

THE LITURGICAL PARISH

The Experiment at Saint Séverin

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THE gables of Saint-Séverin stand sentinel beside the Rue St Jacques as that historic artery of ancient France gains the Seine and the Ile de la Cité. Pilgrims passed by as they left for Campostella; the broad boulevard and the twisting streets of the old quartier are still the home of cosmopolitan youth flocking to the schools of Paris. Here in fact is a special welcome for them, for besides its native parish Saint-Séverin is charged especially with a mission to the university world of displaced youth struggling to keep body and soul together in a world of perpetual motion. A church with a history adapts itself more easily to broad and generous demands. And from the days of Séverin, a sixth-century south bank solitary, this church has a long history. Fulk preached the Fourth Crusade there; Dante prayed there in the thirteenth centuries; and if subsequently its fame declined somewhat, at least Huysmans at the end of the nineteenth century found the church ravishing and its Masses exquisite.

In 1947 something of a renaissance befell when Cardinal Suhard appointed the Abbé Connan to the parish of Saint-Séverin with a special mandate to revive and transform it into a church and community capable of 'welcoming' the students of the Latin Quarter. About the same time the Cardinal entrusted L'Hay-les-Roses to a Benedictine to establish a community capable of welcoming converts from the *Mission de Paris*. In each case the parish was to be given a chance to prove itself as a competent missionary instrument in the modern world. Here at Saint-Séverin, surprisingly enough, was to be a university chaplaincy within a parish, with the express aim of evangelizing youth from and within that authentic Christian unit. At both L'Hay and Saint-Séverin the development which has taken place has outstripped expectation. But as the specific task at Saint-Séverin differs, so does its missionary role, its methods, and its achievement.

In contrast to the relatively compact community of L'Hay, that of Saint-Séverin is widely dispersed. The student body constitutes a distinct element, a scattered *quartier*. They bring different needs, intellectual capacities, and possibly a deeper aptitude for liturgical participation. When they cease to be parishioners they carry away ideas of parochial realizations to the provinces and beyond the frontiers of France. Saint-Séverin is, further, a central parish. The function of

central parishes is becoming a special branch of religious sociological study. Modern conditions—dormitory residence, etc.—sometimes result in individuals being far more effectively attached to a city church than to their home parish. They are still bound to the latter by certain canonical obligations; up to a point their city parish ‘of election’ is a matter of grace and favour, but if this election becomes stable, then, it is alleged, a certain status and accompanying obligations are contracted. We can also add a still wider ‘parish of interest and influence’ stimulated by the printed matter emanating from Saint-Séverin. All this gives the mission of Saint-Séverin a special character which merits attention. But however remarkable the extent of the mission, it is its content which qualifies the parish as a ‘liturgical community’ *par excellence*.

This liturgical mission finds its foremost realization in the parish High Mass. Contrary to what takes place in the experimental parishes of the *banlieue*, it is solemn rubrically, as well as ideally. This is important, since at L’Hay and Colombes it seems to be agreed that the conventional High Mass is beyond the capacity of the parish. The young folk of Saint-Séverin on the contrary seem quite pleased to exchange their current fashions for white albs and take part in a function which would do credit to the highest of high churches. Without a shadow of doubt, at ceremonial Saint-Séverin excels. But it is far from being ceremony for its own sake; it is neither frilly nor archaic; it is not a ritual behind screens. In asserting the place for traditional ceremonies, sometimes in re-interpreting them; in adapting to the fulness of liturgical solemnity modes and actions dismissed in parishes where attention to dechristianized population has become a guiding principle, Saint-Séverin is compensating for this tendency to judge the traditional unprofitable and outmoded. But it has not always been easy to make our inherited treasure of liturgical signs simple, true and meaningful, to redistribute emphasis and readjust maladroit interpretations. The Catholic Church has always held that it is the Pontifical Mass which typifies the plenitude of Christian liturgy. Solemn Mass is based on Pontifical Mass; sung Masses and said Masses lose some of their meaning where reference to the original is overlooked or becomes impossible through disuse. The Directory for the Pastorate of the Mass issued by the French Bishops in 1957 drew attention to these points, emphasizing the significance of this solemnity of Christian worship and insisting that it should be maintained or restored.

