

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

This week and next Father Shamon devotes his column to a survey of Church history designed to explain changes in the Eucharistic rite.

Someone said, "Text out of context is pretext." I suppose what is meant is that roots are important, that whenever we do not see something in its background, we get a distorted view, a wrong picture.

I know communion in the hand will cause quite a stir among some. But let us see how the custom of receiving Holy Communion in a kneeling position and on the tongue got started.

Though the custom goes back 1200 years, the reason behind it goes back back even further — to the heresy of Arianism

Arianism was a teaching of a priest, Arius (318), who said Jesus Christ was not the son of God! In the East this heresy spread like wildfire. St. Athanasius, the bishop who fought this error to his death, wrote that one day the whole world awoke to find itself Arian. It was as bad as that.

To prevent a veritable civil war, Constantine the Great, who had transferred the capital of the Roman Empire to the East, to a city he built and named after himself — Constantinople, called a General Council of the Church (325) at Nicea, a few miles away from the capital. The Council condemned Arius and his teaching. The divinity of Christ was reasserted, defined and articulated in what has become known as the Nicene Creed

However, the error did not go away. Many of the successors of Constantine became infected with it. But what was worse, they peddled this Asian brand of Christianity to the Goths who lived around the Black Sea.

Around 410 these Goths started the westward migration of the nations. For two centuries wave upon wave of barbarians — Vandals, Huns, Goths, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Lombards, et al. — inundated the Roman Empire, submerging Roman civilization under a tidal wave of such destruction that some thought the end of the world had come. When this cosmic upheaval subsided, the Goths were in Spain, the Franks in France, the Huns in Hungary, the Lombards in Italy, and so on.

In these dark ages, God raised up St. Benedict (520) to found monasticism at Monte Cassino. His monks, together with other missionaries, went out to meet the barbarians: St. Remigius to France (490), St. Austin to England (597), St. Boniface to Germany (722), St. Ansgar to Norway (826). And this fusion laid the foundations of Christian Europe.

However, in the 7th and 8th centuries, the Arian Goths in Spain resurrected

the Arian heresy. It reappeared with a new name: Adoptionism. Jesus Christ, according to the Adoptionists, was only a man, no more; but so good a man that God the Father adopted him as His Son.

The Catholic Franks immediately reacted by inserting the Nicene Creed into the Mass, and by emphasizing the birthday of Christ. For this reason, Christmas began to attain a solemnity equal to that of Easter. To quash the insidious heresy further, anything that tended to "subordinate" Christ to his Father was sedulously avoided.

Liturgical prayers from ancient times, for instance, always stressed the mediatorship of Christ by using the formula "through Christ our Lord." Now a new prayer ending was coined which left no room for any subordination: "who lives and reigns with you..." Also, prayers in the Mass today that are directly addressed to Jesus originated at this time.

Furthermore, the Church in ancient times had always been regarded as the Mystical Body of Christ. But since this seemed to imply an inferior position of Christ to the Father, this concept too was buried. The Church instead was given the role of mediator, which had been vacated by Christ. And the title Holy Mother Church replaced that of Mystical Body

In a Teutonic culture, with its stratified society, its deep cleavage between ruler and ruled, the clergy, as mediators, were classed with the rulers. This was the edge of the wedge splitting clergy from the people of God. In consequence, the priest at Mass was likened to a new Moses; the altar, to the mountaintop. To symbolize this and to prevent distractions for the priest while he was engaged in his work as mediator, the altar was pushed as far back from the people as possible — to the back wall of the church, in fact. This necessitated the priest's turning his back on the people. Since he alone mediated with God, a new prayer was inserted into the Mass — the Orate, Fratres (Pray, my brothers and sisters that our sacrifice...) After that he prayed in secret. Since he alone conferred with God, why not do all this silently? As a result, the entire Canon of the Mass was reduced to a silent prayer!

A man very much interested in what has happening in the liturgy was Charlemagne (c. 800). He felt religious unity would strengthen the political ties of his empire. So his minister of education, Alcuin, and his disciple, Rabanus Maurus (author of the well-known hymn Come, Holy Ghost), initiated a liturgical renaissance. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist became much talked about — in fact so much that in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council defined the doctrine of the Real Presence. This talk about the reality of Christ's presence at the altar and the emphasis that He is truly God (against the Adoptionists) coupled with an increasing awareness of human sinfulness led to a decline in receiving Holy Communion. Eventually this drop became so pronounced that the Fourth Lateran Council felt it necessary to legislate at least annual communion (Easter Duty). The Eucharist became more a mystery to

be contemplated and adored than a food to be received. The aura of awe so intensified and the feeling of man's unworthiness so deepened that the intimate bond between sacrifice and banquet was broken.

Greater reverence had suggested further (c. 800) that the bread for the Eucharistic sacrifice be now unleavened. Heretofore, it was leavened, for the altar bread was brought by the people from their own household supplies. When unleavened bread was used, the offering of the bread by the faithful ceased and money was given instead. Unleavened bread was whiter, less crumbly, so deemed more reverent for the Eucharist. Moreover, unleavened bread could be broken before Mass. As a result, by the 11th century the ciborium (breadbox) appeared and the breaking of the bread at Mass deliquesced into a mere symbolic gesture.

