

Public Worship and Human Society

by J. D. Crichton

If we were to take a look at human society of some four and a half centuries ago, say, about the year 1500, we should see there a world that was still largely sacral. The whole of life was bound up with religion, the Church, the *Sacerdotium*, penetrating into every department of human life, and in the civil order the *Imperium* itself was regarded as sacred. The *Sacerdotium* may have been corrupt and the *Imperium* tottering but men still thought of the whole of society as sacred. Even the very processes of nature by which millions of men and women gained a painful livelihood were nearer to magic in their minds than we usually like to think they were. Nature was largely unpredictable, afflicted with mysterious calamities and marred from time to time by what were called 'Acts of God'.

On the other hand, there was an immense surge of new life throughout Europe. Men had rediscovered the ancient literature of Greece and Rome and were luxuriating in it. For more than a hundred years Italy had flowered with a new art in paint and stone, whose products we still admire. Great new buildings were going up, but above all, men felt that they were new beings. They were throwing off the restrictions of the old sacral order and were finding themselves, discovering new powers to which they could see no limit. Nature itself was being freed from the bondage of magic and within a hundred years Galileo would demolish the old picture of the cosmos and take the music out of the spheres.

If we turn to our own age, we find we too are living in a new era, but instead of studying the Greek and Roman classics, men today are rejoicing in new scientific and technological discoveries and are rapidly changing the face of the earth. Man is in the process of completing what he began in the sixteenth century and he has a like sense of power which again he sees to be without limits. All this vast revolution was welcomed by the Vatican Council in its great document called the Church in the Modern World. And we too should welcome it ungrudgingly for it is the manifestation of the almost inexhaustible invention of man who was made in the image of God and was put in this world to subdue the earth.

All this however has led to a reduction of the area of the sacred. Man feels more strongly than ever that he is master of the earth and that it merely awaits a further and more complete exploitation. There is nothing inherently wrong in this though I think there is a danger that

the ultimate mystery that lies at the heart of created reality is not seen and that the nature of things will not always be respected. For precisely the ability to understand the order of creation and the power that has come to man to use it, is a temptation to ride rough-shod over it and in our own time I do not think this temptation has always been resisted. It would seem to be necessary to remember that even though this secularisation of nature is a good and even necessary thing, the very world and all that is in it is an expression, a mirror, a reflexion of the God who poured out his love so that these things might be.

It remains true however that we live in a world that has been stripped of mystery and the question is being asked how this affects our attitude to worship, how in fact these two things are related to each other or if they are at all. For worship is above all in the area of the sacred, it is an activity that is removed from the ordinary affairs of life, it is the way man approaches the all-holy God with sentiments of reverence and even of awe. This is true even if it is not the whole truth and this has been expressed in our liturgy in a whole complexus of ceremonial, gesture, rubrics, language and song. All this said to the world: 'This is the area of the sacred, this you may not approach without due preparation, this is untouchable except by those who have been consecrated – made sacred – so that they may handle it.' One consequence of this was that it was assumed that only priests and other ordained ministers could perform it. The people were spectators of a sacred spectacle rather than doers of a sacred action. A further consequence of this state of affairs was that we had a liturgy that was constructed by the clergy and which expressed clerical attitudes rather than those of the people.

Not all in that situation was wrong but for good or for ill, we have now moved into a different world. People are different and what is more important is that there has been a revolution in liturgy which has been promoted by the Vatican Council. If there is one thing that has been emphasised more than anything else in the Constitution on the Liturgy it is that our worship must be accessible to the people, that it must be available to them not merely at the level of sight or understanding but at the level of action. They must be able to *use* it in *their* approach to God, in the way they go to be united with God. It would seem then that worship as the Church understands it must be clearer in meaning, more open to the people and to that extent less 'sacred' in the old sense than once it was. It is this surely that is at the root of liturgical reform and, as I see it, the liturgy will have to express in the future more adequately than it has done in the past the attitudes and needs of the people. This too would seem to be more in accord with the desacralised world into which we have moved and which the Church at the Vatican Council has welcomed. It is true that worship is not for dechristianised or non-Christian people and I am not suggesting that our worship should be cut down to meet the supposed and

