

THE SPIRITUALITY OF WILLIAM LANGLAND

AN exclusive study of the English fourteenth century mystics might lead one to suppose that the Mass and Divine Office played little part in the genuine spiritual life of the country. It might seem that the individualistic religion of the post-Reformation period was already the vital influence in those, such as Rolle, Hilton and Dame Julian, who sought the Kingdom of God with earnestness. But then we must not forget the great quantity of devotional verse designed for the ordinary Englishmen of the day: ascetical works, mass-books and instructions on the sacraments, on the virtues and vices. The mystical writers presupposed in their readers a thorough acquaintance with the broader and more 'ecclesiastical' type of religion inculcated by these works. It is clear from Walter Hilton that a realization of the union of the faithful in the 'ghostly' Body of Christ and of the meaning of the Mass and Divine Office were considered as the groundwork of a true spiritual life. It is therefore in that other less mystical literature that we may expect to find a mirror of the common spirituality of our forefathers. One of the most fruitful sources for such a picture lies in that vigorous poem of ecclesiastical reform, 'The Vision of Piers Plowman,' which endeavours to recall the sinning English folk to the springs of the spiritual life in the unity of the Church. In this poem we find a truly English and liturgical type of spirituality that must have been characteristic of the devout members of the Church, both ecclesiastical and lay.

William Langland, the author of the poem, represents the English tradition that had survived the Norman conquest and could be traced back to the early northern poetry, the pure and refined Anglo-Saxon literature. He was an

Englishman writing for the English. And in order to understand the nature of his spiritual outlook it is essential to learn what he tells of himself. He was born probably in the West country beneath the Malvern Hills—perhaps even 'On a May morning on a Malvern hillside,' where his first vision is described. He appears to have been a bastard son of a local squire, who had him taught in the traditional clerical style:

My father and my friends furnished my schooling,
Till I was trained truly in the doctrine of Scripture,
In what is best for body, as the Book tells us,
And safest for the soul— . . .¹

With this knowledge he was enabled to take Minor Orders and, living with his wife and daughter in a cottage on Cornhill, to become a beadsman. With 'My seven psalms and sometimes my psalter,' he earned a pittance by singing in chantries and saying prayers for patrons. He suffered from poverty and ill-health,

Yet by my faith, I never found, since my friends perished
Any life that I liked out of these long garments.

His life in London was at first dissolute and distracted, and he must have said his Breviary with as little feeling as those clerks and friars whom he attacks so bitterly. But by the time he came to plan his great poem his whole intent was to find his way back to salvation and to lead his many erring brethren along the same path.

Brought up thus in the ecclesiastical tradition, his whole life devoted to the Psalms and the Office—to 'ding upon David' he calls it—to attending Masses in those London

¹ Passus V, line 37 *sq.* I have used throughout the recent version of Henry W. Wells published by Sheed and Ward. It is the most complete and the handiest modernized version. A great deal of the original power and beauty is necessarily lost in such a version. But in this case obscurity and charm have to be sacrificed to utility.

churches, Langland now followed the liturgical cycle with care and sought spiritual rejuvenation in the Church and her services. He now evidently paid attention to the words he recited and applied them to his daily experience. The words of David, of the New Testament, and of the Homilies of the Fathers formed part of the furniture of his mind, so that quotations from these sources flow from him and litter every page. Many of them are obvious maxims from the New Testament, but many of the applications are ingenious and reveal a persevering attention to the meaning of the words he was daily reciting. Thus he compares the vanity of the learned with the piety of the unlettered:

God is often in the gorge of these great masters,
But among the lowly men are his mercy and his works;
And so says the psalter, as I have seen it often:
'Ecce audivimus eam in Elfrata, invenimus eam in campis
silvae.'

Clerics and other conditions converse of God readily,
And have him much in the mouth, but mean men in their
hearts (X, 69-74).

He warns the 'folk of Holy Church' lest they 'pass over as others do their hours and offices' (XV, 414), and certainly his own thoughts had not always wandered from the words on his lips.

