

XXVI.**The Communion of Goods.**

“If we walk in the light, we have fellowship one with another.”— *1 John i. 7.*



The communion of saints is in the Light. In heaven alone, in the halls of the eternal Light, it shall shine with undimmed brightness. Even on earth its delights are known only inasmuch as the saints walk in the light.

This communion of saints is a holy confederacy; a bond of shareholders in the same holy enterprise; a partnership of all God’s children; an essential union for the enjoyment of a common good; a firm not of earth, but of heaven, in which the members have each an equal share, which is not taken from their own wealth, but bequeathed in their behalf by Another.

Do not think that this savors too much of secularism. Even the Lord Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a merchant, and to one who had found a treasure in the field. And our Catechism also explains the communion of saints as the possession of a *common good*, saying that it includes two things:

First, to be partakers of Christ and of all His riches and gifts.

Second, the obligation to employ these gifts for the advantage and salvation of other members.

Originally communion of saints was taken in the absolute sense of including *communion of earthly possessions*. Hence the peculiar phenomenon in Jerusalem of having all things common. They sold their possessions and they put the proceeds in the common treasury, which was in the hands of the apostles. And from this the poor and they who were formerly rich were supported. Hence there were no poor nor rich, but there was equality:

With reference to this communion of goods, opposite opinions are held. Some have taken it as an indication that all Christians ought to renounce their private possessions, and live after the manner of monks, as members of one family; while others have disapproved of it as an extravagance of Christian fanaticism. Both extremes are untenable.

It appears from Scripture that this generous and enthusiastic effort to escape from the plague of poverty was not only unprofitable to the few, but that it caused terrible suffering which extended over the whole Church. At least, in his epistles, St. Paul speaks again and again of the poverty-stricken saints of Jerusalem, who were always in need of a collection and in danger of starvation. In other places that did not have a communion of goods there was a surplus; and in Jerusalem, where on a large scale possessions had been divided, the people suffered lack. This shows convincingly that division of property, or communion of goods, is not the way ordained of God to overcome poverty or to attain a state of higher mutual prosperity. The subsequent efforts of various sects at Rome to realize a similar ideal



on a smaller and more careful scale met with similar failures. And the secular enterprises of Proudhon and others led to similar miserable results.

But it is equally erroneous to suppose that this failure justifies us in condemning the early church of Jerusalem for this act. This would be inconsistent with the upholding of the apostolic authority. The apostles had a part in this matter; they assisted the church in receiving the money for distribution. Hence to tear the apostles' seal from this heroic act of the church of Jerusalem is simply impossible. We should be careful not to condemn what the apostles have stamped with their own sign-manual.

Judging from the results, this communion of goods and subsequent misery produced precious fruit; partly in the fact that the church of Jerusalem was thus kept from relapsing into worldliness and attachment to houses and lands; and more strongly in the other fact that this very impoverishing of the church became the powerful means by which the breach was prevented between the churches of Palestine and those of the Gentile world. The distress at Jerusalem quenched the rising pride of the Jewish heart; and the delight of imparting to others softened the hearts at Corinth and in Macedonia. St. Paul, traveling to Jerusalem, carrying with him European treasure, holds in his hand the silver cord that keeps together and shortly unites the troubled churches.

But, apart from these good results, this division of property embodies something of still greater and more sacred importance, which essentially belongs to the first Christian congregation. International intercommunication was to be developed gradually; the translation of the Word of God into the languages of the world for the universal preaching of the Gospel would occupy many centuries. Even now it is not universal; and only in heaven, after the judgment, the anthem shall rise to the Blessed Trinity from all peoples and tongues. And yet, while this was tarrying, and the Church of the New Testament was just beginning to manifest itself, it pleased God on Pentecost, by the miracle of tongues, to make men listen to the glorious message which came from the lips of the apostles, to every one in his own language: And the same is true with reference to the communion of goods. Even this shall one day be a reality. Heaven's outward, visible goods shall be for the mutual enjoyment of all the redeemed. But, by reason of sin and present limitations, this is now impossible. In Paradise private possession was out of the question. Neither Adam nor Eve had anything that did not belong to the other. The whole garden was theirs and its possession mutual. Division took place only after the breach had come, and will continue so long as the breach shall last. But as on Pentecost the miracle of tongues was the prophecy, manifestation, and incipient realization of what before the Throne of the Lamb shall be a glorious, universal reality, so was the communion of goods the prophecy, manifestation, and incipient realization of what shall be the communion of external gifts in the heavenly glory.



