

I

How Much Jesus Christ Deserves Our Love, Because of the Love He Has Shown Us in His Passion

1 ♦ The sanctity and perfection of a soul consists entirely in loving Jesus Christ, our God, our sovereign good, and our Redeemer. Whoever loves me, says Jesus Christ, shall be loved by my Eternal Father: "The Father himself loves you, because you have loved me" (Jn 16:27). Some, says Saint Francis de Sales, argue that perfection consists in an austere life, others in prayer, others in frequenting the sacraments, others in almsgiving. But they deceive themselves: perfection consists in loving God with our whole heart.¹ The apostle Paul wrote: "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3:14). Love unites and preserves all the virtues that make a person perfect. Hence Saint Augustine said: "Love God, and do whatever you please,"² because a soul that loves God is taught by that same love never to do anything to displease God, and to leave nothing undone that may please him.

2 ♦ Doesn't God deserve all our love? He has loved us from all eternity: "I have loved you with an everlasting love"

(Jer 31:3). Look, says the Lord, I was the first to love you. You were not yet in the world; the world itself wasn't even there, and already I loved you. As long as I am God, I loved you; as long as I have loved myself, I have also loved you. So, when other earthly husbands were offered her, Saint Agnes, that holy young virgin, was quite right to reply: "I am engaged to another lover."³ Go, she said, O lovers of this world, cease to claim my love; my God was the first to love me. He has loved me from all eternity: thus it is right for me to give him all my affections, and to love none but him.

3 ♦ Seeing that humans are drawn by kindness, God willed to use his gifts to win them over to his love. "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love" (Hos 11:4). I wish to draw men and women to love me with those snares by which they are caught, that is, by the snares of love. And those have precisely been God's gifts to human beings. After having given us souls with powers after his own image, with memory, understanding, and will, and bodies furnished with their senses, he created for us heaven and earth, and so many other things, all for the love of us—the skies, the stars, the planets, the seas, the rivers, the springs, the mountains, the plains, metals, fruits, and countless species of animals: and all these creatures were made to serve the human race, so that men and women might love him in gratitude for so many gifts.

"Heaven and earth," Saint Augustine exclaims, "and all things tell me to love you."⁴ My Lord, he said, whatever I behold on the earth, or above the earth, it all speaks to me, and exhorts me to love you; because all things tell me that you have made them for the love of me.

When the Abbe Armand Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé, the Cistercian founder of La Trappe, looked out from his hermitage

and surveyed the hills, the fountains, the birds, the flowers, the planets, and the skies, he felt himself inflamed by each of these creatures to love God who had created them for love of him.⁵

4 ♦ Similarly Saint Mary Magdalen de Pazzi, when she held any beautiful flower in her hand, felt herself on fire with love for God; and she would say: "Then God has thought from all eternity of creating this flower for love of me!" Thus that flower became, as it were, a dart of love, which sweetly wounded her, and brought her closer to God.⁶

On the other hand, Saint Teresa of Ávila said that when she looked at trees, springs, brooks, coasts, or meadows, all these beautiful creatures rebuked her for her ingratitude in loving so little the Creator who had made them in order to be loved by her.⁷

In this vein we are further told of a devout hermit who, when walking through the country, imagined that the plants and flowers in his path reproached him for his ingratitude to God; so that as he went along he would strike them with his staff, and say to them: "Oh, be quiet, be quiet; you call me ungrateful; you tell me God has made you out of love for me, and yet I do not love him. But I've already understood you. Be quiet, be quiet; don't scold me anymore."⁸

5 ♦ But God wasn't satisfied with giving us all these beautiful creatures. To win all our love he has gone so far as to give all of himself to us. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16).

When the Eternal Father saw that we were all dead and deprived of his grace because of sin, what did he do? Out of his immense love, indeed, as the apostle Paul writes, out of the all too great love he bore us, he sent his beloved Son to make atone-

ment for us; and so to restore to us the life that sin had robbed us of. "Out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ" (Eph 2:4-5). And in giving us his Son—not pardoning his Son, that he might pardon us—he has given us along with him every good thing, his grace, his love, and paradise, since all these goods are surely much less than his Son: "He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Rom 8:32).

