

# BROTHER BERNARD

## ❧ A PSEUDO-BERNARD ❧

# ON WORTHY RECEPTION

CHRIST OUR FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

The Three Ways of Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ

A DISCERNING priest will recognize the fact that there are three ways of receiving this most holy Bread and Cup. First, there is the reception that is both sacramental [i.e., physical, of consumption] and spiritual; and that, the true reception, both is holy and confers holiness. Blessed in itself, it blesses the receiver; a living act, it also is life-giving.

Secondly, there is the reception that is only spiritual; and that most certainly bestows grace, fosters the virtues, and increases merit. And thirdly, there is the reception that is only sacramental; and that is damnable and cause for condemnation; it is hateful to God and separates a soul from Him, and has no blessed consequence at all.

Every faithful priest who goes to God's altar, and there duly celebrates the Holy Mystery, fittingly clad in the wedding-garment of charity and being innocent of any mortal sin, receives the Holy Eucharist sacramentally and spiritually; and every believer who receives It from the hand of a priest with the same dispositions receives in the same way, and no less worthily. The priest's peculiar privilege lies in the fact that he is able to celebrate and receive the Eucharist daily, provided no fault or weakness hinders him; whereas other people are allowed to communicate [i.e., receive the Holy Eucharist] only at the priest's hand and at certain times.<sup>55</sup>

Again, every believer, who is a member of the Church and is living in charity, receives the Sacrament spiritually only; for, though he does not touch It with his lips, he none the less obtains Its virtue for himself—that is to say, forgiveness of his sins and the inpouring of spiritual grace—by means of his faith and union with the Church. And a man receives It sacramentally only, who dares to communicate while persisting in mortal sin; but such a one is fellow to the traitor Judas and, unless he comes to his senses and makes worthy satisfaction to God, it would have been better for him if he had not been born.

Of the first kind of reception, that which is both sacramental and spiritual, the Lord says: 'He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood dwelleth in Me, and I in him'; and again: 'He that eateth Me shall live by Me.' Of the second, which is spiritual only, He tells us: 'The flesh profiteth nothing, it is the spirit that giveth life';<sup>56</sup> which is as much as to say: 'If the mere physical reception, apart from grace, is all that you understand, it profits you not at all, but rather does you harm. But the spiritual reception, without the physical, gives you life.' Of the third kind, which is sacramental only, the apostle says: 'He that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh judgement for himself, not discerning the Lord's Body'<sup>57</sup>—not discerning the difference, he means, between the Body of the Lord and other foods. The salutary difference between the Body of the Lord and other foods is this: when we receive those foods, we make them part of our own bodies; but, when we take and eat the Body of the Lord, if we do so worthily we are taken into and made part of His Body, or rather, we pass over whole into God. For he that is joined unto God is one spirit with Him.

Happy the wayfarer who is refreshed with such Food for his pilgrimage as this; for it will lead him safely all the way back to his native land.

The first mode of reception, therefore, belongs to priests who reverence their office and fulfil it worthily; and the faithful

communicate as the priests ordain. For they hold the keys of the Sacrament; they are the true mediators between God and man; they are the Church's voice and instrument; they offer God the supplications of the people, and bring them back His mercies. O how faithful is He that promiseth, how true in all His words, how generous in His gifts! Thou saidst with truth, Lord Jesus, 'Lo, I am with you all the days, even until the consummation of the age,' and the Scripture also says with truth: 'The Word is nigh thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart.'<sup>58</sup> The Word, Who was in the beginning with God, deigns at the end of the age to be also with man, in the mouth of man and in his heart. What could be closer? What could be more intimate? He is in your mouth; then let His praise be ever on your lips. He is in your heart; thank Him, therefore, with an unfeigned heart and forget not all His benefits. Do you ask me what these are? He forgives all your sin and heals all your infirmities; He saves your life from destruction and crowns you with mercy and loving-kindness. He satisfies your hunger with good things, giving Himself to be your Food for the journey; and He will renew your youth as an eagle's in the resurrection of the just, when at the last He gives Himself as your reward.<sup>59</sup>

—Formerly ascribed to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 or 91–1153); subsequently to 'Brother Bernard', a pseudo-Bernard of around the late twelfth century. Chapter 2, section 5 of his *The Threefold Gift of Christ (Instructio sacerdoti de praecipuis mysteriis nostrae religionis)*, translated and edited by a Religious of CSMV, i.e., Ruth Penelope Lawson (1890–1977), and published by A. R. Mowbray & Co., London, in 1954, pages 36–38.



## NOTES

<sup>55</sup> Right down to the sixteenth century the mere fact [*sic*, cf. suggestion, mention] of frequent lay communion was apt to arouse suspicion of extravagance and illuminism, although both Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Bonaventura in the thirteenth had regarded it as theoretically desirable. See Gregory Dix, *Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster [London]: Dacre, 1945), 598.

<sup>56</sup> Saint John 6:56–57,63 (Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition; cf. 6:57–58,64, Douay Version).

<sup>57</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:29.

<sup>58</sup> See Deuteronomy 30:14.

<sup>59</sup> See Psalm 103[102]:1–5.

