

## SAYING MASS WITH DEVOTION

By G. D. SMITH

I SUPPOSE it is the experience of nearly every priest that in the course of time his outlook on the daily offering of the Mass undergoes a considerable change. At first the thought uppermost in my mind as I say Mass is that what I am doing is very *wonderful*. It may be because the theology of the Eucharist is still fresh in the memory; but, whatever the reason, the aspect of the Mass that chiefly appeals in those early days is what theologians describe as *ex opere operato*: I am above all intensely conscious of the marvellous power which God is manifesting in and through myself. At my words bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ, in my person the Word Incarnate is offering himself in sacrifice to his Father. It is with a feeling of awe, almost of fear, that I tremblingly handle the frail host and gaze wonderingly in the chalice at the blood which Christ has shed for me. And this sentiment, mingled with a feeling of exhilaration, which holds me when I realise that I am acting as God's minister in the miracle of transsubstantiation, is so overpowering that I can hardly think of anything else.

It is only later that the thought: How wonderful is the thing I am doing, begins to give place to another: How *difficult* is the thing I do!

Difficult: not the miracle of transsubstantiation, not the offering of the Church's sacrifice to God. This is wonderful, but not difficult. On the contrary, it is extraordinarily easy; almost too easy, one begins to think. God is doing all the work and I am doing practically nothing; he is using me only as his instrument. An honourable task for me, if you will, but not really burdensome. After all, no unworthiness of mine can prevent my Mass from being the true sacrifice of the New Covenant. By his providential dispensation our divine Saviour has ensured that the salutary virtue of his sacraments and the infinite efficacy of his sacrifice shall not be made void through the frailty of his ministers. It is enough for the priest to perform the rite as enjoined, and to intend to act as Christ's minister. — But, I now ask myself, is God

requiring nothing more of me than this? Was it only for this that I went through a long and arduous training in the seminary? Those instructions in the spiritual life, the training in asceticism, in self-control, in habits of virtue, those repeated warnings that the life of the priest is a life of self-denial and abnegation—was all this designed for nothing more than to make me a reverent and not too unworthy offerer of Christ's sacrifice? We all know, of course, that God does ask far more of his priests than this. What he asks of every priest is that he shall be another Christ—*alter Christus*—and another Christ, not as offerer of his sacrifice merely, but as victim of it also. And this is a very difficult thing indeed.

That it is the task of all Christians to co-operate with Christ in bringing to completion the work of saving souls, is something we all know, and Pope Pius XII emphasised it in his Encyclical on the Mystical Body. 'This is truly a tremendous mystery', he wrote, 'upon which we can never meditate enough: that the salvation of many souls depends on the prayers and voluntary mortifications offered for that intention by the members of the mystical body of Jesus Christ, and upon the co-operation which pastors and faithful afford to our divine Saviour.' But this is specially true of us priests. If the members of the Body must be in all things likened to the Head, then we, sealed with the character of his priesthood, have a paramount duty to conform ourselves in every respect to him. We have to work for souls as he worked for them, and in the manner in which he worked for them. How did he save souls? How did he redeem mankind? By offering sacrifice, yes; but by offering a sacrifice of which he was not only the priest but also the victim. The gift he offers to his Father is none other than himself. His life is a continual holocaust by which everything that is in him is burnt up in the consuming fire of self-immolation. To do the will of his Father is his very meat, the food that sustains him. It is for this only that he came, to do the will of the Father who sent him; it is the sole meaning and purpose of his life and mission. And perhaps it is in order to give us a convincing proof of this that he has allowed us a glimpse of that bitter agony in the Garden, where his human will appears to us in its utter self-abasement, as though annihilated, in its complete submission to the Father. 'Not my will, but thine be done.' Truly the zeal of his Father's house had eaten him up. The last drop of blood that dripped from his wounded side on the cross was the external sign and proof that

there was now nothing, absolutely nothing, that was not utterly and wholly given over, surrendered, to his Father for our salvation.

This is the Priest who is our model; this is the Head to whom we must be likened: not merely priest, but victim, of his sacrifice. That Christ should be victim as well as priest of his sacrifice was the price the Father asked for redemption *in actu primo*; and the symmetry of the divine plan surely shows that the price God now asks for the accomplishment of that work *in actu secundo* is that we, priests after the likeness of Christ, shall be victims also, victims completely self-immolated, of the sacrifice we offer in his name.

