has at all times taught, following Christ, who said: "He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath everlasting life; and I will raise him up on the last day." And here it is of great importance to consider that the Eucharist, being instituted by Christ as a "perennial memorial of His passion," declares to all Christian men the necessity of mortifying themselves. For Jesus said to His first priests: "Do this for a commemoration of Me," that is, do this to commemorate My sorrows, griefs, tortures and death on the cross. Hence this sacrament, which is also a sacrifice, is a ceaseless exhortation, for all time, to penance and every spiritual effort; it is also a solemn and severe reproof of those pleasures which shameless men praise and exalt so highly: "As often as you shall eat this bread, and drink this chalice, you shall show the death of the Lord until He come."

Moreover, if you diligently examine into the causes of the present evils, you will find that they arise from the fact that the charity of men towards one another has grown faint according as the love of God grew cold. They have forgotten that they were sons of God

and brothers in Jesus Christ; they think of nothing but themselves; the rights of others they not only disregard, but attack and invade. Hence the frequent quarrels and contentions among the various classes of citizens; the arrogance, harshness, dishonesty among the more powerful; the misery, envy and spirit of revolt among the weaker. For these evils it is vain to seek a remedy from the enactments of law, the fear of punishment or the plans of human prudence. What must be aimed at, as we ourselves have more than once recommended, is to reconcile the various orders of citizens by a mutual union of duties, a union which would come from God and give birth to works stamped with the true spirit and charity of Christ. This union Christ brought upon earth; by it He wished all things to be inspiréd, as being the one thing that could bring some happiness, even in the present, not only to the soul, but also to the body, restraining as it does man's immoderate love of himself, and repressing the passion for riches, which is "the root of all evils."

But although it is necessary that all just rights should be well protected, it is nevertheless lawful to establish and preserve in society that salutary "equality" which St. Paul recommended. This, therefore, is what Christ wished in instituting this august sacrament—to excite love toward God and to foster charity among men. For the one flows, as is evident, of its very nature and almost spontaneously, from the other; nor can men live without it at all; nay, it must even burn and flourish in their hearts, if they consider the charity of Christ towards them in this sacrament, in which He has maintained His marvelous power and wisdom, and also "poured forth the riches of His divine love for men." And as Christ has given us such an example of love, how we should love and help each other, bound together as we are still more closely by the needs of our common brotherhood! Moreover, the outward symbols of this sacrament are in a special manner calculated to incite us to union. For St. Cyprian says: "The very sacrifices of redemption themselves proclaim the necessity of Christian concord in the firm and inseparable bonds of charity. For when the Lord calls His body bread which is made up of the union of many grains, He indicates the union of that people whose sins He bore; and when He calls His blood wine which is drawn from many ripe grapes, again He signifies a flock made one by the union of the multitude." Similarly the Angelic Doctor following St. Augustine says: "Our Lord commended His body and blood in those things which are moulded in unity; for the first, the bread, namely, is made one from many grains, and the other, the wine, also becomes one from many grapes." And therefore Augustine elsewhere says: "O Sacrament of piety, O sign of unity, O bond of charity."

All this is confirmed by the declaration of the Council of Trent, that Christ left the Eucharist to the Church "as a symbol of that union and love with which He wished all Christians to be bound together—a symbol of that body of which He is head, and to which He wished us to be united as members by the most firm bonds of faith and hope and charity." And this St. Paul himself had declared: "For we, being many, are one bread, one body, all that partake of one bread." Yes, truly, here is a most beautiful example of Christian brotherhood and of social equality, that all should approach the same altars without distinction; the nobility and the people, the rich and the poor, the learned and the unlearned, are equally sharers in the same heavenly banquet. And if it has been the glory of the Church that, in the first ages, "the multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul," it cannot be doubted that such a wonderful blessing was due to the custom of approaching the holy table; for of them we find it recorded, "And they were persevering in the doctrine of the Apostles, and in the communication of the breaking of bread." Moreover, the grace of mutual charity among the living, so much strengthened and increased as it is by the Sacrament of the Eucharist, flows out unto all who are in the communion of saints particularly through the power of the Holy Sacrifice. For the communion of saints, as all know, is nothing else than the mutual communication of aid, expiation, prayer and benefits among the faithful, whether in heaven or enduring the expiatory fires of Purgatory, or still abiding upon earth, but all forming one state, whose head is Christ, and whose life-giving principle is love. It is also a matter of faith that while to God alone the Holy Sacrifice may be offered, yet it can also be celebrated in honor of the saints reigning in heaven with God "Who crowned them," to obtain their patronage and protection, and also to blot out the stains of the brethren who had died in the Lord, but who had not yet made full atonement. That true charity, therefore, which is wont to do and endure all things for the salvation and utility of all, leaps and burns into life from the Most Holy Eucharist, in which Christ is really present, in which He gives way to His love for us in the highest form, and under the impulse of His divine love, perpetually renews His sacrifice. It is from this that the arduous labors of apostolic men, as well as the various institutions that have had their origin among Catholics and deserve so well of the human race, derive their influence, strength, constancy and successful results.