The liturgy, the Mass and the Sacraments are for Langland the first essentials in the life of grace, and without them in the ordinary course the soul remains in sin. In spite of his intense hatred of the simony and lechery of the clergy, he recognises that we 'have clerks to keep us,' and that the normal physicians of the soul are 'parson or parish priest, penitence or bishop.' No matter how black the character of the minister, Langland followed with understanding and devotion the liturgy celebrated by him. His most poetic vision, that of the harrowing of hell, began appropriately on Palm Sunday, and the words of the liturgy of the day keep bursting into the text, so that we can see the procession and the singing of the Passion taking place

as he dreams. 'How the children chanted "*gloria laus*" to Jesus'; 'Then Faith cried from his window, "A, *fili David.*"' The voices of the "turba" crying "*Crucifige,*" "*Tolle,*" "*Ave Raby,*" and the Christus swooning and crying "*Consummatum est,*" these are evidently echoes of the sung Passion (XVIII, 8, *et seq.*). The church doors have become the gates of hell or of limbo, and the crucifix followed by the procession outside represent the victorious Christ with his company, come to open the doors and release the patriarchs and prophets, '*populis in tenebris.*' Again, it is after the Offertory when the sacrifice of the Mass has begun and Calvary is about to be renewed on the altar that Langland has a realistic vision of Jesus suffering victoriously on the Cross (XIX, 1, *sq.*).

The church and the Mass celebrated therein are the centre of Christian worship and the source of grace. There the presence of vice stands out in dark and startling contrast—Envy is distracted in church at Elene's new jacket and Wrath encourages wrangling among widows in the pews. The sinner naturally turns his step to the church to hear Matins and Mass, and it is then that he should petition mercy for his misdeeds. Then Holy Communion takes its proper place in the framework of the Mass; thus he 'went to holy mass and to be houseled after.' It is the fitting and necessary food for all Christians within the Church 'As help for their health once monthly, or as often as they have need.' He who has been baptized and shriven through the blood of Christ 'shall never be stalwart till he has eaten his body and drunk his blood.' But he must take care to prepare himself for the Eucharist by means of those other sacraments lest he incur damnation.

So God's body, my brothers, unless it be worthily taken,
Will condemn us at Doomsday as the writing did the
Hebrews. (XII, 92).

In order to lead the good life baptism is of course the first of the sacraments even though the unbaptized pagan,

Trojanus, has achieved it through some type of baptism by desire. After that the sacrament of penance introduces the sinning Christian once again into the spiritual life which is fed and made stalwart by the Eucharist. But these sacraments are useless without the inner co-operation of the sinner.

But shrift of mouth is worth more if men are contrite inwardly.

For shrift of mouth slays sin, be it ever so deadly.

Per confessionem to a priest *peccata occiduntur*,

Where contrition drives it down till it becomes venial . . .

But satisfaction seeks out the root, slays it and voids it;

It is unseen and sore no longer, but seems a wound healed
(XIV, 99).

Thus Langland indicates the beginning and growth of the spiritual life for the common man of England as involving a sacramental life of co-operation in the Mystical Body of Christ. The Mass, Divine Office, the Eucharist and the other sacraments form the foundation of a life to be led in unity in the Church and inspired above all by Love.

The words 'Mystical' or 'Ghostly Body' appear nowhere in the poem, but Langland's conception of the Church and her members is essentially a corporate one that would be well expressed by that phrase. First from the very fact of the Incarnation all mankind has become related to God by a fraternal and blood relationship, and that applies equally to those outside the Church.

But my nature shall move me to be merciful to man,

For we are brethren of one blood though not in baptism together (XVIII, 397).

They are blood brethren, not only because they have the same nature as the Lord of Life, with the same human blood coursing through their veins, but also because they have been bought by the outpouring of that blood made precious by union with the divinity. 'They are my blood brethren,' said Piers, 'for God bought all men.' Or again:

For we are all Christ's creatures, and by his coffer are we
wealthy,

And brothers of one blood, beggars and nobles (XI, 201).

Those who avail themselves of this fraternal bond, who are
baptized in that blood and fulfil their vocation, become
'whole brethren.'

But none who are my whole brethren in blood and baptism
Shall there be damned to death everlasting (XVIII, 399).

Such Christians are united to Christ through the merits of
the Passion, and he says of them, 'They are mine and of
me.'

Indeed, the moral of the whole vision of *Piers Plowman*
is that all men should cease from injustice, bribery and
vice, and enter into *Unity*. This is the conversion to which
all men are called. But the conversion into the Unity of
the Church of which Langland speaks is not from a pagan
or heretic state into communion with Rome. He is writ-
ing for men who have all been cradled in the bosom of the
Church. In the first Passus the Church appears:

'I am Holy Church,' she said, 'and you should know me.'

'I first found you. My faith I taught you.'

'You brought me pledges to be at my bidding'

'And to love me loyally while life lasted' (I, 76-80).

Those Englishmen were all members of the Church and
had, through their sponsors at baptism, promised to remain
within her protecting unity. Mere physical membership
was no guarantee of salvation. Particularly did this apply
to the lax clergy who formed the framework of the Church.
Like the carpenters who built the ark for Noah but were
all drowned in the deluge, these loose-living clerics were
carpenters to the Church, but ran the risk of being drowned
by their vices.