Allied to this principle of solemnity is that of unity. One church, one community, one priest, one altar, one Mass was a primitive ideal, retaining to some extent a force of law in Eastern rites. It has long since ceased to be practical except in small communities. The integrity of

the parochial community was safeguarded until relatively modern times by confining the valid fulfilment of the Sunday obligation to the parish church. On the other hand, the extent to which not only the unity and solemnity but even the integrity of our principal common act of worship can be corrupted is illustrated by Catholic regions where preaching and the ministry of sacraments, not to mention public devotions, are carried on regardless while a succession of extremely private Masses is said at the altar—or altars. A traditional English parish with some liturgical tradition may retain a High Mass, but it is almost certainly the least attended. When people profess a dislike of High Mass (children often do!) they do not imply a theological distaste, but boredom with trappings, the feeling that something goes on at which they are mere spectators—potential nuisances if they have children or a cold. Ritual is a bewilderment of comings and goings only patent of explanations which prove it far beyond the reasonable grasp of the common man. Some who do appreciate a High Mass often like it simply because they have a *flair* for ceremonies of any sort. Such High Masses menace the principles which justify them, they contradict themselves. If, however, it was true that participation of the laity at High Mass was in too many cases virtually dead, it was at least there in principle, whereas at Low Mass, according to the current acceptance of rubrics, it was impossible. As nearly everyone preferred to go to Low Masses liturgy ceased to be the prayer and act of the people in a full and real and proper sense. Participation existed in the will, often at the lowest acceptable terms; it was not visible, as the worship of the visible Church should be. Hence in many parishes on France it has been made a fundamental principle that all Masses should involve participation. Ceremonies which by definition are intended to prepare the way for the full action of Solemn Mass characterize every Mass. The unity of worship has not been lost sight of, but re-presented for each body of parishioners filling the church for six or seven Sunday celebrations. But as in education or Communism, what is made available for all tends to be fully accessible to few. It fell to the mission of Saint-Séverin to realize a parochial High Mass with all the *rights of participation*; with actions made visible, expressive, meaningful; with vernacular monitions and readings transforming the 'Feast of the Word' into a reality; and, since the reduction of the Eucharistic fast, with a parish Communion which restores it to its just place as 'the culminating point of the parochial liturgy'.

The high altar at Saint-Séverin is designed as a simple free-standing table. The gothic arches of the apse were half-heartedly dressed in classical facings in the seventeenth century. A double ambulatory peculiar to Paris enhances the impression of space, but the vistas of

chapel and arch, the impedimenta of antiquity, hold on to the warmth and familiarity of the traditional. A crucifix, of processional type, stands on the predella before the altar, which is, of course, arranged for celebration facing the people. Apart from altar cloths, nothing disturbs its simplicity except a missal, permanently open at the centre. The Blessed Sacrament is reserved on a fully vested altar in an apsidal chapel which unfortunately does not lie in the axis of the church. Before the central arch of the apse, raised on an estrade, is a chair for the celebrant. Years ago, earlier in the missionary history of Saint-Séverin, I saw the 'altar facing the people' standing at the chancel entrance, while the baroque high altar presided with an air of resignation over an empty choir, and I recall thinking this deviation of primacy absurd. An intermediate arrangement, after the altar was placed in the present position, was a dossal behind the celebrant, intended, no doubt, to facilitate attention. The present solution is a success, unless there is room to object that the *sedile* for the celebrant occupies the traditional place for the bishop's *cathedra*.

During the procession of priest and ministers in albs along the full length of the nave—a true procession, not a hasty entry—a processional chant of antiphon and psalm is shared by choir and people. This fulfils the function of the Introit, but as it is in French the rubric is satisfied by singing the Latin text in plainchant at its conclusion. In all that follows it may be assumed that this obligation to render the Latin Proper is borne by a Schola, while text and music for the vernacular chants are distributed to everyone.

