

THE LAST COMMUNION OF SAINT
JEROME

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THE EUCHARIST, MONASTICISM,
and PRIESTHOOD
in the LIFE *of a* CHURCH FATHER

DOM BASIL NIXEN, OSB

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*Quod nos dicimus: Dominus regit me, Hebræi
dicunt: Dominus pascit me, et nihil mihi deerit. Qui
Deum habet, et qui Deo adhæret, nihil boni deest ei.*

—Ex Breviario in Psalmos, Psalm XXIII

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INTRODUCTION: PRETIOSA IN CONSPECTU DOMINI

ALTHOUGH WE have abundant information about St. Jerome's life, we possess no account of his death from the immediate eyewitnesses who were present on the occasion. As he lay dying on that final day of September,¹ we can reasonably surmise that he was attended to by certain monks of his monastery, in particular, his brother Paulinian and Eusebius of Cremona. It is also likely that St. Eustochium, his devoted spiritual daughter, was also present and took care of him as her very father in his last moments. It is likely that he gave one last spiritual exhortation to these spiritual children, and that it approximated in tone and content the words of St. Paul to Timothy (2 Tim. 4:1-8) preserved for us in the Mass for a Doctor:

Dearly beloved: I charge thee, before God and Jesus Christ, who shall judge the living and the dead, by his coming, and his kingdom: Preach the word: be instant in season, out of season: reprove, entreat, rebuke in all patience and doctrine. For there shall be a time, when they will not endure sound doctrine; but, according to their own desires, they will heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears: And will indeed turn away their hearing from the truth, but will be turned unto fables. But be thou vigilant, labour in all things, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil thy ministry. Be sober. For I am even

now ready to be sacrificed: and the time of my dissolution is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. As to the rest, there is laid up for me a crown of justice, which the Lord the just judge will render to me in that day: and not only to me, but to them also that love his coming.

It is also likely that he received viaticum, perhaps from his brother Paulinian, who was a priest, and that he did so with great fervor and devotion, and afterwards died in peace, with the sentiments of St. Simeon in his heart—*Nunc dimittis, Domine* (Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, O Lord).

Based on these few elements that could have reasonably accompanied the passing of St. Jerome, some pious soul of the fourteenth century composed an elaborately florid account of this event and attributed his legend to St. Jerome's historical disciple, Eusebius of Cremona (see Migne's *Patrologia Latina* (PL) 22: col. 239-282). This pious author, whoever he was, knew enough about St. Jerome to give some impression of authenticity, but the evident mistakes he makes in establishing the chronology of Jerome's life and other inaccuracies of the account make it clear that his report is not history, properly speaking, but an imaginative and pious conjecture as to what St. Jerome's passing *must have been like*. The memorable culmination of the pious account is the moment when St. Jerome receives his last Communion surrounded by angels, and breathes forth his last after praying the *Nunc Dimittis*.

Regardless of its validity as "history" properly speaking, this legend of St. Jerome's death, *De Morte Hieronymi*, became a popular devotional text that helped many people grow closer

to God and increased their devotion to St. Jerome. In 1491, a translation of the legend appeared in Florence, *Il Devoto Transito del Glorioso Sancto Hieronymo, Ridotto in Lingua Fiorentina, a contemplatione delle devote persone*, and became a treasured source of meditation for many people, including the famous painter Sandro Botticelli. Shortly after its publication, Botticelli painted a small (25 cm wide and 35 cm tall) painting of St. Jerome's last Communion for Francesco Del Pugliese, a Florentine merchant. The painting was originally known as *Il Transito di San Girolamo*, a clear indication that it was inspired by the famous legend concerning St. Jerome's death. Through the centuries the painting passed from owner to owner until arriving at its current resting place in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.²

Botticelli's small devotional painting eventually sparked a train of more elaborate descendants. In 1611, the Bolognese painter Domenico Zampieri, commonly known as Domenichino, executed a majestic altar piece with St. Jerome's last Communion as its theme for the Church of San Girolamo della Carità in Rome, closely imitating, yet far excelling, the earlier work by his teacher, Agostino Carracci. Domenichino's famous painting, much larger than Botticelli's and incorporating more of the sensational elements from the legend of St. Jerome's death, is now housed in the Vatican Museums, and an immense mosaic representation of the work adorns the altar of St. Jerome in Saint Peter's Basilica. The piece has an arresting effect, and often makes a vivid impression on those walking through Saint Peter's Basilica. The worshipping love of St. Jerome for the Holy Eucharist is unquestionably conveyed by the magnificent work.

