

Liturgy for Children¹

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Being at Spode brings to my mind recollections of Fr Austin Barker, who often came to lecture to us on social questions, and also gave us a very beautiful retreat. He was very dramatic and highly entertaining, and his name always brings to mind certain phrases, such as: 'Watch it, sisters; watch it very carefully!' I always remember hearing him speak about the children's mass on Sunday. He described it thus: 'Rows and rows of children—tall figure at the end—rows and rows of children all squashed together—tall figure at the end, booming out instructions, and directions and prayers—My dear sisters', he would say appalled, and holding his head in his hand, 'the divine sacrifice of the mass'.

Well, we all long to make this divine sacrifice real to the children—we would love to make them *want* to go to mass—we would all like to be able to say with Cardinal Newman, 'I could hear masses for ever and not be tired'. And yet, how hard it is to inspire this longing!

A few years ago, I prepared the prayers of the canon of the mass, meaning to go into a class and really do it properly! I typed the words out—spacing them in long lines, just as the gospel is printed in Archbishop Goodier's books—and went into class full of enthusiasm, gave out the papers and began. But no—it just didn't work. Even though I said the prayers with all my heart, and tried to explain them—I could see that the children attended—well, because they had to—but there was no real, live interest or attraction.

Suddenly I had an idea! I thought, I'll just take the preface—so I said to the class: 'Now we'll have a change, and you will all be angels. I am going to say the words, and that is *my* way of praying. As I say them you will do what you think the angels are doing in heaven—you have all seen pictures of angels. It may be praising God, adoring, thanking, asking or pleading, and that movement will be your way of praying: Just indeed it is, right and for our welfare, that we should always and everywhere give thanks to thee, Lord, holy Father almighty and eternal God, through Christ our Lord. It is through him that thy Majesty is praised by Angels, adored by Dominations, feared by Powers. Through

¹A talk given at Spode House in November 1960. The reader must imagine the visual and audial aids that went with it.

him that the Heavens and the celestial Virtues join with the blessed Seraphim in one glad hymn of praise. We pray thee, let our voices blend with theirs, as we humbly praise thee, singing: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts! Heaven and earth are full of thy glory. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!' The effect was simply marvellous! They offered up their prayers to heaven, they listened to the words, they made appropriate gestures—in fact the words began to live. Then I divided them into groups—Angels, Dominations, Powers, Cherubim, Seraphim. They grouped themselves anyway they liked, had a little talk about it, did it again, and I felt really thrilled with them. They for their part liked doing it, learnt the words very easily, they knew they were praying, their full attention was given to the words, and it was no time before they knew them.

I think children are natural mimers. I have never found anyone—a child who couldn't take part in a mime. I once had a great big awkward looking girl—but she made a wonderful tree in the garden of paradise. They know instinctively the difference between adoring—going right down to the ground—praising, right up to the sky—thanking, pleading, full of awe. They know how to express all these different ways of praying, and I do think that getting right down on to the ground, and bowing down to adore God, gives them that sense of reverence that nothing else can give. Certainly, they learnt it, they learnt what I wanted them to learn, and they learnt it happily, pleasantly and quickly.

From this beginning I thought of the mass as a drama in which I would like to impersonate everyone who was mentioned. Taking the mass from the offertory onwards, I found that we would need to represent the glorious and ever Virgin Mary, St John the Baptist, Sts Peter and Paul, the martyrs, all the saints, the choirs of angels, the twelve apostles, Linus, Cletus, Clement, etc., etc., thy just servant Abel, our father Abraham, thy high priest Melchisedech, the holy souls, John, Stephen, Matthias, right down to Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, and Anastasia—44 not counting the choirs of angels, the saints and the holy souls—a goodly throng!

I then began to search for some way in which to convey the right idea of sacrifice, the positive idea—the idea of giving a present to God, and in a book, *The Meaning of the Mass*, by Fr Paul Bussard, I found this little parable which seemed to be just what we wanted. We did it in choral speaking, miming the obvious parts.

THE FIELD OF WHEAT

'Once upon a time in a far country there was a man who owned a piece of land which ran quite down to the seashore. The sea to which the land ran down was a peculiar sea, because there was never an ebb tide or a flow tide upon it. Always the water's edge remained quite in the same place. So in the spring of the year, the man ploughed up the land, and walking back and forth, scattered seeds of wheat upon the ground. One day it would rain and another day the sun would shine; and so, after many days, there was a great crop of wheat growing upon the man's land. At mid-day when the sun shone and the wheat was bowing beneath the wind, it looked to him like a sea of gold, waving under the sun. And at night when the moon shone, the man was hard put to tell which was his field of wheat and which was the sea water; so much they both looked like a sea of silver in the moonlight.

