

INSPIRED SYMBOLISM¹

BY

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HE proper sphere of a Catholic craftsman who is responsive to the appeal of the liturgical movement is to transiate its doctrine into terms of form and colour, and so help in presenting it to his fellow men through the medium of the senses. Let us be quite clear about this. His work is not that of a teacher, but of a translator of others' teaching. His normal function is to get on with the job without explaining what he is doing or why he is doing it.

He may well consider the job important enough in itself, if he accepts the definition of Catholic philosophy that all truth has to pass through the senses before reaching the understanding. *Nihil in intellectu nisi prius fuerit in sensu*. And of these senses he may well recognise the eye as affording a more direct avenue than the ear, if he agrees with Horace:

A thing when heard, remember, strikes less keen
On the spectator's mind than when 'tis seen.²

But what is a layman to do when he uses the symbols designed by the Church to express her doctrine and finds them called in question and often rejected by his betters—except fall back on verbal explanation?

In the liturgical movement the most difficult doctrine to translate into the language of form and colour is that of the mystical body. Yet we are urged to keep it constantly before our eyes. The development of this doctrine, we are told, is the most striking feature of modern Catholic life. It is the foundation of the liturgical movement; more than that, it is also the foundation of the Church's teaching on corporate social justice. For this reason these three doctrines of the mystical body, the liturgy, and social justice can only develop together; and, as an informant assures me, all three are in fact growing simultaneously because the Church has prepared them for some tremendous work in the centuries before her. That may well be: it seems to me at least to make sense.

What exactly is this doctrine of the mystical body which we have to translate for representation to the 'faithful eyes'? I take it as

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² *Segnius irritant animos demissa per aures,
Quam quae sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus et quae
Ipse sibi tradit spectator*.

HORACE. *De Arte Poetica*, 180 (Conington's translation).

defined by St Augustine fifteen centuries ago: 'The whole Christ is Jesus Christ and all Christians'. This seems to imply that our Lord wishes to be contemplated constantly as united with the whole human race into the Perfect Man, of which he is the Head, and all the redeemed, past, present, and to come, are the members; that there is no life for any member separated from the body or severed from the head; and that for this reason the liturgy is recognized as the voice of Jesus Christ himself, praising his heavenly Father through the lips of Christians.

If this description conveys little or nothing to the reader, it does not matter: he can compose one for himself which expresses more. I am not here concerned with the definition of doctrine in words. What is of vital concern to my fellow craftsmen and to me is to express it in colour and in a form intelligible to others. If it were a new doctrine, it might require some new architectural expression. But, as all know, it is not new; it is as old as the Gospels, where it finds verbal expression in the allegory of the vine.

It is, however, at least receiving a renewed emphasis; and that requires either the slow evolving of a new symbol to illustrate it, or else the active existence of one already evolved. But is there in the whole record of Christian art any feature which in the least expresses to the man-in-the-pew the whole Christ? Is there any sculpture, painting, or mosaic which conveys a clear representation of Jesus Christ and all Christians recognizably united into the one Perfect Man? And has it the power to lift the heart and mind to God in wonder and gratitude? There can be no doubt about it. The Church has developed just such a symbol in a form of astonishing beauty—of greater beauty perhaps than any other granted to man's invention.

Its origins date from before the Church's earliest records; its development has grown through fifteen centuries; and the full flower—unless further expansion is still to come—has been with us now for four centuries. This symbol is indeed none other than the high altar invested with its coloured robes. As we shall see, the Church identifies the altar in its coloured clothing with our Lord clothed in glorious apparel; 'The Lord reigns; he is clothed with beauty: the Lord is clothed with strength and hath girded himself' (Ps. 92),³ and in so doing, she constitutes the robed altar as the perfect representation of the whole Christ. It is a representation which required the great ages of faith and of liturgy to produce. The full development became officially defined only a few decades before

³ *Dominus regnavit, decorem indutus est; indutus est Dominus fortitudinem, et praececinxit se.*

the disruption of Christendom in the sixteenth century⁴ and was enshrined in the General Rubrics of the Roman Missal⁵ just in time to preserve it through the succeeding period of liturgical neglect and loss of emphasis on the corporate aspect of the Faith resulting from this disruption.