The singing of the *Kyrie* is interesting for the restoration of this prayer as a true intercession for the Church. In oriental liturgies there are still long intercessions punctuated by *Kyrie Eleison*. A similar litany is prominent in the Latin Good Friday ceremonies. The reduction to our present three triple invocations is a denudation, even if St Gregory the Great be its ancient and respectable author. To restore the meaning of this prayer so that it once more emphasizes the unity and charity of the entire Church, the sub-deacon at Saint-Séverin briefly announces certain general intentions before each of the invocations, which are then taken up by celebrant, choir, and people, in turn. *Gloria*, Creed, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei* are sung in Latin to Gregorian chant; so are the responses, and it seems to me that the congregation are quite as content to sing in Latin as in French.

The offertory procession is a major feature of the ceremonies at Saint-Séverin. It has, of course, been general to liturgical movements, but there are also circles where it finds less favour. Here it exists in a specially developed form. Baskets containing offerings in kind, money taken at the collection, the ciborium with hosts and the cruets, are

borne processionally along the nave to the sanctuary to be incensed, and the latter set apart for the sacrifice. This triple division is related to the prayer of the Canon where the Father is asked to make acceptable and bless '*haec dona, haec munera, haec sancta*'. The procession take place during the Creed, a vernacular chant and antiphon being sung during the incensing which follows. Here also intentions are read by three laymen from the 'Community Book', which has been open all the week on a lectern in the nave, for anyone—parishioner or passing visitor—to write down the personal needs he wishes to unite to the liturgical intercession of the community. Neither commentary nor monitions of any sort take place during the Canon, recited in a voice that can be heard, but notably lower than that used for the rubrically audible parts. A large congregation necessitates a number of priests distributing Communion at various approaches to the sanctuary to the faithful, who receive standing. This diminishes to some extent the dignity of the Communion procession which is so impressive at smaller churches. While this takes place a chant is sung. The *Confiteor* before Communion and the last Gospel are recited silently.

Apart from High Mass, all other congregational Masses celebrated at Saint-Séverin have an assistant priest filling what is expressly described as a 'diaconal' role between the celebrant and the faithful. This qualification will be more expressly appreciated by readers familiar with oriental rites, where the deacon's business is far more obviously to act as a go-between.

The clergy of Saint-Séverin have more than once been accused of liturgical innovations. Their condensed reply is worth studying. They emphasize that they were charged with a special mission, the adaptation of a parish, and began where initiative was obvious, with the liturgy. They declare themselves to have a twofold loyalty—to ecclesiastical tradition, and then to people as they truly are. Concerning innovations they make the following points: (a) they are matters of detail where rules are susceptible of more than one interpretation; (b) they are relatively very few; (c) some have been officially sanctioned by their subsequent adoption in official reforms, such as the new Paschal Vigil; (d) they can be justified by the law of custom; (e) that all have been done in virtue of a formal mission, by way of experiment, and subject to authority.

Since it is above all by this liturgical renewal that Saint-Séverin has attracted its extended clientèle, this may be a useful place to present statistics of the increase in attendance over the ten odd years since its inception. Granted that the Cardinal's mission was specifically to welcome the student world, it was after all a parish that was to make the welcome, and that parish a community by no means identical in

quality with its guests. The parish, between Sorbonne and Seine, a world of little streets, back streets, small shops, of the broad *Boul' Mich'*, of apartments with the classic *sixièmes* of poverty, of loudspeaking wells where anyone can tune in to his neighbours' vices and sorrow, is 47 per cent working class. The population is approximately 15,000, but of these an odd thousand can be accepted as neither French nor Christian. In 1948, there were 2,200 at Mass, and 7,000 in 1957. In 1946 there were thirty at High Mass, in 1953, 1,300 (60 per cent not of the parish). Behind this in itself remarkable increase lies the speciality of Saint-Séverin—the 'parish of election'. An estimated total of 12,000-odd Catholics seek a spiritual life at Saint-Séverin either by frequent attendance from neighbouring *arrondissements* or even outer suburbs, or by occasional but regular visits, or work-day assistance at Mass. The difference between these two groups of figures is remarkable and obviously raises many problems.

