

## ON THE MEANING OF COMMUNION

by Lester J. Start

Undated

In the celebration of the Lord's Supper the Christian gives expression to the deepest mystery of his faith, his relationship to God through Christ. The mystery appears all the more profound and meaningful, however, as we meditate upon the meaning of communion in general, think on what it means to have communion one with another.

Communion means literally the act of making common. The words common and communion, and other related terms such as communicate, come from the same Latin root which means common. The relationship between the terms is clearly this: we have communion one with another; we can communicate one with another, only as we hold something in common.

The reason for this is obvious. Human personalities are not objects to be directly sensed. or apprehended.. No one can ever see into another man's mind directly. We know what another is thinking only by his actions or his words. We can communicate only by agreeing upon the meanings of words and concepts, which stand between the two in communication as some third thing. We commune with another in the deepest sense only as we agree upon our devotion to some third thing which lies outside and between us. The only way for two minds to come together is through a common agreement upon or devotion to some other thing.

That is why we say it is so important for people to have things in common. People who are to live together in a deep communion such as marriage can be truly united only as they agree upon fundamental values. This explains too why marriages between people of the same general background-social, economic, and. religious - are infinitely more successful than those between people of different faiths and different backgrounds. There is a better chance of communion.

The same thing is illustrated in other human relationships. Aristotle in his famous study of ethics analyzed the bases for human friendship. He found three: pleasure, utility, and what he called love of virtue in the friend. The first, pleasure, is the motive behind making passing acquaintances. We like some people simply because they are fun to be with or give us pleasure in some other way. Other friendships are made through the cool calculation of the utilitarian motive. We cultivate those who might be of some service to us. Neither of these can be said to be the basis of true friendship. True friendship, says Aristotle, arises from a mutual love of virtue in the friend. We attest to this when we say of a dear friend that we love him for what he is or what he represents. True friendship, then, is also communion, the deep communion in which two people are joined by their mutual love of an ideal, be it kindness, wisdom, or integrity which each cherishes. The deepest communion between people comes when they are united by devotion to the highest ideal. This is the secret or mystery behind the great examples of friendship and comradeship, and the source of their strength.

Is not all this tremendously important for our understanding of the highest communion of which we are capable, the communion which unites us at the Lord's Supper? For it is here that we as men come to commune with God. We cannot do it directly. "No man can see God and live." We

commune with God through some third agency common to both God and us—we commune through Christ Jesus in whom the Word of God was made flesh, who as the Son of God took the form of man so that man could come to God through Him.

The nature of this communion is beautifully illustrated by Kierkegaard in terms of a fairy story with theological implications. Imagine, he tells us, a great and good king, monarch over all he surveys. Everything is in his empire. And then imagine this king out riding one day when he meets a beautiful peasant girl. He falls deeply in love, and wants her for his own. But in his wisdom he knows this cannot be. There can be no easy Cinderella happy ending. Their worlds are too far apart. Were he to raise her to his estate, she could not be happy and at ease. She would think he loved not the simple peasant girl, but some other creature she could never become. Then, too, he would never know whether she loved his goodness or his power. And yet the king in his deep love cannot leave her alone and desolate. He must come to her and win her love. There is only one way to do this. He takes on the rags of a beggar and comes to her as one as lowly as she.

The theological parallels are clear. God is the great monarch and mankind the simple peasant girl whom He loves. But how can He show it? It would be far easier for the king in the story to elevate the peasant girl than for God to raise man to His level. And yet He cannot deny the love and leave us desolate. This is why He took the form of a servant and dwelt among us and showed us His love and awakened our own. We can come to the love of God, however, only through the form of the servant.

As we come to the Lord's table and partake of the elements in this service of Communion, let us remember what it means to commune with God. We can commune with Him only as we unite in a common love and devotion to Christ, who stands between God and us. Let us remember the words of Jesus: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me."