

NATURE AND EFFECTS OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION

I will first present the state of the question regarding Spiritual Communion and then attempt a possible solution. Any attempt at an adequate exposé of this question would have to touch upon the following problems: (1) the necessity of the Sacraments; (2) the efficacy of the Sacraments; (3) the distinction between sacramental efficacy *ex opere operato* and *ex opere operantis*; (4) the nature of sacramental grace.

Surprisingly little has been written on the theology of Spiritual Communion. There is more material available on the devotional aspect. And yet, there is no doubt that the fact and efficacy of Spiritual Communion belong to the doctrine of the Church and therefore Spiritual Communion is more than just a pious practice. This would be already evident from the Council of Trent¹ and Pope Pius XII's *Mediator Dei*.² However, this doctrine goes back to the

¹ As to the use of this holy sacrament, our Fathers have rightly and wisely distinguished three ways of receiving it. They have taught that some receive it sacramentally only, as sinners; others spiritually only, namely, those who eating in desire the heavenly bread set before them, are by a lively *faith which worketh by charity* (Gal. 5:6) made sensible of its fruit and usefulness; while the third class receives it both sacramentally and spiritually, (Cf. *infra*, can. 8) and these are they who so prove and prepare themselves beforehand that they approach this divine table clothed with the wedding garment. (Matt. 22:11.)

Council of Trent, Session 13, The Holy Eucharist,
Chapter VIII, On the Use of This Admirable Sacrament.

The holy council wishes indeed that at each Mass the faithful who are present should communicate, not only in spiritual desire but also by the sacramental partaking of the Eucharist, that thereby they may derive from this most holy sacrifice a more abundant fruit; if, however, that is not always done, it does not on that account condemn as private and illicit those Masses in which the priest alone communicates sacramentally, but rather approves and commends them, since these Masses also ought to be considered as truly common, partly because at them the people communicate spiritually and partly also because they are celebrated by a public minister of the Church, not for himself only but for all the faithful who belong to the body of Christ.

Council of Trent, Session 22, The Mass,
Chapter VI, The Mass in Which the Priest Alone Communicates.
(Fr. N. J. Schroeder's transl. *Canons and Decrees*. Herder, 1941.)

² *Mediator Dei*, "She (the Church) wishes in the first place that Christians—especially when they cannot receive (actual) Holy Communion—should do

time of St. Thomas Aquinas, and he and the other theological giants of that age were in turn inspired by St. Augustine writing almost a thousand years before them. In this connection it might be well to recall that there is still a lot of doubt with regard to St. Augustine's theology on the Holy Eucharist; for example, did he really require actual reception of Holy Communion as a means of salvation, even for children (as Msgr. Battifol claimed he did)?³

Because Spiritual Communion pertains to the doctrine of the Church, it is surely worthwhile to probe into its meaning and its efficacy as far as we can. After taking a rapid view of what generally is taught on Spiritual Communion, we shall examine this teaching to see whether it is satisfactory; whether it gives full justice to the words of the Church, of St. Thomas, and the descriptions of the Saints—that constant testimony that has come down to us over the last 400 years, for instance, through *The Imitation of Christ* (Cf. Book IV, ch. 10).

In his *Summa* when he treats of the Holy Eucharist, St. Thomas asks in Q. 80, art. 1, "Are there two distinct ways of eating Christ's body, namely, sacramentally and spiritually?" And in his reply to the second objection, he implicitly makes a three-fold distinction which is found explicitly in the *Opusculum De Venerabili Sacramento Altaris*: [XVII] "manducatio sacramentalis tantum, manducatio spiritualis, et manducatio sacramentalis et spiritualis simul." The Council treated this question in two of its sessions. In its first reference the Council was refuting the Protestant claim that Sacramental Communion is really no more than a Spiritual Communion since its whole affect is to stir up one's fiducial faith in the imputed merits of Christ.⁴ In the second reference the Council was safeguarding the licity of "private" Masses—Masses, namely, at which the celebrant alone receives Holy Communion. The Council specifies

so at least by desire." Transl. by Gerald Ellard, S.J., in *On the Sacred Liturgy*, America Press, 1948, p. 52, par. 117.