perhaps imaginary needs of unbelievers, but the Christian people live in this world, are affected by it, and are at least partly formed by it. I believe it to be particularly important for young people that they should not experience a sense of alienation when they come to worship. They need to see the relevance of worship to their lives and their world if they are to understand what they are doing and use it fruitfully for the building up of their Christian lives.

All this requires a greater simplification of liturgical worship than we have as yet envisaged, a simplification that is in any case demanded by the Constitution (34). A number of the movements and gestures of our liturgy have become fossilized and it is doubtful whether they express the worship of people of today or of the England in which we live. The general atmosphere of our churches, too often redolent of the Victorian age, will have to be changed and their interior arrangement, orientated to a purely clerical liturgy, will have to be simplified and made more apt for a style of worship that requires the full participation of the people. In short, simplicity, aptness for purpose and a certain visible relationship with the world in which we live are necessary if our worship is to become the sacrament of Christ to the men of our time.

Nor should it be thought that in this way the true sacredness of the liturgy will be injured or destroyed. What is holy in our liturgy is not in the first place its external expression but the divine mystery of Christ's saving passion, death and resurrection, and the whole purpose of the Vatican Council in renewing and reforming the liturgy is that that divine mystery may be accessible to the people. All the changes being made or to be made are intended to bring the people into contact with the mystery of redemption, to make a living contact with Christ and through him and in the Holy Spirit to be carried into the deepest union with the Father. There we shall be, we *are*, united to the All-Holy, to the Sacred, to him from whom all other things derive their sacredness. What it means is that instead of stopping short at things that are indeed sacred but only partially so, we shall more easily go to God, the All-Holy, who will be enshrined in our hearts where we may worship him in spirit and in truth.

One of the more striking features of the Constitution on the Church in the Modern world is that it shows a deep compassion for the anguish of modern man in his sense of alienation from God, in his search for him and in the sense he often has that life seems to be without meaning. With his conquest of the material world, with his sense of power and achievement, with the shrinking of the area of the sacred, men see the need for God less and less. This is perhaps the greatest spiritual problem of our time and it is one to which the Church will have to bend all her efforts to find a solution. It is primarily a matter for the theologians but we have to ask: is worship relevant to this situation? At first sight it seems not. Worship is an absurdity if there is no God. But on the other hand, not all those who would say that they are

without belief in God are indifferent to the problem of finding him. Nor are they indifferent to what Christians say about him or do in his regard. It is part of the awful responsibility that we bear that we mediate God to our neighbours – or we do not, if we are stupid, opaque or infantile. We bear witness to God in our lives, in the compassion we have for those that suffer, in the compassionate understanding we have of those who have not found God or cannot find him. But we also bear witness to God in our worship. The very fact that the Christian people gather together for worship is a witness that we believe so strongly in God that our faith impels us to take action, to go out into the cold winter streets, impels us to go to great lengths to build new churches and maintain those that we have. But as in our words and our life, so in our worship, we can give wrong impressions, we can negative our witness by indifference to the quality of our forms of worship, by sheer sloppiness in the way we worship and by putting the emphasis where it does not belong. If our prayer is always petitionary, if we give the impression that our worship is a sort of bargaining with God – ‘If I do this for you, you will do that for me’ – then we are degrading the very image of God for our fellow-men, we are reducing him to the status of a tribal deity. Petition has its place but not a dominant place in our worship and there is a certain austerity in the Roman rite, which is being made even plainer with reforms that bear witness to the only true God who sent his Son into this world.