Obviously no architectural symbol can preserve a doctrine; it can only interpret or illustrate it, and although the full symbolism was crystallized in the General Rubrics of the Missal from 1570 onwards, it began soon after to be neglected, because the doctrine it was designed to express became overshadowed. But the symbol itself has endured in its full perfection, ready to hand for all who will accept it, as is evident from its notable revival in recent years.

In examining its credentials it may be an advantage to work backwards, since it is the fully developed flower which concerns us today. This will involve the examination of the following points: (1) A preliminary outline of the imagery designed by the Church. (2) The Church's legislation ordaining this imagery. (3) Its full significance. (4) The origins from which the imagery developed. (5) Reasons which may account for its temporary neglect.

(1) The preliminary outline of this imagery is founded on the conception of what the altar represents in the Church's mind. This is given, for instance, in the Breviary office for the dedication of the Lateran Basilica, November 9, Second Nocturn, Lesson iv. 'The altar which, anointed with oil, expresses the representation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our Altar, Victim, and Priest.' This triple representation of him is most vividly portrayed, as we shall see, by the Church's design for the high altar, the tabernacle, and the celebrant in a single colour scheme. In her inspired imagery, each is designed to be enveloped in one and the same colour proper to the occasion, the significance of which is unmistakable, since the three together are ordered to be surmounted by a single mark of royalty—the canopy of honour.

The rite of ordination of sub-deacons in the *Pontificale Romanum* enlarges on this conception in the bishop's charge to the ordinands, beginning 'Adepturi'. '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. 8, 3) standing before the throne, in whom and through whom the offerings of the faithful are made acceptable to the Father.' Let us note here that every high altar in our churches is identified with that 'golden altar which is before the throne', our Lord himself; and that (in the same verse, 3) it is 'the prayers of all

⁴ It appeared first in Burckard's *Ordo Missae* of 1502.

⁵ In 1570.

the saints' which are there offered, by him and through him; therefore the altar is not a figure of our Lord in isolation, but of our Lord inseparably identified with all his saints, the Perfect Man, the whole Christ.

The bishop's charge then continues: '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 beauty" (Ps. 92, 1)'. Although the cloths and corporals (*pallæ et corporalia*) in this passage refer most probably to the linen cloths, about the washing of which the sub-deacon is being instructed. The coloured robes also are an integral part—a more striking and dramatic part—of the 'costly garments', *vestimenta pretiosa*, as will be shown from an earlier writer quoted in section 4.

(2) The Church's legislation for this imagery is contained in the General Rubrics of the Missal, officially adopted in 1570. Chapter XX directs that 'This altar is to be covered with three cloths . . . the upper one, at least long enough to reach to the ground; the other two shorter, or a single one folded. It is to be adorned also with a frontal of the colour appertaining, as far as this is possible, to the feast or office of the day. . . . Nothing whatever is to be placed on the altar which does not pertain to the sacrifice of the Mass or to the ornamentation of the altar itself'.

Chapter XVIII of the same Rubrics lays down the details of the colour scheme. 'The robing of the altar, celebrant and ministers must be of the colour appertaining to the office and Mass of the day, according to the use of the Roman Church, which has the custom of using five colours, white, red, green, purple and black.' It may be noted that the altar robes are placed first, which would hardly be the case if the celebrant's vesture were of the greater importance.

The *Cæremoniale Episcoporum* thirty years later withdraws nothing from these details, but adds two more: the number of colours is increased to six by the addition of gold, and the back of the altar, if free of any wall as the liturgy of its consecration requires, is to have its own *antependium*.⁶ This latter order, taken in conjunction with the Missal's prescription of the long cloth reaching to the ground, makes it quite clear, in case any ambiguity may exist, that the Church's design for the altar is a structure reverently veiled on all four elevations as well as on its upper surface. No further legislation has since made any concession by allowing the frontals to be omitted, and no opinion of any approved author suggesting such omission,

⁶ *Caer. Episc.*, Lib. i, cap. xii, para 11.

even temporarily,⁷ has been embodied in a decree of the Congregation of Rites, still less in any rubric. The legislation as existing today cannot be more accurately, or more briefly, stated than in the passage on the altar frontal in the Reverend J. O'Connell's *The Celebration of Mass*, published in 1941. 'The altar frontal (*pallium, antependium*) and the altar cloths are "the clothing" of the altar, itself representing Christ, and the frontal is its true liturgical decoration. Liturgical tradition and the rubrics demand the use of the frontal'.⁸

(3) The full significance of this picture, this representation of the whole Christ, may now be considered. The outline, consisting of the high altar clothed in robes of beauty, is before us, and its legal authority established; by filling in the details the significance of the design may be made effective for all.