"Cupit imprimis (Ecclesia) ut christiani—cum praesertim Eucharistiam dapem reapse sumere haud facile queant—votis saltem eam sumant." *A.A.S.* 39: 1947, p. 563.

³ P. Battifol, *L'Eucharistie*. 5^e edition, Paris, 1913, p. 449. Recently a doctoral thesis was written on this subject under the guidance of Fr. A. Piolanti, scil., I. Volpi, *Comunione e Salvezza in S. Agostino*. Roma, 1954.

⁴ Cf. note 1 *supra*.

that the faithful share in every Mass and some of the people receive Communion thereat at least spiritually.⁵

Spiritual Communion is defined as a pious desire to receive the Holy Eucharist, at a time when we cannot actually receive it.⁶

Since a Spiritual Communion is an earnest desire to receive the Sacrament, this act can be made only under the following conditions: (1) the person must be baptized, since baptism is the door to the sacraments; (2) the person must be old enough to make a formal will-act, since a free act of faith and love are absolutely required; (3) the object of this deliberate desire must be the Holy Eucharist; [since the Sacraments are *propter homines*, an angel could not make a Spiritual Communion;] (4) the person must be in the state of grace, since this is a necessary condition for Holy Communion, and also because this desire is essentially an act of love of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

Also, it is at least a prayer of petition for the effects of Sacramental Communion which are desired even though the Sacrament cannot be received. Authors agree that the effects produced in the soul by a Spiritual Communion are the same as those provided by a reception of the Sacrament. The only difference, the rest being equal, consists in the amount of grace produced and the manner in which these graces are produced. Almost all authors maintain that grace is effected exclusively *ex opere operantis*—in no wise *ex opere operato*. The reason they give is that since the Sacrament itself does not exist (is not received), it cannot exert any effective instrumental causality on the soul. The entire effect, therefore, would be due to the subjective disposition of the individual who entertains this good desire.

If these are the necessary conditions for a Spiritual Communion in the strict sense of the word, what reasons can we give for the efficacy of such an act? First of all, let us see on what theological principles Spiritual Communion is based. There seem to be two:

First principle: Catholic faith in the Real Presence assures us that

⁵ Note 1 *supra*.

⁶ F. Cappello, *Tractatus canonico-moralis de Sacramentis*, Roma, 1921, n. 546. My principal sources for the common doctrine on Spiritual Communion are the following: *Dict. de Spiritualité*, "Communion spirituelle," v. 2, c. 1294-1300 (Bp. Louis de Bazelaire); *Ami du Clerge* (1949) 59:17-22 (unsigned art. but very probably by Fr. A. Michel).

Holy Communion is a powerful source of spiritual life, of loving union with Christ and our fellow-communicants. It is a natural conclusion therefore to desire to receive such benefits; to recognize that this bread is meant to nourish us spiritually is to will to bolster our strength by means of this food from heaven.

Second principle: This principle is less evident perhaps, but it seems to be solidly founded on the analogy of faith. It is this: under certain circumstances when it is impossible to receive a Sacrament, the desire to receive it can supply the same graces. For example, baptism of desire can bring about the justification of an adult when he cannot actually receive the Sacrament. Mortal sin committed after Baptism cannot be removed except through a contrition which at least implies the desire to receive the Sacrament of Penance. It is a commonplace that God never fails to fulfill a sincere desire to love Him. He accordingly gives the special graces in order to attain this end. The precise question here however concerns Sacramental grace; in other words can sacramental graces be obtained without the actual use of the Sacrament? Theologians commonly answer (against De Lugo, for instance) that if the Sacrament is not received, these graces are surely not produced *ex opere operato*; in fact it would seem to follow that strictly sacramental graces cannot be received at all unless a man is placed *somehow* in contact with the Sacrament.⁷ And the only other way seems to be by means of a sincere desire to receive it.