Nevertheless, due to their connection with the fourteenth century legend *De Morte Hieronymi*, these artistic masterpieces representing the last Communion of St. Jerome are often the target of trivializing comments by modern scholars, and one often gets the impression that the subject of St. Jerome's last Communion had no historical basis whatsoever. But such a simplification of the issue ignores the truth that there is always a connection between historical truth and "that halo of legend that inevitably forms round the heads of all the striking personalities of history."³ In the following work, I would like to establish that link, and show why a devotion to the *last Communion* of St. Jerome is thoroughly consistent with who the historical man actually was. I would like, therefore, to meditate on St. Jerome's teaching on and love for the Holy Eucharist, and on the unconventional manner in which he lived his priesthood, in the hopes that the literary and artistic theme of St. Jerome's last Communion will be better appreciated and understood as a way that the Catholic tradition grappled with, proclaimed, and reverently safeguarded a truth about one of its most beloved saints that was not so easy to understand.

CHAPTER 1

THE EUCHARIST AS EXEGETICAL KEY TO UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE

ST. JEROME left us no systematic treatise on the Eucharist. His teaching on the subject is scattered throughout his immense literary output. For our immediate purpose, we may divide the relevant passages into two categories: first, those that emphasize the Eucharist as an exegetical key to understanding Scripture; and second, those that delineate the means by which we can attain a proper disposition to receive the Eucharist. A good place to begin is his commentary on Ecclesiastes. In the midst of his explanation of Ecclesiastes 3:13, “For every man that eateth and drinketh, and seeth good of his labour, this is the gift of God,” he makes the following statement:

Since the flesh of the Lord is true food, and his blood is true drink, according to the anagogical sense, this alone is our good in the present age, if we are nourished by his flesh and drink his blood, not only in the mystery (Eucharist), but also in the reading of the Scriptures. Indeed, true food and drink gathered from the Word of God is the knowledge of the Scriptures.⁴

Here St. Jerome distinguishes between a *sacramental* eating of the Eucharist and a *spiritual* communion with Christ's Body and Blood through assiduous reading of the Bible. Although both means lead to spiritual union with the Word of God, he makes clear in his commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew (Matt. 26:26) that the Eucharist objectively makes present the truth of His Body and Blood, and is thus a superior mode of Christ's presence:⁵

After the figurative Passover had been fulfilled, and He had eaten the flesh of the lamb with His apostles, He takes bread, that strengthens the heart of man (cf. Ps. 103:15), and passes over to the sacrament of the true Passover, so that as Melchisedech, priest of God Most High, had done offering bread and wine as a type in anticipation of Him (cf. Gen. 14:18), He likewise should make the offering in the truth of His body and blood.⁶

The sacramental presence of Christ's Body and Blood in the Eucharist was not limited to the Last Supper, however; indeed, the faithful have the privilege of receiving it daily should they so choose. St. Jerome thus explains the fatted calf that is slaughtered to provide for the banquet upon the return of the prodigal son (Luke 15): "The fatted calf which is slaughtered for the penitent's salvation is the Savior Himself, on whose flesh we daily feed, whose blood we drink."⁷

In the allusion to the fatted calf we see how the Eucharist was an exegetical key often employed by St. Jerome to explain obscure passages in Scripture. The Scriptures themselves, therefore, point the reader beyond themselves, to seek Christ's Body and Blood in the Sacrament. This is more frequently

to be observed in St. Jerome's exposition of the Old Testament, which was particularly dear to him. Commenting on the description of the new temple in Ezechiel 41:7, he sees in the upper room (*cænaculum*) described in the temple a foreshadowing of the upper room where Christ instituted the Eucharist:

The Savior of mankind also celebrated a Passover in a higher chamber, it too was a large and wide upper room, purged of all uncleanness and strewn, prepared for a spiritual banquet, where He bequeathed the mystery of His body and blood to His disciples, and left us the eternal festivity of the immaculate lamb.⁸

The Eucharist is a key to understanding the Scriptures because it is the glorified Body and Blood, and, hence, Soul and Divinity, of Jesus Christ, who alone opens the Scriptures for us. In a majestic passage in which he displays his consummate ability to explain the Scriptures, St. Jerome shows how closely the Eucharist is linked to the person and mission of Christ. The passage in question is again taken from the Prophet Ezechiel:

And he brought me back to the way of the gate of the outwards sanctuary, which looked towards the east: and it was shut. And the Lord said to me: this gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall pass through it: because the Lord the God of Israel hath entered in by it, and it shall be shut. For the prince. The prince himself shall sit in it, to eat bread before the Lord: he shall enter in by the way of the porch of the gate, and shall go out by the same way (Ez. 44:1-3).