Seen thus, my daily Mass is indeed a difficult thing. The likeness of Christ as priest was stamped indelibly on my soul when the bishop laid his hands on me in ordination; that likeness came easily, as a necessary effect of the valid sacrament. And it is a likeness nothing can efface. I am a priest for ever; for ever Christ's act of offering becomes mine when I pronounce the words of consecration in the Mass. But his victimhood does not come so easily, nor does it remain so indefectibly mine. 'It means entering on a new life', says the Holy Father in *Menti nostrae*, his recent Charge to the clergy, 'a life which will become radiant with the glories of Thabor only when it has first been sealed with the sufferings of our Redeemer on Calvary; and this calls for hard and unremitting toil.'

And now the frail host on the corporal, the precious blood in the chalice, hold a new message. The white host betokens a bloodless body, a sacred body drained of every drop of blood in complete self-surrender to the Father; the chalice of blood speaks to me of the Man of Sorrows who became obedient to the death of the cross. And the contrast between me and my divine model immediately springs to mind. The disproportion, the lack of balance, becomes shamefully apparent. The priestly power, the power of offering the divine victim, so unfailling and so perfect—as perfect as God can make it; and my victimhood, so imperfect, perhaps non-existent. I am so perfectly likened to Christ as priest, because that does not depend on me at all—and so imperfectly likened to him as victim, because that does depend on me and on my co-operation with his grace. Is there any likeness at all between the victim on the corporal, displayed before my eyes in all the outward appearance of death, annihilation, self-oblation

and complete submission to the Father, emptied so that we may be filled, become poor so that we may become rich—and myself, self-willed perhaps, lukewarm, easy-going, grudging in the service of my Master, sometimes unfaithful, sometimes even positively rebellious? Can I even begin to say, with that divine victim truly present before me, that my meat is to do the will of the Father; that the zeal of God's house has eaten me up; that my life has no other purpose or meaning but to do God's will? Can I say with any sincerity to God: 'Not my will, but thine be done'?

This, I think, is the significance of his daily Mass so far as the personal life of the priest is concerned. His Mass every morning is a daily reminder of the real aim of his priestly life: he has to ensure, with the help of God's grace, that his life of complete self-devotion shall liken him as perfectly to Christ the victim as the sacramental character of holy order has likened him to Christ the priest.

And does not this give a real meaning to what is called saying Mass with devotion? Seen in this light, devotion is not any merely affective joy we may feel in celebrating the sacred mysteries (this is a divine favour which is God's to give or withhold at will); not that sense of exhilaration which we may, or may not, experience in performing so sublime a function. No, devotion thus becomes literally self-giving, utter and complete self-dedication. To say Mass with devotion means to offer the Holy Sacrifice in the firm purpose and determination that, by God's grace, my life will be as wholly devoted, as unreservedly dedicated, to the work of saving souls as was the life of that divine victim whom I now render present on the altar and offer to God. To say Mass with devotion means to equilibrate, as far as in me lies, my status of victim with my character of priest.

To say Mass with this sort of devotion is indeed a difficult thing. And yet this difficult thing, I am convinced, is asked of us by God. This is why the Ordinal calls the priesthood a burden, a charge: . . . *dignos esse ad huius onus officii*. So understood, the priesthood is truly a load to carry, a load of which there can be no symbol more fitting than the cross Christ bore to Calvary. Is it necessary, this difficult task? Those whose work lies amongst the people know that nothing short of heroism is required to save the world for Christ. In men's hearts today there is a hardness which only the burning and heroic charity of Christ's servants

will melt. And this heroism is demanded above all of his priests. It may be martyrdom, though of this, perhaps, few will be found worthy. But something hardly less heroic, and something less apparent to the eyes of men, is that whole-hearted devotion which holds back nothing, literally nothing, that may serve to win souls for Christ. Each of us has his reservations. It may be a valued friendship, a legitimate self-indulgence, a recreation, a fond ambition, a personal preference for this or that kind of work, an attachment to a particular place, parish, or post—this at least. Are we prepared to give it all up? I wonder whether there is, perhaps, in the secret life of every priest a Gethsemani: a crisis, an agony, a spiritual conflict in which he is called upon to make the supreme sacrifice of that to which he is most passionately attached; a testing time, when the priest has to show whether he is prepared, like the disciples, to leave all things and follow his Master. If he is not found wanting here, he is well on the way to the Calvary which is his goal.

The final triumph of Christ in the world is certain; it will come. But the time of its coming can and must be hastened by us. I feel convinced that it will come sooner or later, in greater measure or less, according as we priests are able and willing to reproduce in ourselves the *kenosis*, the self-emptying, of Christ: complete dedication to the work of saving souls.

The white host: the body drained of blood: our wills drained of self. This, surely, is the lesson of the daily Mass. If the task calls for heroism we are not without God's help to perform it. For in holy order the character brings with it a sacramental grace; and what is the sacramental grace of the priesthood if not a supernatural stimulus to become more perfectly victims of the sacrifice which the character empowers us to offer?