If you look at the texts of our liturgy, you will see that it has a profound, almost indescribable, reverence for the God we worship. Prayer after prayer tells us that we are totally dependent upon him and the worshipping community is caught up again and again in the purest prayer of adoration. There are the great cries of the psalms that echo through our worship in which we bear witness to the glory of God. There is the pure praise of the *Gloria in excelsis*: ‘We praise thee, we bless thee, we adore thee, we glorify thee,’ and there is finally, one of the purest prayers the Christian ever utters, ‘We give thee thanks for thy great glory’ – our hearts are full of joy and thanksgiving just because God exists, just because he is good, just because he is all beauty, a beauty he has shed on the whole world around us.

But there is more: in our worship God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, becomes a living reality for us here and now. We give our thanks to the Father through the Son, Jesus Christ made man, we call out his holy names, ‘Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God’ and by naming the names we praise him. To this the people answer with a prayer that is almost ecstatic in its intensity: ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts, thy glory fills all heaven and earth. Hosanna in the highest’. But before we have finished with our praise, we return to the mood of reverence, realising that we cannot approach God except through the Son and so we end the thanksgiving with the profoundly Christian prayer that comes at the end of the Canon in which the whole worshipping community is lifted up by Christ in the Holy

Spirit to the Father: 'Through Christ, and with him and in him are given to you, God the almighty Father, in the unity of the holy Spirit all honour and glory for ever and ever'.

This is the God we worship, this is the God to whom we commit ourselves in faith and this is the God that lies at the heart of the Christian reality. I know that here we do not penetrate the mystery of God, that in whole or in part it will remain incomprehensible to the non-Christian, but when we worship it is to him that we are bearing witness, to him who is the deepest reality of our lives, by whom in fact we live. At the least I think it may be said that he is a God worth worshipping.

But we are not yet meeting the need of modern man. The very transcendence of God of which I have been speaking is something that is being questioned even by Christians today. Not only does it make little appeal but the whole concept is said to be meaningless. We are *in* this world, we are *of* this world, we have to do with this world and modern men have some difficulty in thinking of God outside this world or seeing that he is relevant to it if he is. No doubt we need to do some demythologising of our concept of the world and of the relationship it has to God. Most of us have moved beyond the situation when we took such statements as that God is 'up there' seriously and we can think without much difficulty of this world as being present to God and of God being active in it, permeating it with his power and his love. But we must insist on the separateness of God from the world, otherwise we shall be erecting the world into a sort of deity, in fact making of it precisely the mythical monster from which man has been painfully freeing himself in the last four centuries.

But perhaps we can approach to some solution of the problem by taking up another sentiment so often voiced today, and especially by young people. They say 'We can only find God in other people – all the rest seems to us either meaningless or irrelevant'. This is but to say in other words what the Constitution on the Church has said. It bears witness to the overwhelming sense of community that modern man has. Through the modern means of travel, through the mass media of press, radio and television we are conscious of the solidarity of the human race as men have never been before. As Cardinal Heenan himself has observed, we are moved by disasters at the other end of the world and our active charity is at once engaged. All this is but to echo the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World that we in our time have a stronger sense of *community* than man has ever had before. In spite of all the divisions of race, and nation, creed and colour, we feel that we belong to the family that makes up the human race.

Yet as there are those who are afraid of the Church's concern with the world, so there are many who are afraid of the whole idea of community. With memories of various kinds of dictatorship, they think that 'community' means the submergence of the human personality, the invasion of the privacy of the soul by state or even

