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The eucharistic fast.  
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# THE EUCHARISTIC FAST

by

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by

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## THE EUCHARISTIC FAST

In everyday life, various points concerning the Eucharistic fast as well as the evening Mass present themselves for solution. In listing some of them and offering a solution, the common opinion is presented as expressed by Matthaeus a Coronata in his article in the *Jus Seraphicum* (1958), pp. 543 ff.

The Eucharistic fast now in force permits any food or drink, not excluding alcoholic drink even hard liquor, up to three hours before the celebration of Mass or the reception of Holy Communion. It permits liquids, but not alcoholic drink, up to one hour before the celebration of Mass or the reception of Holy Communion. The infirm may take non-alcoholic drink as well as liquid or solid medicine any time before the celebration of Mass or the reception of Holy Communion. Water does not break the Eucharistic fast.

### 1. *Natural fast and Eucharistic fast.*

The natural fast of Canon 808 is abrogated. This follows from the fact that the drinking of water no longer breaks the fast. In place of the natural fast we have a Eucharistic fast which varies according to the norms indicated.

### 2. *Water.*

The drinking of water no longer breaks the Eucharistic fast at any time. By water is meant water without anything added, thus one may not add sugar to water. However, if water from its source contains a small quantity of minerals, such as calcium or iron, or if something is added to the water supply by public authority, as fluoride or chlorine, the water is permitted. In short, whatever is considered as water in the common estimation of men is permitted, including carbonated water or mineral waters. "Needless to say, lemonade, orangeade, etc. which are sometimes called mineral waters in English, are not included." (W. Conway, *The Irish Eccl. Record*, 1957, p. 375.)

### 3. *Drink.*

The drink permitted up to one hour before Mass or Holy Communion, or in the case of the infirm with no time limit, means anything that is liquid or fluid when put into one's mouth so that it

may be swallowed without first chewing it. Such drink may be nourishing, or it may satisfy thirst, or it may give one a lift. It includes liquids in which solids such as sugar are added and dissolved, or are still in suspension. Such permissible liquids are milk, broth, liquid chocolate, tea, coffee, eggnog, lemonade, fruit juices, and the like.

#### 4. *Time.*

The three hours abstinence from solid food and alcoholic drink, and the one hour abstinence from non-alcoholic drink before Mass and Holy Communion include the following:

For celebrating Mass, the time is reckoned from the beginning of the Mass, that is, when the priest at the foot of the altar signs himself with the sign of the cross saying: "*In nomine Patris,*" etc. In Masses which are preceded by some function which supplants the prayers at the foot of the altar as the blessing of the palms, or the ceremonies before Mass at the Paschal Vigil, the beginning of the Mass is not the beginning of the ceremonies before Mass, but the first words of the Introit.

For receiving Holy Communion, the three hours time and the one hour respectively are figured from the time the individual receives the Sacred Host, and no longer from the time when the priest begins to distribute Holy Communion.

The three hours time and the one hour must be computed strictly. The one hour must be sixty minutes and the three hours a total of 180 minutes, with not one minute lacking.

#### 5. *Alcoholic Drink.*

Alcoholic drink of whatever kind within three hours before the celebration of Mass and the reception of Holy Communion is by all means and absolutely forbidden both to priests and the faithful. The same holds for the infirm.

Alcoholic drink includes all drink containing alcohol in whatever quantity or percentage, e.g. beer, wine, whiskey, mixed drinks, etc. A distinction is no longer made between alcoholic beverages and hard liquor in the present law of the Eucharistic fast.

#### 6. *Infirm.*

The infirm are those wanting in health. The infirmity may be grave or light, long or short, even of one day or less, as a headache



or toothache of a few hours. All persons in ill health because of old age or other cause, women indisposed because of pregnancy, are included among the infirm. They also are included among the infirm who are convalescing for a certain time from a grave illness or a serious operation.

They are included among the infirm who get sea sick, air sick, or sick when riding a train or car; such may take liquid or solid medicine without restriction of time before Mass or Holy Communion in order to forestall such sickness. The same holds for one suffering from laryngitis, such a one may even a few minutes before the celebration of Mass or receiving Holy Communion relieve the soreness by sucking lozenges, or the equivalent.