Now the man was wise. That is, he knew that God made the world and that God makes things grow in the world and makes them cease to grow. And the man was wiser than that. He knew that God had made him and that he, the creature, owed God a debt of gratitude and obedience; and he knew that he should satisfy in some way for his own disobedience. And then he wanted to thank God for the field of wheat which was golden in the sunlight and so silvery in the moonlight. He was already grateful in his own mind, but he was not satisfied with that. He wished to express that idea in a manner that all might see.

So, it happened that one day, the man took a scythe and cut down some of the stems of wheat. These he tied in a bundle. Then he took an axe and cut down a little tree, and after he had trimmed off the branches, he put the first sheaf of wheat on one end of the tree, and placed the other end firmly in the ground. Then the birds came and ate the wheat.

That was a sacrifice, the sacrifice of first fruits. It was a gift given to God in the best way the man could think of giving it. It expressed his gratitude and obedience and made some reparation for his past disobedience, and without doubt God was pleased with his child and in return gave him peace and the pledge of eternal peace.

This example of a sacrifice is apt, because the wheat was placed between heaven and earth. At another time there was a greater sacrifice, when the Son of God hung between heaven and earth, dying upon the cross, expressing in that manner the things the man expressed in his manner. And the example is more especially apt, because it is wheat. For the Son of God to this day continues that same sacrifice of the mass when he is present in the act of sacrifice under the form of wine and

bread which is made from wheat'.

This formed the opening of our sacred drama, as we began to call it. Having introduced the idea of sacrifice, we now represented the three sacrifices of the old covenant mentioned in the mass. Cain and Abel was the children's own vivid reproduction of the story. Time does not permit me to tell you of that, nor of the sacrifice of Abraham, which was taken directly from the Bible. As Melchisedech entered, the choir explained:

'Melchisedech was the king of Salem and priest of the most high God. He lived long before our blessed Lord and was the very first person to offer bread and wine as a sacrifice to God'.

St Paul says of Melchisedech:

'Observe that his name means king of justice and that he is king of Salem, that is of peace'.

That is all. There is no name of father or mother, no pedigree, no date of birth or of death. There he stands, eternally a priest, the true figure of the Son of God.

After we had once 'prayed', not 'performed', our sacred drama, I received a letter saying:

'I think the most outstanding participant—I must not say "performer", was Melchisedech, who really did convey the idea that he was the close prototype of our Lord as eternal high priest. This idea was conveyed by silent mime'.

In the meantime, we found classes to represent the apostles, popes and martyrs, not forgetting the holy souls, who were very popular. We had another class to represent the priests of the whole world. These were taught all the actions, from the offertory onwards, by a priest. They took great interest in watching the priest during the holy sacrifice, bringing their missals daily to school, and making one think that this was the first time they had really watched the actions of the holy sacrifice, so surprised were they to find that the priest did 'just what you said, sister'.

Having prepared the three sacrifices of the old covenant, we next mimed the last supper—taken partly from the epistle to the Corinthians and from the gospel of St John. In this connection we showed the film of the Jewish passover.

We then formed a great procession—a triumphal procession of the Church in heaven, on earth and in purgatory—carrying the crucifix on high and singing:

'Behold the royal ensigns fly
 Bearing the cross's mystery,
 Where Life itself did death endure,
 And by that death did life procure.

O faithful cross, O noblest tree,
 In all our woods, there's none like thee,
 No earthly groves, no shady flowers,
 Produce such leaves, such fruit, such flowers'.

Those representing the Church triumphant, took their places on the stage—Angels and Archangels, Dominations and Thrones in groups in front—apostles, martyrs and saints in serried ranks behind—our Lady being in the centre. Those representing the Church suffering took their places somewhat below stage on either side—whilst the Church militant stood below the stage and in front. The crucifix was placed between heaven and earth. Here was a visible representation of the communion of saints.

At the end of the hymn, all recalled the words of Abraham, saying:
 'God himself provided a victim for our sacrifice'.