church and the levelling down of everyone to a least common denominator. This is to misunderstand the whole Christian conception of community. The Christian community, whether the Church, the diocese or the parish, is a community of persons, not robots or automata, and in the community it is precisely the personal values of its members that are of overriding importance. I am aware that hard things have been said about the institution ignoring or riding roughshod over personal relationships and I would not wish to deny the truth of such allegations where they can be proved. But no institution, not even the Church is perfect, and that means quite simply that we must expect imperfections which sometimes fall hard on individuals. But however that may be, what is of fundamental importance is that in community man finds the completion and fulfilment of his personality. This is obviously true of the smallest community in the world, marriage. But is also true of all genuine communities, and the reason why we do not always realise this is that we have become so radically individualistic that we think we exist only of and for ourselves. Society around us is alien to us. It is 'They', the enemy of 'Us', and at all costs we must keep 'Them' out. Religion, and especially worship, has become a purely individualistic exercise, oddly enough done in public, in which we go to God all by ourselves and in abstraction not merely from the great Church of which this liturgy is the sign but from the very people who are kneeling beside us. They too are 'the others', potential enemies with whom we must have as little to do as possible.

The vision of Christian worship is quite different. Here you have a community the members of which are bound together by faith and love, all together bent on approaching God in that common faith and love that is in the hearts of all. In the early church Christians were keenly conscious of the presence of Christ in each other when they were gathered together in worship. The word of the Lord, 'When two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them' was a vivid reality and not just a pious catch-phrase. To this very day the liturgical choir face each other during the liturgical offices and it is explained that the reason for this is that they are acknowledging Christ in each other. The kiss of peace, made before holy communion, which, alas, has become a fossilized clerical gesture, is a recognition that Christ is present in those with whom we worship. In a word, the truth of Christian worship is expressed in the Maundy Thursday hymn, 'Where is love and loving-kindness, *there is God*'. If this is our understanding of our worship, then we see that it comes some distance to meet the desire of modern people who find God easily in other people. Here is a community of people, conscious of the bonds that bind them together, conscious of the faith and love that is in their hearts, conscious indeed that God in a very real sense is present in the members of the worshipping community and that all together are seeking a new encounter with God, wanting to know him better,

wanting him to be more real to them, wanting finally to enter into an ever deeper union with him.

God indeed remains mysterious, intellectually we may know him little better through our worship, but what the moderns desire is not so much a clear idea of God, as for instance he can be defined in metaphysical terms. What they seek is an existential personal contact with the living God who, as Karl Rahner has said, can fill their abysmal need with the infinite riches of his being. And it is here in our humble acts of worship that they can be swept into the stream of the trinitarian love in which they make contact with the All-Holy God.

I am however aware that the whole idea of community is repudiated from another point of view. For too long we have been content to think that our parishes are communities and that if they are not, they can be made such. I accept the sociologists' allegation that our parishes for the most part are not communities but at this stage we are not talking about the sociologists' community. It is all too easy to think that the Christian community is something made by men; the Christian community, which is the body of Christ, is something that pre-exists us, something to which we are called, something into which we are admitted by an act of Christ who is active in his sacrament. By baptism and indeed by the other sacraments of initiation we enter the great invisible community which we call the Church which is vitalised by the life of Christ, poured out unceasingly by the Holy Spirit in the faith and love that he communicates to the members of the church. Here is the inner reality of the church, here is the mystery of the church which St Paul can liken to the intimate union between man and wife. It is this community into which we are introduced by baptism and in which we are able to sustain a dialogue with God. It is this dialogue that constitutes the heart of our worship.

But this intimate and invisible union, because it was born of Christ on the cross, seeks and demands a visible shape, an outward expression. For just as the Son of God made man was the manifestation, the sacrament of the Father, so the Church must be the sacrament of Christ. If the deepest reality of the Church is invisible, yet sheer *visibility* is of the very nature of the Church for it is her task to show forth Christ to the world and to convey to it his saving power. In other words, institution is of the very nature of the Church – it is not an added extra, or something that has grown up through the exigencies of history – and the institution is made up of human structures with all their imperfections, structures that cannot of their nature express the whole of the divine mystery that is the Church, structures that are subject to decay, to rigidity, that can only be changed by the breathe of the Holy Spirit blowing through the Church.