And here lies the chief problem. How can such a desire be so effective? Is the Sacrament of Baptism an instrument of grace in the case of an explicit desire of Baptism? It is generally held that the Sacrament is not operative in this case since the grace is produced only *ex opere operantis*. But if this is so, one can hardly call Baptism of desire a Baptism in any real sense of the word; nor is a Spiritual Communion, a real Communion. Evidently these subjective acts are good acts, even meritorious before God; but this alone would not justify the common belief that Baptism of desire and Spiritual Communion are somehow special causes of grace; that they are not to be classified with the ordinary acts of love of God, sorrow for sin,

⁷ B. Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology*. Newman Press, 1956, n. 111, 112.

or any others that are pleasing to God and meritorious of an increase of grace. In other words, we are asking how the *res sacramenti* can be produced without the normal existence of the *sacramentum*. This classical distinction, which we know owes its origin to St. Augustine,⁸ was used in the acts of the Council of Trent when it said in its thirteenth session, Chapter eight, "Quosdam . . . sacramentaliter dumtaxat id sumere . . .; alios tantum spiritualiter, illos nimirum, qui voto propositum illum coelestem panem edentes, fide viva, quae per dilectionem operatur, fructum ejus et utilitatem sentiunt."

We know that God in giving grace is not restricted to the use of His Sacraments (St. Thomas, 3, 68, 2.). At the same time, it is common doctrine that the specific sacramental graces are produced by the Sacrament alone. Therefore, if Spiritual Communion produces substantially the same graces as the Sacrament, would not this imply that one's desire for Holy Communion has something more than a mere *ex opere operantis* effect connected with it? If there is no *ex opere operato* effect at all, can we still say that sacramental grace is produced in the soul? If the Sacrament itself has no efficacy in Spiritual Communion, why insist that there must be a strong faith in the Holy Eucharist, real love for Christ in the Holy Eucharist, and an explicit desire to receive the Sacrament itself?

An important distinction, it would seem, has to be made between a Spiritual Communion in the strict sense and a Spiritual Communion that consists of any act of love of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, to which is added some desire to receive Him in Holy Communion. There seems to be a great difference between a desire for Communion made by a man who cannot actually receive the Sacrament, and a desire made by someone who has actually received Holy Communion that day; in other words when a desire for Holy Communion is a real substitute for actual reception, the case is different from a merely devotional desire which is over and above the reception of Holy Communion. As a matter of fact a person is not allowed to receive more than once a day. And this law of the Church must be based on the nature of this supersubstantial bread. In the case of Baptism, of course, there is no point in a baptized person's making a desire to be baptized again. Is not the case somewhat

⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 150.

similar when a person who has received the Sacrament desires to receive it again the same day? We recall the theological principle that a desire for a Sacrament can substitute for it when the Sacrament itself cannot be received. Now, when we speak of receiving Holy Communion we understand one Communion per day. And so it seems that a Spiritual Communion *in the strict sense* can occur only when it has to substitute for the *manducatio realis*. In other cases it is an ordinary act of private devotion and it is clear that the efficacy is merely *ex opere operantis*. When, on the contrary, the Spiritual Communion is a real substitute for the Sacrament, it would seem then that the proper *res sacramenti* is received and that therefore the Sacrament itself causes grace—in other words it produces grace in some sense *ex opere operato*.

A French theologian, Father E. Neveut, writing in *Revue Thomiste* in 1936 seems to give some explanation for this *ex opere operato* effect of Spiritual Communion.⁹ He is directly concerned with justification outside the actual reception of Baptism or Penance. He recalls that according to St. Thomas the universal salvific will of God requires that a sincere desire for a necessary Sacrament can suffice whenever the Sacrament itself cannot be received. On the other hand, a desire, being human and limited, cannot possibly have a divine efficacy. It cannot produce grace. Therefore, the real causes of grace will be God as principal cause and the Sacrament as instrumental efficient cause. The good desire cannot be more than a dispositive cause. Therefore, if the effects produced by a Spiritual Communion are the same as those produced instrumentally by the Sacrament itself, it would seem to follow that the Sacrament is somehow operative in a Spiritual Communion. God in this case would consider the Sacrament as already existing, says St. Thomas in *De Veritate*.¹⁰ St. Thomas teaches that the martyrs who died without

⁹ E. Neveut, "Le desir des sacrements," in *Revue Thomiste* XIX (1936) 313-329; 486-504.