Then, pointing each time to the crucifix all said:

*'This is the sacrifice we offer
 Here is the priest who offers
 Here is the victim who is offered
 Here is the altar on which the sacrifice is offered'.*

Then making a profound genuflection whilst the crucifix was raised on high, those in heaven, in purgatory and on earth proclaimed:

*'We adore thee, O Christ, and we praise thee,
 Because by thy holy cross thou hast redeemed the world'.*

Those on earth explained: We represent the priests of the whole world. We come from . . . each girl then called out the name of the country she had chosen, e.g., Mexico, France, New Zealand, England, Spain, etc. In this way we taught the prophecy of Malachias:

*'From the rising of the sun to the going down thereof,
 My name is great among the gentiles,
 And in every place there is offered to my name a clean oblation'.*

We now 'performed' the prayers of the mass, beginning at the offertory. As the narrator said the prayers, the girls in front performed every action of the priest whilst those in heaven made appropriate gestures of offering, supplication, adoration and thanksgiving, accord-

ing to the sense of the prayer. Thus, in the prayer for the mixing of the water and the wine

'O God, who in a wondrous manner didst create human nature', Adam and Eve appeared in heaven, showed the love, the temptation and the fall, disappeared from heaven. Then with

'and still more wondrously has restored it', when the crucifix was lifted on high, they returned restored to life. This little drama took place in heaven while the prayer was recited and the priests were taking the wine and water.

The souls in purgatory never wearied in pleading for a place of cool repose, of light and of peace, and at the appropriate moment when the priests below joined their hands for the *memento* of the dead, were willingly assisted into heaven by angels, and presented before the throne of God by our blessed Mother. Heaven was truly full of joy! As each individual saint was mentioned, the living representative rose to offer praise and supplications to God, and we recognized in heaven the apostles, whom we had seen at the last supper, whilst Abraham, Abel, and Melchisedech called to mind the ratification of the old covenant by the new.

This sacred drama was produced and performed in the lent term, and at the end of the year we had a dry mass in school. At the celebration of the holy sacrifice in the convent chapel the next day, the children's interest and devotion were very evident. The class who had taken the sacrifices of the old covenant wrote letters to me after they had seen the sacrifice of the mass. I give some quotations:

'Most of all I liked the mass because it taught me something I wasn't quite sure of—that is that the angels and saints join in to offer up the mass with the priests'.

'I have told my mother about the sacred drama. I learnt a good deal just watching the mass'.

'From where it began—which was the offertory—I have been thinking all about it, and have learnt a tremendous lot, and I like to hear those beautiful prayers which are mentioned in the mass.

'I have learnt a lot by looking at that mime—it makes me want to go to mass more often in the week as well as on Sunday'.

'It has made me think that the priest does not offer mass on his own but we help him to do it as well'.

'Mass is being said all the time—even when I am writing this letter somewhere mass is being said'.

'I learnt that when mass is being said, it is said not only by the priest

and congregation, but the saints in heaven join in too'.

'When I go to church, I will think about the mass more seriously than I have ever done before'.

'I liked the sacred drama very much and it helped me very much when I went to mass this morning. This is what I have learnt from it—our sacrifice is as good as the one offered on Calvary, for indeed it is the same sacrifice only under different forms. I have realized that the church must be full of angels and saints, only we cannot see them, this in itself shows us that we must be respectful in church. The girls who played the part of the priests, taught me this—to watch the priest carefully and follow in my prayer book, because then you can understand what the priest is doing'.

One class, whose part was the holy sacrifice, composed thirty-five questions for a quiz—here are some of them:

'What is the difference between the offertory and the elevation?

How many times is our Lady mentioned in the mass and when?

What action does the priest do when he says, "Come, O sanctifier"?

What action does the priest do when the second bell rings before the consecration and what is the meaning of it?

Name the saints mentioned before the consecration.

What is the mystical body?

Why is the holy mass the best gift we can give to God?

This month (November) we are trying to do something about the liturgy of the mass for the dead. It is rather difficult to get across to children the right idea of death, and it is sad to think that so many grown-ups do not avail themselves of the comfort and sympathy of our mother the Church, when they lose their nearest and dearest. Death is, after all, life—the beginning of a new life, and as I read in *We die unto the Lord*, funerals are a profession of faith in the resurrection. We say daily 'I believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting'.

I gave a lesson to girls of fifteen or so when I wanted to prepare them for singing a requiem mass. 'If you cannot call to mind the name of one dead person you know', I said, 'raise your hand. If you only know one or two, raise your hand.' There was no response. Had they not been able to think of anyone, I was going to give them the newspaper, where they would find names of many people for whom they could pray. I told them to prepare a list of all the dead they knew, and then at the requiem we would hold these papers in our hands. I said I would prepare my own list, too, and of course, at the top of my list I would

write the names of my father and mother, who are both dead.

Profiting by the interest aroused by the mention of one's own parents, I said to them: 'Of course death is a great mystery—we cannot understand it—but as Catholics we firmly believe in the resurrection of the body. The day your mother dies is one of the saddest days of your life: your mother is your best friend, and once she has gone life is never quite the same. It is quite right to feel great sorrow at your mother's death, but if at that sad time you could just remember to turn to the Church, if you could remember that another life is beginning, that as the priest says in the requiem mass life is changed, not taken away—if you could remember to try to follow the prayers said by the priest, if you could try to understand their meaning now—then, at that sad time, you will benefit from the sympathy and consolation the Church is only too willing to give you. Listen to this beautiful hymn which is said at the graveside, a hymn of joy and hope'—and after explaining the story of Lazarus, I sang this

'May all the angels lead you into paradise, and at your coming, may the holy martyrs greet you: and may they lead you into the holy city of Jerusalem. May a choir of angels be there to receive you, and with Lazarus who once was poor, may you then enjoy eternal rest'.