What pastoral success has there been among the impregnable proletariat? As far as numbers show, at least, nothing outstanding. In 1954 it was estimated that 4 per cent practise, the mean for Paris being 2 per cent. The local percentage of 'workers' is 44.7, but this is regarded as a rather liberal estimate. In spite of explanations and remonstrances it is hard to escape the conclusion that a preponderance of university intellectuals and better-class 'parishioners of election' freeze out, or at any rate inhibit to some degree, the mission to the dechristianized sections of the *quartier*.

A Parochial Congress of 1957/58 involving the distribution of an extremely detailed questionnaire facilitates some analysis of the 'parish of election' at Saint-Séverin, and reveals something of its mentality. It is easy, in the first place, to disprove the charge that nearly all are old maids or liturgical faddists. About half are single, about half aged over thirty-four. Estimating from the limited response to the enquiry, about a third are engaged in Catholic Action. This may be an unduly favourable picture, since it is precisely the more active Catholic who would have bothered to fill in the questionnaire.

Most interesting are their reasons for attachment to Saint-Séverin with appropriate reflections on the ministry of their own pastors. Many appreciate the 'live' community. Nearly 90 per cent, given an opportunity to be more specific, acknowledge a need for community prayer, which they sought in the liturgy—and found at Saint-Séverin. In particular they appreciate the opportunity for a full share in the liturgical solemnity already in part described. The age-group specially sensitive to this attraction of common worship is notably the younger middle-aged (twenty-five to forty). Atmosphere, an omnibus expression for factors ranging from the simply aesthetic to recollection, spiritual

fervour, a sense of 'return to authentic sources', etc., is another motive. The external perfection of the liturgy is an appeal mentioned mainly by younger people (under thirty-five). Some express more particular reasons; the instruction given, the offering in kind (obviously regarded as an act of personal participation), etc. We hear also of negative motives, such as dissatisfaction with worship at the home parish, a dissatisfaction ranging from sheer boredom to danger of losing the faith. The salient feature is the constant reference to worship. 'Parishioners of election'—by courtesy, we suppose—even include a quota of non-Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox. Reactions to the liturgical initiative at Saint-Séverin by territorial parishioners follow similar lines but at a slightly lower percentage. In fact, there are even some die-hards who admit they only want 'personal prayer' from the liturgy and resent the 'outsiders' to the point of being downright uncharitable.

In the same enquiry a few scruples turned up, reduced in sum to the right notion that a Christian has duties towards his pastor and his community. The earlier principles safeguarding the integrity of parochial rights survived up to fifty years ago in the duty of making Easter duties in one's parish church; the social sacraments of baptism and marriage must still be celebrated there. A footnote to the report of the Parochial Congress suggests that the liberty conceded to the making of Easter duties should go further—presumably all the way. I had the impression that L'Hay-les-Roses, for one, would favour a contrary trend. Some 'parishioners of election' do practise partly in their home parish; others try, usually ineffectually, to encourage there the spirit and practices they have learnt to appreciate at Saint-Séverin, or, if that effort did not reduce them to despair, look forward to a happier return later on. From this state of affairs, which is certainly one of the tokens of success of Saint-Séverin as a parish of liturgical revival and reforms, a condition of tensions results, both on the parochial and individual levels. Setting opinions aside, it is indisputable that thousands with a material home elsewhere have found a spiritual one here. Other parishes which attract people looking for 'genuine' religion may quietly dissuade; Saint-Séverin welcomes in, invoking its peculiar character as a *paroisse du centre* and the conditions of dispersed interest peculiar to modern life.

Since these 'parishioners of election' receive so much attention, it is as well to note that there was some adverse criticism revealed in this survey. An examination of two hundred questionnaires completed by territorialials showed that 25 per cent were unfavourable. Of these criticisms some were neither charitable nor constructive, but all seemed based first on a certain class resentment (workers *versus* intellectuals), and secondly on a fear of losing hold on the church they

expect to regard as their own. Even among those who show understanding and favour some insist that the 'parishioner of election' should not regard his status as permanent; that his job is to be the apostle at home.