It is clear that one need not be confined to bed or even to the house in order to be included among the infirm. Moreover, since the legislator does not use the word *aegrotus*, but that having a wider meaning *infirmus*, one must not depart from the wider meaning of this word *infirmus*; for instance, he who has a headache or toothache for a few hours is not *aegrotus* but he is *infirmus*.

The infirm may take non-alcoholic drink as well as liquid or solid medicine before the celebration of Mass or Holy Communion without any time limit whatever, just as with water.

#### 7. *Medicine.*

Medicine is a liquid or a solid substance which is taken to heal sickness, to alleviate its ill effects, as also to prevent a crisis in sickness. If it is prescribed by a doctor, it certainly is medicine; but this last point is by no means necessary. It suffices that a certain substance is considered medicine in the common estimation of men. Also, it does not matter that the medicine may at the same time be nourishing, although it is also true that not every solid substance taken as nourishment may be considered medicine. There is a great difference between medicine which at the same time nourishes and some solid substance which is taken for nourishment. For medicine, of its very nature, is intended to heal, while solid food first and directly rebuilds strength. So a medicine which at the same time nourishes does so indirectly and by accident. Likewise also a solid substance taken as nourishment may in the end heal some weakness. The criterion is: medicine which is lawfully taken by the infirm with no time limit before Mass or Holy Com-

munion is either liquid or solid substances which according to medical science or the common estimation of men of its very nature is taken *to heal*. Wherefore, steak which of its very nature nourishes and strengthens, although prescribed by a doctor to build up blood, is only food and not medicine.

The question arises whether medicine containing alcohol is permitted the infirm without any time limit before Mass or Holy Communion.

Some taught that the use of medicine containing alcohol is not forbidden the infirm because neither the Constitution *Christus Dominus* nor the Instruction which followed, when speaking of medicine, distinguished in any way regarding the elements of which medicine is made. According to others, however, medicine containing alcohol was said to be forbidden by all means.

However, since the *Sacram Communionem* almost all the authors agree in admitting the opinion which holds that medicine which also contains alcohol does *not* break the Eucharistic fast for the infirm.

#### 8. *Those in Danger of Death.*

As in the past, so also under the present Eucharistic legislation, it is certain that alcoholic drink including hard liquor, and solid food, just as ordinary drink, medicine and water are not forbidden those infirm (and others) who are in danger of death, and who may receive Holy Communion daily as Viaticum; for Holy Communion received as Viaticum is not subject to the law of the Eucharistic fast. This portion of Canon 858, par. 1 "*nisi mortis urgeat periculum, aut necessitas impediendi irreverentiam in sacramentum*" remains in full force at the present time.

#### 9. *The Choice of Observing the Former Law of the Eucharistic Fast.*

In granting the very generous mitigation of the Eucharistic fast, His Holiness Pope Pius XII strongly exhorted both priests and faithful, who can do so, to observe the venerable and old form of the Eucharistic fast before Mass and Holy Communion.

The question is, in view of this exhortation, is it possible for anyone to ignore entirely the new law of the *Sacram Communionem* and live solely according to the older law in the matter of the Eucharistic fast?

The answer is no. In at least two points the *Sacram Communionem* made the Eucharistic law stricter, and everyone must observe these two points where they apply:

(1) Masses offered at midnight or in the first hours of the morning as well as Holy Communion at midnight or the first hours of the morning must also be preceded by the three hour and one hour abstinence from food and drink respectively as prescribed in the *Sacram Communionem*.

(2) In Canon Law, Canon 858, pargh. 2, under the conditions specified, the infirm without limit of time were allowed drink not excluding alcoholic drink. Now they are allowed drink under more generous conditions but all alcoholic drink is forbidden in the concession (apart from that medicine which also contains alcohol, according to most authors).

#### 10. *The Ablution at Bination and Trination Masses.*

The ablution may be taken at the first and second Masses, but only water. If through inadvertence wine is taken at the ablution in the first and second Masses, the priest may celebrate the second and third Mass without being obliged to ask another priest who is perhaps still fasting to take his place.