6 ♦ And so the Son, too, through the love he bears us, has given himself completely to us: "Who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). In order to redeem us from everlasting death, and to win back for us God's grace and our lost paradise, he became man, and took on flesh like ours: "And the Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14). Behold, then, a humbled God, who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...and being found in human form" (Phil 2:8). Behold, the Lord of the world lowers himself to the point of taking the form of a servant and of subjecting himself to the miseries that all other human beings endure.

7 ♦ But still more amazing is the fact that he could very well have saved us without dying and without suffering. But no, he chose to live in affliction and contempt and to die in bitterness and ignominy, so that he even died on a cross—the dreadful gibbet designed for criminals. "He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). But why, since he could have redeemed us without suffering, should he choose death, and death on a cross? To show us the love he bore us. "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph 5:2). He loved us and, because he

loved us, he gave himself up to sorrow and shame and to a death more painful than anyone on earth ever endured.

8 ♦ Hence that great lover of Jesus Christ, Saint Paul, once said: "The love of Christ urges us on" (2 Cor 5:14). The apostle meant that it is not so much the sufferings of Jesus Christ as the love he showed us in enduring them that obliges, and all but constrains, us to love him. Listen to what Saint Francis de Sales says on this text from Corinthians: "Knowing that Jesus Christ, true God, has loved us so that he suffered death, and death on a cross, for us, doesn't that put our hearts in a vise, and make them feel its force, and squeeze love from them, but with a power that, the stronger it is, the more delightful it is."⁹ He goes on to say, "Why, then, don't we cast ourselves on Jesus crucified, to die on the cross with him, who has chosen to die for love of us? I will hold him (we should say), and I will never let him go; I will die with him, and will be consumed in the flames of his love. One flame will consume this divine Creator and his wretched creature. Jesus gives himself unreservedly to me, and I give myself unreservedly to him. I will live and die in his loving arms; neither life nor death shall ever separate me from him. O eternal love, my soul longs after you, and chooses you forever. Come, O Holy Spirit, and inflame our hearts with love. O to love! O to die! To die to all other loves, and to live only for the love of Jesus Christ! O Redeemer of our souls, grant that we may eternally sing, Long live Jesus, whom I love. I love Jesus, who lives for ever and ever."¹⁰

9 ♦ The love of Jesus Christ for his people was so great that it made him desire the moment of his death, so as to show them the affection he had for them. Hence he used to say in

his lifetime: "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" (Lk 12:50). I have to be baptized in my own blood; and how strongly I feel myself gripped by the desire that the hour of my Passion may come, so that all people may know the love I bear them! That is why John, speaking of the night on which Jesus began his Passion, writes: "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own...he loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). The Redeemer called that hour *his* hour, because the time of his death was the time he had desired; as it was then that he wished to give humankind the ultimate proof of his love, by dying for them upon a cross, consumed by pain.

10 ♦ But what could ever have led a God to die executed upon a cross between two villains—such a disgrace to his divine majesty? "Who did this?" asks Saint Bernard. "It was love," he answers, "careless of its dignity."¹¹ See how love, when it wants to make itself known, doesn't go looking for what best befits the dignity of the lover, but what will serve best to show itself to the beloved. So Saint Francis of Paola had very good reason to cry out at the sight of a crucifix, "O love, O love, O love!"¹² Likewise, when we look at Jesus on the cross, we should cry out those very same words.

11 ♦ Indeed, if faith had not assured us of it, who could ever believe that a God, all powerful, most happy, and Lord of the universe would have wished to love humanity so much that he seems to have gone out of himself for the love of us humans? We have seen Wisdom itself, that is, the Eternal Word, go mad from overwhelming love for humanity! That was how Saint Laurence Giustiniani spoke of it: "We see Wisdom itself

infatuated through excess of love."¹³ Saint Mary Magdalen de Pazzi said the same thing: One day, in ecstasy, she took a wooden crucifix into her hands, and cried out: "Yes, my Jesus, you are mad with love. I say that, and I will say it forever: You are mad with love, my Jesus."¹⁴ But no, says Dionysius the Areopagite: "It is not madness, but the usual effect of divine love, which makes him who loves go out of himself, in order to give himself up entirely to the object of his love."¹⁵

