

COLOUR IN THE LITURGY

CATHOLICS to-day are left in no doubt of the importance which the Church attaches to the kind of music she considers suitable for use in her liturgy. Since the year 1903, when Pius X issued his *Motu Proprio*, the principles governing legislation in this art have been made accessible to all. But in that encyclical a reference is made to other arts besides music and it is stated,¹ 'The Church has always recognized and favoured the progress of the arts, admitting to the service of worship everything good and beautiful discovered by genius in the course of ages—always, however, with due regard to the liturgical laws.' Among these things 'good and beautiful' the Church has made use of the Art of Colour at all times, and has, moreover, in various places explained her principles and reasons for so doing. References to these principles are scattered among the canonical books, and occur in the decrees of the Congregation of Sacred Rites. They may be difficult to find when they are wanted, but the general principle of using colour as part of the splendour of the liturgy is too well known and accepted to need emphasis. It has always taken its part in the ceremonial, as one instrument in an orchestra, and the gap in the general harmony would be obvious, if it were omitted. Cardinal Schuster, the present Archbishop of Milan, dwells on this accumulated harmony when describing the Introit for Whit-Sunday.² 'It is well known,' he says, 'that all the present texts of the Missal and of the Breviary have beautiful melodies attached to them. As no one, for instance, would desire to judge of an opera simply by reading the *libretto* of the author, but would also wish to hear the music and see the full effect of the *mise-en-scène*, so, in order thoroughly to appreciate

¹ *Cap. ii, 5.*

² *The Sacramentary*, Trans. Arthur Levelis-Marke, M.A. Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1925; Vol. II; pp. 389.

the sense of beauty and inspiration, the powerful influence produced by the sacred liturgy on Christian people, it is necessary to see it performed in the full splendour of its architectural setting, of the clergy in their vestments, of the music, the singing and the ritual, and not to judge it merely from a curtailed and simplified presentment.' The vestments of the clergy, here taken as an example of the use of colour, have been regulated by the Church to give point to the character of the Feast of the Day by their variation in colour. But she also gives directions for the use of colour on a larger scale by its use on the altar itself, and this to a greater extent and with more exact care than is often realised, or at least observed. Her reasons for these directions are to be found in her references to the unique importance which she attaches to the altar as the central focus of her liturgy. Not only does she look on it as the *raison d'être* of the whole building, proclaiming that the church exists for the altar rather than the altar for the church; not only does she recognise in it the sacrificial stone, upon which Christ, our Priest and Victim, offers Himself daily in the Eucharistic Sacrifice; but she has consistently maintained that in her mind the altar represents her Lord Himself. The reverence due to it represents the reverence due to Him. In the Breviary Office for the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica,³ she speaks of 'the altar which, anointed with oil, expresses the representation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our altar, victim and priest.' In the *Ritus Servandus*, prescribing the rules for Exposition and Benediction in England, the reason for forbidding the temporary throne to be set up at any considerable distance from the altar is stated to be because 'the most holy sacrament ought never to be placed outside the *consecrated altar, which represents Christ Himself.*' In the Rite of Ordination of subdeacons in the *Pontificale Romanum* this representation of Our Lord by the altar is extended to include the members of which He is the Head. In the

³ November 9, 2nd Nocturn, Lesson IV.