Just as in times past, Saint-Séverin stands at a cross-roads. Its example, the fruit of its experiments, would inevitably find a wider audience than the local parish or the Latin Quarter. Even if the phenomenon of the 'parish of election' had not occurred—and found favour—the traffic of students and visitors, not to mention journalists, would soon have discovered the classic parish of the liturgical mission. As a central city church, it has opened its pulpit to a wide variety of preachers, and through the *Association Philippe Neri*, which has its centre there, sermons, broadcasts and articles by the leading figures in missionary experiment in France have found a wide and appreciative public. Handling four volumes at random of *Paroisse et Mission* I find the names of Cardinal Lercaro, Canon Hollande of the Mission de Paris, Abbé Vinatier of the Mission de France, Père Jean de Féligonde of L'Hay-les-Roses, Abbé Le Sourd of the team of priests at Saint-Sulpice, and articles on every aspect of parochial life and mission. A series of sermons on the Mass, *Les Chrétiens autour de l'Autel*, has been translated into several languages.¹ All these publications bear the name 'Communauté Chrétienne de Saint-Séverin', which has thereby become a melting-pot of liturgical and missionary ideas.

The opinion that nothing is done at Saint-Séverin except liturgy is often heard. If liturgy meant nothing more than empty ritualism, sterility would certainly have been the result. But the wide interest in and the names associated with Saint-Séverin already demonstrate that its influence is something more. A parish priest might however wonder about other aspects of parochial life: finance, for instance, charity and piety, associations, schools. What is happening in these spheres? In 1947 Saint-Séverin maintained a small private school, not exclusively parochial, a convent school, and a small country property for a girls' holiday home. In 1956 the boys' school was transformed into a centre for youth activities, catechism, etc.; the convent provides in addition a dispensary and youth club quarters; both premises have been repaired and restored. A country mansion with extensive wood and parkland has been acquired as a holiday home and camp site; several other premises and a wooden hut accommodate a parochial library, student clubs, parish societies, etc. The presbytery has been adapted to accommodate a staff increased from five to fourteen; a spacious meeting room

1. The English translation, *The Mass. Christians around the Altar*, by Margaret Clark i* published by Geoffrey Chapman at 10s 6d. A companion volume from the same source, *Confession*, translated by A.V. Littledale, has also just appeared from the same publishers at the same price.

has been contrived in the basement. There are the usual charitable organizations, St Vincent de Paul, etc., groups of 'foyers', various groups for children and young persons, a choir of sixty, a mutual help organization designed to relieve the clergy of material responsibilities and to co-ordinate the work of specialized activities. This works in collaboration with two local *mairies* and has registered up to 1,500 visits in a year. A central committee surveys the whole picture and maintains liaison with the clergy; it controls the parish finances. On this committee qualified and competent laymen cope with special problems; proceeds of activities which show a material return are 'distributed to all according to their need'.

The reforms at Saint-Séverin have been effected—as elsewhere—through a team of priests. 'Team' is a word enjoying a special prestige in Catholic action, so much so that it has been borrowed for other contexts; we even find it used in religious congregations. Its choice derives partly from a suspicion of old systems with their terminology now felt as archaic, partly from its connotation of real co-operation—men side by side at a task, which, like the firing of an ack-ack gun or the operation of a fighter aircraft, calls for an alert, synchronized collaboration of eyes, hands, minds. 'Community' might have smelt too ripely of religious life for a group of seculars. Nevertheless, the priests of Saint-Séverin have resolutely styled themselves a sacerdotal community. Through their Bulletin the whole question of the constitution of groups of diocesan clergy enters the forum.

The English reader, accustomed to finding his priests all under one roof and at the same table, needs to know that continental curates usually live separately in apartments. The communities realized in France in the last few years are not merely economical arrangements, but far outstrip the Anglo-Saxon system, which certainly does not suppose community of life and still less the evolution of a particular spirituality. How far such an evolution can really go without compromising the character of secular clergy and creating another institute of common life can only be judged from experience. At Saint-Séverin it is in fact ten years' experience alone which has created the community, which otherwise lacks any canonical structure, apart from the recommendation of the Code of Canon Law that clerics should be encouraged to practise common life. Obviously, the priestly community exists primarily for the sake of the parish; its formative principles will be pastoral work and prayer. The clergy at Saint-Séverin make that prayer liturgical, public, and common. Daily they recite three of the Little Hours together in church, and assist at a weekly community Mass in addition to the Solemn Mass on Sunday in which all are expected to take some part. In this way their breviary becomes part

