

## THE REVIVAL IN LITURGICAL PRAYER

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THE present century has seen a great number of changes not only in the world at large but even very fundamental characteristics of the Church life. Among these the liturgical changes are perhaps the most startling. In the last five years these revolutions have emanated from Rome herself, though the preparatory work was done for the most part in France and Germany. The restored Easter Vigil and the new directives for Holy Week are but instances of the intervention of the highest authority in the general manner of conducting ourselves in church. Looking further afield to the Church at large, we see increasing acceptance of Mass offered facing the congregation, the development of the vernacular, the stream-lined architecture of new churches, the popularizing of the missal and many other activities which our grandfathers would never have tolerated. All this liturgical enthusiasm contrasts strongly with the general temper of Catholics in the last century. In those days the congregation, knelt, stood or sat mute and vainly unaware of what was happening at the altar, while the priest mumbled the low Mass unintelligibly or the 'picked' choir entered with gusto into Gounod's *Ave Maria* during the Offertory of the parish sung Mass. In those days it would seem that the general feeling for prayer lay in rosaries, meditations, holy hours, Benediction—in almost any activity in church apart from the official liturgy of the Church. Not that the faithful were in any doubt about the relative importance of the Mass in relation to other services; they were well instructed on the duty of attending Mass on days of obligation and many of them were well aware of the significance in England of the slogan: 'It is the Mass that matters'. But for most of them the Mass was an act of religion apart from their life of prayer, and in some ways apart from themselves—something that took place on the altar while they stood by. St Pius X was expressing an idea new to many when he encouraged the faithful throughout the world to 'pray the Mass', and even that phrase could have failed to convey to the uninstructed that the Mass is itself the highest prayer, the heart of all prayers—in St Vincent Ferrer's words, 'the highest work of contemplation that can be'.

What I wish to consider in this paper is first of all, and briefly, how the separation between prayer and the liturgy came about, and then how the liturgical revival during this century began to bridge the gap between them, and finally the theory of liturgical prayer as the centre of all personal prayers, for we have yet some way to go before the official prayer of the Church is accepted as the chief form and means of prayer for the individual, so that it is necessary to reconsider the principle underlying the modern practices.

The separation of meditation and private prayer from the liturgical prayer of the Church up to the end of the last century should not be accepted as an absolute fact. It needs to be modified in view of such things as the parochial Sunday Vespers which was included in the original editions of the *Garden of the Soul* and which has died out in some older parishes only during this present liturgical century of ours. Yet despite the modifications we might make to the assertion, it remains substantially true that the liturgy had largely ceased to be the main source of prayer for several centuries before our own. One of the reasons for this was the growing individualism in Catholic piety towards the end of the Middle Ages. The works that fed the prayer of Christians then were devoted to private forms of devotion and forms of meditation. Even the writings of Thomas à Kempis that centred so wholesomely on our Lord were devoid of the communal aspect of prayer. The whole trend of spirituality had been towards the individual's relation towards God independently of the body of Christ. All the excellent works of the English mystical writers had ignored, or perhaps it would be truer to say had taken for granted, the prayer of the Mass and the Divine Office. It can be argued that these things were so much part and parcel of their lives, as familiar as the air they breathed, that it did not occur to them to mention such fundamental sources of spiritual life. The fact remains, however, that they were not mentioned, so that the subsequent generality who benefited from those works were given little assistance in forming their life of prayer on primary sources.

We may take Walter Hilton's description of the lowest degree of prayer in the *Scale of Perfection*:

There is first vocal prayer, either given us directly by God himself, as the Paternoster, or by the Church, as matins, vespers

and the other canonical hours, or else composed by holy men and addressed to our Lord, our Lady or the Saints.

We should notice in the composition of this list that the Mass receives no mention at all. Later he says of the Divine Office that 'since it is the prayer of the Church, there is no vocal prayer so profitable'. But the rest of the chapter (I, 27) presumes that this vocal prayer is only for beginners, sinners, sensual men who are unable to reach to the higher forms of prayer in contemplation. There is no need to labour this point for it has often been pointed out. But we must remember that the Reformation served to crystallize this individualism, coming when there were more copies of the *Imitation of Christ* than of the New Testament coming from the newly-founded presses. The countries that were swamped by the new religion were unable to exploit the full properties of the liturgy. In England the Mass had to be celebrated in attics with as little sound or ceremonial as possible, and the faithful were left to their books of piety to continue the heroic struggle of the faith with fervour and true union with God. Of necessity, then, in such countries as ours the liturgy was abandoned as the main source of prayer and was substituted by private forms of devotion that could be practised alone easily hidden from the prying eyes of the pursuivants.