12 ♦ If people would only stop to consider, looking at Jesus on the cross, the love that he has borne each one of them! "With what love," says Saint Francis de Sales, "would we not be set ablaze at the sight of those flames in the Redeemer's breast! And oh, what happiness, to be able to be burned by that same fire with which our God burns for us! What joy, to be bound to God by the chains of love!"¹⁶ Saint Bonaventure called the wounds of Jesus Christ wounds that cut through the most senseless hearts, and which inflame the most frigid souls.¹⁷ How many arrows of love come forth from those wounds, to strike the hardest hearts! What flames issue from the burning heart of Jesus Christ, setting on fire the coldest souls! And how many chains come from that wounded side to bind the most rebellious hearts!

13 ♦ Blessed John of Ávila was so enamored of Jesus Christ that he never failed in any of his sermons to speak of Jesus' love for us. In a treatise on the love that this most loving Redeemer has for human beings, John has expressed such burning feelings that I wish to insert them here because of their extreme beauty. He writes:¹⁸

14 ♦ "You, O Redeemer, have loved us in such a way, that anyone who reflects upon this love cannot do less than love

you; for your love does violence to hearts: as the Apostle says: 'The love of Christ urges us on' (2 Cor 5:14). The source of the love of Jesus Christ for us is his love for God. That is why he said on Holy Thursday: 'That the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way' (Jn 14:31). But where? To die upon the cross for men and women.

15 ♦ "No human mind can understand how hotly this fire burns in the heart of Jesus Christ. Just as he was commanded to suffer death once, if had he been commanded to die a thousand times, he had enough love to suffer every one of them. And if what he suffered for all people had been imposed upon him for the salvation of a single person, he would have done it for each one as he did for all. And as he hung for three hours upon the cross, so, had it been necessary to hang there until the Day of Judgment, he had enough love to do it. So that Jesus Christ loved much more than he suffered.

"O divine love, how much greater were you than you seemed to be; for so many wounds and bruises tell us of a great love, but they do not tell of all its greatness. There was more within than appears without. That was but a drop that sprang forth from the great sea of infinite love.

"This is the greatest sign of love, to lay down one's life for one's friends." But this sign was not enough for Jesus Christ to express his love.

16 ♦ "This is the love that leaves good souls beside themselves, and makes them stand amazed, when it is granted them to know it. It gives rise to a burning sensation in the gut, to the desire for martyrdom, to bliss in pain, to rejoicing, as Saint Lawrence did, over a red-hot grill, to walking on burning coals as if they were roses, to yearning for torments, to rejoicing in

what the world dreads, and embracing what it abhors. Saint Ambrose says that the soul married to Jesus Christ upon the cross thinks nothing is more glorious than to bear the marks of the Crucified.

17 ♦ "But, my lover, how shall I repay this love of yours? Blood deserves to be recompensed with blood. Let me see myself dyed in this blood and nailed to this cross. O holy cross, receive me too upon you. Crown of thorns, grow wider, that I too may put my head in you. Nails, leave those innocent hands of my Lord and pierce my heart with compassion and love. That, says Paul, is why you died, my Jesus: to take possession of the living and the dead, not with punishments, but with love: 'For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living' (Rom 14:9).

18 ♦ "Great thief of hearts, the strength of your love has broken even our hard hearts. You inflamed the whole world with your love. Wisest Lord, inebriate our hearts with this wine, burn them with this fire, pierce them with this arrow of your love. This your cross is indeed a crossbow that pierces hearts. Let the whole world know that my heart is stricken. Sweetest love, what have you done? You have come to heal me, and you have wounded me. You have come to teach me, and you have made me like someone mad. O wisest madness, may I never live without you. Lord, everything that I see on the cross invites me to love: the wood, the form, the wounds in your body; and above all, your love invites me to love you and never to forget you."

19 ♦ But to arrive at the perfect love of Jesus Christ, we must take the necessary steps. Here are the steps that Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches us (*Opusculum De dilectione Dei*, §1):

1. Constantly keep in mind God's benefits, both general and particular.
2. Consider the infinite goodness of God, who is forever doing us good, who always loves us and seeks our love.
3. Diligently avoid the slightest thing that might offend him.
4. Renounce all the goods of this world, riches, honors, and sensual pleasures.