And these words of our Lord himself:

'I am the resurrection and the life, he that believes in me although he be dead shall live: and everyone who lives and believes in me, he shall not die for ever'.

The children picked this up very quickly and were quite pleased to sing it. We don't sing it at a liturgical function, as that would be against the rulings of the Sacred Congregation of Rites.

A young child who recently attended the funeral of her grandmother, to whom she was very devoted, came to tell me that she had recognized the prayers the priest had said at the graveside, and had been very comforted.

The mention of prayers brings me to the morning Assembly. Some of the prayers we use I have taken from Prime, thus associating the day with the great Religious Orders. Since the foundation of prayer is reverence it is worthwhile going to some trouble to inculcate this attitude in body and in mind. In a Religious House we have two bells to call us to prayer—one to get ready—to get the mind ready so that we do not go into God's presence unprepared. We take holy water at the door of the church, and even on entering have some way to go before we reach the holy of holies—all our steps are aids to preparation of our

minds for prayer. I explain this and ask for strict silence once the girls come into the Assembly Hall.

After having announced birthdays, wedding anniversaries, special intentions, illnesses, accidents, etc., I generally give a little reminder such as *one* of these sentences.

'Somewhere a priest is actually saying mass now: offer your prayers up with those of our Lord himself. What a wonderful opportunity it is to speak to God through our Lord Jesus Christ'.

'When God appeared to people in the old covenant, they fell flat on their faces—they were afraid'.

'God is here—where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them'.

'We are part of the Catholic Church and it is the Church's mission to praise and glorify the blessed Trinity'.

'Prayer is getting in touch with God'.

On special feasts the collect of the mass may be said, and in special seasons the whole Assembly may be different. This is always the case in holy week.

If we cannot walk in a procession on Palm Sunday, we can at any rate learn the liturgical hymn—the *Gloria Laus*, which makes a very good processional hymn:

'All glory, laud and honour,
To thee, redeemer king,
From whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.
Thou art the king of Israel,
Thou David's royal Son,
Who in the Lord's Name cometh
The king and blessed one. All glory, laud and honour'.

We break up for Easter on the Wednesday in holy week, so we always have to do these things out of time. One day we have a solemn entry of the crucifix, covered in purple, carried by a very tall girl and preceded by four very small girls carrying lighted candles. The procession proceeds up the centre of the hall, whilst the children face that way, and at a signal make a profound genuflection as the crucifix passes, singing:

'Forth comes the standard of the king,
All hail thou mystery adored,
Hail cross, on which the Life himself
Died, and by death our life restored'.

But though I should like to go on and tell you much more about Easter ceremonies, I must draw this to an end. I hope at least you can see what can be done. And yet I feel I have been only scratching the surface, because whatever we do must be inadequate when we think of the liturgy, so vast, so wonderful, so mysterious. It means we must pray very hard about it all.

St Dositheus

SISTER FELICITY P.C.C.

'He was well to do and lived a careless and worldly life in a military circle'. Dositheus is not the only young man to be described in these terms in any century. It is safe to say he is not the only one to have been converted by the fear of eternal punishment either. Perhaps in the twentieth century when the notion of hell is considered a naive superstition, such a conversion may be more rare, but Dositheus was born around the middle of the sixth when (we are pleased to think) people were not so civilized and enlightened.

The young man heard from his friends and soldier acquaintances a great deal of talk about Jerusalem and made up his mind to visit the city and see for himself whether 'army language' was exaggerating its attractions. He toured the chief sights and was duly impressed, but it was a flamboyant painting depicting the tortures of the damned that made him stand still and stare in Gethsemane. Since Dositheus presumably knew nothing and cared less about eternal life he was very puzzled by this picture and stood gazing at it, attracted and repelled at the same time.

Suddenly it was imperative that he should find out what the lurid representation of human torment was all about. He turned to an elderly lady kneeling in prayer and interrupted her devotions to ask for an explanation. Nothing loth she gave him a great-aunt's lecture on the Four Last Things that left him almost speechless. The joys of heaven were, as to all over-sophisticated young men, incomprehensible to Dositheus. Everlasting happiness without wine, women and song?—Impossible. The pains of hell on the other hand needed very little