On each feast of our Lord, his representation by the altar is offered to our eyes, not in isolation—that drama occurs but once in the whole year—but 'clothed in beauty'. He reigns, clothed with the beauty of his greatest glory, girded with a people bought out of slavery back into union with himself. The white-robed altar of Christmas shows the Babe of Bethlehem born on earth for no other purpose than that he may be born again in all who join in the *Gloria in excelsis*; and therefore he seems to refuse to be represented or contemplated apart from them.

His purple robe of Lent unites his prayer and fasting with that of his members. For how else can they be considered? In isolation his penance has no necessity, and ours no virtue. His robes of gold or white at Easter adorn no isolated victor, but a triumphant Lord, 'clothed in strength and girded' with those in whom his own victory is bearing fruit. The golden frontal may also, for all I know, include the Easter communicant: *Vincenti dabo manna absconditum*; but that is for the theologian to decide.

After the red robes of Pentecost, revealing the Holy Spirit as the Agent of this union, the colour of the season changes, and the picture of Jesus Christ and all Christians is portrayed in green—the colour of unnumbered leaves and blades of grass, rather than of the chosen flowers of canonization. We may well ask whether any other device could depict the doctrine of the mystical body with greater genius than is displayed by this portrait of our Lord united with all his faithful common people in a single Perfect Man, the whole Christ. What design could achieve so much beauty with such simplicity and yet with such variety, so that each experience of daily Mass is not

⁷ E.g. Van der Stappen, *Sacra Liturgia*, Ed. 2, Vol. iii, Q. 44.

⁸ *The Celebration of Mass: A Study of the Rubrics of the Roman Missal* by the Reverend J. O'Connell, Vol. 1, p. 241; Burns, Oates, 1941.

only a new experience but is even made visibly to be *seen* as such? The spiritual fight against sluggishness and staleness is reinforced through the senses, which are enlisted to serve, not in the fifth column as traitors to war-effort, but as allies of the spirit,

. . . in the world
Of matter, and of sense;
Upon the frontier, towards the foe,
A resolute defence.

But this variety does not end here. It is not limited to the proper of the season, for it illumines the proper of the saints with equal significance. There can be no costly garment more precious to him than the white mantle or, as Psalm 44 suggests,⁹ the golden vesture, which clothes him on the feasts of his blessed Mother. Of all the costly garments for which he paid so great a price on Calvary, hers was the most perfect beyond measure, stainless from the beginning. His eyes had beheld her spotless purity, ordained *ab initio et ante saecula*, from that hour when they first opened at Bethlehem until they closed on the cross. It is a precious garment indeed in which he now presents himself to our sight as the source of her immaculate perfection.

From the Byzantine painter of our Lady of Perpetual Succour down to our own time, sculptors and painters have combined inspiration with infinite painstaking to present our Lady to faithful eyes. But which of them has ever represented her complete identification with her Son so dramatically or so convincingly as this robing of his altar succeeds in doing month by month? And what painting leaves the spectator so free to follow his own vision? If there is one created work which can hope to bless the eyes of men with the vision of our Lady 'advancing like the break of dawn, fair as the moon, brilliant as the sun, terrible as an army drawn in battle array', it is this masterpiece of the high altar on her feast day.

In these days of world-wide suffering, I believe the best service our senses can render us is to help us to recognise in the robed altar of our Lady's feast days her who is not only *regina coeli* but also *mundi domina*, and to convince us that the world's relief has been entrusted to her hands, because of her identification with her Son to an extent which defies description, as it passes understanding.

The significance of the red frontal on a martyr's feast is unmistakable in portraying the martyr's victory as that of the *Rex martyrum* reproduced in his servant. It pictures that triumph as the victory of the Head realised afresh in yet another of his members; and the Church accentuates this interpretation by selecting for the

⁹ *Astitit regina a dextris tuis in vestitu deaurato.*

gospel of the feast of England's patron, St George, and of all martyrs in Paschal time, the simile of the vine and the branches. The white frontal for confessors and virgins shows our Lord's own constancy and purity, not only as bearing fruit in his followers but also as the instruments uniting them to him, in order to clothe him in further beauty. Thus the symbolism is complete which identifies Christ, 'our Altar, Victim and Priest', with the members of his mystical body: for the same colour sequence extends to the conopaeum of the tabernacle in which he resides as victim, and to the vestment of the celebrant in whom he is present as priest.