of their external witness and apostolate. The comment, 'Now we have priests who do pray', is not an aspersion on the preceding clergy, who might have been contemplatives, but an appreciation of a public action and example. The community also makes an annual retreat together. In the pastoral domain, all preaching, catechism, and literary work is the fruit of concerted action—to the extent of even signing articles with the anonymous 'A Priest of the Sacerdotal Community of Saint-Séverin'. Problems pastoral, missionary, or liturgical, are solved in conclave. To make this specific, one morning a week is given to discussion of pastoral responsibilities, and once a month a similar meeting is arranged with a theologian invited from outside.

An old clerical saw makes out that the worst thing next to being a curate is to have one. Communities without the formalized patterns and conventions of religious life and its unifying spirit are hard to maintain. Nevertheless, out of the practice of pastoral sharing and co-operation in work and prayer and thought at Saint-Séverin a certain spirituality is evolving. In a report submitted to Cardinal Feltin there is a lengthy quotation from an article by the Abbot of Mondaye evoking the secular collegiate system, familiar in the Middle Ages but almost obsolete today, as a solution to the maintenance of stable groups of diocesan clergy in the ministry of urban or rural areas. The details of this restoration are not elaborated, but the principle is. Canonically erected colleges would be new structures, more competent than any collection of individuals however generous or co-operative. The influence of such secular colleges could become so impressive that, parallel with the example of some monasteries or regular colleges, they could become the centre of a new movement. They could also be adapted to the service of a region with a particular social pattern. Originally a cathedral and a bishop—a church with the fullness of worship and a pastor with the plenitude of priesthood—existed in every major township. Nowadays the paternal influence of the bishop is far too remote to be felt as effective, and many French cathedrals at least are not much more than monuments. If cathedrals and bishops cannot be multiplied, their place could perhaps to some extent be filled by a renewal and, doubtless, a remoulding of the collegiate system. What is happening at Saint-Séverin is perhaps a pointer to this.

The solid achievement at Saint-Séverin presupposes at least an organized catechism, an attempt to assimilate the young and assure the maintenance and understanding of the traditions established. Considering the alarming lapse after Solemn Communion (at about twelve) so common in France, and the further defections that take place from 'perseverance' classes, the curriculum available in the parish of Saint-Séverin is impressive. In effect, Christian education is

provided from kindergarten to marriage. From the beginning, but especially in the perseverance course (ages thirteen to fourteen), the children are grouped for instruction in authentic communities (children from the same street, same school, etc.). Weekly meetings called community assemblies conclude with a meal together. As the children enter adolescence they graduate to a Catholic Action group based on the *quartier*, the basic unit of French apostolate. From fourteen to seventeen there are religious study groups. Recently these numbered forty young persons, free to continue, if they wished, by joining a three-year adult course. The syllabus of the latter is interesting. First-year studies cover the Creed and spiritual life (prayer). In the second year, scripture and patristics are studied. There is a supplementary third year on the history of religions and missiology, morals, and social problems. In 1957 there were about two hundred enrolments for the first year with about half continuing to the second.

The episcopal mandate inaugurating the missions at L'Hay and Saint-Séverin was 'to extend welcomes' through the instrumentality of the parish. In one case it was a welcome to the proletariat—I think we really ought to translate this as 'ordinary folk'; in the other, to the intellectual world of the Latin Quarter. At L'Hay the task was entrusted to Benedictines, in the other to diocesan priests. These differences in agent, milieu, end, all contribute to a divergence in the development of the two experiments. In some respects they seem to vary not only in means and detail but even in principle. They remain, however, very much alike in their sense of God, in the reality they attach to his worship, and in their search for the authentic principles of tradition. To the extent that they have been successful the confidence which Cardinal Suhard placed in the parish is justified, even if their experience and example would seem to point to certain modifications in the traditional parochial pattern.

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NOTE.—The statistical details, etc., in this article are drawn mainly from two sources, a report made by the 'Communauté Sacerdotale' to the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Feltin, in 1957, and various articles in the series *Paroisse et Mission*, published by the parish. As the former is unpublished and the latter not readily accessible there seemed little point in giving footnote sources.