Therefore I counsel you clerks, who are the wrights of Holy
Church,

Work the works that you see written, and be wary that you
come into it (X, 436).

Not only do 'holiness and honesty come out of Holy Church through the lives of holy men,' but also many evils and much wretchedness are to be found in her external union through the imperfections of her ministers (*cf.* XV, 95).

Hence the last two sections of the poem, which are concerned with the best type of Christian life, insist on a true conversion into Unity in the Church, not merely by external membership, but by a union in the life of grace which is the basis of unity in the Mystical Body.

With this *Grace* began to make a good foundation,
 And wattled it and walled it with his pains and passion.
 With all Holywrit he made a roof afterwards,
 And called that house Unity, or Holy Church in English . . .
 Then Conscience addressed all Christians: 'My counsel is
 presently
 'To hasten into Unity and hold us within it . . .'
 The purification of the people and a pure clergy
 Made holiness the unity of Holy Church (XIX, 330-386).

The visionary or his allegorical characters are constantly urging all Christians 'to hold themselves in Unity.' This conscious participation in the life of the Mystical Body, while built up by grace, is finally effected by learning to love. The one craft needful for those who walk into Unity is 'Learn to love and leave all others.' Love is the heart of Langland's message, who in this respect is thoroughly evangelical. True members of the Church who have entered into Unity despise all other learning for the lofty science of love. 'Nothing shall fail you if you will leave logic and learn loving.' Love is the 'leach of life,' 'the wicket gate that goes to heaven.' Charity is 'a childish thing'; but yet 'a frank and free spirit without folly or childishness.' This is the spirit of all the externals of religious life which tends to become a mere playing with talismans without it; it is the spirit of Unity, the spirit, in fact, of all that liturgical piety which was based on the

Psalms, the Sacraments and the Mass. Certainly Langland regarded love in the Church mainly from the viewpoint of the corporal works of mercy and the more tangible effects of fraternal charity. Nevertheless, we may say that by describing the life of Do Best, as contrasted with Do Well and Do Better, in terms of Love and Unity he has shown how the greatest holiness is to be built on the treasures both external and internal of Holy Church, the Mystical Body of Christ.

Finally, Langland's attitude towards the person of Christ seems to reflect the restrained, austere and majestic treatment of the liturgy. The realistic and emotional devotion to the humanity of Christ, so typical of fourteenth century piety, finds little expression in the Vision of Piers Plowman. It is true that he treats the Passion and the Redemption in terms of medieval chivalry, which had inspired other writers, as for instance the author of the *Ancren Riwle* a century and a half before. Indeed, Langland follows the tradition of that earlier work when he describes Christ's human nature or body as the armour which is pierced in the jousting—the *Riwle* calls it his shield. But this knight Jesus who comes to Jerusalem to 'joust for the judgment of knighthood' appears usually a resolute and stern character. His severe words to the Jews are representative:

'You are churls,' said Jesus, 'and your children like you,
And Satan your Saviour as yourselves witness!
I find falsehood in your fair speaking,
Guile is in thy glad cheer and gall in thy laughing' (XVI,
168 sq.).

His disciples, marvelling at his many miraculous cures, and at the raising of Lazarus, call him 'The leach of life and the Lord of high heaven.' Faith, in the person of father Abraham, explaining the mystery of the Holy Trinity, thus describes the Incarnation.

So God, who had no beginning, but at his good pleasure,
Sent forth his son, a Servant for a season,
To engage himself here till issue had arisen,
Which were the children of Charity, and Holy Church their
mother (XVI, 243 sq.).

It might be argued that the lack of tenderness and realistic devotion is due to the character of the poem, the purpose of which is to turn men from the path of vice. The awe-inspiring figure of the Lord of Life is well calculated to remind the sinner of the danger to himself of unrepented sin. But this cannot be the complete explanation, for there is that other elevated and almost mystical aspect of the poem which insists on the bond of Love and the Unity of the Church. We should have expected that sense of the spirit of love to have dictated the more 'devotional' figure of Jesus as he appeared to such mystics as Richard Rolle. Perhaps, then, a life spent in constant contact with the liturgy gave Langland a dominating idea of the majesty of the High Priest of our sacrifice.

In the Vision of Piers Plowman the modern Englishman will find a national and yet Catholic type of spirituality. If he reads it often he will learn incidentally how to mould his life on the sacraments, the Divine Office and the Mass, how he must become conscious of his place in the unity of the Mystical Body, and how to temper his private devotion with the hieratic picture of the one High Priest and Victim of the liturgy.

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