Only on Good Friday does our Lord consent to be contemplated in isolation. 'Then his disciples leaving him, all fled away'.¹⁰ The terrible drama of stripping the altar reveals him deprived not only of his clothes, but also of his disciples who were designed to be his robes of glory. Our ears are allowed to help our minds in realising this utter desolation through the chanting of the Passion. Why should the service of our eyes be excluded by leaving the figure of Christ stripped throughout the year?

(4) The origins from which this imagery of the mystical body derives are clear enough as far back as the time of Charlemagne (742-814); earlier evidence, though scarce, goes back to the fifth century in the West¹¹ and to the fourth in the East; but there is none so far as I know to show that the altar was habitually left unclothed at any time. In the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which preceded the inclusion of the General Rubrics in the Missal, frontals had already assumed the form which has persisted ever since. As in St Peter's in Rome today, they were hung before the front and also on the back of detached altars, and the two sides were veiled by the linen cloth reaching to the ground. Altars were thus completely clothed all round, as later the rubrics of 1570 were to direct, but their colour scheme was left mainly to individual preference; consequently they had not yet attained quite the full significance provided in 1570 by allotting a definite colour to make the identification of the Head with each group of his members.

In *Der Christliche Altar*, Vol ii, plates 117 to 119, Fr Joseph Braun, S.J. devotes five illustrations to the frontals of the thirteenth century. Each one of these five is embroidered in the centre with a figure of Christ flanked by members of his mystical body. In four of them he is shown enthroned on a rainbow or on an altar-shaped seat, and robed in glory within a vesica, while in the remaining one all three Persons of the blessed Trinity are represented surrounded

¹⁰ Mark 14, 50.

¹¹ Joseph Braun, S.J., *Der Christliche Altar*, vol. 2, p. 23, 1924.

above, below and on either side by fourteen saints, all framed in letters of their names followed by *ora pro nobis*. These five examples seem to me remarkably significant to modern designers, for evidently in that great century of liturgical enthusiasm the altar and frontal were already recognised as the Church's symbol for the mystical body, and the frontal's decoration was designed to that end.¹²

This medieval arrangement of detachable frontals had developed as a convenient improvement from the use of the preceding nine or ten centuries, which consisted in the West of a single coloured cloth, either enveloping the top and all four sides of the altar, or hung on rings below the projecting *mensa*, and veiling all four sides but not the top. The former method, covering the top as well as all four sides, is shown in a painting in the Benedictional of St Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester from 963 to 984.¹³ It is light rose-purple in colour. (Purple seems to have been a favourite colour for altar clothing in pre-medieval times.)

The most significant evidence of all comes from the writings of Amalarius¹⁴ who died in 859. 'The altar signifies Christ, as Bede narrates. . . . The robes (*vestimenta*) signify the Apostles and all saints'. Here is exactly the same interpretation of the altar clothing as that given by the rite of ordination of sub-deacons, quoted above and here applied not to linen cloths but to the coloured robing indicated by the word *vestimenta*. For that is its meaning, when applied to the altar, as is clear, for instance, from an inventory (about 800) in the monastic church of Milz, where it is used to describe purple altar robes: '*altarium vestimenta purpurea, novem*'.¹⁵

Still earlier documentary evidence of coloured altar clothing in the West comes from the Life of Bishop Wilfred (634-709) by Eddius Stephanus:¹⁶ 'Like Solomon the wise, they consecrated the house and dedicated it to the Lord in honour of St Peter. . . . The altar also with its bases they dedicated to the Lord and vested it in purple woven with gold; the people shared in the work, and thus all was completed in a canonical manner'.

In the East evidence from documents and illuminations is more plentiful and reaches back to an earlier date. The altar was robed in colour on all four sides, at latest from the fourth century; a white cloth, the *eilléton*, was used above it, and so it continues in the

¹² Several more photographs are shown in plates 131, 132, of gilded metal frontals and of painted detachable wooden ones in plates 140, 141, showing twelfth and thirteenth century examples of this same motif.

¹³ Folio 118, V, reverse side; preserved in the Chatsworth Library.