Thus it remained for several centuries, though we should not forget the work in this country of Bishop Challoner whose aim, though so different in its outward garb, is comparable with that of the modern liturgical movement in France insisting on the Scriptures as the foundation of liturgical prayer. He was however something of an exception, so that when freedom of worship was at last granted to English Catholics it was not the heroic families who had maintained the faith according to the old tradition who reclaimed the glories of the liturgy, but rather the new converts of the Oxford Movement.

From the middle of the last century the liturgical movement was born and began to grow steadily. But in this country it was inspired to a certain extent by the converts' enthusiasm for the beautiful externals of the worship of the Church only now able to receive full justice. But this concentration on the external elements of religion was not limited to England. It seems to have become almost universal, for the Church was at last emerging from its state of siege in Europe and the sense of freedom which

had always existed within the hearts of the individual faithful was now able to express itself outwardly in the way the faithful worshipped in church. Dom Gueranger inaugurated a great interest in the liturgy, and Benedictine centres such as the Abbey of Solesmes began to pay very careful attention to the chant, the style of vestments, the carrying out of ceremonial according to the rubrics. During the first part of the century the liturgical movement thus became associated with the specialists in rubrics and the history of worship. Some of these men were of outstanding merit, and men like Edmund Bishop gave a very sound basis to the movement, making it possible to understand the meaning of much that was done round the altar which had hitherto been accepted without understanding. The history of the liturgy is a most necessary background to the full participation in the Church's worship and the same may be said of perfection in chant and precision in rubrics. But all this expertise was largely taken for granted the old dichotomy between personal piety and the Church's prayers. The question of personal prayer was still left to the spiritual director who assisted his clients in forms of mental prayer. The Mass where the priest was an enthusiast for the liturgy became an exasperating performance to the simple faithful who could not see how the cut of vestments or the number of candles or presence or absence of flowers on the altar could possibly make any difference to his own personal approach to Almighty God.

One of the factors that aggravated the lack of comprehension of the interior spirit of the liturgy lay in the uncertainty about the theology of the Mass. Since the sixteenth-century attack on the sacrifice of the altar there had been so many theories and explanations that the ordinary folk seldom heard a sermon on the Mass, preachers all being too scared of the subject to venture to expound the meaning of the central sacrifice from the pulpit. Without theology a sound piety cannot exist, and this dearth of true theological instruction on so important a point left the faithful with the well-developed theology of the stages of prayer and nothing else, and naturally the devout made good use of what was at their disposal. Thus for several decades the liturgical movement carried a bad name for most of the faithful. Concentration on the liturgy seemed to them to lead to faddism and eccentricity. At best it seemed to make everything more compli-

cated. They usually felt that the Rosary was more simple than trying to follow all the meanings of the priest's gestures and words, each of which could receive homilies of long duration filled with historical fact and explanation. But these eccentricities were perhaps the inevitable concomitant of a really living movement in the Church. The pendulum inevitably swung too far from the purely internal and individual religion of the preceding centuries; and where external religion is concerned there is always a danger of paying attention only to the outside of the cup. It is even easy to look upon rubric and artistic perfection in worship as a sort of mechanism that will of itself bring supernatural goodness, to consider oneself as praying so long as one is reciting the words and going through the motions. It is this form of modern pharisaism that the average Catholic has distrusted in the modern enthusiasm for liturgical prayer.

But in the last decade or so the tide has turned and a far deeper and more genuine spirituality has developed which promises well for a true liturgical prayer among the faithful. The pendulum has begun to return to centre. Perhaps the first really fundamental work in this direction was that of Abbot Vonier and of Père de la Taille, who recalled the theologians of the Eucharist to their senses by those revolutionary volumes on the Mass. We need not agree with all they had to say, but they did bring back the discussion to a sacramental plain from which it had almost entirely deviated. They realized that the whole question of Sacrifice and Communion lay in the realm of signs and symbols, and ever since their day there has been an increasing awareness among theologians of the importance of the sacramental sign. The sacramental signs lie, of course, at the heart of the liturgy. Their interior spirit rescues external worship from the danger of remaining purely external. The Mass ceases to be a series of words and gestures when viewed as a sacrificial and eucharistic sign, and becomes a single action involving all those who are taking part. Following on the track blazed by Vonier and de la Taille, theologians have given a lead in founding the liturgical movement on the true basis of the sacraments which has already rescued it from the dangers of externalism.

