

A PARISH PRIEST ON LITURGICAL DEVOTION

By

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THE subject of Liturgy is so vast that only a few can command a deep knowledge of its history, but there is one aspect which does not call for high scholarship, and that is the pastoral—the Liturgy as it affects the average Catholic, especially as his normal means of instruction.

By general agreement these days in which we live have witnessed a general falling away from Bible reading amongst non-Catholics, whilst that practice has not been a strong point amongst English Catholics; then, too, only a small fraction of our people ever hear a sermon, for most come only once to church on a Sunday, and then to a Low Mass, at which they hear only the usual notices. Few in proportion to the sum total study Catholic books on religion, and so thousands have starved minds, a condition responsible in large measure for so much apathy. Apathy is the inevitable prostration of will which follows on after a long period of mental starvation. Now, in the Liturgy, and I am here using that term as equalling the Mass, we have an unequalled book of instruction, and the finest comment ever produced on the meaning of Holy Scripture. The Liturgy is great drama, and the lines spoken are largely those of inspired Scripture; not only that, but passages of Scripture are so related as to constitute a most moving drama, with all the added gain of fitting scenery—the actions and ceremonies of the Mass. Even just to watch a Mass is a spiritually satisfying experience, and there are times when we may be too tired to do anything else.

Take, for instance, the story of the Epiphany; it is fine reading just as a tale, as we find it in the gospel of St Matthew, but how enormously that incident gains in meaning and vitality when seen represented in the great mystery play of the Mass! How the various liturgical pieces of the feast, such as the epistle, add to the reality of the presentation of the Gospel story. The *Gloria* brings in the note of Bethlehem; the incense, at a sung Mass, the offering of the frankincense; the genuflections at the consecration living again those words: 'and falling down, they adored him.'

Take, again, the Lenten Masses, how day by day the epistles and gospels form an exquisite comment on Scripture: the epistle, or lesson, often being prophecy in action, and the fulfilment shown in the Gospel that follows. So with the special masses for saints; at least the better constructed ones are redolent of the saint—as can be seen from a study of the Mass for St Thérèse of the Infant Jesus; so, too, the votive Masses.

If only we can get this wealth of teaching across the altar rails

to our congregations—that is one of the most urgent problems of today. I must avoid raising any contentious issue in this article, so I refrain from offering any suggestion as to *how*, but can anyone deny that this is a really critical matter in these days when the Church is fighting for her children's souls a very grim battle indeed?

The Mass, then, can reveal our Lord to us better, so I believe, than any other way, for the Mass unfolds to us that Christian year which is none other than a dramatized re-presentation of the human life of our Saviour; not only that, but also an opening of heavenly windows to show us the ascended and reigning Christ in his glory. All Catholics know from experience the truth of this, as our memories of Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, etc. prove. In and through the Liturgy the tremendous facts indicated by those feast-names become vivid and vital contemporary happenings; we their eye-witnesses and participants.

And there is another aspect of the Liturgy I have found personally of the greatest help, in addition to the joys I have already indicated. I suppose most of us at times fearfully question the reality of our love for our Lord. Perhaps we can say with simple reality that we are trying to do his will, and therein lies true love; but we do long to have more *awareness* of the love we hope we possess, an enlisting of our God-given emotions as well as the discipline of our will. I do not think anything so answers to this desire as the Liturgy. I have already referred to the glow and beauty of the great feasts. How enchanting, for example, the simple ceremonies of Candle-Mass Day—the little procession of, it may be, a priest, a few servers, and a handful of faithful (why do so many churches omit this procession?), and the twinkling of the tapers in that procession and at various portions of the Mass. Just a delightful re-living of that first Candle-Mass procession of the Holy Family, with the coming into the temple of the Light of the World, and the little gathering of devout people—Simeon and Anna.

If we train our minds and hearts to this awareness we can discover unsuspected evidence of our love for God. I know, for example, if I may be forgiven talking about myself, how one is conscious of a sudden delight in seeing a few extra candles gleaming on our Lady's altar or shrine on one of her feasts. Our Lady has been remembered—and the heart rejoices. Is not that experience definite evidence that the soul thus moved is so affected because it loves? Some may say: Oh, but that may be true of a priest especially fond of the Liturgy, but you surely don't expect that sort of thing amongst simple, ordinary folk? Well, I am a retired parish priest, with a long experience of the effects of liturgical training on average Catholics, and I can say definitely that no class of people show greater appreciation of the Liturgy than

working-class men and women. I can see now the fine old face of an army pensioner lit up with joy as he said to me after some rite: 'A lovely service, Father, a lovely service!' Recently, after the Candle-Mass rites in a little chapel, a working man was talking about his delight in witnessing them for the first time for days after the event; the simple rite had brought a glow of happiness into his work-days. No priest will ever regret taking pains in carrying out these rites, no matter how limited the resources at his command. Let there be reverence in the sanctuary, and a sustained personal enthusiasm for the Liturgy as a *spiritual reality*, a vital contact with Christ our High Priest, and our people will respond. Mere attention to rubrics and liking for ritual leads to formalism and sheer boredom, but the true appreciation of the meaning of the Liturgy never loses its power to delight and to sanctify. I end by stressing the importance of teaching our people by example, and not only by sermons, the joy of Liturgy's chief purpose—the worshipping of God. The first tribute of the Gentile Wise Men was the giving of adoration, and every day can be a renewal of that mutual epiphany—Christ showing himself with love and tenderness, and we showing in return our humble devotion. The Feast of Adoration was an occasion of 'great joy,' and those who live in that experience never lack the spirit of Christian joy.

THE WAY OF PERFECTION IN THE ENGLISH MYSTICS

BY

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III—THE SCALE

Before proceeding to a detailed discussion of the English spiritual authors, some explanation is required of the order and design of the treatment. For we do not intend to follow a chronological order and indeed we have included the Ancren Riwle which is outside our period, as also William Langland who scarcely deserves the name of mystic though he was a great poet and the mystic is often, if not always, a poet too.

Our plan is to climb up the scale, the ladder of perfection, from the lowest rungs to the topmost, where, like Jacob's ladder, they disappear into heaven. The theme of this essay has been adopted from Père Garrigou-Lagrange's now celebrated thesis that the highest flights of infused contemplation and mystical union are on