

Letter 54: To Januarius

Augustine of Hippo

Patristic · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Letter

STROMATA 193

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INTRODUCTION

In this letter to the layman Januarius, Augustine works through a set of practical questions about liturgical custom, whether to fast before receiving the Eucharist, what to do about the timing of Holy Thursday's rites, why some churches fast on Saturday and others don't. His answer isn't a ruling but a method: distinguish what Scripture and universal practice require from what varies by place, and where practice varies, follow the custom of the church you're in rather than import your own. The oft-quoted advice from Ambrose - fast in Rome, don't fast in Milan - comes from here. A short, practical letter, useful for thinking about unity amid local difference.

To His Beloved Son Januarius, Augustine Sends Greeting in the Lord.

Chapter 1

- In regard to the questions which you have asked me, I would like to have known what your own answers would have been; for thus I might have made my reply in fewer words, and might most easily confirm or correct your opinions, by approving or amending the answers which you had given. This I would have greatly preferred. But desiring to answer you at once, I think it better to write a long letter than incur loss of time. I desire you therefore, in the first place, to hold fast this as the fundamental principle in the present discussion, that our Lord Jesus Christ has appointed to us a light yoke and an easy burden, as He declares in the Gospel: Matthew 11:30 in accordance with which He has bound His people under the new dispensation together in fellowship by sacraments, which are in number very few, in observance most easy, and in significance most excellent, as baptism solemnized in the name of the Trinity, the communion of His body and blood, and such other things as are prescribed in the canonical Scriptures, with the exception of those enactments which were a yoke of bondage to God's ancient people, suited to their state of heart and to the times of the prophets, and which are found in the five books of Moses. As to those other things which we hold on the authority, not of Scripture, but of tradition, and which are observed throughout the whole world, it may be understood that they are held as approved and instituted either by the apostles themselves, or by plenary Councils, whose authority in the Church is most useful, e.g. the annual commemoration, by special solemnities, of the Lord's passion, resurrection, and

ascension, and of the descent of the Holy Spirit from heaven, and whatever else is in like manner observed by the whole Church wherever it has been established.

Chapter 2

- There are other things, however, which are different in different places and countries: e.g., some fast on Saturday, others do not; some partake daily of the body and blood of Christ, others receive it on stated days: in some places no day passes without the sacrifice being offered; in others it is only on Saturday and the Lord's day, or it may be only on the Lord's day. In regard to these and all other variable observances which may be met anywhere, one is at liberty to comply with them or not as he chooses; and there is no better rule for the wise and serious Christian in this matter, than to conform to the practice which he finds prevailing in the Church to which it may be his lot to come. For such a custom, if it is clearly not contrary to the faith nor to sound morality, is to be held as a thing indifferent, and ought to be observed for the sake of fellowship with those among whom we live.
- I think you may have heard me relate before, what I will nevertheless now mention. When my mother followed me to Milan, she found the Church there not fasting on Saturday. She began to be troubled, and to hesitate as to what she should do; upon which I, though not taking a personal interest then in such things, applied on her behalf to Ambrose, of most blessed memory, for his advice. He answered that he could not teach me anything but what he himself practised, because if he knew any better rule, he would observe it himself. When I supposed that he intended, on the ground of his authority alone, and without supporting it by any argument, to recommend us to give up fasting on Saturday, he followed me, and said: When I visit Rome, I fast on Saturday; when I am here, I do not fast. On the same principle, do you observe the custom prevailing in whatever Church you come to, if you desire neither to give offense by your conduct, nor to find cause of offense in another's. When I reported this to my mother, she accepted it gladly; and for myself, after frequently reconsidering his decision, I have always esteemed it as if I had received it by an oracle from heaven. For often have I perceived, with extreme sorrow, many disquietudes caused to weak brethren by the contentious pertinacity or superstitious vacillation of some who, in matters of this kind, which do not admit of final decision by the authority of Holy Scripture, or by the tradition of the universal Church or by their manifest good influence on manners raise questions, it may be, from some crotchet of their own, or from attachment to the custom followed in one's own country, or from preference for that which one has seen abroad, supposing that wisdom is increased in proportion to the distance to which men travel from home, and agitate these questions with such keenness, that they think all is wrong except what they do themselves.

