

Pope St. Gregory the Great (+605)

Menstruation and Holy Communion: To St. Augustine of Canterbury, Enlightener of England

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A WOMAN SHOULD NOT BE FORBIDDEN to enter the Church during the times of her monthly period; for the workings of nature cannot be considered sinful, and it is not right that she should be refused admittance since her condition is beyond her control. We know that the woman who suffered an issue of blood, humbly approaching behind our Lord, touched the hem of his robe and was at once healed of her sickness. If, therefore, the woman was right to touch our Lord's robe, why may one who endures the workings of nature not be permitted to enter the church of God? And if it is objected that the woman in the Gospels was compelled by disease while these latter are bound by custom, then remember, my brother, that everything that we endure in this mortal body through the infirmity of its nature is justly ordained by God since the fall of man. For hunger, thirst, heat, cold and weariness originate in this infirmity of our nature; and our search for food against hunger, drink against thirst, coolness against heat, clothing against cold, and rest against weariness is only our attempt to obtain some remedy in our weakness. In this sense the menstrual flow in the woman is an illness. So if it was a laudable presumption of the woman who, in her disease, touched our Lord's robe, why may not the same concession be granted to all women who endure the weakness of their nature?

A woman, therefore, should not be forbidden to receive the Mystery of Communion at these times. If any, out of a deep sense of reverence, do not presume to do so, this is commendable. But if they do so, they do nothing blameworthy. Sincere people often acknowledge their faults even when there is no actual fault, because a blameless action may often spring from a fault. For instance, eating when we are hungry is no fault, yet being hungry (in our present way) originates in Adam's sin. Similarly, the monthly courses of women are no fault. They are caused by nature. But the defilement of our nature is apparent even when we have no deliberate intention to do evil, and this defilement springs from sin. So may we recognize the judgment which our sin brings

upon us. And so may people who sinned willingly bear the punishment of their sin unwillingly.

Therefore when women, after due consideration, do not presume to approach the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord during their monthly period, they are to be commended. But if they are moved by devout love of this Holy Mystery to receive it as pious practice suggests that they do, they are not to be discouraged. For while the Old Testament makes outward observances important, the New Testament does not regard these things as highly as the inward disposition, which is the sole criterion for allotting punishment. For instance, the Law forbids the eating of many things as unclean, but in the Gospel the Lord says: "Not that which goes into the mouth defiles a person, but that which comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." He also said, "Out of the mouth proceed evil thoughts" (See Mark 7:18-20). Here Almighty God shows clearly that evil actions spring from the root of evil thoughts. Similarly the apostle Paul says: "To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. And later he indicates the cause of their corruption, adding, "For their very minds and consciences are defiled" (Titus 1:15). If, therefore, no food is unclean to one of a pure mind, how can a woman who endures the laws of nature with a pure mind be considered impure?