

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

What Sort Of God Is That?

When we were preparing for our First Holy Communion in 1954, the rule was still that those wanting to receive the Lord must fast from the previous midnight. (I remember how this meant that most communions were received at the 8 30 mass, some at the 9 30 mass, and hardly any at the 11 o'clock mass; servers used to notice such things. Priests used to wreck their digestions: the number of older clergy with stomach ulcers was astonishing. Good or bad idea?)

A Tale Of Disaster

The First Communion white shirts and trousers of the boys, and the bridesmaids' dresses of the girls, were all present and correct in the classroom, when a thing happened that was so dreadful that I've never forgotten it. A little girl in my class shyly revealed that she had sucked a sweet at home before remembering the fast. This awful dereliction was soon reported to the authorities: and Sister - I won't name her - came down like a wolf on the fold, snatched off the little veil and the white dress, and sent the miscreant away with the bitterest scolding. (And where scolding was required Sister was in the big league; even at seven years of age we got the full force of her considerable personality. She would have done well at the Nuremberg Tribunal.) I still shudder at the memory of this, because it seems to me to distil just the essence of rotten religion. Could anyone imagine Jesus Christ joining in such a reprimand, approving of such a separation? Yet it was one among thousands of vile things we've done in the name of religion. We'll look back in horror if ever we find ourselves near to the real God: to think of the things we found necessary, the cruelties and inhumanities we committed to preserve "the rules".

Let's Look At Ourselves

The Church has given people a choice: baptism or death. The Church has blessed Crusades - holy wars - and ridden into battle to destroy unbelief (by simply destroying unbelievers). The Church has extirpated heresy (by setting fire to heretics). We shouldn't ignore these dreadful facts; they should give us a collective shudder of shame, and we should be humble and tentative in our Catholicism rather than putting ourselves into league with the sins of the Catholic past.

But I think the examination of conscience should be deeply personal, an examination of faith itself, to see whether our own weak understanding and poor faith has infected the way we live out our religion. The most telling thing here is to look at our prayer itself.

Never Lose Heart

When Jesus speaks of prayer as *continuous* he is telling us something precious. Not that, to be holy, we need to be muttering prayers all day long; many of us have other things to think about and to say! But that holy place within us, that space around the heart from which we lift up our eyes and call on God, must be the most familiar place of all to us; we should find it easy to slip into that place, and to sense the gaze of God upon us. And we should make sure that there never enters in to that place anything that is greedy, or mean, or cruel, or proud, or harsh, or false, or malicious; that when we stand there in our heart-space, we should be clean of all unworthy thoughts or motives. God's steady regard is upon us there; it isn't a place where fakery or nonsense can survive. I think that the line should be written over the door of our heart: *indeed, you love truth in the heart; then in the secret of my heart, teach me wisdom.* The continual purification of the heart is enough to make our prayer continuous, like a deeply-sourced spring, leaping up unailing to eternal life.

God Is Utterly Good

We must be sure that our prayer takes as its foundation-stone trust in God's goodness. He will never allow evil to triumph over us; and we can be sure that our trust in him will never be disappointed. So we can turn all things to goodness, if we take them to God in our prayer. The Bible is full of stories of prayer, where the one praying has found calm trust in the experience of meeting God in faith. That murmuring stream of trust must constantly sweeten whatever is bitter in us, warm whatever is cold, soothe our hurts and make flexible the rigidity which sometimes defaces and deforms religious people. To come to God is to come to the fountain of life. We shall never return poorer than we came, and never without believing that all manner of thing is going to be well. May his will be done!
Fr Philip