The spiritual writer John Tauler says that another great way to acquire perfect love for Jesus Christ is to meditate on his holy Passion.¹⁹

20 ♦ Who can deny that, of all devotions, devotion to the Passion of Jesus Christ is the most useful, the most tender, the dearest to God, the one that most consoles sinners and most inflames loving souls? Where else do we get so many blessings as from the Passion of Jesus Christ? Where else do we have hope of pardon, strength against temptations, and confidence that we are going to paradise? Whence come so many bright lights of truth, so many loving calls, so many promptings to change our life, so many desires to give ourselves to God, as from the Passion of Jesus Christ? Thus Paul the Apostle was only too right to declare that those who do not love Jesus Christ are excommunicated. "Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord" (1 Cor 16:22).

21 ♦ Saint Bonaventure says there is no devotion more capable of sanctifying a soul than meditation on the Passion of Jesus Christ. For this reason he advises us to meditate every day upon the Passion, if we want to advance in the love of

God.²⁰ And before him Saint Augustine, as Bernardinus de Bustis relates, said that shedding one tear in memory of the Passion is worth more than fasting on bread and water every week for a year.²¹ That is why the saints have always taken up meditation on the sorrows of Jesus Christ: it was by this means that Saint Francis of Assisi became a seraph. One day a gentleman found him weeping and crying out with a loud voice. On being asked why he did so, he answered, "I weep for the sorrows and ignominies of my Lord: and what makes me weep the most is that we, for whom he suffered so much, live in forgetfulness of him." And on saying this he redoubled his tears, so that this man too began to weep. Whenever the saint heard the bleating of a lamb, or saw anything else that reawakened the memory of Jesus' Passion, he immediately fell weeping. Another time, when he was sick, someone told him that he should have a book of devotion read to him. "My book," he replied, "is Jesus crucified." Hence he did nothing but exhort his brethren to think of the Passion of Jesus Christ at all times.²²

Giorgio Tiepolo writes: "Anyone who does not fall in love with God by looking at Jesus dead upon the cross will never fall in love."²³

Prayers of Love and Affection

Eternal Word! You spent thirty-three years in sweat and hardship. You gave your blood and your life for our salvation. In short, you spared nothing to make us love you. Then how can there be people who know this and yet do not love you? O God, I am one of these ingrates. I see the wrong I have done.

O my Jesus, have pity on me. I offer you this ungrateful heart of mine—ungrateful, but repentant. Yes, above every other evil, my dear Redeemer, I repent having despised you. I repent, and I am sorry with all my heart.

My soul, you love a God who is bound like a criminal for you, a God scourged like a slave for you, a God made a mocking for you, a God, in short, dead upon a cross for you as if he were a scoundrel. Yes, my Savior, my God, I do love you. Always remind me of everything that you suffered for me, so that I may never again forget to love you.

Ropes that bound Jesus, bind me to Jesus; thorns that crowned Jesus, wound me with love for Jesus; nails that pierced Jesus, nail me to the cross of Jesus, that I may live and die united to Jesus.

Blood of Jesus, make me drunk with holy love. Death of Jesus, make me die to every earthly affection. Pierced feet of my Lord, I embrace you; deliver me from hell, which I have deserved.

My Jesus, in hell I could not love you anymore, but I want to love you always. Save me, dearest Savior, hold me close to yourself, that I may never lose you again.

O Mary, refuge of sinners, and mother of my Savior, help a sinner who wishes to love God, and who pleads with you. Help me for the love you bear for Jesus Christ.

II

How Much Jesus Christ Deserves to Be Loved by Us, Because of the Love He Has Shown in Instituting the Most Sacred Sacrament of the Altar

1 ♦ "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father; having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). Our wisest Savior, knowing that the time had already arrived for leaving this earth, before he went to die for us, wished to leave us the greatest sign of his love that he could give us; and this was precisely the gift of the most sacred sacrament.

Saint Bernardine of Siena says that people remember more vividly and hold more dear the signs of love shown them in death.¹ So when they come to die, friends are accustomed to leave to the persons they have loved in this life some gift, a garment or a ring, in memory of their affection. But you, my Jesus, in leaving this world, what have you left us in memory of your love? Not a garment or a ring, of course, but your body, your blood, your soul, your divinity, your whole self, keeping

nothing for yourself. "He gave you all," says Saint John Chrysostom: "He left nothing for himself."²

2 ♦ The Council of Trent says that in this gift of the Eucharist Jesus Christ wanted, as it were, to pour out all the riches of his love for us human beings.³ And the apostle Paul notes that Jesus wanted to give this gift to human beings on the very same night that men were planning his death: "The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me' (1 Cor 11:23-24). Saint Bernardine of Siena says that Jesus Christ, before he died, burning with love for us and not content with preparing to give his life, was driven by the excess of his love to do an even greater deed, which was to give his own body for our food."⁴

3 ♦ This sacrament, therefore, was rightly named by Saint Thomas Aquinas "the sacrament of love, the pledge of love."⁵ "Sacrament of love," because it was love alone that led Jesus Christ to give us his entire self in it; and "pledge of love," so that if we had ever doubted his love, we would have in this sacrament a pledge of it. It was as if our Redeemer, in leaving us this gift, had said: Souls, if you ever doubted my love, see how I leave you myself in this sacrament: with such a pledge in hand, you can never again doubt that I love you, and love you very much.

But over and above that, Saint Bernard calls this sacrament "the love of loves,"⁶ because this gift includes all the other gifts given us by the Lord—creation, redemption, predestination to glory. So the Eucharist is not only a pledge of the love of Jesus Christ, but of the paradise that he wants to give us. "In

which," says the Church, "we receive a pledge of future glory."⁷ Hence Saint Philip Neri could find no other name for Jesus Christ in this sacrament save that of "love."⁸ And so, when holy Viaticum was brought to him, he was heard to exclaim, "There is my love; give my love to me."⁸

4 ♦ The prophet Isaiah wanted the whole world to see the loving devices that God had found to make people love him.⁹ And who could ever have thought—if he himself had not done it—that the Incarnate Word would place himself under the appearances of bread in order to become our food? "Does it not seem madness, says Saint Augustine, to say: 'Eat my flesh; drink my blood?'"¹⁰ When Jesus Christ revealed to his disciples the sacrament that he wished to leave them, some couldn't bring themselves to believe him; and they took leave of him, saying: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?... This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" (Jn 6:52,60).

But what men and women could neither think of nor believe the great love of Jesus Christ has thought of and done. Take and eat, he said to his disciples—and through them to us all—before going off to die. Take and eat! But what sort of food will this be, O Savior of the world, that you wish to give us before you die? "Take, eat; this is my body" (Mt 26:26). This isn't earthly food; it is I myself who give myself entirely to you.

5 ♦ And note how longingly Jesus Christ yearns to come to our souls in holy Communion! "I have eagerly desired to eat this passover with you" (Lk 22:15). So he spoke on that night when he instituted this sacrament of love. "I have earnestly desired"—that, as Saint Laurence Giustiniani writes, was how his immense love for us made him speak.¹¹

And so that everyone could easily receive him, he chose to leave himself under the appearance of bread. If he had left himself under the appearance of some rare or very costly food, the poor would have been deprived of him. But no, Jesus wanted to place himself under the form of bread, which costs little and can be found everywhere, so that every person in every country can find him and receive him.

6 ♦ So then, to make us eager to receive him in holy Communion, he not only exhorts us to do so with many invitations: "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed" (Prov 9:5); "Eat, friends, [and] drink," speaking of this heavenly bread and wine (Song 5:1), but he even imposes it on us a command: "Take, eat; this is my body" (Mt 26:26). And still more, so that we may go and receive him, he lures us with the promise of paradise: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life" (Jn 6:54). "The one who eats this bread will live forever" (Jn 6:58).

Moreover, he threatens us with hell and banishment from paradise if we refuse to take Communion. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (Jn 6:53). These invitations, these promises, and these threats all come from the great desire he has to come to us in this sacrament.

7 ♦ But why is it that Jesus Christ so longs for us to receive him in holy Communion? Here is the reason: Dionysius the Areopagite says that love always sighs and aims for union,¹² and we read in Saint Thomas, "Lovers desire to cease being two and to become one."¹³ Now this has led the infinite love of God not only to give us himself completely in the eternal kingdom, but even in this life to let men and women possess him

in the most intimate union possible, by giving himself to them completely under the appearances of bread in the sacrament. He stands as though behind a wall; and from there he looks at us, as if through a narrow gateway: "Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice" (Song 2:9). So we do not see him; but he watches us from there, and is really present there. He is present so that we may possess him, but he hides himself to make us desire him; and until we come to our homeland, Jesus wants to give himself wholly to us, and to remain wholly united with us.

8 ♦ He could not satisfy his love by giving himself entirely to the human race by his Incarnation and by his Passion, dying for all people. He sought to find a way to give himself entirely to each one of us in particular; and so he instituted the sacrament of the altar in order to unite himself fully with each one of us: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (Jn 6:56). In holy Communion Jesus is united with the soul, and the soul with Jesus; and this is not a union of mere affection, but a true and real union. Hence Saint Francis de Sales says: "In no other action can the Savior be considered more tender or more loving than in this one, where he annihilates himself, so to say, and reduces himself to food, in order to penetrate our souls and to unite himself to the hearts of his faithful."¹⁴ Saint John Chrysostom says that Jesus Christ, through his burning love for us, wished to unite himself to us, so that we might become one and the same thing with him.¹⁵

9 ♦ "O God, in love with our souls," says Saint Laurence Giustiniani, "you wanted, in a word, to use this sacrament to make your own. Heart become a single heart with ours, in-

separably united.¹⁶ Saint Bernardine of Siena adds that, "The gift of Jesus Christ to us as our food was the ultimate measure of his love; since he gave himself to us in order to unite himself wholly to us, the way that food becomes one with the eater."¹⁷ Oh, how pleased Jesus Christ is to be one with our souls. One day after Communion he said to his beloved servant, Margaret of Ypres, "See, my daughter, the beautiful union between me and you: come, love me; and let us always remain united in love, and let us never separate again."¹⁸

10 ♦ So we must be persuaded that a soul can neither do, nor think of doing, anything more gratifying to Jesus Christ than to take Communion with a disposition befitting so great a guest whom we have to receive into our heart. I said "befitting," not "worthy of"; for if we had to have a "worthy" disposition, who could ever go to Communion? Only another God would be worthy to receive a God. By "befitting," I mean the sort of disposition that befits a miserable creature, clothed with the unhappy flesh of Adam.

It is enough that the person, ordinarily speaking, receive Communion in the state of grace and with a strong desire to grow in love for Jesus Christ. "Jesus Christ," said Saint Francis de Sales, "ought to be received solely for love, because he gives himself to us solely out of love."¹⁹

11 ♦ Next we must realize that there is nothing from which we can reap so great an advantage as from Communion. The Eternal Father has made Jesus Christ the master of all his own divine treasures. "The Father has given all things into his hands" (Jn 13:3). Hence, when Jesus Christ comes to a soul in holy Communion, he brings with him endless treasures of grace. And so after taking Communion one can rightly say: "All good

things came to me along with her [wisdom]" (Wis 7:11). Dionysius the Areopagite says that the sacrament of the Eucharist has a supreme power for sanctifying souls, more than all the other spiritual means.²⁰ And Saint Vincent Ferrer writes that one Communion does the soul more good than a week's fasting on bread and water.²¹

12 ♦ First of all, as the Council of Trent teaches, Communion is the great remedy which frees us from venial, and preserves us from mortal, sins.²² It says: "We are freed from daily faults" because, according to Saint Thomas, this sacrament stimulates a person to perform acts of love, through which venial sins are forgiven.²³ And Trent says that, "We are preserved from mortal sins," because Communion raises the level of grace, which will save us from serious faults. Hence Innocent III says that Jesus Christ delivered us from the power of sin through his Passion, but that through the Eucharist he delivers us from the power of sinning.²⁴

13 ♦ Moreover, this sacrament, above all, inflames our souls with divine love. God is love (1 Jn 4:8). And he is a fire that consumes all earthly affection in our hearts. "The Lord your God is a devouring fire" (Deut 4:24). This fire of love is precisely what the Son of God came to ignite on the earth. "I came to cast fire upon the earth," he said, adding that he wanted nothing more than to see this holy fire lit in our souls, "And would that it were already kindled!" (Lk 12:49).

And what flames of divine love Jesus Christ kindles in every person who receives him devoutly in this sacrament! Saint Catherine of Siena once saw the host in a priest's hand take on the appearance of a globe of fire; and the saint was amazed that all human hearts were not burned and reduced to ashes by

such a flame.²⁵ After she took Communion, the face of Saint Rose of Lima shone so brightly as to dazzle those who saw her; and her breath was so hot that a hand held near it felt burned.²⁶ The story is told of Saint Wenceslaus that merely visiting churches where the Blessed Sacrament was kept inflamed him with such ardor that his servant-companion never felt the cold while walking through the snow if he trod in the footsteps of the saint.²⁷ Saint John Chrysostom, too, says that the most holy sacrament is a burning fire, so that when we leave the altar we breathe forth flames of love that make us frightening to hell.²⁸

14 ♦ The spouse in the Song of Solomon says: "He brought me to the banquet house, and his intention toward me was love" (Song 2:4). Saint Gregory of Nyssa says that Communion is precisely this banquet house, where the soul becomes so inebriated with divine love that it forgets itself and loses sight of all created things;²⁹ and this is the "languishing with love" of which the spouse then speaks: "Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples, because I am sick with love" (Song 2:5).

Someone might say: "But this is why I don't go to Communion more often, because I see I am so cold in the love of God." Jean de Gerson answers this sort of person: "So, because you feel cold, you move away from the fire?"³⁰ Since you feel cold, you should approach this sacrament all the more frequently, so long as you wish to love Jesus Christ. "Even though you feel lukewarm," writes Saint Bonaventure, "approach anyway, trusting in the mercy of God. The sicker you feel, the more you need the doctor."³¹ In a similar vein Saint Francis de Sales writes: "Two sorts of persons ought to take frequent Communion: the perfect, in order to stay that way, and the imperfect, in order to reach perfection."³² But for frequent

Communion one must at least have a great desire to become a saint and to grow in love for Jesus Christ. One day the Lord said to Saint Matilda: "When you go to Communion desire all the love that any heart has ever had for me, and I will receive such a love as you would like it to be."³³

Prayers of Love and Affection

God of love, O infinite lover, worthy of infinite love, tell me what more can you devise to make us love you? Was it not enough for you to become human, and to subject yourself to all our miseries? Was not it enough for you to shed all your blood for us in torments, and then to die consumed with pain, upon a cross destined for the worst of criminals? Finally, you reduced yourself to hiding beneath the species of bread and wine, to become our food, and so to be joined with each of us. Tell me, I repeat, what more can you devise to make us love you? What wretches we are if we do not love you in this life! When we enter eternity, what remorse we will feel for not having loved you? Jesus, I do not want to die without loving you, and loving you greatly.

I am deeply sorry, and it pains me to have displeased you so often. I repent, and would that I could die of sorrow for it.

But now I love you above all things. I love you more than myself, and I consecrate to you all my affections. May you, who have already given me this desire, also give me the strength to accomplish it.

My Jesus, I desire nothing from you but yourself. Now that you have drawn me to your love, I renounce everything. I cling to you: you alone are enough for me.

O Mary, Mother of God, pray to Jesus for me, and make me a saint. Make this just one more of the many wonders you have done by changing sinners into saints.

III

On the Great Confidence We Must Have in the Love That Jesus Christ Has Shown Us, and in All That He Has Done for Us

1 ♦ David placed all his hope of salvation in his future Redeemer and said: "Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God" (Ps 31:5).

How much more should we put our trust in Jesus Christ, now that he has come and has carried out the work of redemption. Each one of us should say, and keep on repeating with greater confidence: "Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God."

2 ♦ While we have good reason to fear eternal death because of our sins against God, on the other hand we have far greater reason to hope for everlasting life through the merits of Jesus Christ, which count infinitely more for our salvation than our sins count for our damnation. We have sinned and deserved hell; but the Redeemer has come to take upon himself the burden of all our offenses, to make satisfaction for them with his sufferings: "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Is 53:4).

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*A New Translation by Peter Heinegg
With an Introduction by J. Robert Fenili, C.Ss.R.*



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*Let anyone be accursed
who has no love for the Lord.*

1 Corinthians 16:22