

## THE LITURGY AND THE PARISH

THE EDITOR

THE relation of the parish and the liturgy may be approached theoretically from the point of view of the virtue of religion, that is from the point of view of the nature of the liturgy itself and of the parish as a worshipping, religious community. For this reason we may begin with general theological principles about the virtue of religion, and insist on the fact that religion is not first and foremost an organization, as it has come to mean in the English language when we speak of different religions. Religion has come to mean a system of dogmas and behaviour into which men are grouped in so far as they are related to God. In Latin this meaning appears in the phrase *mixta religio*; and theologians distinguish between *religio* in that wide and general sense and the special virtue of religion which is to be found in the scheme of moral virtues. The more general sense of the word, however, derives from the meaning of the virtue, and it is from this point of view that we should understand the essence of the parish which forms a part of the general organization as well as of the essence of the liturgy. For the liturgy is an expression of the virtue and the form of the observances which characterize the general organization.

Religion then in this special sense is a potential part of justice; that is to say, it is engaged in evening things out between two people, in paying debts and dues, giving to another what belongs to him. But when the two poles of justice are God and man the cardinal virtue cannot be wholly fulfilled for the reason that man is not sufficiently *other* from God; he has of himself nothing that is not in some sense already God's. We may say that man is already bound to God by the tie of dependence in being; man is constantly being made by God; he is only in so far as God is giving him his being. Religion 'relegates' man to God in a new manner; it binds man to God by way of the co-operation of man's will in that process of creation coming out from God and returning to him. The whole universe worships God by being what it is; so the praise or song of the spheres is the religion of

the universe giving back to God what is his due by the very act which God is giving to it. But man has an intelligence, so that his form of being demands that he should give this back to God by a free and intelligent act. He returns his life to God by a central act of human life. His praise of God proceeds from a deliberate movement of mind and heart. Moreover, since he is the head of material creation it is his duty to put an intellectual note into the religion of the rest of the universe, which thus praises God not simply by being what it is, but by being unconsciously subject to man who is consciously subject to God. Man employs the physical universe in paying God his dues. Human life forms a part, the capital part of the universe so that in returning that life to God he returns the whole world. And still further and deeper, man is bound to other men by his social nature so that he cannot praise God entirely on his own but in union with other men. In this sense religion might be classed as one of the social virtues, and if the word 'religion' derives from the idea of binding together, it binds not merely the individual man to God, but the society of men and the whole world through men to God.

Looking at the parish from this angle it is clear that it is considerably more than part of an organization. It is more than the sum total of a section of men all of whom are engaged from time to time in the act of the virtue of religion. We sometimes call it a 'cell' as being itself a unit of life in the complete life of the Mystical Body, and this is true so long as we give it its widest meaning. For it is a religious cell, and according to what has been said it binds a part of the world, a unit of the earth's surface, with all that stands thereon to God through the worshipful activity of men in that area.

Before elaborating this idea of the parish as a religious cell in the total universe we may recall the general principles of the liturgy. The liturgy is simply the outward expression of this movement of the just return of all things to God. Or rather, since the outward expression cannot in fact be separated from the inner reality (for the outward without the inner would be no true liturgy at all), we ought to say that it is the total act of religion involving man in the act of giving his mind, his will, his body by gesture and word, his material surroundings by external gifts and sacrifices back to the Source of all being. Liturgy is the common life of man shared with other men, and

the common being of man shared with the whole of creation, made manifest in its dependence on God and in its return to him. All this of course needs to be organized since it is the activity of many men together, so that law and order have to be introduced in the form of rubrics. But rubrical laws are not entirely arbitrary; they flow from the nature of the worship which they regulate; and they are extrinsic to the liturgy itself. What is essential in liturgy is its commonality, an act of justice shared by creatures willing that dues be paid to God. Liturgy therefore is essentially parochial and the parish is essentially liturgical.

Let us take a certain district, an area of several square miles, preferably in the country for it is easier to show our meaning where things are not so crowded, rushed or organized. In the centre of this area stands the church surrounded by a group of homes, good Christian homes, bad Christian homes and good or bad pagan homes. Beyond these houses and surrounding them stretch the fields or arable meadow land, the woods and copses, the hills, and above them the sky. All this area is peopled by men and women, beasts and birds, fruit and crops. We could extend our view to the bowels of the earth with its fuel and metals and thus incorporate into our imaginary parish miners and factory workers as well as farmers, merchants, craftsmen and wives and children. The earth of the area is cultivated and thus through man's initiative is brought into the divine cultus of the liturgy. Some of the corn that he sows and reaps and mills is turned into paste and baked for the Eucharist—an occupation which in the East is undertaken by a sort of deaconess who sees that the best local wheat is set aside for the altar and herself sees to its milling and baking. The fruit of the land, too, if there are vineyards is represented on the altar by the fermented grape, and even if this has to be imported the wine represents the orchards, strawberry beds, barley and hopfields and all the other growing things that make drink and refreshment for man. The oaks and the elms are felled for the structure of the homes and the furnishing thereof, but also for the church's roof and spire, for the roodscreen and the choir stalls. Clay is dug and baked or stone is quarried for the homes and also for the church. Above all the best stone is set up for an altar in the centre of the whole life of the community, while other stones are set up in God's acre as memorials to the dead and so to preserve them as an integral part of the parochial life. The