But what is far more important than that is that of all the visible structures of the Church, the liturgy is by far the most significant and the most powerful. The Constitution says that the liturgy is the summit of the all the Church's activity – all else, whether preaching

the gospel, reconciling sinners or ruling the people of God – is ordered to this one end that men through worship may give glory to God and achieve sanctification for themselves. The liturgy is the most adequate sign we have of the mystery of the Church even if it must always remain an imperfect one. When, says the Constitution, the liturgy is performed by the whole Christian community, by bishop, priests and deacons, by people each in their liturgical rank doing what is proper to them, then the sign of the Church is constructed, the nature of the Church is expressed, the mystery of its redeeming power is made present in the world. This in fact *is* the Church, the community of God's people loving each other and all lifted up together by Christ their head that they may find union with the Father.

But it is important to note that the *people* are part of this sign that manifests the Church, numerically much the greater part of the sign and this means that all in their proper order must play their role in the celebration of worship if the real nature of the true church is to be expressed. This is the fundamental reason why the reform of the liturgy has emphasized so heavily the part of the people in the celebration of the liturgy and why the Church is striving so hard to see that all in fact do play their part.

But, as yet, we have a community that is visible only to the eye of faith. The *meaning* of the sign the worshipping community constructs is hidden from the non-Christian observer and something of its meaning can only be conveyed on another level.

Commentators of all kinds on the Vatican Council have remarked that one of its most striking features is that here the Church showed a concern with the world outside it which has rarely, if ever, been shown by a church council before. In the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World there is a humility *vis-a-vis* the world that is remarkable. The Council Fathers said that they wished to enter into dialogue with the world so that they might understand it better and offer what help the Church has to bring in the most effective, and one might add, in the most acceptable way possible, to the solution of its problems. Visibly the Church is reaching out to the modern world and the 'Church' means all of us. How then can the liturgy do anything to forward this immensely important work? The immediate answer is, 'Directly, nothing'. What has to be constructed is a bridge between the worshipping community and the world and this can only be found in the lives of its members. They, and especially the people who are immersed by the nature of their tasks in the work of the world, have to express in their lives the love that is at the very heart of the mystery of Christian worship. It is the Christian people living in the world and conveying by the quality of their lives the love they have encountered in worship who will make visible the mystery of Christ and the mystery of the Church which is his body. All liturgy in the last resort has a missionary issue and as someone has said, it is not the intention of the Church in her pre-

occupation with liturgy to construct cosy cult-communities which shall be shut off from the world. The Constitution says that the liturgy is the source of all the Church's power and if the gospel is carried to the ends of the earth and if it is effective, it is because at the centre of that effort there is the worshipping community which is in ceaseless and living contact with the Word that brings salvation.

There is one final consideration. There are those who express their concern with some vehemence about the modern Church's pre-occupation with the world. They are afraid, I suppose, that the Church will be corrupted by the world, although that has only happened when the Church has not had a keen sense of its mission to the world. One can answer that in a sense if the Church is not concerned with the world, it is difficult to know what it should be concerned with. And the answer comes quickly, 'With God', and shocking as it may seem, it is yet true that Christians can be concerned with God in a way that is wrong. If that concern leaves out men, then it is fundamentally un-Christian. Christ came to men, he made himself one with them, he put on the human condition, he became a Jew of first century Palestine and all that he might save them, that is, lift them out of the sin-ridden condition in which they were alienated from God and re-unite them to him. The Church has no other mission than this and if in her discharging of it, she too has to go down to people, to suffer with them, to take on herself something of their shame and misery, she is doing no more than her Master, even if her doing of it will be infinitely less perfect than his. But she is also concerned with God for her one purpose is to lift up the whole world and the whole of mankind into the prayer of Christ so that she and they may give perfect praise and thanksgiving through him in the Holy Spirit to the Father.

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NOTE: In the last issue (April) we omitted to mention that the article 'Reflections on the February Editorial' by Cornelius Ernst, O.P., had originally appeared in *The Tablet* on February 25, 1967. We apologise to the editors of *The Tablet* for this omission —EDITOR.