On Christmas and All Souls Day, if the Masses are said without interruption, the rubrics are to be followed, that is, no ablution in the first two Masses. If, nevertheless, one does take water at the ablution in the first two Masses, one may still say the second and third Mass, because water does not break the Eucharistic fast. Presupposing no contempt, there is no question of serious sin in the violation of this rubric, because the rubric does not intend to oblige gravely.

What is the state of the question if in violating this rubric with an ablution, there is also a conscious violation of the Eucharistic fast in taking not only water but also wine for the ablution in the first and second Masses. In thus taking wine at the ablution, the law of the Eucharistic fast is violated, and therefore the second and third Masses may no longer be celebrated lawfully within the three hour limit. Moreover, one may not apply the exception recognized in the Instruction for the case in which wine is taken inadvertently at the ablution. For this exception is only for the case in which the priest *is obliged* to celebrate a second or third

Mass, which generally is not verified when three Masses are offered in succession as when said out of devotion.

Here Matthaeus a Coronata comments on the word *debeat*: "is obliged." He says that although we understand the word *debeat* as a true obligation, it must be taken in a wide sense. One not only celebrates two or three Masses out of obligation who uses an apostolic indult or a faculty granted by the local ordinary, in favor of a notable part of the faithful who otherwise could not attend Mass on a day of obligation (can. 806) but also he who does so by command of the superior or pastor, so that, for example, a Mass stipend may be satisfied that day or even that hour, or that an opportunity be given to those accustomed to come to the church of hearing Mass. Apart from the command of the superior or pastor, this priest would have said only one Mass.

When two or three Masses are spaced so that more than three hours intervene between any two Masses, the common opinion holds that in virtue of the *Sacram Communionem* it is of obligation that (if the ablution is taken at the first of the two Masses) the ablution must be both water and wine—wine being allowed more than three hours before Mass.

#### 11. *The Hour for Holy Communion.*

Canon 867 says in part that Holy Communion may be distributed only during those hours in which Mass may be offered. Those hours are according to Canon 821 from one hour before dawn up to one hour after noon. These are the hours when without restriction Mass may be offered and Holy Communion distributed.

Some there are who mistakenly try to apply the same norm to the evening hours when the bishop may allow evening Mass. The evening hours during which the bishop may allow evening Mass cannot be classified correctly among the hours spoken of by Canon 867 "in which Mass may be offered," because during the said hours evening Masses are *forbidden*, not permitted, unless by a special faculty of the bishop of the diocese. And when evening Mass is permitted, Holy Communion is specifically limited by the Holy See to the Communion during the Mass itself, just before the Mass or immediately after that Mass. A distribution of Holy Communion which is independent of the evening Mass is forbidden.



The same holds true regarding the evening hours during which the bishop may in virtue of the faculty of March 21, 1960 allow Holy Communion to be distributed under the same conditions as at the evening Mass in connection with the public devotions which he specifies. A distribution of Holy Communion which is independent of these specified evening devotions is forbidden.

Therefore, even on days when the bishop grants permission for evening Mass with its special opportunity to receive Holy Communion as indicated, the ordinary hours for distributing Holy Communion are the hours in which Mass may be offered, namely, from one hour before dawn up to one hour after noon.

Added to this general norm, Canon 867, par. 4 makes provision for a case occurring rarely, namely, Holy Communion is to be distributed only during the hours indicated, "unless a reasonable cause urges otherwise: *nisi aliud rationabilis causa suadeat.*"

For example, this provision of Canon 867 was used by a priest who once each Lent made a special trip to hear the confessions of workers speaking a foreign language. He heard their confessions at three o'clock in the afternoon. Immediately after hearing the confessions of this group, he distributed Holy Communion to them. This was in the days when these men were obliged to observe the natural fast from the preceding midnight in order to receive Holy Communion.

Such special cases for distributing Holy Communion as provided for by Canon 867, par. 4 are applicable at any time in the afternoon, evening or night. The Holy Office in its decision of March 21, 1960 states that this clause "*nisi aliud rationabilis causa suadeat*" has not been abrogated, though with the mitigation of the Eucharistic fast such a reasonable cause will occur more rarely now than formerly.

