Dancing with David

by Pamela Newman

Those whose reservations kept them away from the 'Dance' Mass at the French Church, Leicester Place, last summer will be relieved to know that the congregation neither indulged in 'one more time' of *Lord of the Dance,* nor flung off garments to give way to unbridled holy rolling. A few jackets and ties were removed (it was a warm evening) but the only sensational happenings were the sincerely vigorous protestations of a few ladies of strong Tridentine loyalties. What, then, was done? And was it worth doing? Above all, was it proper to be done in the context?

'The theatre is the place for this, not the House of God' intoned one of the ladies in a recurring and joyless antiphon, received for the most part by the packed congregation in compassionate silence and heroically overlooked by the readers thus interrupted. Well, is it? Were we insulting God by a mock marriage of actress and bishop? 'But what about David?' a young Anglican said to me as we queued to get in. Ah, yes, *David* . . . but he was one of your ancient royals. And very Old Testament and Jewish. But so—inconveniently?—is the foundation of belief in, and credibility of, the Person who said 'Before Abraham was, I am'.

By this time the moths of misconception have no doubt gathered in large numbers. It will be useful to begin, therefore, with an account of what actually took place. Before the Mass, the celebrant, Father Kevin Donovan, S.J., explained clearly and with infectious enthusiasm what was intended. The Liturgy of the Word would include a number of readings from the Gospels and the psalms which would then be interpreted in dance and movement. At the Offertory the whole congregation would be invited to pray aloud together for the consecration of our own lives in the Sacrifice about to be offered, expressing with appropriate movements of the hands our will to be united with the total self-oblation of Our Lord. Hymns and psalms would be sung in the customary places.

I confess to some difficulty in recognising the liturgical sequence of the readings as there followed between collect and Offertory a series of half-a-dozen or so passages from the Passion, the epistles and various psalms of praise, read alternately by a man and a woman reader and then expressed in music and movement by the dancers. Episodes of stylised mime of Gethsemane, the crowning with thorns, and the Crucifixion alternated with dances expressing the joy and triumph of the Resurrection and that continuing peace and delight (a children's dance, this) of those whose Shepherd is the Lord.

Recorded music was used, varying from electronic to Bach for the Passion sequences, with choral classics for the rejoicings and a jolly

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(but rather ordinary) folk 'n' western guitar piece for the dance of Our Lord with the children. Jesus was fair and bearded and wore a long white gown : the other adult dancers were all female and admirably costumed in dark-coloured leotards. The children—some sixteen or so—were aged from about four to twelve and wore ordinary summer clothes. It is perhaps appropriate to record here that the ensemble and technique of the Reigate Dance Group were excellent. There was occasionally in the joyful sequences a tendency to earnest cheerfulness which stirred wicked memories of Joyce Grenfell and the use in some episodes of trailing coloured scarves was also a mistake, for the vulgar-minded like myself were inevitably trapped between the twin impure thoughts of Morris men and the Seven Veils. The scenes of the Passion, however, were moving and powerful, partly because the choreography was more sharply and accurately drawn, partly because it is easier in any visual medium to portray action than subjective existential experience. In the Crucifixion sequence, for example, the formation of the dancers into a living cross reaching out towards Christ was striking and memorable. But in the Resurrection chain-dance which followed I was uncomfortably reminded of a shy young man trying to find his right partner in the Paul Jones.

It sounds something of a pantomime, you may feel, and the Tridentine ladies thought so too. And there they spoke more truly than they realised for although this was by no means a pantomime in either effect or intention, there is of course a relationship between all ritualised forms of drama and the Mass. Perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of this event lies in the timeliness of its reminder that the Mass is the highest Drama of all. That is to say, it is not merely something said, as it so often—so boringly often—seems today, or something done, as the wide gap between high altar and laity made it seem years ago. It is something both said and done, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes alternately.

Good drama consists of a framework of events, spoken and performed, each of which is both critical and constructive in relation to that which precedes it, until finally the cumulative power of the action brings about a climax and a conclusion. Since it happens in time and space those dimensions must also be shaped in its immediate context so that the core of the mystery is revealed and made comprehensible by means of the surrounding activity, which is both contingent and concentric. It is fairly obvious, of course, to state that the context must be subordinate and serviceable to the drama, not tangential and irrelevant. I have no doubt that the Tridentine ladies would argue—and they would be right—that the ceremonial of the pre-conciliar Latin High Mass was one of the best examples of such concentric activity that the Church has ever known. Why, then, have we jettisoned it for this raw and upstart 'heresy'?

Perhaps if we consider how worship evolves the answer will emerge.

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First, there is no doubt that the 'Dance' Mass concept *is* raw, both in content and form. More economy is necessary, both of time and movement. ('The Mass was low and short. It is a Christian country' said Belloc of a village encountered in his travels.) We are as yet on the threshold of rediscovering the place of the body not only in worship but in life itself. But the concept is therefore powerfully upstart, and bound to force tradition aside, for it is the first harbinger of the instinct of human regeneration hunting its release from the repressions of our present age into the freedom of God's service.

A new form of concentric activity is emerging not from aesthetic tinkerings with the trimmings of worship but from man's deep yearning for contact *as an integrated creature* with the God of creation. In opposition to the near-despair which underlies much of our society's denial of the procreative properties of the physical a regeneration of the flesh is springing up which leads of necessity to reconciliation with the Body and Blood of Christ. Perhaps great movements in worship have always grown from necessity, as development of doctrine seems to have done, and not from conscious choice: Ambrosian chant was devised, after all, not primarily to create pleasing tunes for the liturgy but to prevent the hot-headed Milanese Christians of the 4th century from becoming too restive while under siege from Justina's Arian troops—fulfilling, in fact, much the same function as the singing at a football match.