metals, too, are used in similar fashion from iron to gold and silver to support the parishioner's life and liturgy. Even the fuel is used on the hearth and in the church's stoke-hole. All these things are used for the support of the parishioners' social, human life and at the same time for their worship.

The same system applies to the people themselves. They do not all play an active direct part in the construction of the church-building, nor in the functions that are carried out therein. But because they are linked together by common ties of nature, of family, of occupation, those who build and repair the church do so on behalf of all the others; the craftsmen who decorate it represent the others whose craft is concerned with home-fashioning; those who come to the church for the active worship of God are so engaged not only for themselves but for the whole community, the bad Christians, the pagans, virtuous and otherwise, as well as for those who would come were they not prevented by other occupations. At the head of them all, representative of the fields, the fruit of which he holds in his hands, of the woods and the hills, for the timber and stone of which he has appointed duties in the house of God, of the homes and their occupants from whom he has been set apart as God's representative, at the head of this whole area stands the priest before the altar gathering all the acts and gifts of worship into one and welding all in the one liturgy of Calvary, *per Christum Dominum nostrum*.

This is of course an ideal picture which may never have been realized to the full in any area of the earth's surface. But we may imagine that in the first ages of the Church, when the liturgy was a more spontaneous expression of the common life of worship in the places that had been converted to Christ, the picture was nearer to realization than it is today.

The liturgy of the Mass in those early days had inherited a great deal of the natural unity of land and people and priest to be found not only in its immediate parent, the Jewish ritual, but also in all the primitive religions which had helped to form the Jewish worship. To take one example, the Egyptian priest on occasion of the harvest festival offered a small flat sheaf of plaited barley ears to the goddess of the harvest, just as the Jews offered their barley-sheaf at the Pasch in the temple of Jerusalem; and the people brought little white loaves, as well as other gifts, to obtain assurance from the goddess of her protection of the grain.

This loaf offering was adopted by the Jews and so found its way to the Eucharist, where this primitive religious sense of the dependence for life upon the God who made the seed to grow became purified and supernaturalized into the Body of Christ himself. There was then in the early days a sense of the connection between the Eucharist and the land that gave the harvest. Similarly the other instruments of worship were linked closely with the place and its inhabitants: *Locus iste a Deo factus est, inestimabile sacramentum* sing the choir at the dedication of a church.

The same close link with the natural lives of the people and the early liturgy of the Church may be seen in the way St Patrick was able to preach about the life-giving waters of baptism to a people whose existence was linked with the rivers whose spirits they had hitherto worshipped; or the way in which he introduced the liturgy of the new fire from the bonfires in honour of the sun. Dependence upon the sun is a very conscious part of the life of a people living in a cloudy country—the sky and its occupants also are part of the liturgy of the parish.

In particular to people for whom spring meant so much to their life and therefore entered so deeply into their religion, the central feast of the Christian Pasch brought everything, the whole year and all its events, to the altar in the central act of worship. And even if the parochial organization that we know today was not developed, every town had its church, and that church gathered the locality, spatially and temporally as we have described, under its roof before its altar and was offered there liturgically by its priest.

The rise of large cities and of industrial society has of course altered all this by making the relationship between men and things so much more complex and tenuous. But we have to go further back to discover the reason for the break between the common life and the common liturgy of Christian men. There are many reasons, of course, and here we can only suggest one or two that seem to have special significance.

