

PREPARING TO RECEIVE THE LORD: THE HOLY COMMUNION FAST

It is always risky business to contradict one's mother— on this point all should be in agreement! During the Christmas Octave, I asked my mom a few details about her wedding ceremony, held 63 years prior. Her recall for details is amazing, but she threw me one curve ball. She reminisced about the challenge of observing the Communion fast, noting not only the prohibition of eating but also of **abstaining from water** prior to her nuptials. Thoroughly skeptical, I offered an immediate and rather haughty rejoinder. "Liquids yes, sure. But drinking water was **always** allowed," I replied. **Wrong!** The regulations for the Eucharistic fast have undergone significant changes and are too often misunderstood. They are most certainly underappreciated and so it seems opportune for a brief review of this Catholic practice.

Church writings dating to the 3rd century A.D. describe the Eucharist in terms that clearly **distinguish it** from all other kinds of food. While offering advice to Christian women married to unbelievers (i.e. pagans), **Tertullian** (writing in 200 A.D.) made a cryptic reference to what may be a Communion fast. Evidently, some women had brought the Eucharist home to consume on days in which there was no celebration of the Eucharist. He cautions: "Will not your husband know what it is which you secretly taste before (taking) any food? and if he knows it to be bread, does he not believe it to be *that* (bread) which it is *said* to be?" (*Ad Uxorem* II, V) A clearer indication of fasting comes from the local **Synod of Hippo** held on **Oct. 8, 393 A.D.**, at which none other than **St. Augustine** himself had been invited to give the opening address to the assembled bishops. Mind you, ordained a priest for all of two years, his **brilliant intellect** had already distinguished itself.

Located in modern day Algeria, this synod is significant as it produced the first list containing the Canon of the New Testament (i.e. which books are included), forwarding it for approval to the churches "overseas" (e.g. Rome and Milan). It established the age of 25 as normative for ordination to the priesthood, a rule I dutifully observed 1,596 years later! But it also **forbade clerics** to frequent **taverns** (eating **or** drinking) except when traveling! I'll plead the 5th here! C'mon, where were they supposed to watch the Vikings game? But seriously, in detailing norms for the celebration of the Mass, it included the first legislation for a **Eucharistic Fast**. Canon 28 is defined: "The Sacraments of the Altar are not to be celebrated except by those who are fasting, except on the one anniversary of the celebration of the Lord's Supper; for if the commemoration of some of the dead, whether bishops or others, is to be made in the afternoon, let it be only with prayers, if those who officiate have already breakfasted." The Holy Thursday exception was offered in imitation of the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper.

In a letter he wrote seven years after the council, Augustine **refers** to this legislation: "It pleased the Holy Spirit to appoint, for the honor of so great a sacrament, that the body of the Lord should take the precedence of all other food entering the mouth of a Christian; and it is for this reason that the custom referred to is universally observed." (Letter 54, VI, 8) This at least shows us that fasting before Holy Communion was the **expected practice** in North Africa at the close of the 4th century. Why fast before Holy Communion? It is because we partake of food— **real** food— though **different** from all other foods. The Church was concerned very early on that people not approach Holy Communion casually.

Still, it is possible to miss the forest for the trees. The idea of abstaining from all food and liquids (even water!) certainly strikes the modern mind as excessive. My mother was married on December 29, 1956. Now, concerning her claim that **even water** was forbidden before Mass on one's wedding day? Well, she was **half-right!** She indeed had to fast from midnight. And **I was half-wrong** in stating that water was **always** exempted. In fact, it was not until January 6, 1953 that Pope Pius XII relaxed that rule, stating: "In the future it shall be a general and common principle for all, both priests and faithful, that **natural water does not break the Eucharistic fast.**" (...*aquam videlicet naturalem Eucharisticum ieiunium non frangere*). Thus, it goes in the books as a **"split decision"**. So diligent was she with her college studies, it is understandable that she missed the Epiphany (6 January 1953) instruction! Believe it or not, as groundbreaking as **that** concession was, Pius XII legislated again in March 1957, **reducing** the length of time for fasting from solid food from Midnight down to **three hours** before Communion. By then, it was more common for later Masses on Sundays, as well as evening Masses of a special nature, etc.

Amidst a culture that seeks to avoid any and all self-denial, we would benefit from rediscovering the value of fasting. The Communion fast is but one form of this and to be frank, it is anything but onerous. Canon 919 §1 states: “A person who is to receive the Most Holy Eucharist is to abstain for **at least one hour** before holy communion from any food and drink, except for only water and medicine.” (My emphasis added). “At least” (Latin: *saltem*) is a minimum requirement. We ought to challenge ourselves to fulfill this as a means of recalling that the reception of the Eucharist demands proper preparation of mind and body. A one-hour fast is so little to ask as we prepare to receive this magnificent gift. May we never take the Eucharist for granted. P.S. **Don’t correct your mother!**

- I watched the **Golden Gophers** bowl game in its entirety on New Year’s Day—well, almost. Okay, I dozed a little. But it was extremely entertaining and I readily admit that my many years of Gophers skepticism had me searching for **images of bandwagons** online in the second half. I jumped right on! The Gophers beat the venerable Auburn University squad, dominating the line of scrimmage. Gopher WR Tyler Johnson, the game’s hero, hails from North High School in Minneapolis. Congratulations!
- You are not alone. It’s no secret that the scourge of pornography affects millions, including numerous observant Catholics who are mired in this vice. A new online program named STRIVE is specially designed for Catholic men, affording them “virtual accountability” with other participants. When following the **21-day program**, live-streamed videos offer practical spiritual tips to help men rid themselves of their harmful patterns. Participants receive daily challenges, while remaining anonymous. Visit **www.strive21.com** to learn more.
- We continue to receive envelopes to assist us in raising needed funds to install security cameras. Building upon the tremendous lead gift we received, we have raised an **additional \$16,117** to date! Please know that this is an ongoing collection. **Safety and Security** Fund envelopes are available on the tables by the piers. Your support for this project is greatly appreciated!
- It is quite a chore to disassemble our two magnificent Christmas Crèches, but ’tis the season. They have been frequently visited and I enjoy seeing cars slow down on John Ireland Blvd. to get a closer look. Thanks to all who helped with all of our Christmas decorations!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector