The Teaching of St. John Cassian on the Eucharist and the Communion

Report of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, Rector of the Ss. Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate Studies, Chairman of the Biblical-Theological Commission, at the Conference on "St. John Cassian and the Monastic Tradition of Christian East and West"

Dear conference participants!

We have gathered today at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate Studies to discuss the spiritual legacy of a renowned religious writer – St. John Cassian the Roman.

This is the third patristics conference of the Institute for Post-Graduate Studies. The previous two were devoted to St. Isaac the Syrian and St. Symeon the New Theologian. We are pleased to offer to the conference participants' attention a collection of works from the first conference published in Russian by the Post-Graduate Studies Institute and in English by the largest American Orthodox publishing house St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. A collection from the conference on St. Symeon is now in preparation for print.

The study of the heritage of the holy fathers is a priority for our Institute and for all Orthodox theological scholarship. We have invited to our conferences the best specialists in each of the authors studied so that their heritage can be presented as fully as possible. From the very beginning we decided to move along three directions – Oriental, Greek and Latin. The Syrian author was the first followed by the Greek one, and now the turn of Latin has come. And if we keep up this pace, then next year, with God's help, we will hold a conference on St. Ephraim the Syrian, an author who has exerted a significant influence on the development of Orthodox theology and liturgical poetry.

And so, at the centre of our attention today is St. John Cassian, whose name is known not only in the Latin West, where he lived and laboured, but also in the Orthodox East.

In my talk I would like to take a look at the teaching of St. John Cassian on the Eucharist and the communion of the holy mysteries of Christ. This topic remains practically unstudied in the vast scholarly literature devoted to this saint**[1]**. Researchers have passed over this topic in silence, considering unworthy of thorough examination unlike, for example, the works of St. Symeon the New Theologian, who devoted dozens of pages to the Eucharist. However, Cassian's thoughts on holy communion are

not fortuitous mentions lost among the stories of Egyptian ascetics or the teachings of a general ascetic nature.

The saint's teaching on the Eucharist ought to be looked at from two perspectives: the synchronic – in the context of the spread of monasticism in the Christian West and overwhelmed by the Pelagian disputes, and the diachronic - by defining the place of St. John Cassian's teaching in the patristic tradition of eucharistic theology.

An analysis of the body of the works of St. John Cassian on the topic of the use in them of the terms *dominica/sacra / sacrosancta communio* and *perceptio* (*sacramentorum*) demonstrates that all of his theologically important considerations on the Eucharist are contained mainly in the *Conferences*. They unfold as a discussion on an occasion connected with the very specific question of pastoral practice, responsibility for the resolution of which could not be assumed by every spiritual guide. This concerns the communion of those possessed by demons. St. Cassian takes the view that being possessed by unclean forces is permitted to sinners as a 'humbling temptation' (*temptationis humiliatio*) which leads to their cleansing and perfection. Abba Herman, one of the participants in the *Conferences*, in reply to this viewpoint advances the following objection: if demonic possession is sent providentially, then why are people not only afraid of and despise the possessed, but also why are they denied holy communion? Herman refers to the practice accepted in Egypt and remarks that is can be justified by the words of the Saviour: 'Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine' (Mt 7:6).

The words of Matthew 7:6 have a very ancient tradition of eucharistic commentary: they were testified to in the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. These words were linked to the impossibility of communing people not belonging to the Christian community: 'Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist apart from those baptized in the name of the lord. For the Lord said, “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs.”**[2]**

The practice mentioned by Herman at first glance continues the same tradition; however, St. Cassian points towards the fact that it does not fully correspond to the eucharistic consciousness of the Church. If heretics do not belong to the body of the Church, then the possessed, whom we are speaking

of, are by contrast her suffering members. To deprive them of communion would mean not only to demonstrate a lack of mercy unworthy of a Christian, but also to destroy the eucharistic unity of the Church. St. Cassian decisively points out that 'without them, as her members, we cannot be fully perfected, as we read that our forefathers without us could not attain the fullness of that which was promised, as the apostle says of them: “And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not

be made perfect” (Eph 11:39-40).”'

Thus, the saint relates the words of the apostle, spoken about the Old Testament righteous, to members of the Church, which many were prepared to recognize as outcast. All of the Church's members, who have not separated from her through their own free will, comprise a single whole, and the Eucharist is the pledge of this unity. It is precisely for this reason, according to the saint, that it would be wrong to forbid the possessed communion, but, on the contrary, they should definitely be allowed to receive communion: 'Let us recall that holy communion was not forbidden them by our elders; on the contrary, they believed that if possible they should be given it every day (*cotidie*)'.**[3]**

In justifying the necessity for such a radical measure – for, as we shall show later, even the monks received communion far more rarely – St. Cassian goes from the ecclesiological aspect of the Eucharist to the ascetic aspect. He describes the effect of the holy mysteries on the human person: 'When received, it (holy communion – M.H.), like a consuming flame, drives the spirit that has taken up abode in his members or has hidden there. We recently saw that by these means the abba Andronicus and many others were healed. For the enemy will attack even more on the one he has possessed, when he sees that he has been cut off from the heavenly healing, and with greater evil and more frequently will torment him the longer he will be removed from spiritual healing'.

Here St. Cassian uses the concept of the 'heavenly/spiritual' ('healing'), *caelestis medicina/spiritale remedium*, which without exaggeration may be called central to an understanding of the Eucharist. This concept leads him to think beyond the confines of individual ascetic questions, discussed in the *Conferences*, for the notion that the Eucharist is medicine presumes all who partake of it are in needing of healing.

Both aspects, the ascetic and the ecclesiological, are treated by St. Cassian together in one and the same context. The Eucharist is essential to every Christian, for it unites those who believe in Christ into a single Body of Christ; is essential to everyone, for all have a need of healing. The meaning of the Eucharist as spiritual medicine not only reminds every person of his own infirmity, but also obliges the members of the Church to show compassion for each other.

The concept of 'heavenly medicine' in St. Cassian has its nearest meaningful and lexical parallel in the works of the holy martyr Ignatius the God-bearer, who called the Eucharist the *pharmakon athanasias*, the 'medicine of immortality'.**[4]** This name for the Eucharist is repeated many times in the subsequent patristic tradition. In the third century the expression 'medicine of immortality' (*pharmakon athanasia*) is used by Clement of Alexandria,**[5]** in the fourth century in the so called Euchologion of St. Serapion of Thmuis the Eucharist is called the 'medicine of life' (*pharmakon zois*).**[6]** In the same century in the *Apocritica*, ascribed to St. Macarius of Magnesia and an apology for the Church's teaching on the

communion of the body and blood of Christ, the Eucharist is called the 'medicine of the Divinity' (*pharmakon tis Theotitos*). The term 'medicine' in relation to the Holy Gifts is used also by St. Gregory the Theologian.**[7]** St. Ephraim the Syrian plays with the ambiguity of the Syriac word *samma*, which means both 'medicine' as well as 'poison',**[8]** when speaking of the Eucharist as medicine which can be poison for those who partake unworthily.**[9]** In the Macarian Corpus a similar dual image is presented in another key: the Eucharist as medicine abolishing the sinful poison, while this medicine is found in the poisoned body of Adam – the body which the Saviour assumed.**[10]**

At the very sources of the Church's teaching on the Eucharist we see the same unity of asceticism and ecclesiology that we find in St. Cassian. The holy martyr Ignatius the God-bearer in the aforementioned context from the Epistle to the Ephesians makes an unbreakable mutual connection between the action of the Eucharist as the medicine of immortality and its ecclesiological meaning as the pledge of the unity of the community: '...in another letter I shall reveal the divine economy regarding the new person of Jesus Christ... If the Lord reveals to me that *all of you until a single man, without exception, are united by the grace of God in one faith and in Jesus Christ* who came in the flesh from the line of David, the Son of Man and the Son of God, then submit to the bishop and priesthood in perfect unity of mind, *breaking the one bread*, this *healing of immortality not only protecting you from death, but also granting life in Jesus Christ*'.**[11]**

In St. Cassian, however, the accent in his ecclesiological interpretation of the Eucharist is placed on a call to compassion: Christians as members of a single body of the Church should not break eucharistic communion with their infirm brethren.

Both aspects of St. Cassian's concept of the Eucharist, the ascetic and the ecclesiological, form the basis for his teaching on frequent communion. Firstly, Christians are to think of themselves as infirm and in need of healing, and therefore are to strive to receive the 'heavenly medicine': 'And yet, we are not to remove ourselves from the Lord's communion because we are aware of ourselves as sinners; but *ever more frequently, with thirst we are to hasten to him* for the healing of soul and the purification of the spirit; however, with such humility and faith in order to regard ourselves as unworthy to receive this grace, we should all the more desire this medicine for our wounds'.**[12]**

Secondly, for this same reason Christians are to care for the frequent communion of those suffering members of the Church. The famous place in the seventh *Conference*, where St. John Cassian speaks of daily communion, is unique in the body of his writings. In the Russian translation of the *Conferences* there is the following mention of daily communion: '...It is far more proper for us with humility of heart, according to which we believe and confess that we can never be worthy to approach the holy mysteries, that every day we should take them for the healing of our infirmities rather than being moved by the vain conviction of the heart that in a year's time we are worthy of receiving them'.**[13]**

However, comparison with the original Latin text shows that here we are dealing with a translation error. In fact, St. Cassian says '*ut... singulis ea diminicis ob remedium nostrarum aegritudinum praesumamus*' – 'so that we may receive them every Sunday for the healing of our infirmities'. These words echo the well known monastic practice: thus, in the *Spiritual Meadow* we constantly encounter mentions of the custom of taking communion every Sunday.**[14]**

It is evident that St. Cassian in practice clashed with opponents of this custom who asserted that throughout the course of a week it was impossible to prepare oneself worthily for the reception of the holy mysteries and the monk is to receive communion only when he attains the appropriate level of spiritual perfection. St. Cassian saw in this viewpoint a dangerous spiritual temptation. How can a monk see that he has attained spiritual perfection? And can this perfection be such that that it is appropriate to the majesty of the Eucharist? Having allowed that he has sufficiently prepared for the communion of the holy mysteries, the monk will inevitably fall into a state of pride. By contrast, the saint contends, an awareness that for the sick person the Eucharist is spiritual medicine leads the Christian into a state of humility. It is far better to receive the holy mysteries as a sick man receives medicine than to perceive the Eucharist as a spiritual reward for ascetic labours accomplished: 'Otherwise once a year it is impossible to receive communion worthily, as some do, who, living in monasteries, the dignity, holiness and beneficence of the heavenly mysteries evaluate in believing that only the holy, those without stain, are worthy to receive them. It would be better to believe that these sacraments, through the communicating of grace, make us pure and holy. They rather express pride than humility as it seems to them; for when they receive them they believe themselves to be worthy to receive them'.**[15]**

These thoughts concern not only ascetic practice. They are directly linked to the theological disputes, an active participant of which was St. John Cassian. The assertion that not a single person can, through his own efforts, attain that measure of holiness to be made worthy of communion, was directed straight against the concept of Pelagius. Above we pointed out that in the thirteenth *Conference* St. John Cassian conducted a polemic against Pelagianism, as against the excesses of St. Augustine's teaching on grace. Here, in the twenty-second and twenty-third *Conferences*, in connection with the problem of the Eucharist John Cassian renews his polemic with new force, asserting that even with great will power the human person cannot be free from arbitrary sin: 'Nobody who is clothed with this corruptible flesh can receive this holy food according to his own merits, but only by the unmerited grace of God... Nobody in the struggle with this world can be so circumspect that he has not been wounded by the rare or light arrows of sin, for it is impossible that a man cannot sin either in ignorance or lack of zeal, or by lack of seriousness in thought, or by distraction, or by absentmindedness, or by some need or by forgetfulness. If someone has reached the heights of virtue, he must however know that he cannot be without sin'.**[16]**

In this connection we find interesting St. Cassian's thoughts on the concept of 'holiness'. In defining it, the saint in fact appeals to the Old Testament understanding of holiness: 'To be holy... means to be devoted to the veneration of God (*divino cultui consecratum*). For this name, according to Scripture, is not only common to people, but also to places, the temple vessels and fire grates'.**[17]** In other words, 'to be holy' is to be at a distance from the profane and unclean. With this definition we can understand the call 'to be consecrated' before the epiphany on Sinai, addressed to the Israelites (Ex. 19:10, also 19:14-15), and the fact that the priests and Levites 'sanctified themselves to bring up the ark of the Lord God of Israel' (1 Chr. 15:14).
But why does St. Cassian expound here the Old Testament concept of holiness by which it is difficult to see a principle difference between the holiness of people and the holiness of sacred vessels? Because those who believe that it is possible to prepare for communion in the proper manner adduce precisely this concept.

The Christian understanding of holiness, on the contrary, presumes the inner transformation of the human person. And here we are dealing with the opposite dependence: it is not holiness that becomes the condition for receiving the Eucharist, but the Eucharist becomes the condition for attaining holiness, for the inner transformation of the human person is impossible without communion. Each person, for all his endeavours, cannot be free from sin and 'to be without sin... befits solely the majesty of our Lord Jesus Christ'.**[18]**

As we come to understand this, the 'Old Testament' approach to the communion of the holy mysteries turns out to be impossible. The holy mysteries are not a sacred object, contact with which requires purification beforehand. Communion is always dialogical; it is the living call of the Living God, whom the Christian dares to receive in the holy gifts, a call demanding a response. The one who does not hear this call and is not ready to respond to it receives communion 'not discerning the body and blood of Christ'.

In calling for frequent communion, St. Cassian was an apologist of a Church tradition well known both in the East and in the West. The early Christians received communion at every Eucharistic gathering in which they participated; moreover, there existed the practice of keeping the holy gifts at home and of receiving communion privately. This practice is mentioned by Tertullian. Clement of Alexandria speaks of how Christ daily nourishes the Christian by giving himself to him as bread and the drink of immortality.**[19]** In the fourth century Nilus of Sinai wrote: 'Abstain from all that is corrupt and each day receive communion at the divine supper, for in this manner the body of Christ becomes our own'.**[20]** St.

Basil the Great wrote: 'It is good and very beneficial each day to take communion and receive the body and blood of Christ... However, we may receive communion four times each week: on the Lord's day, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, as well on other days when we venerate the memory of a saint'.**[21]** According to the eighth Apostolic Rule, those who do not receive communion for a long time without good reason were excommunicated from the Church. Tertullian and St. Augustine understood the words of the Lord's prayer 'give us this day our daily bread' to mean daily communion.**[22]**

Not only in early Christian period, but also in later times many saints called for frequent communion. In the eleventh century St. Symeon the New Theologian taught of the necessity of receiving communion daily with tears. In the latter half of the eighteenth century St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and St. Macarius of Corinth wrote a *Book on the Benefit for the Soul of Unceasing Communion of the Holy Mysteries of Christ*, a work which has not lost its relevance to this day.

The teaching on frequent communion inevitably leads to the question of unworthy reception of the holy mysteries. If St. John Cassian conducts a polemic with those who insisted on the need for a lengthy preparation for communion, and recommends that we should receive communion as often as possible, then what are we to do about those who approach the Eucharist with a lack of seriousness?

In the first instance, St. Cassian points to the dual effect of the Eucharist: it can not only give healing, but also can cause illness and even death for those who partake unworthily. The saint illustrates this thought with a quotation from the Book of Leviticus with regard to Old Testament sacrifices: 'And the flesh that toucheth any unclean thing shall not be eaten; it shall be burnt with fire: and as for the flesh, all that be clean shall eat thereof. But the soul that eateth of the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings, that pertain unto the Lord, having his uncleanness upon him, even that soul shall be cut off from his people' (Lev. 7: 19 - 20). The Eucharistic interpretation of this quote is particular indicative as the Book of Leviticus was the subject of early Christian commentators' attention, while most of the well known commentaries on the book on the whole, as on separate verses, have an allegorical intention. Here St. Cassian takes the words 'the soul shall be cut off from his people' literally, as a punishment by death for those who unworthily approach the New Testament sacrifice, the natural consequence of someone taking the 'heavenly medicine' in an unworthy manner.

It may seem that St. John Cassian may be guilty of contradiction, and indeed Theonas, one of the participants in the *Conferences*, explicitly points this out: in one place St. Cassian speaks of how there is no a single person free from sin, and the Eucharist has to be taken for healing; here he is contending that only the pure can receive communion. If only the holy can partake of the holy mysteries, but the human person is unable to be fully liberated from sin and is in need of heavenly medicine, then how is it possible to receive it?

A way out of this difficulty is shown by the saint himself, and it is tied to the ability of the human person to evaluate his condition and his actions. One cannot but sin, but one can be aware of one's sin and recognize oneself to be a sinner. This awareness in itself does not cleanse the human person, but it is this which opens up the person for that transformation which the Eucharist accomplishes in him. First of all, so that the 'heavenly medicine' has a saving effect, the human person must realize that he needs healing. Further, even in recognizing his sinful nature, the person may misunderstand the call not to refuse communion in all instances. This incorrect understanding may have the consequence that the sinner will perceive the partaking of that which is holy as his due. It is precisely in this way that St. Cassian understands the words 'not discerning the body and blood of Christ'.

At the same time, the 'heavenly medicine' as before will still be effective, and the results of this action Cassian describes in both medicinal and judicial terms. Firstly, they are likened to the effects of incorrect use of medicine: the person becomes drowsy, falling asleep with the 'sleep of sin, and from this fatal falling asleep he cannot be wakened into saving concern'**[23]** (here we cannot but recall the double meaning of both the Greek word *pharmakon* and the Syriac *samma*, which the fathers of the Eastern Church drew attention to). Secondly, healing from sin, which is given in the Eucharist, is preceded by judgment upon it. But this judgment can be brought by the human person, and then communion will be for the purification of sins. If the person has not judged himself, then judgment comes from God.