Again those who are most concerned to restore the liturgy to its true place in the life of the Christian have become more and more aware of the importance of the Scriptures. In the early days of the

organized contemplative life the *opus Dei* in church was closely linked with the *lectio divina* in the cell. There was the liturgy running side by side with study and meditation on the word of God without which it could not exist. As St Thomas points out, the Eucharistic bread which nourishes the heart cannot be separated from the bread of the Word of God which nourishes the mind without the former developing into superstition. Especially in France the insistence on the understanding of the Scriptures as part of the liturgical movement has reached considerable success if we may judge by the printed output in magazines, picture papers such as *Fêtes et Saisons* or *La Vie Catholique Illustrée*, as well as in the more scientific introductions to the Bible and commentaries. The faithful are now encouraged not simply to follow the words of the priest in their missals but to relish the meaning of the passages of Holy Writ that are read to them in the course of their common worship, and they are encouraged too to go further afield and gain the sense of the whole books and epistles from which the passages were extracted. Moreover by translating the Psalms, in particular, into a modern and more poetic idiom and setting them to modern music those foundation stones of the Church's prayer have begun to play some part in the prayer of the faithful. As I say, this has so far been mainly a French success, but there are signs that it is beginning to affect other countries as well.

This renewed interest in the Scriptures and in the Psalms in particular goes hand in hand with a greater appreciation of the biblical theology of the Fathers of the Church who, whatever their scientific shortcomings might have been, thought always sacramentally, taking the 'sacred sign' for granted in all that they had to say. Patrology was, of course, the strength of the great converts of last century, but perhaps it takes a century for such work to make its way into the life of the ordinary Christian. Whether this is so, it is only recently that the general view of theologians and preachers has taken cognizance of the primary importance of the Fathers in relation to the liturgical revival.

It would be interesting to be able to compare the relation between works on personal prayer and piety and those on the Scriptures of the Fathers a hundred years ago with those of today. The ordinary Christian was well supplied with books on how to make mental prayer, private meditations on all sorts of topics,

but he had little opportunity of really tasting the word of God and feeding his prayer directly on that, in the way that he is today in connection with the common prayer of the faithful.

All this augurs well for the liturgical prayer of the Church in the future. But all the signs of a firmer hold on the spirituality of the liturgy the resurrection of the theology of the Mystical Body is the greatest. It should be noted that Pius XII's great 'liturgical' encyclicals which summarize the intense activity of the last fifty years followed the logical order—the Mystical Body, the Scriptures and the Liturgy itself. In those three encyclicals together we can find a great deal of theology necessary for understanding true liturgical prayer.

Now perhaps we may turn from this rough outline of the history of the re-appearance of liturgical prayer to consider the theory of this form of prayer. First of all we have to insist that liturgical prayer is the prayer of the Church. This expression, of course, appears in almost every work of spirituality, but so often the Church in this context is de-personalized, so that her prayer is regarded as something quite apart from the prayer of the individual Christian. He tends to think of some immense, amorphous mass of humanity praying, almost automatically, almost inevitably, almost in the same way as the universe is regarded as praising God by being what it is, dependent on the Creator. This impression is often strengthened by the manner in which some of the clergy recite their Breviary or say their Mass. As long as the words are said with the lips and the obligation fulfilled the Church's prayer continues wherever their hearts or thoughts may be. The practice of some religious orders whose members were unversed in the Latin language none the less reciting the Divine Office conveyed something of the same impression: the Church's prayer is continuous outside ourselves.

But in fact the Church is the Body of Christ, so that on the one hand her prayer is our Lord's prayer, but not his prayer exactly as if he were now in Palestine praying alone on the mountain top. Today our Lord exists on earth in his members, each of which is a distinct person, and each member prays either individually, or sharing the same words, the same action, the same mind, the same heart as all the other persons comprising that Body. Our Lord, of course, is present in the individual's own private prayer, but he is present in a more direct and deeper way

in the common prayer of all the members together. First, his Real Presence in the Eucharist is given to these members when they assemble and pray together with him and for the purpose of his becoming more really present in their midst in that they are drawn together in closer unity with a union of mind and heart. He shares his mind and heart more fully with those assembled for Eucharist—and that is the prayer of the Church. Secondly, the words the members use together are Divine Words, associated with the Word of God himself, mostly from the inspired Scriptures or at least from the long tradition of the Church, the Body. And thirdly, the assembly, their words and their actions are all informed by obedience, which lies at the heart of prayer and the virtue of religion in general—those who take part in the liturgy are acknowledging the authority of Christ in his Church; the element of authority in liturgy is fundamental and it is the first element in unity in prayer.

Liturgical prayer, therefore, is the prayer of Christ because it is according to his institution, his mind, it is inspired by his grace and love and it is designed to draw all men into Christ through whom alone they can approach the Father. We need not go further into this as Father Lawler brought out so clearly the need for prayer to be Christian, built up on the grace of our Lord.