St. Jerome explains the passage as follows:

This door, therefore, which is closed to everyone (for no man shall pass through it), shall be closed to the prince, and to the duke, and shall be opened by the coming of Him who shall sit in it, that He might eat bread before the Lord. Concerning this bread He speaks openly in the Gospel, saying: My food is to do the will of Him who sent me, that I may accomplish His work (John 4:34). He is the prince, and pontiff according to the order of Melchisedech, and victim and priest, who with us eats celestial bread in the Father's sight, and drinks the wine of which He speaks in the Gospel: I shall not drink of the fruit of this vine, if not when I drink it anew in My Father's kingdom (Matt. 26:29): in that kingdom, namely, concerning which He says elsewhere: The kingdom of God is within you (Luke 17:21).

And the door shall be closed. Nobody, indeed, can know the sacraments of the Lord's passion, of His body and blood, on account of the majesty of the reality. And our Prince is of such goodness and clemency, that though He sits alone at the door, which is closed, He desires to have numerous companions at His table and banquet, and says: Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if someone should open to me, I shall enter near him and dine with him, and he with me (Apoc. 3:20). Alone He eats bread before the Lord, for His substance and divine nature is distinct from all substances of creatures. He enters and exits through the same door of the atrium: for He is both within and without, that is, infused inside and surrounding everyone; and entering through the

door, that with Himself He may lead in others, who without His teaching and assistance cannot enter; and exiting, that He may lead in others yet again; and speak to them who do not grasp the harder matters. But that the Eastern door beyond the limits of the world should be forever closed, and never be exposed to human sight, John's Gospel verifies when saying: No one has ever seen God: the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known (John 1:18).⁹

The passage which gave rise to the Eucharistic interpretation in the previous passage was taken from Ezechiel 44:3: "The prince himself shall sit in it [i.e., the doorway], to eat bread before the Lord." Although the text here mentions only bread, i.e. the Eucharistic Body of the Lord, St. Jerome instinctively brings into his interpretation the sacred Blood, which is concomitant with the Eucharistic Body. We see Jerome similarly introduce the Lord's Eucharistic flesh when commenting on Ezechiel 45:19, a passage which alludes only to the precious Blood:

And, the prophet says, the priest shall take of its blood, which shall be for the sin of everyone: who in Exodus and in the Gospel by similar words is called a lamb, with John the Baptist proclaiming: Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). The blood, however, is that same precious blood by which we are redeemed in the passion of the Lord Savior; by whose flesh we are nourished, and whose blood we drink.¹⁰

The concomitance of the Lord's Flesh and Blood, and, moreover, water, help Jerome explain why Isaiah invites the thirsty

poor of Israel to *eat* the water, wine, and milk which they are to procure gratuitously in the prophecy: "All you that thirst, come to the waters: and you that have no money, make haste, buy and eat. Come ye: buy wine and milk without money and without any price" (Is. 55:1). The *doctor maximus* (St. Jerome) explains this passage thus:

What is more, in a wonderful manner they buy waters without money; and they do not drink them, but eat them. Indeed, He who came down from heaven, is both water and bread (Jn. 6). Thus, that which is read in some codices: *Buy, and drink*, was changed by uninformed scribes, who considered it more coherent that water should be drunk rather than eaten. There is, moreover, evil money, or silver, which the Scripture condemns when it says: *Money which is given with deceit shall be reputed as a potsherd* (Prov. 26:23 according to the *Septuagint*); and in another place: *Your silver is condemned* (Jer. 6:30). There is also silver which is compared to the words of God: *The sayings of the Lord are pure sayings: silver tried by the fire, purified seven-fold* (Ps. 11:7). Having thus rejected that silver and money with which we cannot purchase the waters of the Lord, let us press onwards to Him, who, holding the chalice of the Sacrament, spoke thus to His disciples: *Receive and drink, this is my blood, which shall be shed unto the remission of sins* (Matt. 26:27-28). This is the wine which Wisdom mixed in her bowl, inciting all the foolish ones, who lack the wisdom of this age and world, to drink. And we should purchase not wine alone, but also milk, which signifies the innocence of little ones, which custom and figure is kept to