These few things written by us on a great subject will, we doubt not, produce much fruit if you, venerable brethren, seasonably expound and commend them to the faithful.

At the same time this sacrament is so great and so abounding in

virtue that no one has ever yet adequately praised it by his eloquence or worshiped it by his adoration. Whether you meditate upon it or rightly worship it, or better still, purely and worthily receive it, it is to be regarded as the great centre round which turns the whole Christian life; to it all other forms of piety lead; in it they end. In the self-same mystery that gracious invitation and still more gracious promise of Christ: "Come to Me all you that labor and are burdened, and I will refresh you," are renewed and daily fulfilled. Lastly, it is, as it were, the soul of the Church, towards which is directed the fulness of sacerdotal grace through the various grades of orders. From the very same source does the Church draw all her power and glory, all the ornaments of her Divine ritual, and all the efficacy of her blessings. Therefore, she takes the greatest care to instruct the faithful and lead them to this intimate union with Christ by the Sacrament of His Body and Blood; and for the same reason she adorns it and makes it more worthy of reverence by means of the most sacred ceremonies. The constant care of our Holy Mother the Church in this matter is summed up in the exhortation of the Council of Trent; an exhortation breathing forth wonderful charity and piety, and worthy of being entirely recalled again by us to the Christian world: "With paternal affection the Holy Synod admonishes, exhorts, demands and, by the bowels of God's mercy, entreats all, without exception, who are called Christians, to sometimes meet and find peace in this sign of unity, in this bond of charity, in this symbol of concord; to be mindful of that immense majesty and of that wonderful love of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who gave His life as price of our salvation, and His flesh to be our food; to believe and venerate those sacred mysteries of His Body and Blood with such constancy and firmness of faith, such devotion of mind and piety and zeal, that they may be able to frequently receive that supersubstantial bread, so that He may be truly to them the life of their soul and the perpetual health of their mind, and thus that strengthened by its vigor, they may be able, after the journey of this miserable exile, to reach their heavenly country and eat without any veil upon their eyes the very same bread of angels which they now eat concealed under the sacred species."

Now, history bears witness that Christian life flourished better in the times when the reception of the Blessed Eucharist was more frequent. On the other hand, it is not less certain that when men began to neglect and almost despise this heavenly bread the vigor of the Christian profession sensibly diminished. Lest it should some time pass away altogether, Innocent III., in the Council of Lateran, imposed the most solemn precept that, at the very least, no Christian should abstain at Paschal time from receiving the Body of the

Lord. This precept, however, was imposed with reluctance, and, it is clear, only as the last remedy; for it has been always the wish of the Church that the faithful should approach the holy table at every sacrifice. "The most Holy Synod would wish the faithful attending each Mass to communicate not only spiritually, but even sacramentally, so that they might receive more abundantly the fruits of the sacrifice."

And this most sacred mystery contains as a sacrifice the plenitude of salvation not only for individuals, but for all men; hence the Church is accustomed to offer it unceasingly "for the salvation of the whole world." It is fitting, therefore, that by the common zeal of the devout there should be greater love and esteem for this sacrifice; in this age particularly there is no more pressing necessity. Accordingly, we desire that its efficacy and power should be remembered more widely and even more diligently proclaimed. Principles evident from the very light of reason tell us that God, the creator and preserver of all things, has a supreme and absolute dominion over men, both privately and publicly; that all that we have and are in every sphere has come from His bounty; and that we, in turn, are bound to give Him the highest reverence as our Master and the greatest gratitude as our most generous benefactor. And yet how few are there to-day who fulfil those duties with suitable piety.