¹⁰ Qu. 28, a. 8, ad 2: ". . . If contrition is considered in itself, then, it is related to grace only as a material disposition; but if it is considered in so far as it has the power of the keys in desire, then it works sacramentally in virtue of the sacrament of penance, as also in virtue of baptism, as is clear in the case of an adult who has the sacrament of baptism in desire only." *Truth*, by St. Thomas Aquinas. Transl. by R. W. Schmidt, S.J. Regnery, Chicago, 1954, v. 3, p. 394.

Baptism, receiving Baptism in desire, received the sacramental grace of Confirmation in like manner (3, 72, 6, ad 1). Since sacramental grace can only be received through the Sacraments, there must be more than a mere *ex opere operantis* effect in such cases. Father Neveut says that a Spiritual Communion acts sacramentally. And he insists that it is the rite which operates. Is not this the *sacramentum*? No doubt there is great difficulty in understanding how a sacramental rite, which may not exist, can here and now have an efficacious influence in the production of grace. However, more than one capable theologian has attempted to show how this may be.

It is to be noted that we are not dealing with that type of desire that is commonly attributed to children at the moment of their baptism. St. Thomas says that these children receive the Holy Eucharist also by reason of an implicit desire (*ex intentione Ecclesiae*).¹¹ These children, of course, can make no personal will-act with regard to the Holy Eucharist. In their case the implicit *votum* for Communion results in the *res sacramenti* being given to them, that is a union with Christ as Head of the Mystical Body by means of sanctifying grace. These children would not receive the special sacramental graces. On the other hand, in the case of Spiritual Communion in the strict sense, even these specific graces of the Sacrament are commonly said to be received.

How can a Sacrament act in this manner? In connection with the efficacy of absolution that is present only in desire, Dom Paul De Vooght, O.S.B., explains that since we are dealing with spiritual and supernatural effects, and not with material or physical ones, an instrumental cause can be used by God even though that instrument is not physically in contact with the soul.¹² According to St. Thomas, since God is everywhere at all times He can be the link between the instrument and the soul, even when they are separated physically (3, 56, a. 1, ad 3). At any rate, even though it is difficult to explain

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*, p. 326.

¹² P. De Vooght, O.S.B., "La justification dans le sacrement de penitence," in *Ephem. Theol. Lovan.* V (1928) 238-239 (art. begins on p. 225): "His (St. Thomas') solution attributes to the *votum* the same essential causal efficacy as to Confession itself. We have here an extension, as it were, of the power of the Sacrament in the *votum* that calls for it. . . . Thus, the Sacrament (of Penance) may be received *actu vel proposito*. . . . They (the Sacraments) work also through the *votum*."

how Spiritual Communion can produce a sacramental effect in the soul, the fact that it does produce such an effect seems to be common doctrine. In other words the statements of the Church and of theologians regarding the effects of Spiritual Communion seem to imply that these effects when the Sacrament cannot actually be received, are produced somehow *ex opere operato*.

The Magisterium, echoing St. Thomas and the theologians generally, emphasizes that Spiritual Communion is less effective than actual Communion. The spiritual writers agree; but some of them extol Spiritual Communion so highly and unconditionally that at times they seem to pay only lip service to the priority of Sacramental Communion. They insist for example that a Spiritual Communion, if very fervent, can bring more grace to the soul than a half-hearted reception of the Sacrament. And they point out the advantage of Spiritual Communion insofar as it can be repeated over and over again during the day. For instance, Archbishop Landriot quotes Tauler as follows: "If anyone cannot communicate according to his wishes, let him not be troubled and let him be convinced that he will receive Christ spiritually and perhaps with more abundant fruit than if he communicates sacramentally . . . and that Spiritual Communion may be renewed a hundred times a day and everywhere."¹³

Now, if we bear in mind that Spiritual Communion supposes the impossibility of receiving the Sacrament *in re*, and that its graces are of the same nature as the Sacramental grace, should we not wonder how all this is to be understood? For instance, if a Catholic cannot receive on a certain day and he makes a hundred fervent Spiritual Communions, would it not appear that he actually gets more Sacramental grace on that day than if he had gone to Communion! On the other hand, if he has received Holy Communion, would it not be more in line with theology to recall his Communion and strive to stir up the grace thus bestowed, since the one Communion should be a rich enough source for all the grace he needs that day!