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bishop's charge to the ordinands beginning *Adepturi*, we read 'For the Altar of Holy Church is Christ Himself, as John bears witness, who in his Apocalypse tells us, that he beheld a golden Altar (Apoc. VIII, 3) set before the throne, on and by which the offerings of the faithful are made acceptable to God the Father. The cloths and corporals of this altar are the members of Christ, God's faithful people, with whom, as with costly garments, the Lord is clad according to the Psalmist: *The Lord reigns, He is clothed with majesty* (Psalm xcii, 1).' In this passage the altar is taken to be a figure of Our Lord Himself who, when presenting the faithful to His Father, clothes Himself with those in whom His own victory has borne fruit, as with robes of majesty. And to bring home this truth the Church makes use of a sequence of colours, by clothing the altar in the colour according with the feast of the day. The whole altar is robed in a frontal, red for the martyr, white for confessors and virgins, gold or white for the greater feasts of His Blessed Mother, thereby proclaiming that the Martyr's victory is not his own, but is the victory of the Rex Martyrum realised afresh in yet another of His members; and so with each victory throughout the calendar; even His Blessed Mother's sinlessness, the most costly and precious of all His clothing of majesty, is shown to be not her own achievement, but that of her Son, when He, represented by His altar, puts on the *vestimenta aurea*, the garments of wrought gold, to receive the Queen who is brought to Him in clothing of golden needlework. It would seem that the Church originated this means of the robed altar to bring out the truth which was the inspiration of the first centuries of Christianity, as it is of all time. In *The Life of the Church*, edited by Father M. C. D'Arcy, S.J.,⁴ there occurs the following passage dealing with the second and third centuries: 'Christ present in the Martyrs, whom He sustained with His strength and to whom He opened the vistas of Heaven, Christ present in the Faithful, whom

⁴ Published by Sheed & Ward, London, 1932; p. 110.

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He united, purified, sanctified—that was where the attraction lay, which drew to the new religion the majority of its adepts.' It is hard to suggest how the Church could have brought home this truth, or have given it expression, more vividly than by this use of colour to change the whole face of the altar itself.

The directions for making use of these coloured 'robes of majesty' for the altar are found in the General Rubrics of the Missal. Number twenty directs that 'the altar, moreover, should be adorned with a frontal of the colour suitable to the feast or office in so far as that is possible.' The particular use of the various colours is laid down in the eighteenth rubric of the same series. 'The vesture (*paramenta*) of the Altar, Celebrant and Ministers ought to be of the colour suitable to the Office and Mass of the day according to the use of the Roman Church, which has been accustomed to use five colours, White, Red, Green, Violet and Black.' It is worth noticing that the coloured vesting of the altar is placed first in the list, before the celebrant's vestment, for it seems the right order to place first what appertains to the Head, and afterwards what concerns the members. In practice at the present day the members are not infrequently seen clothed in the colour of the Feast or Saint of the day, while the altar, representing Him from whom the members derive, is left uncovered and uncoloured, unaffected, as it were, by the victory of which He is the sole author. Directions for the use of colour on the altar are to be found also in the *Caerimoniale Episcoporum*.⁵ 'The altar itself should be adorned more on solemn feasts, or when a bishop is to celebrate—if it is detached and separate from the wall, it should be furnished on its front and also on its back elevation with frontals of gold, or of silver, or of silk finely woven with gold, according to the colour of the festival, the frontals strengthened with cut and squared laths, called battens (*telaria*) so that they do not appear rucked or puckered, but stretched and

⁵ Lib. 1, cap xii, 11.

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tight in a more fitting way.' Instances of the use of these embossed gold and silver frontals are not uncommon. There is the famous set for the high altar of St. Ambrose's at Milan, of which the front piece is of gold and three separate pieces for the back and two sides are of silver. The reredos of St. Mark's, Venice, known as the *Pala d'oro*, was originally a nether-frontal: it dates from the tenth century. King Henry VII of England had several frontals made of embossed silver, covered with gold-leaf, which he presented to different churches as his personal gift. But the feature which all these frontals had in common, in contrast with examples of recent date, is that they were removable. This is essential, if the Church's use of colour in its most dramatic gesture on Holy Thursday is not to be lost. After Vespers the altar is stripped of every frontal and cloth during the recitation of Psalm 21, *Deus, Deus meus respice in me*, with its antiphon, *Diviserunt sibi vestimenta mea: et super vestem meam miserunt sortem*. The altar is then left a bare stone, its only decoration the five crosses incised on its upper surface. But with the removal of its coloured frontal is portrayed more than the removal of Our Lord's garments: the desertion and flight of His disciples is included in that action: *Tunc discipuli omnes relicto eo fugerunt*. He is stripped of His most costly robes, the faithful, whom He was labouring to present to His Father. *Relicto eo*. Is it possible to devise any method of bringing this desolation home to the mind, through the agency of the senses, more surely than by this annihilation of colour?

