

## THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 7, 2021

EXODUS 20:1-17 | PSALM 19 | 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25 | JOHN 2:13-22

We're continuing this week with some reflections on the meaning of the Eucharist. And I want to start this week by going back in time to the most important event you've probably never heard of: the Fourth Lateran Council convened by Pope Innocent III in 1215. This was an enormous meeting with church authorities and political ambassadors from all across Europe that set down new rules and norms and regulations for the medieval church and its vast domain. And it's of particular interest to us because when the Lutheran reformation blew up three hundred years later, it was largely in response to the culture, doctrines, and rules created by this conference.<sup>1</sup>

It's surprisingly interesting to go back and read through the list of regulations they came up with.<sup>2</sup> As you might expect, some of them reflect an environment impossibly far removed from our own context. *Canon 22. Clerics may neither pronounce nor execute a sentence of death.* Some of them sound like good ideas that I might start enforcing here. *Canon 19. Household goods must not be stored in churches.* And some of them are so terrible they make you cringe at what's coming. *Canon 68. Jews... must be distinguished from the Christian by a difference of dress.*<sup>3</sup>

Some of the rules are mundane but suggest an intriguing problem the church is dealing with. And it's one of those that I want to get into today. *Canon 21. Everyone who has attained the age of reason is bound to confess his sins at least once a year... and to receive the Eucharist at least at Easter.* If you read between the lines, you can parse out something interesting here. If you went to Western Europe in the twelfth century, you would find lots of faithful, prayerful, generous Christians, people who were by every indication true believers who wanted to be in good standing with the church and in good relations with God. But they did not want to receive communion. The obvious question is why?

To answer that question, it helps to go back to today's Hebrew Bible reading. This is the story of the covenant God forms with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. The Israelites have been rescued from slavery in Egypt, they've traveled out into the wilderness, and now God brings them together as a new, different, type of community in the world. They're brought out of slavery and into freedom. And that freedom is formed through these famous commandments.

These commandments aren't just guardrails meant to keep society from devolving into Lord of the Flies. They're meant to order society in a way that reflects the character of God. So that when you encounter life in this group of people, you glean something about what their loving, liberating, and life-giving God is like. How do you know these are the people of God? How do you know they are in a covenant with God? Because they don't worship any other gods. They don't take the Lord's name in vain. They don't murder. They don't steal. Etc. Etc.

If the commandments are just meant to keep order, that's all fine and good. But if the commandments are meant to help the people reflect the character of God, that's going to be a problem. Because the standard for keeping the commandments isn't just at not killing people. The standard is treating them the way God does.

If you've ever read Luther's comments on the Ten Commandments *Small Catechism*, you know that he makes a similar move by shifting from commandments as guardrails to commandments as vocation.<sup>4</sup> And he does it by placing all these commandments in a positive light.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the doctrine of transubstantiation was made official church teaching at Lateran IV.

<sup>2</sup> Full text at "Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215," accessed March 2, 2021, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/lateran4.asp>.

<sup>3</sup> For more background, see James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 282.

<sup>4</sup> *ELW* p. 1160.

Not just rules, but an ethic that forms our entire lives. And when you do that, when you try to actually be shaped by them rather than just not flagrantly break them, it gets much harder. Not just “You shall have no other gods,” but we are to “fear, love and trust God above all things.” Not just “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” but that you “come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”

If these commandments are just about being a reasonably upstanding member of society, basically just pay your taxes, put out the recycling on time, and don’t kill anyone, then I’m doing alright. But if these are meant to order my life, if these are meant to help me reflect the love of God, I’m not doing great. I don’t make wrongful use of the Lord’s name, but I make sure to sign an email with “Reverend” when I need a favor from someone. I don’t steal from others, but I don’t think much about the working conditions of the people who harvest the food I eat. I don’t kill, but when someone makes a prejudiced comment in conversation, I often say nothing. I don’t bear false witness against my neighbor, but I view everything they do in the way that’s most favorable to me and just reinforces what I already think about them, which is often not particularly kind. Coveting other people’s homes on Zillow is probably the least of my problems.

And that brings us back around to those twelfth century believers who prayed and served but didn’t want to take communion. Their actions probably seem strange at first glance (*We love communion! We gotta have it! Why didn’t they want to take communion?*), but they understood something important. Which is that if you have to achieve your salvation or behave your way to God, you’re never going to get there. That if the metric for whether you are worthy to receive the body of Christ is whether your life perfectly reflects the love of God, you should probably just stay in the pew.

But they only believed that because the church around them misunderstood something very important about communion. It’s something Luther got. And there’s another sign of that in today’s reading from Exodus. Before the rules, before the laws, God says something else. “I am your God.” That no matter what happens in the wilderness and in the future, God will be God *for them*. God will not be God if they meet a certain standard or if they keep a certain set of rules. But God will be God. I am who I am.

People often say that God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath. Which is true as long as you don’t actually read much of the Old Testament. But when you read the Israelites’ history with God, you discover that it’s usually the people of God who are the wrathful ones. But whenever they stray from God’s promises or confuse salvation with their own comfort, God shows up again and again and again to bring people back into their covenant. God is challenging, sure. But God is relentlessly nurturing. No matter what the people do, God is their God.

And that word, “I am your God,” is the same word God speaks here at table. That apart from our actions, God is still God for us. The reason we come to this table is not because we are good people whose lives reflect the lovingkindness of God, but because we know that they often don’t. As the author of our Lenten book puts it, “We take Holy Communion not because we are doing well, but because we are doing badly.”<sup>5</sup> That’s why it’s good news that Christ eats with sinners and tax collectors. Because that means that Christ is at table with people like you and me.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 53.

<sup>6</sup> There’s actually been an interesting example of this in the news recently in how Catholic bishops are dealing with having a Catholic President. And there’s been all this sniping between bishops about President Biden should be able to receive communion even though he supports abortion rights. When this argument gets picked up in the mainstream press, it’s usually in terms of Catholic social teaching on abortion and Roe v. Wade. But that’s not really what they’re arguing about. They’re really arguing about whether communion is something that you are given when you are doing well or whether communion is something you are given when you are falling short. Is communion the end of our life of faith? Or is it the beginning? Obviously, Lutheran and Catholic teaching on reproductive rights are divergent,

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We encounter God here at table just like the Israelites encountered God at Sinai. Not as an end, but as a beginning. Not as a reward, but as a foundation. Not as an achievement, but as a blessing. So that even as we journey through the wilderness, we too might walk in newness of life.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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but the beliefs about communion are the relevant thing here. See Emma Green, “A Catholic Sinner Seeks Communion—And Happens to Be President,” *The Atlantic*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/02/joe-biden-catholic-communion-abortion/618067/>. “DC’s Wilton Gregory, First African American Cardinal, on Joe Biden, Race and COVID-19,” *Religion News Service* (blog), December 11, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2020/12/11/cardinal-wilton-gregory-on-joe-biden-race-and-covid-19/>.

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