

QUAM SINGULARI

Decree of the Sacred Congregation of the Discipline of the Sacraments on First Communion

August 8, 1910

The pages of the Gospel show clearly how special was that love for children which Christ showed while He was on earth. It was His delight to be in their midst; He was wont to lay His hands on them; He embraced them; and He blessed them. At the same time He was not pleased when they would be driven away by the disciples, whom He rebuked gravely with these words: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for of such is the kingdom of God." It is clearly seen how highly He held their innocence and the open simplicity of their souls on that occasion when He called a little child to Him and said to the disciples: "Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like little children, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven....And whoever receives one such little child for my sake, receives me."

The Catholic Church, bearing this in mind, took care even from the beginning to bring the little ones to Christ through Eucharistic Communion, which was administered even to nursing infants. This, as was prescribed in almost all ancient Ritual books, was done at Baptism until the thirteenth century, and this custom prevailed in some places even later. It is still found in the Greek and Oriental Churches. But to remove the danger that infants might eject the Consecrated Host, the custom obtained from the beginning of administering the Eucharist to them under the species of wine only.

Infants, however, not only at the time of Baptism, but also frequently thereafter were admitted to the sacred repast. In some churches it was the custom to give the Eucharist to the children immediately after the clergy; in others, the small fragments which remained after the Communion of the adults were given to the children.

This practice later died out in the Latin Church, and children were not permitted to approach the Holy Table until they had come to the use of reason and had some knowledge of this august Sacrament. This new practice, already accepted by certain local councils, was solemnly confirmed by the Fourth Council of the Lateran, in 1215, which promulgated its celebrated Canon XXI, whereby sacramental Confession and Holy Communion were made obligatory on the faithful after they had attained the use of reason, in these words: "All the faithful of both sexes shall, after reaching the years of discretion, make private confession of all their sins to their own priest at least once a year, and shall, according to their capacity, perform the enjoined penance; they shall also devoutly receive the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist at least at Easter time unless on the advice of their own priest, for some reasonable cause, it be deemed well to abstain for a while."

The Council of Trent, in no way condemning the ancient practice of administering the Eucharist to children before they had attained the use of reason, confirmed the Decree of the Lateran Council and declared anathema those who held otherwise: "If anyone denies that each and all Christians of both sexes are bound, when they have attained the years of discretion, to receive Communion every year at least at Easter, in accordance with the precept of Holy Mother Church, let him be anathema."

In accord with this Decree of the Lateran Council, still in effect, the faithful are obliged, as soon as they arrive at the years of discretion, to receive the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist at least once a year.

However, in the precise determination of "the age of reason or discretion" not a few errors and deplorable abuses have crept in during the course of time. There were some who maintained that one

age of discretion must be assigned to reception of the Sacrament of Penance and another to the Holy Eucharist. They held that for Confession the age of discretion is reached when one can distinguish right from wrong, hence can commit sin; for Holy Eucharist, however, a greater age is required in which a full knowledge of matters of faith and a better preparation of the soul can be had. As a consequence, owing to various local customs and opinions, the age determined for the reception of First Communion was placed at ten years or twelve, and in places fourteen years or even more were required; and until that age children and youth were prohibited from Eucharistic Communion.

This practice of preventing the faithful from receiving on the plea of safeguarding the august Sacrament has been the cause of many evils. It happened that children in their innocence were forced away from the embrace of Christ and deprived of the food of their interior life; and from this it also happened that in their youth, destitute of this strong help, surrounded by so many temptations, they lost their innocence and fell into vicious habits even before tasting of the Sacred Mysteries. And even if a thorough instruction and a careful Sacramental Confession should precede Holy Communion, which does not everywhere occur, still the loss of first innocence is always to be deplored and might have been avoided by reception of the Eucharist in more tender years.

No less worthy of condemnation is that practice which prevails in many places prohibiting from Sacramental Confession children who have not yet made their First Holy Communion, or of not giving them absolution. Thus it happens that they, perhaps having fallen into serious sin, remain in that very dangerous state for a long time.