What I should like to mention here as one of the essentials of liturgical prayer is its incarnational effect, i.e. of making the word *flesh*. Prayer as meditation in the sense in which Father Hollings has discussed it is always inclined to consider the soul as entirely distinct from the body which is regarded as a hindrance to true prayer. In the liturgy bodily things far from being hindrances are used as helps towards communion with God: not only the body of the individual who is praying, but every material thing in the universe from the Body of Christ to the 'body' of fire or of the tiny fibres that go to make up the altar cloth. When I speak of these things as 'helps' I do not mean to imply that they are merely stepping stones to be left behind one by one as the person who prays approaches the further bank of unity with God. It is the man, body plus soul, who prays, just as Christ in his human nature prayed and continues to pray in us not as a separated soul but as a man. Man is also a part of the universe and one element of his prayer should be in this sense 'universal', he gathers into it the whole of God's creation. When he prays at Easter he prays with



all the rising life of the countryside around him. Liturgical prayer teaches him, not to despise the hills and the sea, the green herbs and lively animals, but to draw them into the praise of God. Of course there is the ascetic action of sacrifice which detaches him from all these things, but detachment implies reverence for, and a certain type of unity with, things other than God. In this age of materialism when men as a rule despise matter and simply make use of it for their own ends this is an important aspect of liturgical prayer. It teaches the Christian to pray as a man and in his prayer to play his part in God's creation. It makes it possible for him eventually to find in every created thing in his daily life a sacrament of God's presence.

Especially does liturgy teach man to pray with his fellow men, in common. Again not despising his fellows, but detached from, yet reverencing and loving them, he finds himself carried nearer to God in the action of the priest and congregation at Mass. His own prayer is deepened and at the same time he draws others nearer to our Lord by his own co-operation with grace. No effect of the individualism of past centuries is more evident than in the way so many people assist at Mass engrossed in their own pieties and actively despising the sailor in the next bench who reeks of beer and tar or the half-witted woman who mutters and mumbles throughout the service. There is bound to be something wrong in that form of prayer, and that wrong should be set right by a true liturgical prayer.

To come to more precise details; the variety of words and gestures and actions in the liturgy, while offering an opening to 'activism' and distraction if misused, in itself should lead the pray-er deeper into unity, finding eventually the simplicity within this complex system. The whole day has been made liturgical by the daily sacrifice round which has spread the hierarchy of the Divine Office, intended to break seven times in twenty-four hours, into the other occupations of man. Fr Hollings has already suggested how the Psalms of themselves should lead to meditation and contemplation. Made up of a multitude of verses the one who takes part in this prayer begins perhaps by trying to follow actively each phrase and sentence, but soon he finds that the antiphon gives him a single point that can keep his attention or else he can find his own 'antiphons'—phrases that catch his attention as he goes along. Eventually the Psalms may keep him

so constantly before God that all the words begin to have a single meaning, he sees the psalm as a single prayer without discursion. But he does not reach this stage alone. He is in church with his fellows whose voices sustain his own, as their prayers sustain his prayer. With them he stands up, sits down, bows and genuflects. In this atmosphere he can eventually find a relaxation which enables him to breathe freely both physically and spiritually. The Office becomes a re-creation rather than a burden, and his prayer is built up gradually as he returns faithfully to choir at the appointed hours and so prepares himself for the great daily act of sacrificial prayer in the Mass, and so to continue his prayer of gratitude after this act of communion with God and with his fellow men in God.

But liturgical prayer is not simply active recitation of prayers. There are specified times during the Lessons, the Little Chapters, the Epistles and Gospels when he must sit or stand passively absorbing the Word of God. At these times his prayer is being nourished and his further meditations guaranteed. His *lectio divina* should spring from these readings and lead him back to them, thus tying up his vigils and retreats and meditations with his liturgical prayer—each nourishing the other. He is encouraged also to sit quietly back and meditate while the chant of the cantor elevates his spirit throughout a gradual or 'Alleluia' to consider a single verse from a psalm at some length.

All this of course is in the ideal order and certainly in practice the harsh nasal tones of the cantor may be a distraction rather than an encouragement to prayer. But even here the displeasing behaviour of our fellows in common prayer can play its part ascetically and sacrificially.

There is no need here to consider the theology of the Mass as the greatest work of contemplation. The subject has been dealt with elsewhere. But it must be remembered that this forms the core of liturgical prayer, and the revival of true liturgical prayer is the revival of a deeper understanding of the daily sacrifice of the altar.