#Chapter 3

- Some one may say, The Eucharist ought not to be taken every day. You ask, On what grounds? He answers, Because, in order that a man may approach worthily to so great a sacrament, he ought to choose those days upon which he lives in more special purity and self-restraint; for 'whosoever eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks judgment to himself.' 1 Corinthians 11:29 Another answers, Certainly; if the wound inflicted by sin and the violence of the soul's distemper be such

that the use of these remedies must be put off for a time, every man in this case should be, by the authority of the bishop, forbidden to approach the altar, and appointed to do penance, and should be afterwards restored to privileges by the same authority; for this would be partaking unworthily, if one should partake of it at a time when he ought to be doing penance, and it is not a matter to be left to one's own judgment to withdraw himself from the communion of the Church, or restore himself, as he pleases. If, however, his sins are not so great as to bring him justly under sentence of excommunication, he ought not to withdraw himself from the daily use of the Lord's body for the healing of his soul. Perhaps a third party interposes with a more just decision of the question, reminding them that the principal thing is to remain united in the peace of Christ, and that each should be free to do what, according to his belief, he conscientiously regards as his duty. For neither of them lightly esteems the body and blood of the Lord; on the contrary, both are contending who shall most highly honour the sacrament fraught with blessing. There was no controversy between those two mentioned in the Gospel, Zacchæus and the Centurion; nor did either of them think himself better than the other, though, whereas the former received the Lord joyfully into his house, Luke 19:6 the latter said, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof, Matthew 8:8 — both honouring the Saviour, though in ways diverse and, as it were, mutually opposed; both miserable through sin, and both obtaining the mercy they required. We may further borrow an illustration here, from the fact that the manna given to the ancient people of God tasted in each man's mouth as he desired that it might. It is the same with this world-subduing sacrament in the heart of each Christian. For he that dares not take it every day, and he who dares not omit it any day, are both alike moved by a desire to do it honour. That sacred food will not submit to be despised, as the manna could not be loathed with impunity. Hence the apostle says that it was unworthily partaken of by those who did not distinguish between this and all other meats, by yielding to it the special veneration which was due; for to the words quoted already, eats and drinks judgment to himself, he has added these, not discerning the Lord's body; and this is apparent from the whole of that passage in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, if it be carefully studied.

Chapter 4

- Suppose some foreigner visit a place in which during Lent it is customary to abstain from the use of the bath, and to continue fasting on Thursday. I will not fast today, he says. The reason being asked, he says, Such is not the custom in my own country. Is not he, by such conduct, attempting to assert the superiority of his custom over theirs? For he cannot quote a decisive passage on the subject from the Book of God; nor can he prove his opinion to be right by the unanimous voice of the universal Church, wherever spread abroad; nor can he demonstrate that they act contrary to the faith, and he according to it, or that they are doing what is prejudicial to sound morality, and he is defending its interests. Those men injure their own tranquillity and peace by quarrelling on an unnecessary question. I would rather recommend that, in matters of this kind, each man should, when sojourning in a country in which he finds a custom different from his own consent to do as others do. If, on the other hand, a Christian, when travelling abroad in some region where the people of God are more numerous, and more easily assembled together, and more zealous in

religion, has seen, e.g., the sacrifice twice offered, both morning and evening, on the Thursday of the last week in Lent, and therefore, on his coming back to his own country, where it is offered only at the close of the day, protests against this as wrong and unlawful, because he has himself seen another custom in another land, this would show a childish weakness of judgment against which we should guard ourselves, and which we must bear with in others, but correct in all who are under our influence.

Chapter 5

- Observe now to which of these three classes the first question in your letter is to be referred. You ask, What ought to be done on the Thursday of the last week of Lent? Ought we to offer the sacrifice in the morning, and again after supper, on account of the words in the Gospel, 'Likewise also . . . after supper'? Luke 22:20 Or ought we to fast and offer the sacrifice only after supper? Or ought we to fast until the offering has been made, and then take supper as we are accustomed to do? I answer, therefore, that if the authority of Scripture has decided which of these methods is right, there is no room for doubting that we should do according to that which is written; and our discussion must be occupied with a question, not of duty, but of interpretation as to the meaning of the divine institution. In like manner, if the universal Church follows any one of these methods, there is no room for doubt as to our duty; for it would be the height of arrogant madness to discuss whether or not we should comply with it. But the question which you propose is not decided either by Scripture or by universal practice. It must therefore be referred to the third class — as pertaining, namely, to things which are different in different places and countries. Let every man, therefore, conform himself to the usage prevailing in the Church to which he may come. For none of these methods is contrary to the Christian faith or the interests of morality, as favoured by the adoption of one custom more than the other. If this were the case, that either the faith or sound morality were at stake, it would be necessary either to change what was done amiss, or to appoint the doing of what had been neglected. But mere change of custom, even though it may be of advantage in some respects, unsettles men by reason of the novelty: therefore, if it brings no advantage, it does much harm by unprofitably disturbing the Church.
- Let me add, that it would be a mistake to suppose that the custom prevalent in many places, of offering the sacrifice on that day after partaking of food, is to be traced to the words, Likewise after supper, etc. For the Lord might give the name of supper to what they had received, in already partaking of His body, so that it was after this that they partook of the cup: as the apostle says in another place, When ye come together into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's Supper, 1 Corinthians 11:20 giving to the receiving of the Eucharist to that extent (i.e. the eating of the bread) the name of the Lord's Supper.

