

Approaching the Holy Supper

Rev. Lorentz R. Soneson

For the sake of...affiliation with angels and at the same time conjunction with the Lord, the Holy Supper was instituted, the bread of which in heaven becomes Divine Good, and the wine Divine Truth, each from the Lord. Such correspondence exists...to the end that...the spiritual world may make one with the natural world, and the Lord may conjoin Himself with both at once.

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The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us that the Lord commanded only a few external observances for the Christian Church. The two sacraments of worship are baptism and the Holy Supper: baptism because by it regeneration may be remembered, and the Holy Supper because it is a symbol of the Lord, His love for the human race, and the reciprocal love of people to Him (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4904:3).

Throughout Christianity the Holy Supper, or communion, is regarded as one of the most important externals of worship. The very act creates a solemn sphere that is awe-inspiring. In spite of the fact that direct statements are made in the gospels concerning the Holy Supper and its institution by Divine command, it carries with it an air of mystery. Part of the confusion, perhaps, is because of the language used in describing the historic last supper in the gospels. The bread was broken and distributed to the disciples, and then the Lord said, "This is My body...do this in remembrance of Me." And when the cup, containing the wine, was passed after the supper, it was offered with the words, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:19,20).

Over centuries of celebrating the Holy Supper, Christian churches have presented many different concepts of its purpose. Even today, the Holy Supper, or (as it is often called) the eucharist, is taken with the idea of remembering the passion of the cross, which followed the disciples' first communion or Last Supper. About 1000 A.D. the doctrine of transubstantiation crept into the mass. This mystical belief, that the bread and wine are actually changed into the blood and flesh of the Lord, still exists in the Catholic Church. This miracle, however, claims to change only the substance of the sacrament, not the appearance. As a result, many people have doubted and rebelled against such a mystery of faith because it eludes their understanding. For others, their interest and attention is centered on the miracle rather than on the true meaning of the Holy Supper intended by the Lord.

When the Reformation came, this miracle of the mass was rejected. The protestors also discarded the greatly-feared teaching that excommunication meant eternal damnation. Being excluded from the communion table, they taught, held no such frightening ramifications. In addition, the Protestants restored wine to the communicants table, which had long been reserved for the clergy. Some prohibitionist reformers ruled out the wine, offering only unfermented grape juice.

Despite these differences, in all churches that recognize the Holy Supper as a sacrament, it is considered one of the most holy forms of external worship. The reason for this, we are told, is

because in those brief but most solemn moments of the Supper, the worshiper centers his attention on the Lord Himself, without distraction. As a result, he perceives the sphere of heaven close at hand.

Another concept that is universally associated with the Holy Supper is the doctrine of repentance. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church states,

Can there be anything better known in the Christian world than that a person ought to examine himself? For everywhere, in empires and kingdoms, whether in those adhering to the Roman Catholic or to the Evangelical religion, before approaching the Holy Supper, people are taught and admonished to examine themselves, to recognize and acknowledge their sins, and to live a new and different life (True Christian Religion 526).

But common sense dictates that the mere tasting of the bread and wine cannot in itself cleanse the soul. The act, then, must be symbolic of something else. The natural food must correspond to the essential spiritual food that feeds the heart and mind of the communicant. A sincere worshiper knows that a merciful Lord alone can see into someone's heart and provide the nourishment he needs. The confession of sins, privately, before one's Creator has a definite cleansing affect on the conscience. But, as in every trespass in life, confession of guilt is only the beginning. For the confession to have meaning, it must be followed by an amended life.

Examination and confession are essential and prerequisite. But if a person lingers in this state, without turning to the Lord for both instruction and help to move on from there, he can fall back into the hands of the hells. Evil spirits enjoy prodding our memory of trespasses. They entice us to dwell on our evils. Their ambition is to make us feel both helpless and hopeless. Their goal is to create doubt, hesitation, and eventual immobility. Their cunning approach intends to take away our trust in a merciful and forgiving God, who alone can remove evils from us. By keeping our imperfections before us, they hope to blind our understanding with remorse and self-pity.

However, the Lord, through His angels, endeavors to show us the next step. Once we admit to our failings and shortcomings, we should turn to the Lord for the strength and insight to combat the hells. Admitting to our own weakness is initial; acknowledging that the Lord alone is omnipotent is crucial. When we continually reaffirm this belief by approaching the Holy Supper table to symbolically receive His good and truth, we are, for the moment, released from the grasp of the hells. The very act of reaching out for His spiritual food, represented by the bread and wine, invites a heavenly sphere. His presence during this most holy act of worship restores our vision of His Divine Human.

However, some worshipers may be disturbed by the teaching given in the Heavenly Doctrine that a person should only approach the Holy Supper table "worthily." Honest self-examination prior to the sacrament may lead people to mistakenly believe that they are not worthy to partake. The Heavenly Doctrine defines "worthily" in these terms: "Those come to the Holy Supper worthily who have faith in the Lord and charity toward the neighbor" (*True Christian Religion* 722). For those who exclude themselves from partaking of the sacrament for this reason, it is indeed unfortunate. Their motive may be sincere, but it is misguided.

Our presence at the table, on bended knee, should be a sign to ourselves that we are reaching out for His love and wisdom. When we place ourselves before His altar with the understanding that we are hungry and thirsty for His spiritual nourishment in our lives we initiate “worthiness.” If our approach is sincere, then we are in the state to worthily enjoy the Holy Supper: we are acknowledging God and having faith that He will feed us and guide us in a life of charity (*ibid.*).

When we feel the attack of the hells, suggesting that we are unworthy to approach the Lord for His help, we should reflect on the angels of the highest heaven. We are told that these celestial beings, who have regenerated to the highest degree, cast themselves prostrate on the ground when they acknowledge their unworthiness before the Lord. They are far more aware of their own evils than we are, but they also recognize that the Lord will feed them, strengthen them, and fill their lives with the delights of heaven (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4801:2).

Nearly every one of us practices acts of charity toward the neighbor every day. This is not difficult, for our livelihood and reputation depend upon our living so. All that the Lord asks is that we continue doing this because He has commanded it in His Word. But our own determination to live a life according to His Commandments is not sufficient. The life of true charity requires spiritual food to sustain us. When we seek this nourishment from His Word and in prayer in the Holy Supper, we are infilling this external act of worship with essential internals.

Partaking of the sacrament is very much like opening a copy of the Word. Nothing miraculous in our life, observable to our senses, happens when we open the pages of the Sacred Scriptures or the Heavenly Doctrine. Nor is there usually a perceptible change when the teachings enter our thoughts. But we are assured that when we search the Scriptures for help and enlightenment to guide our lives, not only are all of the heavens present, offering enlightenment, but the Lord Himself is immediately present with us.

Therefore, if we consider ourselves worthy to open the Lord’s Word for spiritual food, so should we avail ourselves of the Holy Supper. And just as we must continually feed our natural bodies, so we need continual nourishment from His Word for our spiritual bodies. Active and regular participation in the eucharist (which means “thanksgiving”) is a powerful reminder that the Lord alone can feed us this heavenly food. His presence with us during this most holy act is intended to re-affirm this great and essential truth. The external eating of the bread and drinking of the wine stimulates and strengthens our desire to live a life of internal worship.

But we must take the initiative. We must open His Word; we must approach the table He has prepared for us. For as He tells us, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and sup with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20).

Amen.