Wherefore, for any reasonable, even though not grave cause, Holy Communion may be distributed outside the hours appointed for the distribution of Holy Communion. To distribute Holy Communion in the afternoon, evening or night without any reasonable cause at all is a venial sin for the priest doing so. (Capello and Matthaeus a Coronata.)

A reasonable cause is an inconvenience of any moment, a greater convenience, devotion, undertaking a journey, etc. The reasonable

cause can be on the part of the communicant or on the part of the priest distributing Holy Communion. Capello indicates that the reasonable cause must be greater, the earlier before dawn or the later after noon Holy Communion is distributed in this way.

And Madden writes (*Australian Catholic Record* [1957], p. 317): "Since canon 867 still remains in force, a reasonable cause will justify a priest who wishes to give Holy Communion during the afternoon apart from Mass. Some special circumstances would be needed, perhaps more serious than when a fast from midnight was obligatory. The fact that a man had fasted till the afternoon hours in order to receive Communion was already a good argument that he had a reason for wishing to communicate on that particular day. With only a three hours' fast from solids and one from liquids, he has not suffered such inconvenience to attain his desire. However, individual cases which merit consideration can still arise."

## 12. *Evening Mass.*

### (1) *Who may permit evening Mass?*

The local ordinary may permit evening Mass. Since this is ordinary power, he can delegate his power of granting such faculties. The vicar general needs a special mandate from his bishop to grant permission for evening Mass.

Since the major superiors in clerical exempt Religious Orders are not local ordinaries, they cannot grant permission for evening Mass, not even in their interior oratories.

A military ordinary may grant permission for evening Mass within the sphere of his jurisdiction.

The competent local ordinary for granting permission for evening Mass on a ship is the ordinary of the place in whose territory lies the port in which the ship is usually berthed.

### (2) *Is a grave necessity required for the local ordinary to permit evening Mass?*

No, a grave necessity is not required. The original grant in the *Christus Dominus* made mention of necessity being required, but even then the necessity was interpreted in a wide sense as meaning rather a certain reasonable convenience. The new grant in the *Sacram Communionem* drops the reference to necessity and in-

stead uses the words "if the spiritual welfare of a notable part of the faithful requires it."

(3) *Does the faculty to grant permission for evening Mass apply both to weekdays as well as to Sundays and Holydays of obligation?*

The Holy See makes no distinction between evening Masses on weekdays and those on Sundays and Holydays of obligation. The norms apply to both kind of evening Masses. If a distinction is made, it would give a special emphasis to the evening Masses on Sundays and Holydays of obligation as arising from the fact that at the beginning of the *Sacram Communionem* the Sovereign Pontiff proposes this to himself as a reason for evening Masses, namely, in order to make it easier for the faithful to satisfy the precept of attending Mass on Sundays and Holydays of obligation.

(4) *When is the clause verified "if the spiritual welfare of a notable part of the faithful requires it"?*

A notable part of the faithful would be had if some twenty persons are concerned. This is based on the analogy with the interpretation of Canon 806 where the term "a notable part of the faithful" is used in reference to the local ordinary granting the faculty to binate. In granting permission for evening Mass for a notable part of the faithful, necessity is not required but only a reason that is conducive to their spiritual welfare.

(5) *On what days may the local ordinary permit evening Mass?*

Every day. The *Christus Dominus* had allowed it only on specified days. At the request of the bishops, Pope Pius XII extended this in the *Sacram Communionem* and granted the local ordinaries the faculty to permit evening Mass every day. He uses the word *quotidie*.

(6) *May permission for evening Mass be presumed at times?*

It is admitted that the faculty or permission to binate may be presumed at times, if, namely, a real and grave necessity is present and recourse to the local ordinary to obtain permission is impossible. With this twofold condition present, the presumption is reasonable and suffices. From an analogy with bination permitted in the case when the spiritual welfare of a notable part of the faithful requires it, some authors teach that permission may be presumed to celebrate evening Mass.

(7) *Whether in one and the same place and on the same day more than one evening Mass may be celebrated?*

The answer is yes. The local ordinary may permit more than one evening Mass on the same day, either in the same or different churches, either in the same or at different hours.

(8) *Where may evening Mass be celebrated?*

Evening Mass may be celebrated in the same places where under the same conditions morning Mass may be celebrated, namely, in churches, public and semi-public oratories (also on ships), and *servatis servandis* in the open air, if the spiritual welfare of a notable part of the faithful as already explained requires it.