We all know that theologians deny the possibility of reviviscence in the case of Holy Communion, and the reason given is that the

¹³ This extract is taken from the recently published pamphlet, *Spiritual Communion*, by William LaVerdiere, S.S.S., Sentinel Press, N. Y., 1957. Cf. p. 9.

res et sacramentum (the Real Presence) remains only as long as the species. This does not alter the fact that Holy Communion is a *food* and as such is meant to sustain, nourish, increase, and repair our life of grace. Surely then the full effect is not exhausted during the short space the Real Presence is within us. Nor should we forget the special *title* to actual graces conferred by the Sacrament. What I am trying to say is that, on a day of actual reception of the Sacrament, the doctrine of Spiritual Communion should not lead us to forget the day-long value of the morning's Communion. On the other hand, during the hours *preceding* Holy Communion (think for example of an Evening Mass), Spiritual Communion is very much in order; then it is truly a desire for Communion (and the reception of Holy Communion will further increase the sacramental grace).

Today when frequent Communion is common and to be encouraged more and more, it would be regrettable if the faithful, upon reading the enthusiastic descriptions of the power of Spiritual Communion, were to forget the more abundant source of grace available in the Sacrament itself. A Catholic sense of values is surely to be safeguarded here. Without deviating from the merit of a fervent Spiritual Communion, we must remember that this type of Communion is only a substitute for actual reception of the Sacrament. And *ceteris paribus*, the substitute can never equal the power of the Sacrament itself.

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Digest of the Discussion:

Father M. J. McLaughlin opened the discussion by asking why it was necessary to insist on a person's being really baptized before he may receive the fruits of spiritual communion. After all, wouldn't it be sufficient that a person had received Baptism of Desire in order to qualify for the effects of Spiritual Communion. *Father Costa* replied that the main reason why theologians require Baptism *in re* seems to be because it alone impresses a character in the soul, and this makes us capable of graces that are strictly sacramental. Therefore, unless a person had

received Baptism, it is normally impossible to receive the graces of Spiritual Communion because they are of a sacramental nature. St. Thomas' view that unbaptized martyrs could desire Baptism and Confirmation and thus receive the sacramental grace of both poses a problem. This would seem to be an exceptional case. Because Baptism *in re* is impossible to receive, Baptism *in voto*, without the character, would seem in this case to be a sufficient prerequisite for the grace of Confirmation.

Father James M. Lavin wanted to know if these graces are really of a sacramental nature, or whether these graces are something like the graces of the sacrament. Father Costa felt that these graces are, in a technical sense, of a sacramental nature, because this explanation is the only one which would justify the special efficacy traditionally attributed to Spiritual Communion.

Father M. J. McLaughlin brought up the question of a person in mortal sin who wanted to make a spiritual communion. Would that person thereby commit a sacrilege? Father Costa answered that it would be necessary to distinguish the case of a person acting in good faith from the person in bad faith; in the former instance, there would be no sin; in the latter, there would be a sacrilegious act. However, the sacrilege would be only *affective* since there would be only a mental dishonoring of the Sacred Species. De facto, the desire to make a sacrilegious Spiritual Communion *qua talis* is hard to imagine.

Father Wayne A. Turner then raised the difficulty of how our doctrine of Spiritual Communion could be misunderstood by Protestant Denominations; namely that our pious, affective acts become the "source of grace." Father Costa agreed that this is an important point. It should be made clear to them that Spiritual Communion is only a "second best" and we do not say that our personal acts are the cause of the grace. God is the cause and according to the theory explained here, God uses the Sacrament as an instrument in the production of grace. The subjective love and desire are not the cause; they are merely the *condition* for the reception of grace.

Father Paul Boyle, C.P., turned the discussion to the number of times a person may receive Spiritual Communion each day. Father Costa answered that a person can actually make only one Spiritual Communion each day, if we understand Spiritual Communion in the strict sense.

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