St. Cassian delineates two stages of this judgment: in this age and the age to come. Judgment in this age consists of the afflictions sent by God to bring the indifferent to reason and to arouse him from the 'sleep of sin'. If the human person does not change his life, then judgment and punishment in the age to come awaits him. This is how St. Cassian understands the words of St. Paul: 'For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged' (1Cor. 11:31).

These thoughts of St. John Cassian are remarkably echoed in the commentary by St. Symeon the New Theologian on the liturgical exclamation 'the holy things are for the holy': 'So, then? He who is not holy is unworthy? Far from it! But he who does not confess daily the mysteries of his heart, he who does not repent of them... he who does not continually weep... is unworthy. And he who does all of this and lives his life in wailing and tears is completely worthy not only on feast days, but also every day, although it is bold to say, to be in communion with these divine mysteries from his very first repentance and conversion'.**[24]**

This echo is all the more remarkable in that St. Symeon's attitude towards unworthy communion is the

opposite of that of the double effect of the Eucharist as expounded by St. Cassian. St. Symeon says that those who take communion without spiritual contemplation nourish only their bodies and not their souls, and he even asserts that he who unworthily receives the Eucharist 'partakes of mere bread, and not God at the same time'.**[25]** Another radical conclusion of St. Symeon are the words that the person cannot receive communion until he has attained holiness. However, an analysis of his utterances on this topic**[26]** make it obvious that St. Symeon was speaking primarily of people who had not repented and as an alternative was examining not the absence of sin in the person but the sincere awareness of sin and contrition over it.

In his teaching on the Eucharist St. John Cassian comes over, first of all, as an organizer of monastic life. All of the aspects of eucharistic theology that he examined are from the beginning tied to concrete practical issues of how often should monks receive communion. How should the father confessor resolve the question of the worthy or unworthy communion of the monk? Nonetheless the resolution of these problems always leads St. Cassian into the realm of general theological questions.

The measure of all of his deliberations, the criterion for evaluating all of the opinions he has examined, is the notion of the Church as the body of Christ, the spiritual and inner pledge of the unity of which is the Holy Eucharist. All of his thoughts are based on an attentive reading of Scripture, of both the Old and New Testament. In this regard St. John Cassian may serve as an example for both pastors striving to make a reality the eucharistic consciousness of the Church in their parishes, and for Orthodox theologians aiming to bring to our contemporaries the Church's teaching on the sacraments.

[1] We will confine ourselves to one telling example: Casiday in his fundamental monograph on Cassian’s theology (Casiday, Tradition and Theology in St. John Cassian, Oxford, 2007) does not even mention the Eucharist.

[2] Didache 9,5

[3] John Cassian, Conferences 7,30

[4] Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 20.

[5] Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, 10, 106, 2

[6] Zheltov, M., 'The Eucharist. Part 1. The Eucharist in the early Church' in *The Orthodox Encyclopedia* (in Russian), Vol. 17.

[7] Gregory the Theologia, *Homily* 8, 18.

[8] We note that the Greek *pharmakon* can mean both 'medicine' and 'poison'

[9] Ephraim the Syrian, *On Unleavened Bread*, 16, 5.

[10] Macarius the Great, *Spiritual Discourses* (second collection) 2, 12, 6.

[11] Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 20. My italics (author).

[12] John Cassian, *Conferences*, 23, 21. My italics (authors).

[13] John Cassian, *Conferences*, 23, 21.

[14] However, St. John Cassian in another place mentions the practice of communion on Saturdays and Sundays (*Institutes,* 3, 2). See also: Chadwick, *John Cassian: A Study in Primitive Monasticism* (Cambridge, 1950), p. 66.

[15] John Cassian, *Conferences*, 23, 21.

[16] John Cassian, *Conferences*, 22, 9.

[17] John Cassian, *Conferences*, 22, 9.

[18] John Cassian, *Conferences*, 22, 9.

[19] Clement of Alexandria, *How The Rich Is Saved*, 23, 4.

[20] Nilus of Sinal, *Admonitions*, 94.

[21] Basil the Great, *Epistle* 93.

[22] Tertullian, *On the Lord's Prayer,* 6; Augustine, *On the Sermon on the Mount*, 2, 26.

[23] John Cassian, *Conferences*, 22, 5.

[24] Symeon the New Theologian, *Catechetical Homily*, 4, 604-616.

[25] Symeon the New Theologian, *Catechetical Homily*, 10, 760-764.

[26] Symeon the New Theologian, Epistle 2, 106-128. See: Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), *Symeon the New Theologian and the Orthodox Tradition* (Moscow, 2013) (in Russian), pp. 111-114.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/49981/