Man is sorely at odds today with his physical nature. In a very real sense we do not know what to do with ourselves. Techniques of sex absorb much attention but the unisex trend shows that our understanding of the mystery of sexuality is naive and confused. I am convinced, too, that the battening down of procreative instincts by means other than voluntary abstinence sets mind and body deeply at variance. Similarly the enslavement of physical powers to tedious and repetitive work which offers nothing but money in return creates a fundamental discord in man. The incidence of mental illness and of that slight regard for inarticulate physical life which opened the statute book to abortion (and perhaps, before long, to euthanasia) are both grim omens of the painful and chronic state of disintegration in which our society finds itself, evade it as it may with temporary pacifiers and spurious forms of detached spirituality.

It is this disintegration which has given rise to the current preoccupation with yoga and transcendentalism and the Church should recognise and encourage the principles of personal integrity on which the various forms of the yoga cult are based. It may well be that the great pagan religions of the east can provide the catalyst for the renewal of Christian understanding both of the body in relation to mind and spirit and of the sacredness of all created things. Perhaps our western obsession with technological progress and artifacts has made us crypto-Manicheans without our realising it.

Because we are at odds with our physical nature we have perhaps also lost that deep affective understanding of the meaning of dance, which must be recovered if experimentation is to lead to a renewal of significant and worshipful ritual. I can do no more here than point to its obvious elements—formal order, communal involvement by active participation or as audience, externalisation of emotion: joy and the *élan* of the procreative instinct in the wedding dance, fear in the mediaeval dance of death, ethnic pride in national or regional dance. It is, too, always concentric. 'At the still point of the turning world . . . there the dance is. . . . Except for the point, the still point. There would be no dance. . . .' And the 'still point' is what the Mass is all about, the point not, as Eliot says, of fixity, but of dynamism and consummation, the powerful confluence of time and eternity which is what we mean by that weary formula, 'the Sacrifice of Calvary daily renewed'.

This, then, is the soil through which the shoot of our crying need for physical sanctification thrusts blindly to the surface. Will not our hang-ups be turned to sanctifying power if we accept willingly a crucifixion with Christ? It is significant that at the same time as we are seeking the place of the physical in the worship of God the much-neglected sacrament of anointing is at last being offered publicly to those who struggle continually with the disintegrating effects of chronic illness.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the 'Dance' Mass was not the dancing but the effect of its cumulative force as we joined together at the Offertory to pray for the conversion of our negativity—our anger, our rapacity, our fear—into the power of love by which God means us to accomplish our part in the salvation of His world. I had dreaded some kind of holy Hokey Cokey. But as we moved from petition to petition ('. . . When I am angry, give me calm. . . . When I am greedy, make me generous. . . .') with fists clenched or palms clasped or open to express the words, I realised that here was the stuff of real liturgy—the human gesture at once actual, symbolic, economical and effective of itself, for to release a clenched fist into an upturned palm causes a chain reaction of physical and psychic relief. 'Help us to give ourselves to you' the prayer ended and hundreds of pairs of hands rose slowly in supplication. Where had one seen this before? Suddenly I remembered with a stir of excitement, for it was the classic figure of the *orante* of the primitive Church. 'Pray, brethren' urged the priest and with hands still upraised we responded with a new vigour to the offering of his sacrifice and ours.

Where, then, from here? An important beginning has been made and perhaps the day may not be so far off when the Tridentine ladies will no longer spurn the sign of peace as, sadly, they did on this occasion, for they and we are in search of the same objective. Certainly the close attentiveness of the congregation reflected not a greed

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for gimmickry but a loving zeal for God which must reach out to Him in some manner more sustaining than our present cerebral liturgy. There is no reason why we should fear such physical manifestations of our faith as the Holy Spirit wills to be released for He will not fail to ensure that our need (and His) for dignity and order will also be met.

Yet I felt that something—someone—was still lacking to set free in us the power of re-creation. It is Our Lady. For apart from a token acknowledgement at the bidding prayers, she is hardly mentioned in public today. Can we really come alive in the body or resolve the conflict between male and female which underlies the unisex façade until the Mother of God is restored to her proper place as the perfect creature in the wider concentric activities of devotional practice? Ronald Knox spoke of her as 'Touchstone of Truth in the ages of controversy' and the great pioneers of renewal—St Dominic, Newman, Don Orione and countless others—have always taken her as their model and leader, for it is primarily by following the pattern of her response to God's demands that we shall grow nearer to the Heart of Christ. The development of physical expression in the Mass must surely proceed wisely and well if we commit it and ourselves to Mary's care. For she gave herself in perfect integrity that God's Word might be made flesh for us.

A View of the Resurrection

by Michael Sharkey

It was in the future days—I know time tells strange tales—that the idea first came to me. We had discovered long before how to transmit objects by dematerialising them in one place, translating them into the basic energy of their matter, and directing this energy to another place for rematerialisation. You will appreciate that this in itself had given rise to some pretty wild theories about the Resurrection of Christ. However, in working out how to apply this principle across galactic distances, we accidently discovered a way of tracking the light of past events. As you know, you see a thing when light is reflected from it to your eye. That light never dies but hurtles away, out through space, at the speed of 186,000 miles per second. Somehow, one of our team was able to draw up the formula for finding and reconvening the light of past events, and for showing us these events on the face of our computer.

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