¹⁴ Amalarius, *De eccles. officiis*, 1. 1. 12. 13. P.L. CV. 1023 D, 1026 C.

¹⁵ Joseph Braun, *op cit.*, vol. 2, p. 10.

¹⁶ Translated by Bertram Colgrave, Cambridge University Press, 1927, p. 37.

Greek rite today. The earliest documentary evidence from the East quoted by Father Braun is taken from the writings of St Ephrem, who died in 373;¹⁷ it refers to the custom of donors bequeathing their richest robes to adorn the altar. 'Blessed is that man with whose robes the altar stands adorned; for enriched with the robe of glory from the Lord he shines in glory among the holy spirits'.

This brief selection of evidence is, I hope, enough to show that the symbolism of the altar's coloured clothing has always been an expression of the doctrine of the mystical body, and to prove that in practice the altar has always been so clothed from the earliest times for which evidence is available until the symbolism became crystallised for all time in the Rubrics of the Missal. It is indeed very hard to say which is the more surprising—that any neglect of frontals should have appeared at all, and for the first time, after the rubrics had prescribed them with such decisive finality; or that this decision should have been crystallised in the Missal just in time to forestall the coming tendency to neglect.

(5) The reasons which may account for this temporary neglect are a legitimate subject for speculation. It was not due to the change of architectural style from gothic to classical renaissance, for the classical paintings of Pinturicchio in Siena (1502) and of Raphael's *Disputa* (1509) both adhere to the medieval form of frontal and fringed frontlet; but as the sixteenth century advanced, the neglect began to appear, and in the seventeenth it became widespread. Fr Braun connects it with the desire to display the skill of the renaissance sculptors. 'The magnificent marble coating already favoured by Italy in the seventeenth century for embellishing altar supports, the telling reliefs decorating the front elevation, the brilliant effect of the marble veneer imposed upon it made a frontal seem not only superfluous but even inappropriate.'¹⁸

I find it hard to believe that craftsmanship alone could supply the initial momentum required to effect so revolutionary a change. The sculptor is more likely to have seized the opportunity already offered to display his skill; and the art of embroiderers and of the metal workers, who in the ninth century had produced those masterpieces of gold frontals still adorning the high altar of St Ambrose in Milan, must correspondingly have declined. This tendency inevitably started a vicious circle; the art of frontal design died out, and whenever a demand for its resurrection was made, the result was so unattractive that the public would have none of it; and so any attempt at revival was still-born. That vicious circle still revolves today: frontal design

¹⁷ Joseph Braun, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

is still at a very low ebb; to break the circle requires the concerted effort of craftsmen in many lands, and their undoubted ability to respond worthily can only follow the advance of demand for their skill.

The real explanation, I suggest, lies ultimately in the partial eclipse of liturgical splendour and in the withdrawal of emphasis from the doctrine of the mystical body to other doctrines more characteristic of the renaissance. The approaching shadow can be seen by the most cursory glance at the photographs of the fifteenth century frontals among Father Braun's illustrations,¹⁹ in which pictorial scenes from the Gospels begin to supersede the portrayal of Christ among his saints. The shifting of doctrinal emphasis led, rightly enough in so vital an art, to a change of symbolism. It is not for the craftsman to urge the accentuation of this or of any other doctrine; but if the doctrine of the mystical body is in fact now being urged with a revival of its ancient emphasis, it is within his province to analyse the true form for its symbol. And for those of us concerned in its architectural expression, a study of twelfth and thirteenth century examples is an invaluable foundation for producing treasures new as well as old.

This is not necessarily a plea for elaboration; the symbol is complete in any unembroidered hanging of simple fabric, which only requires the exercise of a trained colour-sense. But, given the demand and the means, there need be no limit to the value of our Lord's 'glorious apparel' in embroidered silk, cloth of real gold, or gilded reliefs in metal (so long as they be made detachable). What the financial value of the four Milanese gold masterpieces is today, I have no idea. It would probably sound fantastic, though it can hardly equal the cost of one fighter aeroplane. If in war time small towns and even villages can compete in raising the price of one Spitfire, peace might live to see a transfer of this rivalry to the enrichment of the altar; and concentration on the doctrine of the mystical body might be expected, without undue strain on the imagination, to supply the surest motive for enabling nations to live in harmony.

¹⁹ E.g., vol. 2, plates 127, 129, 135.