But worse still is the practice in certain places which prohibits children who have not yet made their First Communion from being fortified by the Holy Viaticum, even when they are in imminent danger of death; and thus, when they die they are buried with the rites due to infants and are deprived of the prayers of the Church.

Such is the injury caused by those who insist on extraordinary preparations for First Communion, beyond what is reasonable; and they doubtless do not realize that such precautions proceed from the errors of the Jansenists who contended that the Most Holy Eucharist is a reward rather than a remedy for human frailty. The Council of Trent, indeed, teaches otherwise when it calls the Eucharist, "An antidote whereby we may be freed from daily faults and be preserved from mortal sins." This doctrine was not long ago strongly emphasized by a Decree of the Sacred Congregation of the Council given on December 20, 1905. It declared that daily approach to Communion is open to all, old and young, and two conditions only are required: the state of grace and a right intention.

Moreover, the fact that in ancient times the remaining particles of the Sacred Species were even given to nursing infants seems to indicate that no extraordinary preparation should now be demanded of children who are in the happy state of innocence and purity of soul, and who, amidst so many dangers and seductions of the present time have a special need of this heavenly food.

The abuses which we are condemning are due to the fact that they who distinguished one age of discretion for Penance and another for the Eucharist did so in error. The Lateran Council required one and the same age for reception of either Sacrament when it imposed the one obligation of Confession and Communion.

Therefore, the age of discretion for Confession is the time when one can distinguish between right and wrong, that is, when one arrives at a certain use of reason, and so similarly, for Holy Communion is required the age when one can distinguish between the Bread of the Holy Eucharist and ordinary bread-again the age at which a child attains the use of reason.

The principal interpreters of the Lateran Council and contemporaries of that period had the same teaching concerning this Decree. The history of the Church reveals that a number of synods and episcopal decrees beginning with the twelfth century, shortly after the Lateran Council, admitted

children of seven years of age to First Communion. There is moreover the word of St. Thomas Aquinas, who is an authority of the highest order, which reads: "When children begin to have some use of reason, so that they can conceive a devotion toward this Sacrament (the Eucharist), then this Sacrament can be given to them."⁶ Ledesma thus explains these words: "I say, in accord with common opinion, that the Eucharist is to be given to all who have the use of reason, and just as soon as they attain the use of reason, even though at the time the child may have only a confused notion of what he is doing." Vasquez comments on the same words of St. Thomas as follows: "When a child has once arrived at the use of reason he is immediately bound by the divine law from which not even the Church can dispense him."

The same is the teachings of St. Antoninus, who wrote: "But when a child is capable of doing wrong, that is of committing a mortal sin, then he is bound by the precept of Confession and consequently of Communion." The Council of Trent also forces us to the same conclusion when it declares: "Children who have not attained the use of reason are not by any necessity bound to Sacramental Communion of the Eucharist." It assigns as the only reason the fact that they cannot commit sin: "they cannot at that age lose the grace of the sons of God already acquired."

From this it is the mind of the Council that children are held to Communion by necessity and by precept when they are capable of losing grace by sin. The words of the Roman Synod, held under Benedict XIII, are in agreement with this in teaching that the obligation to receive the Eucharist begins, "after boys and girls attain the age of discretion, that is, at the age in which they can distinguish this Sacramental food, which is none other than the true Body of Jesus Christ, from common and ordinary bread; and that they know how to receive it with proper religious spirit."

The Roman Catechism adds this: "At what age children are to receive the Holy Mysteries no one can better judge than their father and the priest who is their confessor. For it is their duty to ascertain by questioning the children whether they have any understanding of this admirable Sacrament and if they have any desire for it."