This age, if any, surely manifests the spirit of rebellion against God; in it that impious cry against Christ again grows strong: "We will not have this man to reign over us," and that impious resolve, "Let us cut Him off." Nor, indeed, is anything urged more vehemently by very many than this, that they should banish and separate God from all intercourse with men. This criminal madness is not universal, we joyfully admit; yet it is lamentable how many have forgotten the Divine Majesty and His benefits, and the salvation that was obtained chiefly through Christ. Now, this wickedness and folly must be resisted by an increase of general devotion and zeal in the worship of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Nothing could of itself be more full of sweetness and consolation to the Christian soul. For the Victim that is immolated is Divine, and, accordingly, the honor that we render through it to the Holy Trinity is in proportion to its infinite dignity; we offer also to the Father His only-begotten Son—an offering that is infinite in value and infinitely acceptable; hence it is that we not only give Him thanks for His goodness, but even make Him a return. There is also another two-fold and wonderful fruit which may and ought to be derived from this great sacrifice.

The mind grows sad when it reflects on the fearful multitude of

crimes which abounds on all sides, God, as we have said, being neglected and the Divine Majesty despised. The human race in great part seems to call upon the Divine anger, although indeed that harvest of evil which has been reaped contains in itself the ripeness of a just punishment. The zeal of the faithful should be roused to appease God, the avenging Judge of crime, and obtain from Him the reform of a sinful age. This is to be done chiefly by the aid of this holy sacrifice. For it is by virtue alone of Christ's death that men can fully satisfy the demand of Divine justice, and abundantly obtain mercy and pardon. But this power of expiation or of entreaty Christ wished to remain wholly in the Eucharist, which is not a mere commemoration of His death, but a real and wonderful, although unbloody and mystic, renewal of it.

At the same time let us confess we have not a little joy knowing that in those last years the minds of the faithful seem to have been renewed in love and reverence for the Sacrament of the Eucharist; and this gives us a better hope for the future. For, as we said in the beginning, ingenious piety has done much in this direction, especially in sodalities, either by increasing the splendor of our Eucharistic rites, or worshipping the Holy Sacrament constantly by day and night, and making atonement for the insults and injuries it receives. But, venerable brethren, it is not lawful for us or for you to stop here; for yet many more things remain to be done or undertaken, so that this, the most Divine work of all, may be put in a clearer light and held in greater honor among those who practice the duties of the Christian religion, that so great a mystery may be honored in a manner worthy of its greatness. Hence the works that have been undertaken are to be urged on more vigorously from day to day; old institutions, where they have disappeared, are to be renewed, as, for example, the Sodalties of the Eucharist, the supplications poured forth to the holy sacrament exposed for adoration, all the solemnity of pomp with which it was surrounded, the pious salutations before the tabernacles, and other holy and most profitable practices of the same nature; in fine, everything is to be done that prudence and piety could dictate. But, above all, endeavor should be made to revive widely again among Catholic nations the frequent use of the Holy Eucharist. To this the example of the early Church, the decrees of councils, the authority of the fathers and of the holy men in every age exhort us; for as the body needs its own food, so does the soul, and the most life-giving nourishment is given by the Holy Eucharist. Therefore, condemn beforehand the opinions of those who oppose such frequent communions. Banish the idle fears of many and the spacious excuses or reasons for abstaining from the Body of the Lord; for nothing could be more effective in rescuing

the world from its anxiety about perishable things, and in bringing back and perpetually preserving the Christian spirit. Here the exhortations and examples of the higher orders, and still more the zeal and industry of the clergy, will be of great value. For priests to whom Christ, the Redeemer, has given the office of consecrating and administering the mysteries of His Body and Blood, can surely make no greater return for the high honor they have received than to do all in their power to promote His glory in the Eucharist, and by following the desire of His Most Sacred Heart to invite and draw the souls of all to the saving fountains of so great a sacrament and sacrifice.

Thus may the surpassing fruits of the Eucharist become, as we ardently desire, more fruitful from day to day, with abundant growth, also, in faith, hope, charity, and in every virtue; may this revival of piety tend to the peace and advantage of the State, and may the designs of God's most provident love in instituting such a perpetual mystery for the life of the world be made manifest to all men.

Buoyed up with such a hope, venerable brethren, and as a pledge of Divine gifts as well as of our affection, we lovingly impart to each one of you, and to your clergy and people, our Apostolic Benediction.

Given at Rome, near St. Peter's, on this 23d day of May, on the approach of the solemnity of Corpus Christi, in the year 1902, the twenty-fifth of our Pontificate.

LEO XIII., POPE.