There is yet a third property or function of the coloured frontal. Two have been suggested; that of providing a covering of honour for the Altar as representing the Lord's Body; and that of indicating the association of the Head with the members. The third is more architectural in character. Its principle is referred to in the passage from the *Caerimoniale Episcoporum* quoted above, which directs that the frontal should not appear rucked or puckered, but flat. It is natural that the Church, who regards the altar as the central focus of her building as well

as of her liturgy, should take steps to ensure that the high altar should appear to the eye as what in fact it is, the most important feature of the church. The great canopy above it has this effect, but the coloured frontal is a valuable accompaniment to it. Prominence in architecture is obtained by presenting an unbroken surface; a series of alternating lights and shadows introduces the principle of camouflage, the whole purpose of which is to render an object inconspicuous by breaking up a plain surface. Consequently an altar whose front elevation consists of recessed panels alternating with columns or projecting shafts, becomes insignificant by the breaking up of its surface. But as soon as the flat surface of a coloured frontal is hung in front of it, the altar holds its own at once against any background. The Congregation of Sacred Rites makes this clear in its reply to a question from Mexico. 'By an ancient custom, in place of the frontal, which should cover the whole front elevation of the altar, in several churches is used a little frontal (*palia*), about half a metre each way, which is hung in the middle of the altar.' Permission for this was refused. Its effect would have been to cut the altar vertically into three and to render it quite insignificant.

In practice the expense of supplying a set of frontals is urged as an insuperable difficulty: but the Rubric of the Missal meets the difficulty with its 'in so far as that is possible.' A frontal of gold, or of some brocade introducing colours on a white ground, can be used for all but the penitential seasons, and if this is backed with violet and the frontal hung on a rod, as the medieval ones appear to have been, the one frontal will serve all purposes: all that is needed is to lift the rod and reverse the hanging for Advent and Lent.

In the case of colour used in the vestments it is unnecessary to add anything to what has been said of the frontals: and the same principles apply to the veil of the tabernacle which is intended to share in the same sequence of colour,

⁶ S.R.C. 4000, ad 2, Sep. 10, 1898.

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though the decree on that point is less definite. It occurs in S.R.C. 3035, ad 10, July 21, 1885. Question: (a) 'Should the Tabernacle in which the most Holy Sacrament is reserved be covered with a veil, as the Ritual directs? And if so (b) may that veil be made of cloth, or cotton, or wool, or woven hemp? (c) Of what colour ought it to be? In opinions of some, such as Barufaldus, the veil ought to be white in colour, as most becoming to the most Holy Sacrament; while in that of others, like Gavantus, it should be of the same colour as the altar frontal and the other vestments, according to the period of the feast, except black, which should be changed to violet in offices for the dead.' Answer to (a), 'Yes.' To (b), also 'Yes.' To (c), 'Either opinion may be put into practice, but most especially the opinion of Gavantus, which has on its side the custom of the Churches of Rome.'

It is significant, too, that the decrees appear to attach more value to the coloured veil, than to any costliness of material used in the tabernacle itself. The veil must cover the whole tabernacle;⁷ to hang a curtain, or a pair of them, before the door does not fulfil the requirements. However precious or elaborate the outside of the tabernacle may be, the veil may not be dispensed with. This is laid down in S.R.C. 3520, August 7, 1880. Question: 'If the Tabernacle of the Most Holy Sacrament is wrought in silver, gold or other precious material, may it thereby be dispensed from the general obligation of being covered with the veil?' Answer. 'The provision of the Roman Ritual must be retained.'

It seems reasonable to trace in this reply the stress which the Church lays on the importance of bringing the tabernacle into the scheme of colour with the altar and celebrant. In her mind apparently the vital point which she wishes to emphasise is better expressed by the sequence of colour than by any wealth of metal-work, however costly the material, or skilled the craftsmanship.

GEOFFREY WEBB.

⁷ *Rituale Romanum*, tit. iv, cap. i, 6.