the present day in Western Churches, so that wine and milk are offered to those reborn in Christ. Concerning this milk Paul also used to say: *I gave you milk to drink, not solid food (1 Cor. 3:2)*. And Peter: *In the manner of new born babes, long for spiritual milk (1 Pt. 2:2)*. Hence Moses, also, understanding wine and milk as referring to Christ's passion, testifies with mystical words: *His eyes are more lovely than wine, and His teeth are whiter than milk (Gen. 49:12)*. In place of "milk" here the Septuagint translated "fatness". Concerning this fatness saint David says in the Psalm: *Let my soul be filled with fatness and grease (Ps. 62:6)*; and in another place: *He fed them with fatness of wheat, and satisfied them with honey from the rock (Ps. 80:17)*. This fatness seems to be nothing other than the sacramental flesh to which the Lord summoned His disciples, saying: *Unless you eat my flesh, and drink my blood, you will not have life within you (John 6:54)*.¹¹

This passage shows how the Eucharist is perhaps the greatest expression of God's extravagant love for us. As the enduring memorial of His passion and death on the Cross, it not only makes present for us the Christ who suffered, but fills those who worthily partake of the Eucharistic banquet with the water and blood which flowed from the pierced side of Christ. He asks us for nothing else in return than that we bear His "easy yoke" and "light burden," i.e., that we avoid that which separates us from Him, and seek out that which unites us to Him. But we consistently perceive His restful load to be unbearable, and therefore miss out on the festive joy the Eucharist is meant to bring us. St. Jerome thus interprets the words the Lord echoes through the prophet Hosea, "And I

will be to them as one that taketh off the yoke that is on their jaws: and I bowed down to him that he might be nourished” (Hos. 11:4), as foreshadowing the sorrow of Christ’s unrequited love in giving us the Eucharist:

And they considered my light yoke to be terribly heavy: and I bowed down to them, deserting the heavenly realms, that I might eat with them, having assumed the form of man, and gave to them the food of my Body, which is both food and shared rejoicing (*cibus et conviva*).¹²

However, those who receive the Eucharist as the magnificent gift it truly is are thereby strengthened to ascend to that heavenly realm from which the Son of God descended in order to give it to us. Anyone who attempts the arduous climb to heaven without this fortifying food will therefore collapse from weakness on the way. This is the mystical truth St. Jerome perceives behind the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves in Matthew 15:32:

Jesus does not wish to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way. Whoever, therefore, hastens to reach the desired dwelling place without the heavenly bread is in peril. Hence the angel also says to Elijah: *Rise, and eat, for you are setting out on a great journey* (3 Kings 19:7).¹³

This passage shows us how important viaticum (one’s last Communion before death) was for Jerome, as it has been for Catholics throughout the centuries. We can only imagine, then, that he would have taken great care to make sure he received it before his own death, and that he did so as devoutly

and worthily as possible. Indeed, he was keenly aware of the truth St. Thomas Aquinas would declare centuries later in his sequence for the Feast of Corpus Christi:

Good souls consume it, as do evil: unequal, though, their destiny: life or destruction. Death for the evil, life for the good: behold, though equal the reception be, vastly unequal is the outcome.¹⁴

St. Jerome expressed this truth in his polemical treatise against Jovinianum:

The sanctification in the sacraments is one for master and servant, nobleman and commoner, king and soldier: though that which is one may be differentiated according to the merits of the recipient. *He, indeed, who unworthily eats and drinks, will be answerable for the desecrated Body and Blood of Christ (1 Cor. 11:27).* Or do you suppose that since Judas, too, drinks from the same chalice as the other Apostles, he will deserve the same merit with the rest?¹⁵

St. Jerome returns to St. Paul's admonition from 1 Corinthians in his dialogue against the Pelagians. Toward the end of Book I, amidst numerous texts from the Pentateuch affirming man's inherent tendency toward sin after the fall, Jerome makes a connection between someone who, through ignorance, eats from ritual sacrifices of which he is forbidden to do so by the laws of Leviticus 22:10-13, and St. Paul's example of someone consciously in a state of sin partaking of the Eucharist:

Finally it says: *If someone eateth of the sanctified things through ignorance, injustice and transgression is imputed*

*to him, and he shall be answerable for the burnt-offering.*¹⁶
Hence the Apostle also admonishes that the Eucharist of the Lord is to be eaten with caution, lest we eat it unto our condemnation and judgment (1 Cor. 11:27). If ignorance is condemned in the law, how much more full knowledge in the Gospel!¹⁷

The worthy reception of the Holy Eucharist was, therefore, very important for St. Jerome. We shall now turn our attention to passages in which he discusses how we may fittingly dispose ourselves to receive it.