There is not only an immortality of the soul, but also a resurrection of the body. Wherefore the glory of the New Jerusalem may not be presented as consisting only in the spiritual and invisible. Heaven exists, and in that heaven Christ sits upon the throne in the body which the Father has prepared for Him. The Father's house is not a fiction, but a real city with many mansions; and when the glory shall have come, after the great and notable day of the Lord, the felicity of God's children shall be not only a spiritual delight, but also the enjoyment of outward and visible glory and beauty. As there were in Eden, so there will be in heaven, external goods in relation to man's external bodily appearance, when he shall walk in his glorified body. And, since body and soul in perfect and indissoluble union shall work upon each other in a harmonious manner, the communion of saints must have two sides: a communion of spiritual good, and a communion of the outward and visible glory. And inasmuch as this twofold nature of the communion of saints must be illustrated to the church of Jerusalem in its perfect unity, therefore the communion in the breaking of bread had to be accompanied by a communion equally intimate in the possession of temporal goods. The division of property contained the prophecy of this future communion, a glorious prophecy which contains a *threefold exhortation* for the Christian Church of all ages.

The *first exhortation* is what St. Paul calls "*to possess as not possessing*"; to be loose from the world; the consistent carrying out of the idea that we are but stewards of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only Proprietor of all men's personal property and real estate. It is always the choice between Jehovah and Mammon.

Not Baal, nor Kamosh, nor Molech, but Mammon, is the idolatrous power in which Satan appears against the glory of Jehovah, especially among mercantile nations. Many men, otherwise not unspiritual, can scarcely separate from the altar of Mammon—visible things have such strong attraction, and entrench themselves so firmly in the impressionable heart.

Compared to the treasures on earth, those of heaven seem to us something accidental and of uncertain value. To possess as not possessing is to our flesh such a bitter cross. And for this reason the early church of Jerusalem appears in the beginning of the dispensation of the New Covenant glorious in her communion of goods, in order to illustrate against the dark background of the half-heartedness of Ananias and Sapphira the power of the Holy Ghost to make the children of God at Jerusalem at once loose from their earthly possessions. Of course it did not last, for the spiritual forces of Paradise were lacking to make it lasting; but it shows the majestic act of the Holy Spirit, and the majestic preaching which proceeded from it: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth," "but let your treasure be in heaven."

And the *second exhortation* is, *that the poor be remembered*. They did not merely sell their possessions, but they divided them among the poor; and from this divine manifestation of love sprang the fair flower of mercy, as indigenous to the Church of Christ. It may be said that it was the effect of excitement; but remember that, unless the impressions on our



sinful hearts are produced in a very powerful manner, they will soon be effaced; and with this in view it must be acknowledged that no other event could have stamped upon the Church the impress of mercy, which was to last throughout the ages, so long as the Church was to last, than this general division of goods, which was wrought by the powerful pressure of the waves of love and the wonderful manifestation of the work of the Holy Spirit.



And thus, by this communion of goods, it became the indestructible character of the Church of Christ to exercise mercy, to impart to the poor, to abound in the works of benevolence, and to interpret to men the mercy of God. But not as tho the Church might be reduced to a benevolent society; he that proposes such a thing cuts off her life at the root. The exercise of mercy in the Church of Christ is the fruit of the Cross. Where this is lacking, mercy languishes. But it is the Holy Spirit's pleasure to work love, to show love, to cultivate love, and to cause love to be glorified. And since the life of man and of the Church has a spiritual and a material side, the Holy Spirit perseveres with His work so long and so mightily that even the gold and silver of the earth become subject to Him and serve Him. Hence the communion of goods in Jerusalem is the impressive inauguration of the work of mercy for the whole Church of Christ, and as such it is nothing else than the power of the Holy Spirit penetrating to the circle of the material life.

