A distinguishing aspect of Juan de Ávila’s ascetic spirituality was his emphasis on frequent communion. In his time there was no universal consensus regarding the practice of receiving the Eucharist on a daily or even weekly basis, and the practice remained controversial in Spain for most of Ávila’s lifetime. Yet, Ávila became an ardent advocate of frequent communion and his reforming zeal on this point had long lasting implications.

A comprehensive exposition of the history of frequent communion in Western Christianity is clearly beyond the limits of the present work. Nevertheless, it is crucial to place Juan de Ávila’s contribution on this subject within proper historical perspective. Moreover, as I surveyed a selection of sixteenth-century Spanish catechetical and devotional literature it became clear to me that a series of patristic and medieval texts played an important role in shaping the sixteenth-century Spanish debate over frequent communion. Hence, I concluded that it is crucial to identify these texts and disentangle their respective histories before we can properly assess Juan de Ávila’s position. It is also important to keep in mind that the essential question facing Juan de Ávila and other reformers of the period was the frequency with which the laity, not the clergy, could receive the Eucharist.

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Frequent Communion in New Testament and Patristic Sources

It is widely thought that the celebration of the Eucharist was frequent in the primitive church. However, it is not clear what kind of frequency New Testament communities observed. In the New Testament, texts such as Acts 20:6–11 seem to suggest that the Eucharist was celebrated every first day of the week. Yet these texts do not necessarily reflect the norm in early Christianity. In the second century, Justin Martyr (c. 100 – c. 165) describes weekly worship meetings consisting of, among other things, the celebration of the Eucharist.² By the third century Cyprian (d. 258) in his Liber de oratione dominica refers to the celebration of the Eucharist as a “daily” event (quotidie) and intimates that nonparticipation is tantamount to separation from the body of Christ.³

Ambrose’s De sacramentis became a very influential text in the subsequent history of frequent communion in the West. Like the relevant section in Cyprian’s Liber de oratione dominica, Ambrose (c. 339–397) addresses the frequency of the Eucharist in a brief comment on the Lord’s Prayer, specifically upon the supplication “give us this day our daily bread.”⁴ Ambrose questions the practice of receiving the Eucharist once a year. In a memorable dictum he concludes, “Receive daily, that which benefits you daily” (“Accipe quotidie, quod quotidie tibi prosit”). He continues with an exhortation to live life every day in such a way as to be worthy of receiving the Eucharist every day.⁵ Drawing upon the biblical image of Job and his daily sacrifices on behalf of his children, Ambrose argues that “whoever does not merit receiving it daily does not merit

³ “Hunc autem panem dari nobis quotidie postulamus, ne qui in Christo sumus et Eucharistiam quotidie ad cibum salutis accipimus, intercedente aliquo graviore delicto, dum abstenti et non communicantes a coelesti pane prohibemur, a Chrisi corpore separum.” Cyprian of Carthage, Liber de oratione Dominica, PL 4:531; Brown, De frequenti communione, pp. 11–12.
⁴ “Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie.” Ambrose, De Sacramentis libri sex, PL 16:452.
⁵ “Si quotidianus est panis, cur post annum illum sumis, quemadmodum Graeci in Oriente facere consuerunt. Accipe quotidie, quod quotidie tibi prosit. Sic vive, ut quotidia merearis accipere. Qui non meretur quotidie accipere, non meretur post annum accipere.” Ambrose, De Sacramentis libri sex, PL 16:452; Brown, De frequenti communione, p. 15.