

THE LITURGICAL DRAMA

Ways and Means

AWARENESS of the enemy's method usually tempts one to imitate him, to meet tanks with larger tanks and poison gas with a gas even more poisonous. It is not a process which I commend. It would seem wiser to develop one's own genius than to copy another's, especially when that other is an enemy. The Church can hardly be interested in a Five Year Plan, nor enthusiastic about shock troops, while she has eternity to play in. Unless the Communist gets quick results he knows he will have none; he knows, in his heart, that all mankind is but waiting to relapse into its old bad ways.

The Catholic stage has powers hardly dreamt of by the Soviet, and were it elevated to an arm of Catholic Action, it would quickly achieve the same position in propaganda as it held when the people of Chester, York and other cities of England turned out

‘ At Pentecost

‘ When all our pageants of delight were played,’

to celebrate the descent of the Holy Ghost in a summer holy day. Historians sometimes lift a corner of the veil which hides these scenes from us, but only as a reminder that they are no more. Playwright, actor and audience of to-day are silent when our forefathers rejoiced, they seem to be unaware that the power to make and the sense to enjoy such pageants is within themselves, rusty only for want of use. The example of Soviet and Cinema may send us into our own dramatic storehouse—not to imitate these methods, but to practise those peculiar to our Faith and Religion.

It is immediately possible (1) to develop the dramatic elements of the Liturgy, (2) to use the dramatic situations of the parables, the life of our Lord, and other religious incidents in stage plays produced in a liturgical manner.

The development within the Liturgy may be instanced (a) from the tenth century *Quem quaeritis*. Here the priest,

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standing before the altar, addresses the angelic interrogation to two clerics, representing the Maries, standing in the middle of the choir. These answer 'Jesus of Nazareth,' and after receiving the angelic assurance, 'He is not here but is risen,' they address to the choir their triumphant 'Alleluia, Resurrexit Dominus: ¹ (b) from the processions of the Blessed Sacrament, (c) from the sermon, (d) from the performance of the Stations of the Cross and Mysteries of the Rosary.

The sanctuary is the ecclesiastical stage. I have nothing to say as to its conduct, for that is not my business. There would seem to be no essential difference between the *Quem quaeritis* and such-like plays of the tenth century, and the processions, sermons and 'Stations' of the twentieth. We may regret that the Easter Tropes have ceased to be performed, but to remain content with simple things does not seem to belong to human nature, and the additions of properties soon divided the drama proper to the Church from that proper to the street or public hall. A furnace constructed of cloth and oakum might be built in the nave for the 'burning' of the *pueri*, but it would soon be found to impede the normal use of the Church building and the play be found a less disturbed milieu outside.

The Church is a theatre, in the sense that it is a place where things can be seen, and it has already a large wardrobe and many properties peculiar to itself with which other properties do not mix. The Bishop leaves his top hat in the Sacristy, a barrister is seldom seen with a bowler hat over his wig, and men refrain from plus-fours at a Levée. This sense of fitness affects most of us in the matter of Church function as well as Church furniture. The performance of Henri Ghéon's *Marriage of St. Francis* in the (Anglican) Parish Church of Brighton necessitated the erection of a stage across the Sanctuary. It was also a costume play; as in the Poet Laureate's passion play performed

¹ For other examples of early drama within the normal Church services, consult *The Drama of the Medieval Church* by Karl Young, Oxford University Press.

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in Canterbury Cathedral the actors appeared in garments appropriate to the play but not to the place. Such furniture and dressing-up offend our sense of fitness; the plays were written to be performed in an ordinary theatre; the fact that they might be described accurately as religious does not gain them an entrée to the Sanctuary.

Plays which can be performed by priests, deacons, and vested attendants without the introduction of properties, other than those which are already in the Sacristy, will normally be elaborations of existing processions or devotions. They will be stopped, as recently in Rome, if they become theatrical, and though the line to be drawn between 'liturgical' and 'theatrical' may not always be settled by vestments, it will serve as a general guide. If the play or representation cannot be produced in the clothing of the Church it has no place inside the building. But within those limits there would seem to be many opportunities for development, though we may always remain some centuries behind Italy and Spain, and never attain to the freedom we once enjoyed.

We may learn something from the account of *The Burial of Christ at Maracaibo* (Venezuela), which takes place annually on Good Friday. At five in the evening, the normal hour of burial, the Bishop and clergy assemble in the Cathedral before the altar upon which reposes a painted wooden **body** of our Lord. The figure is life-size, the wounds and issuing blood are red, the face is that of Death. The body lies upon tortoise-shell and is encased in glass. It is placed upon a bier with draped sides, under which the bearers are quite hidden, so that it appears like a moving platform proceeding through the Cathedral doors, where the Governor of the State, officers, guard and military band are waiting to head the procession through the city. The Bishop and clergy follow the bier. Behind them are images of Our Lady, St. Mary Magdalene, and St. John the Baptist—each on a similar platform, each followed by a sodality or confraternity in mourning. The general congregation follows at the end, reciting the Rosary.

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Very, very slowly and mournfully the procession goes through the city and returns. The coffin is again placed upon the altar. The crowd kneels for the Bishop's blessing and the ceremony is at an end.

The number of plays which are suitable for performance outside the Church is infinite, though relatively few are to be found ready made. Of those which exist there are the mystery plays of the past, and those by such writers as Mgr. Benson, Claudel and Ghéon of the present. But these have been written, as already stated, for the modern theatre, they require scenery, costume and technique which can only be handled effectively by actors trained in elocution and impersonation aided by the skilful support of designers, electricians and producers, most of whom have no more idea of liturgical drama than a nineteenth century organist of Plainsong.