There is the almost natural tendency of man, under the influence of religion, towards puritanism. In Christian tradition this was enhanced by the introduction of neo-platonism into what may be called spiritual theology. This doctrine inclined zealous Christians to regard the whole material universe as

unreal and unimportant, if not evil and treacherous. When the life of the soul became separated in people's minds from the life of the body, true religion appeared to be exclusively a thing of the spirit. Emotions which play so large a part in linking man with his place and his people and which enter so strongly into a liturgical life became more and more suspect. They had to play some part in the beginnings of the Christian's life, but as he progressed he moved further and further away from such things into a world of prayer which was exclusively a raising of the mind and heart to God, and as these were raised up they left all the rest low down beneath them. It is not merely that the puritan eventually comes to denounce all alcoholic liquor and therefore becomes embarrassed by the presence of wine in the act of Christian worship. The tendency of spiritual preaching and writing has often been to build up the life of the spirit to the exclusion of the life of the body and of the natural things that go to make up that life. It is sometimes difficult to understand how the liturgy can be fitted into the system of spiritual writers like à Kempis or the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and in the case of St John of the Cross there arose a difficulty even about the Word-made-flesh.

Under the influence of this teaching the pious folk of the parish came to the church to elevate their own precious souls towards the Most High, they came to open their individual hearts to the descent of his saving grace. They invented their own devotions at Mass, and the singing of the choir, so often somewhat discordant, became a distraction and hindrance to prayer. The locality ceased to have any significance and the members of the parish grew into individual 'souls' to be saved, units unrelated to anything except God alone.

Another reason for the separation between the liturgy and the parish may perhaps be discerned in the development of sacramental theology. The sacraments form the core of the liturgy and, as we have seen, it is in them that the worship of the locality finds its expression through wheat, oil, water, grape and the natural bond of marriage. Before the eleventh century this sacramental world was extended into many facets of life. One author enumerated well over a hundred sacraments; so many things used by man were outward signs of grace; indeed the whole universe was a sacrament in this general sense, and so all the material things

brought by the people to church and used in worship were sacraments which thus sanctified their lives. But when it was determined that there were only seven sacraments strictly so called and that all the rest were to be considered as belonging to the lower category of sacramentals, a different temper began to appear. It is true that St Thomas draws out the analogy between the natural life of man and the life of grace achieved by means of the seven sacraments. But the close relationship between the two was not generally understood. Emphasis came to be laid more and more upon the '*ex opere operato*' quality of these seven, so that the external sign itself which in so many ways has been developed from the instinctive way in which man acts, from universal symbols that were purified and perfected by our Lord's institution, dwindled in importance. All attention was concentrated upon the inner effect brought about by the divine action. So long as the priest pronounced the right words and used the materials appointed by Christ and determined by theology and canon law, little else mattered. Not only, for example, was it often forgotten that the sacrament of the Eucharist was enclosed in its setting of the High Mass by a vast array of sacramentals which contributed to its total effect, but it even became of little moment that bread and wine were the outward signs. The little round wafer did not easily connect in men's minds with the loaves which the baker brought for their meals, nor did the tiny cruet of wine appear to have much reference to the daily refreshment in jug or bottle upon their dinner table. High Mass or Low Mass, it mattered little which it was. All that was of importance was that the priest should pronounce the words of consecration over the host and over the chalice and thus 'confect' the sacrament. The grace of confirmation, which was a sacrament intended for entry into the difficult period of development towards human maturity, was seen purely in its spiritual action upon the soul so that it did not matter at what age the Christian was confirmed. And so with the other sacraments, though matrimony has retained more of its sacramental character than any other of the seven sacraments. Under such circumstances it cannot be a matter of wonder that the liturgy of the sacraments ceased to tie up with the ordinary life of the parishioner and his surroundings.

Although in these days we are offered too many analyses of our

present evils and too few constructive remedies, we will here leave the question of the divorce between the life of ordinary men and the organization of the parish. Another writer in this issue of *THE LIFE*, however, has suggested a return to the Psalms as a real remedy. Already in France the new version and new music of the Psalms sponsored by the translators of the *Bible de Jérusalem* and Père Gelineau, S.J., have received a wide popular appeal. They have become almost popular songs which will surely make some impression on those who sing them. In England some of these psalms with their psalmody have been put into English by The Grail. And Fr Sebastian Bullough, O.P., has translated a set of psalms for Vespers and these have been set to music by Anthony Milner. These words and tunes, which together make up a liturgical office capable of being used by a parish choir and congregation, may perhaps grow to a similar popularity. This is at least one sign of the rediscovery of a link between parish and its liturgy on the one side and the normal life of man on the other.



## SEASONAL PRAYER

E.B.

**T**HERE is in our lives a natural rhythm to which we must all conform: we are born, we grow to adolescence, reach maturity and then die. This larger individual rhythm, which is repeated in all animate nature, has its smaller counterpart in each cell of our bodies, and then again our bodily functions fit into the larger rhythms of our lives. All the rhythms must in their turn harmonize with the mighty throb of nature herself, whose endless cycle of the seasons brings home to all of us our ultimate dependence upon the Creator—God himself.

Mankind used to be very conscious that he was only a small