Chapter 6

As to the question whether upon that day it is right to partake of food before either offering or partaking of the Eucharist, these words in the Gospel might go far to decide our minds, As they were eating, Jesus took bread and blessed it; taken in connection with the words in the preceding context, When the evening had come, He sat down with the twelve: and as they ate, He said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray Me. For it was after that that He instituted the sacrament; and it is clear that when the disciples first received the body and blood of the Lord, they had not been fasting.

- Must we therefore censure the universal Church because the sacrament is everywhere partaken of by persons fasting? Nay, verily, for from that time it pleased the Holy Spirit to appoint, for the honour of so great a sacrament, that the body of the Lord should take the precedence of all other food entering the mouth of a Christian; and it is for this reason that the custom referred to is universally observed. For the fact that the Lord instituted the sacrament after other food had

been partaken of, does not prove that brethren should come together to partake of that sacrament after having dined or supped, or imitate those whom the apostle reprov'd and corrected for not distinguishing between the Lord's Supper and an ordinary meal. The Saviour, indeed, in order to commend the depth of that mystery more affectingly to His disciples, was pleased to impress it on their hearts and memories by making its institution His last act before going from them to His Passion. And therefore He did not prescribe the order in which it was to be observed, reserving this to be done by the apostles, through whom He intended to arrange all things pertaining to the Churches. Had He appointed that the sacrament should be always partaken of after other food, I believe that no one would have departed from that practice. But when the apostle, speaking of this sacrament, says, Wherefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, tarry one for another: and if any man hunger, let him eat at home; that you come not together unto condemnation, he immediately adds, and the rest will I set in order when I come. 1 Corinthians 11:33-34 Whence we are given to understand that, since it was too much for him to prescribe completely in an epistle the method observed by the universal Church throughout the world, it was one of the things set in order by him in person, for we find its observance uniform amid all the variety of other customs.

Chapter 7

- There are, indeed, some to whom it has seemed right (and their view is not unreasonable), that it is lawful for the body and blood of the Lord to be offered and received after other food has been partaken of, on one fixed day of the year, the day on which the Lord instituted the Supper, in order to give special solemnity to the service on that anniversary. I think that, in this case, it would be more seemly to have it celebrated at such an hour as would leave it in the power of any who have fasted to attend the service before the repast which is customary at the ninth hour. Wherefore we neither compel nor do we dare to forbid any one to break his fast before the Lord's Supper on that day. I believe, however, that the real ground upon which this custom rests is, that many, nay, almost all, are accustomed in most places to use the bath on that day. And because some continue to fast, it is offered in the morning, for those who take food, because they cannot bear fasting and the use of the bath at the same time; and in the evening, for those who have fasted all day.
- If you ask me whence originated the custom of using the bath on that day, nothing occurs to me, when I think of it, as more likely than that it was to avoid the offense to decency which must have been given at the baptismal font, if the bodies of those to whom that rite was to be administered were not washed on some preceding day from the uncleanness consequent upon their strict abstinence from ablutions during Lent; and that this particular day was chosen for the purpose because of its being the anniversary of the institution of the Supper. And this being granted to those who were about to receive baptism, many others desired to join them in the luxury of a bath, and in relaxation of their fast.

Having discussed these questions to the best of my ability, I exhort you to observe, in so far as you may be able, what I have laid down, as becomes a wise and peace-loving son of the Church. The remainder of your questions I purpose, if the Lord will, to answer at another time.

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