The making of plays to be produced in a liturgical manner is the simplest form of dramatic art. Its conditions are (1) a plot which is widely known, (2) a concentration on action to be seen rather than upon ideas to be thought. An exclusion of all scenery, properties, and dressing-up which are not inevitable to the plot. The necessity of an already known story may become obvious if we realize how mystified a non-Catholic would be at the Ceremonies of the Mass; also as we remember that most of us are children who delight in a twice-told tale. The concentration on action will be appreciated by all who have played at charades or enjoyed pageants and masques where deeds are done rather than spoken of. A dark back-cloth, some boxes covered in the same material (for seats, tables, etc.), and a regulation dress for the players, should meet all our requirements in scenery and costume.

Instances of plays of this kind may be given to indicate the possibilities open to any parochial dramatic club. The easiest are such parables as *The Prodigal Son* and *The Sower*, because these can be translated into modern times and terms avoiding even the necessity of a stage costume. The first has been illustrated by Thomas Derrick and could be staged by anyone with dramatic aptitude. One danger

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is in making the period of prodigality too alluring. I should recommend that the vice chosen to portray should be that of avarice (speculation and gambling). The *Sower* might be the C.T.S. and the plot developed in the form of the history of one of its pamphlets.

If I may be pardoned for relating a personal achievement, I will instance a mime of *The Oxford Movement*, which will serve to show how the art of pantomime can be concerned with topical events. The Oxford Movement seemed to me to have its roots in the eighteenth century and the French Revolution; this period is noteworthy for the way in which formalism overshadowed the Truth. I wanted to begin with this fact as a spectacle. The stage is empty except for an Altar, at the back, set out ready for Mass. All the players enter in one long but slow procession from the front of the stage—it is as though a section of the audience has decided to act.

The first group consists of the *Pope* attended by acolytes. They go up to the altar and prepare for Mass.

The second group is of *Mammon* and two *policemen* with attendants carrying a small platform which they set up immediately in front of the altar. The masks and cloaks of Mammon and the policemen are set up on this platform, which is supported by the attendants.

The third group is of the *King and Queen of France*, a *Cardinal*, and attendants. Their masks are set up upon a similar platform to Mammon's, on his right.

The fourth group is that of *King George III*, the *Lord Chief Justice* in full bottom wig, and a *politician*. Their effigies are set upon a third platform to the left of Mammon.

The fifth group consists of English divines in preaching vestments. They erect a pulpit in front of the 'English' platform.

The sixth group consists of the proletariat under two taskmasters, with whips, who erect a small factory on the opposite side to the pulpit.

These platforms entirely hide the Pope and the altar at the back.

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As soon as the factory is set up the proletariat begins to make rhythmical but also mechanical motions, and produces gold bricks which are passed up to Mammon, and from him on to the other effigies (though he retains every other brick for himself). The taskmasters drive their men too hard, there is an altercation, the disorder spreads to all proletarians who raise their fists at the taskmasters, and push over the 'French' Platform. Mammon and King George are alarmed and their platforms are moved out a yard or two further away from the disorder which is now quelled by the appointment of three proletarians who change places with the taskmasters. The factory resumes work. It is to be noted that the Gospel side of the altar is now visible.

The English divines begin to act. After looking at the Pope round the corner of Mammon, they turn the pulpit on to its side and make it into an altar. Then they proceed to develop the 'six points' of the movement by: (1) Looking to see what the Pope does, (2) quarrelling, (3) doing the action, (4) turning to the King and Lord Chief Justice for approval — which is always refused, (5) repeating the action. The quarrel is simple buffoonery, e.g., six candles are put on the altar and lighted by one divine, while another blows them out, vestments after being pulled about are put on the wrong way, fingers are burnt in lighting the incense.

One of the divines (Newman) leaves the movement and kneels at the Pope's altar half-way through this part of the play. The factory continues to make gold bricks and the Pope to say Mass.

The Pope has now read the Gospel and begins the sermon (to represent the *Rerum Novarum* and the *Quadragesimo Anno*). The Anglican divines stand round their altar as though in act of worship but not actually moving. As the Pope speaks, the proletarians begin to listen, their work gradually stops; as no bricks reach him, Mammon subsides on to the floor, followed by the 'English' platform, of King, Justice and Politician. The divines now look round to see the altar of the Church unobstructed. The Pope turns to resume Mass, a Cardinal's hat and cloak are

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put upon Newman, all dispose themselves to hear Mass, the Pope raises the Host at the elevation, the divines no longer resist but kneel down with the others in adoration, and so the end is achieved in the one fold and one Shepherd.

My object in quoting this play rather fully is not that it may be acted, but that it may be seen how easily topical Subjects can be given a dramatic form. The Saints have crammed the calendar with drama which is permanent; the heretics, freemasons, governments, and powers supply a never-ending drama of the ephemeral—yet our theatres, stage societies and dramatic clubs cannot rise above *The Importance of being Earnest*.

We are so accustomed to sound upon the stage that music as an accompaniment to action is desirable. A drum, plain-song, choir, orchestra should not be despised. Those who can make plays are not necessarily those who can make music, but they will know how to use music, as they will know how to use scenery and costume, for to them 'the play's the thing.' It may encourage those who are 'stage-struck' and would direct their enthusiasm into Catholic action to know that play-making does not begin in the Coliseum or Drury Lane. Plays may be designed to instruct or to amuse others, but they may be also the simple outcome of a people's desire to amuse themselves. Folk-song and dance began not on the village green, but in the home—and not in the drawing room, but in the nursery. The drama began in the Church. So, for our beginnings, we have to turn to the divine crib with St. Francis and to the human crib with the Grimms, Andersens, and Carrolls of this world . . . surely a pleasant company of teachers.

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