This overriding desire for reverence altered the method of giving communion. Originally, Holy Communion was dispensed to the people while they stood, and they took it in their hands. The faithful approached the priest with folded hands, then bowed before the minister, unfolded his hands and placed the left hand over the right in the shape of a cross, with the palms upward. After the Amen, the Host was placed in the hand. The communicant then stepped aside and immediately took the Host in the right hand and communicated himself.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote regarding receiving Holy Communion in the hands:

"Be careful that no particles fall, for what you lose would be to you as if you had lost some of your members. Tell me, if anybody had given you gold dust, would you not hold fast to it with all care, and watch lest some of it fall and be lost to you? Must you not then be even more careful with that which is more precious than gold and diamonds, so that no particles be lost?" (Jungmann, Vol 2, 178)

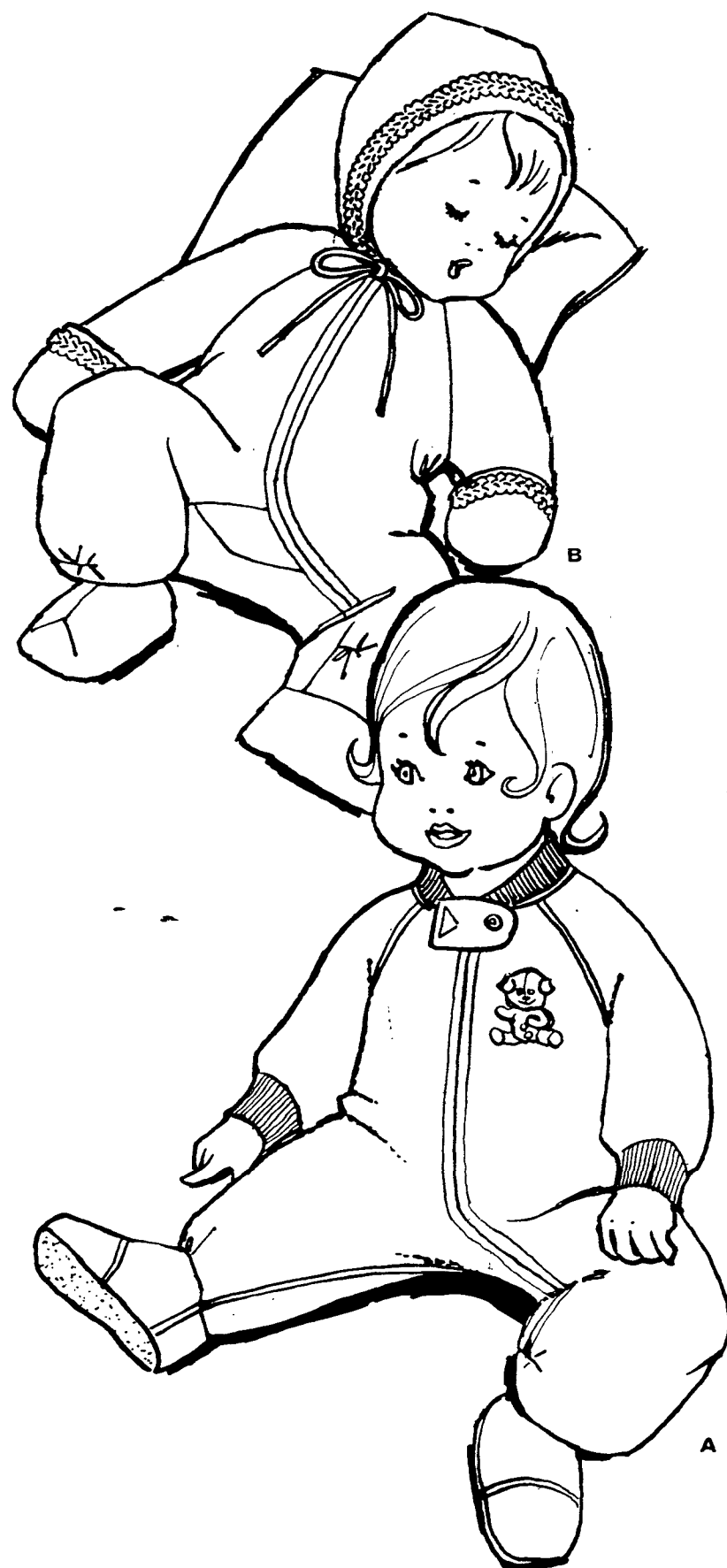
Worry about possible misuse and the growing respect for the Eucharist led to the practice of placing the sacred Host in the mouth. Unleavened bread made this exceedingly easy to do. And since it was more reverent to place the Host on the tongue of one kneeling, Holy Communion began to be received kneeling. To support the kneeling communicant, a communion rail was built. Now the people were fenced out. And that is how and why we got to receiving Holy Communion kneeling and on the tongue.

(To be continued)

PRAYER, FAST

Prayer and fasting for one meal a week for the sake of priestly fidelity to the Holy Father has been added to the monthly Eucharistic devotions at Blessed Sacrament Church. According to Wilma Higgs, coordinator of the event which takes place on the first Thursdays of the month, fasting has been added to the rites as "an important element." The devotions begin at noon and continue throughout the afternoon until 5:15 p.m. when Mass is celebrated, with Benediction. The Blessed Sacrament is exposed throughout the afternoon

McCurdy's 76th ANNIVERSARY SALE



SNUG WINTER SAVINGS FOR BABY

A. BLANKET SLEEPER, reg. 7.50, 5.27

Deep fleece with knit collar and cuffs, full length zipper, non skid soles. Pink, blue, yellow. Sizes S, M, L, XL.

B. PRAM SUIT, reg. \$8, 5.77

Warming fleece, full front zipper, keeps baby cozy and covered from head to toe. Pink, blue, yellow. 0-9, 9-18 month sizes.

Infants' Wear (D28), Third Floor, Midtown and all McCurdy stores.