A private oratory may not have evening Mass, that is, if it is erected in a private house for the exclusive benefit of some family or of a private individual.

(9) *May evening Mass be permitted for some private reason?*

The answer is no. The evening Mass is permitted for the spiritual welfare of a notable part of the faithful. This is generally equal to some public good. Evening Mass, then, may not be permitted for the benefit of some private person, as a wedding or a funeral of a *private* person. Here the word private is stressed in contradistinction to some public person as a mayor, or governor, etc., in which case there is a public cause and permission may be granted.

From what has been said, it does not follow that every private ceremony or private celebration is forbidden at an evening Mass, as the first Communion of one person, a marriage of a private couple, a First Mass. Here evening Mass is permitted for the benefit of the faithful, and *at this public evening Mass* some private ceremony may take place. The permission for the evening Mass is given not because of the private ceremony; this is something merely accidental. For example, with the permission of the local ordinary many parishes have an evening Mass on all First Fridays. There is nothing forbidding the pastor to arrange a wedding, the First Communion of an individual, or a First Mass at such an evening Mass.

(10) *What is the earliest time an evening Mass may begin?*

Four o'clock in the afternoon, that is, excepting Good Friday and Holy Saturday.



The Mass on Holy Thursday is in the evening, at an hour more opportune, not however, before four o'clock nor later than nine o'clock.

The Liturgical Action on Good Friday is to be held about three o'clock in the afternoon; however, if a pastoral reason favors it, the ceremonies may begin at noon or at a later hour, not however, later than nine in the evening.

Regarding the lateness of the hour when evening Mass may begin, nothing is determined in the pontifical documents on the new legislation. Since an evening hour must be distinguished from a nocturnal hour, it seems that the latest an evening Mass may begin is up to the first or second hour after sunset. Huerth teaches: "The celebration of Mass may be held as lawful at any hour which according to a sane and reasonable judgment is evening—taking into account our present mode of living according to which also an hour quite late is still classed as belonging to the day or evening. Nevertheless, no one would say that a Mass begun at midnight or shortly before is an evening Mass; it is a nocturnal Mass."

(11) *Regarding the hour of the Paschal Vigil.*

(a) The competent hour is about midnight between Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday.

(b) For reasons of the faithful or considerations of the place, the local ordinary may permit the anticipation of the Paschal Vigil, but not before twilight on Holy Saturday, or certainly not before sunset.

(c) General permission to anticipate the Paschal Vigil may not be given to a whole diocese or region, but only for places and churches where true necessity exists. Moreover, let the competent hour of about midnight be observed at least in the cathedral, and in all other churches, especially religious, which can do so without grave inconvenience.

(12) *Fulfilling the precept of hearing Mass in the evening.*

Speaking of evening Mass on Sundays and Holydays of obligation, anyone assisting at such a Mass fulfills his obligation of hearing Mass that day. This certainly holds for persons for whom the evening Mass is permitted, and also for all the other faithful who actually assist at it. This, indeed, is not clearly stated in the official documents, but it is admitted by common teaching and interpreta-

tion, with no one dissenting. This holds true even if the faithful could easily have attended Mass in the morning, but deliberately chose to go in the evening.

Whence it follows that the faithful who cannot attend Mass in in the morning are bound to do so in the evening if they are not excused because of grave inconvenience.

(13) *Has the introduction of the new legislation on evening Mass abrogated the privilege of celebrating Mass as late as three o'clock in the afternoon?*

The answer is no. Matthaeus a Coronata in his *Institutiones* (Vol. I, fourth edition, number 61 bis in a note), as well as Capobianco, O.F.M. (*Privilegia et Facultates O.F.M. Romae* [1956], n. 64 ff.) speak of the privilege some religious have had for centuries to begin Mass as late as three o'clock in the afternoon. This privilege is practical at times when one is unduly delayed in traveling. Since this privilege in no way contradicts the new legislation on evening Mass, it is by no means abrogated by the new documents of the Holy See; neither is it necessary, as is evident, to have the consent of the local ordinary in order to use this privilege.

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