FASTING RECEPTION OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT, A CUSTOM OF THE CHURCH CATHOLIC

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Trieste

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A Custom of the Church Catholic

BY

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"τὰ ἀρχαῖα ἔθη κρατείτω" NIC. CAN. 6

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Inscribed

TO

THE HON. CHARLES L. WOOD,

PRESIDENT OF

The English Church Union:

A SOCIETY

"FORMED FOR THE PURPOSE OF

UNITING CLERGY AND LAITY IN LOYAL DEFENCE OF

THE DOCTRINE AND DISCIPLINE OF

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND,

AND OF THE RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES OF HER

FAITHFUL CHILDREN:"

AN EXPRESSION

OF MUCH GRATITUDE AND GREAT RESPECT

FROM ONE OF

Nineteen Thousand Members, Communicants.

Fasting Reception

OF THE

BLESSED SACRAMENT

I BASE the practice of early and Fasting Communion on Catholic custom: and custom is unwritten human law.

How considerable is the importance which we attach to *custom* in matters of every-day life! What, for instance, would be thought of a man who persisted in attending the funeral of one very dear to him—his mother, his wife, or his child, bedecked in the brightest-coloured clothes on which he could lay hands? And what said if, in reply to all remonstrances, he urged, "No one's grief under such circumstances could possibly be greater than my own; nothing can surpass the love that I bore the departed in her lifetime, and the respect that I entertain for her memory now; but I cannot submit to a custom which seems to me so exceedingly foolish as wearing black clothes in time of sorrow, as though, forsooth, the intensity of my grief were to be gauged by the depth of my mourning?" His friends would naturally ask him to consider the

feelings of others as well as his own, the pain that he would cause by his apparent slight to the deceased, and the occasion which he would give for others to question the reality of his grief, if he acted in a way so contrary to the custom of the country in which he lived. The fact is, no one can disregard the appeal to custom; no one who is not very wilful and insensible to the feelings of others does.

S. Basil, writing in the fourth century on marriage with a deceased wife's sister, says, "Our custom in this matter has the force of law, because the statutes we observe have been handed down to us by holy men."[1]

Tertullian says, in reference to certain practices of the Church, "For these and such like rules, if thou requirest a law in the Scriptures thou shalt find none. Tradition will be pleaded to thee as originating them, custom as confirming them, and faith as observing them."[2]

One custom of the Catholic Church—*mos pro lege*—though sadly forgotten in recent days, has been the fasting reception of the Blessed Sacrament, a practice which has been adopted as a special sign of reverence, a mark of our sense of the "great dignity of that Holy Mystery."

It was after the Paschal Supper indeed, and in the evening, that the Holy Eucharist was instituted by our Lord, but without any command with which we have

[1] Quoted by Bishop of Lincoln on Lev. xviii. 18.
[2] *De Cor.* iv.

been charged, that the details on Maunday Thursday were to be considered an exact pattern for all future Celebrations; otherwise, It could *only* be celebrated in the evening, in a room, in ordinary dress, with common vessels, after supper, by men reclining on couches round a table. S. Gregory Nazianzen, in a sermon preached at Constantinople (January, A.D. 381), said: "Every action of Christ is not necessary to be imitated by us, for He celebrated the mystery of the Passion with His disciples in an upper room, and after supper; but we do it in the church, and before supper."[1] This distinction Canon Bright recognizes when he says, "In contemplating our Lord's life, the early Church saw plainly that while in some respects His actions were to be imitated closely, literally, and for ever, in others they were peculiar to, and a part of, His redemptive and incommunicable relation to the human race."[2]

Probably with the desire closely to conform to the pattern of the first celebration of the Holy Eucharist by our Lord Himself, the Christians of the very earliest age met together in the evening, and partook of a supper called the Agape, or Feast of Charity (S. Jude 12), preceded or followed[3] by the Holy Communion. But this practice led, as S. Paul tells us, to most unhappy results; the rich feasted to repletion, while the poor

[1] *Orat. 40 de Bapt.*, quoted in Bingham's *Antiquities*, xv. vii. 8.

[2] *Evening Communions*, p. 4.

[3] According to Mr. Conybear and Dean Howson (Life of S. Paul c. xiii.), the Agape originally preceded the Holy Eucharist, subsequently followed It, and finally was totally separated from It.