From all this it is clear that the age of discretion for receiving Holy Communion is that at which the child knows the difference between the Eucharistic Bread and ordinary, material bread, and can therefore approach the altar with proper devotion. Perfect knowledge of the things of faith, therefore, is not required, for an elementary knowledge suffices—some knowledge (*aliqua cognitio*); similarly full use of reason is not required, for a certain beginning of the use of reason, that is, some use of reason (*aliqualis usus rationis*) suffices.

To postpone Communion, therefore, until later and to insist on a more mature age for its reception must be absolutely discouraged, and indeed such practice was condemned more than once by the Holy See. Thus Pope Pius IX, of happy memory, in a Letter of Cardinal Antonelli to the Bishops of France, March 12, 1866, severely condemned the growing custom existing in some dioceses of postponing the First Communion of children until more mature years, and at the same time sharply disapproved of the age limit which had been assigned. Again, the Sacred Congregation of the Council, on March 15, 1851, corrected a prescription of the Provincial Council of Rouen, which prohibited children under twelve years of age from receiving First Communion. Similarly, this Sacred Congregation of the Discipline of the Sacraments, on March 25, 1910, in a question proposed to it from Strasburg whether children of twelve or fourteen years could be admitted to Holy Communion, answered: "Boys and girls are to be admitted to the Holy Table when they arrive at the years of discretion or the use of reason."

After careful deliberation on all these points, this Sacred Congregation of the Discipline of the Sacraments, in a general meeting held on July 15, 1910, in order to remove the above-mentioned abuses and to bring about that children even from their tender years may be united to Jesus Christ, may live His life, and obtain protection from all danger of corruption, has deemed it needful to

prescribe the following rules which are to be observed everywhere for the First Communion of children.

1. The age of discretion, both for Confession and for Holy Communion, is the time when a child begins to reason, that is about the seventh year, more or less. From that time on begins the obligation of fulfilling the precept of both Confession and Communion.
2. A full and perfect knowledge of Christian doctrine is not necessary either for First Confession or for First Communion. Afterwards, however, the child will be obliged to learn gradually the entire Catechism according to his ability.
3. The knowledge of religion which is required in a child in order to be properly prepared to receive First Communion is such that he will understand according to his capacity those Mysteries of faith which are necessary as a means of salvation (*necessitate medii*) and that he can distinguish between the Bread of the Eucharist and ordinary, material bread, and thus he may receive Holy Communion with a devotion becoming his years.
4. The obligation of the precept of Confession and Communion which binds the child particularly affects those who have him in charge, namely, parents, confessor, teachers and the pastor. It belongs to the father, or the person taking his place, and to the confessor, according to the Roman Catechism, to admit a child to his First Communion.
5. The pastor should announce and hold a General Communion of the children once a year or more often, and he should on these occasions admit not only the First Communicants but also others who have already approached the Holy Table with the above-mentioned consent of their parents or confessor. Some days of instruction and preparation should be previously given to both classes of children.
6. Those who have charge of the children should zealously see to it that after their First Communion these children frequently approach the Holy Table, even daily if possible, as Jesus Christ and Mother Church desire, and let this be done with a devotion becoming their age. They must also bear in mind that very grave duty which obliged them to have the children attend the public Catechism classes; if this is not done, then they must supply religious instruction in some other way.
7. The custom of not admitting children to Confession or of not giving them absolution when they have already attained the use of reason must be entirely abandoned. The Ordinary shall see to it that this condition ceases absolutely, and he may, if necessary, use legal measures accordingly.
8. The practice of not administering the Viaticum and Extreme Unction to children who have attained the use of reason, and of burying them with the rite used for infants is a most intolerable abuse. The Ordinary should take very severe measures against those who do not give up the practice.

His Holiness, Pope Pius X, in an audience granted on the seventh day of this month, approved all the above decisions of this Sacred Congregation, and ordered this Decree to be published and promulgated.

He furthermore commanded that all the Ordinaries make this Decree known not only to the pastors and the clergy, but also to the people, and he wishes that it be read in the vernacular every year at the Easter time. The Ordinaries shall give an account of the observance of this Decree together with other diocesan matters every five years.