Finally, the *third exhortation* is contained in the never-ceasing cry: "*Behold, He cometh.*" The men in Jerusalem nineteen centuries ago would not have sold and divided their possessions so freely and readily if the expectation of the Lord's return to judgment had not taken hold of them with overwhelming power. They did undoubtedly expect that return during their own lifetime; not after many days, but shortly. And since this *expectation* depreciated the value of their possessions, they resolved to sell and distribute them much more readily than otherwise would have been possible for their covetous hearts. And altho there was in their expectation something overstrained, which the succeeding ages have corrected, yet there is in this "Maranatha" of the apostolic Church an inestimable testimony, which exhorts the Church of all ages to look upon Him who shall come upon the clouds. With bread and cup we remember His death *until He comes*. All the apostles direct us to the future; and when, in the Revelation of St. John, the Book of Testaments closes, it leaves us upon the mountain-top, from which there is no other perspective than the glory of Christ's return.

Putting that return far from our thoughts, or altogether ignoring it, we can not possibly unite our life with the life of Immanuel. The Holy Spirit works the eternal work of Love; but this work is never severed from the Love of the Son. The treasure which the Holy Spirit distributes is in Immanuel. Christ is the Blessed Head of this holy communion in which He gathers together all God's elect. And, therefore, the eye may never be taken from Christ; it must always look unto Him; it may not cease to wait for Him.



This Love wrought by the Holy Spirit is the Bride's love for her Bridegroom; and thus the communion of saints finds its completion in the heart's most intimate communion with the Redeemer of souls.

XXVII.

The Communion of Gifts.

“Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned.”—*1 Tim. i. 5.*

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Communion of goods in Jerusalem was a symbol. It typified the communion of the spiritual goods which constituted the real treasure of Jerusalem's saints. The other inhabitants of that city possessed houses, fields, furniture, gold, and silver just as well as the saints, and perhaps in greater abundance. But the latter were to receive riches which neither Jew, Roman, nor Greek possessed, viz., a treasure in heaven. The saints were holy, not in themselves, but through Him who had said, “Now are ye clean through the words which I have spoken unto you.” (*John xv. 3*) The Lord had indeed ascended unto heaven, but only “to receive *gifts for men*; yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them.” And this treasure was *Christ Himself*.

Speaking of the contribution which was being collected in Macedonia, Achaia, and Corinth for the saints in Jerusalem, the apostle admonishes the Corinthian church to render thanks to God for a gift infinitely greater than the gold which was to be sent to Jerusalem; and it is in this connection that he uses that captivating expression—“*unspeakable gift*”—which we received in the surrender of God's dear Son.

It is, therefore, a mutual possession. Jesus has us, and we have Him. He possesses the saints, and they possess Him. That He possesses them is their only comfort in life and death. But that they also possess Him, as their own heart's treasure, is to them source of all their wealth and luxury. The Catechism confesses, therefore, very correctly that the communion of saints consists first of all in the fact that they are partakers of Him, and then of His gifts.

The gift is not without the Person, nor outside of the Person, nor even before the Person. The saint partakes first of Christ, and from this sacred partnership flows every other blessing. Even as the Head possesses the Body, and the Body possesses the Head, so is this also a mutual possession. Head and Body belong to each other, even tho the Head has this advantage over the Body, that it commands it at will, while the Body must follow the Head wherever it leads. “To follow the Lamb wherever He goeth” is the peculiar mark of this mutual relation.

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But, with the reservation of this essential mark, the possession is absolute. The saints belong to Jesus, just as much because the Father has given and brought them to Him, as that He has bought them, not with gold or silver, but with His own precious blood. And, on the contrary, He belongs to His saints, not because by their own labor they have obtained Him, but as a gift of free grace. The Triune God has ordained the Mediator for His people, to whom He has given and brought Him; and the Mediator having come in the flesh, has given Himself to His people.