

THE LITURGY AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

AELRED SILLEM, O.S.B.

IT is sometimes felt that the inward tendency and logic of liturgical prayer, and those of contemplative prayer, are conflicting, so that these two types of prayer will always attract different temperaments and define different vocations. And indeed, there is an evident divergence between the tendency of contemplative prayer towards simplicity, as the soul is drawn away from multiplicity of concepts and images towards a dry and wordless absorption in God, and the surface multiplicity of the liturgy, with its complexities of ceremonial and chant, its elaborate and absorbing symbolism, its richness of doctrinal content and conceptual teaching. Yet in such a field, personal attraction cannot be the deciding element; it is primarily from the life and living voice of the Church, and only secondarily from the writings of the saints and the masters of the spiritual life, that we must learn the laws of the interior life. We can be sure that it is from the Church alone that we shall acquire an integral spiritual life, full and balanced. If we neglect any element of the Church's life, either in the name of a particular spiritual tradition or because it does not appeal to our temperament, the result can only be impoverishment and one-sidedness. So it is with the 'multiplicity' of liturgical prayer. If the Church gives to ceremonial and to chant the place they have in her liturgy, it is because she knows that for the human worshipper these are the natural expression and stimulus of interior worship. But if—to begin with a more superficial difficulty which can nevertheless be very real for some temperaments—ceremonial and chant are to be used, we must be prepared, particularly at first, to accept the distractions of discipline—of training and preparation, of attention to pitch and movement. This distraction, which gradually eliminates itself as 'drill' becomes second nature, is a price worth paying for the aid which ceremonial and chant will give to our interior religion; if they are to be used at all, the only alternative to the largely temporary distraction of discipline is the enduring distraction of disorder and conflict. Only it must be remembered that ceremonial and chant are only means to interior worship; if their perfection is allowed to become an end in itself, then the discipline of its pursuit can

become an obstacle to prayer. So also can be the attempt to carry them out with an elaboration beyond the physical or psychological powers of those called upon to do so. On both these points, spiritual tact is called for.

These considerations are familiar enough, or should be. But the problem lies far deeper than this; we must look more closely at the nature of liturgical prayer and of our vital association with it, and also at the nature of contemplative prayer, if we are to take a just view of their mutual relationship.

The world was created for the glory of God; and since the intervention of sin, this purpose is realized in the priestly work of the Incarnate Word, in his sacrifice of adoration and atonement, in its perpetuation in the liturgy, and in its working-out in the transformation of our lives. To be a Christian is to be associated with Christ's priestly work, by the sacraments—above all by Baptism and by the Eucharist—and by the liturgy; and the Christian life is to bring all our activity, whether directly religious or 'profane', under the transforming power of Christ's priestly work, making of it the prolongation of his sacrifice of adoration and atonement, so that the integrity of our human life, body as well as soul, can be presented to God, 'a sacrifice, living, holy . . . your spiritual service'.¹

This, then, is the essential character of the liturgy: it is the perpetuation of Christ's priestly work in the Church, and the instrument and term of our association with it. Every element of the liturgy is in its own degree and in its own way a part of this great *sacramentum*. The Mass, of course, re-presents Christ's redemptive work in a unique way; but the sequence of liturgical feasts and seasons is also the means of real communion with facet after facet of it. This too is the key to the central place of the psalms in the liturgy; whether in the directly messianic psalms, or in the psalms of Jerusalem or of the Kingdom, or in the pleadings and thanksgivings of God's people, or in the voice of the friend of God suffering and delivered, we gradually come to hear what St Augustine calls 'vox Christi in omnibus psalmis',² to recognize Christ as their speaker or their theme, not by any cumbersome allegorizing, but by a growing insight into the unity of God's work and of God's word. Thus the liturgy is not simply a complex

¹ Romans xxi, 1 (Westminster Version).

² *Enarratio in Ps. xlii*, n. 1.

system of meditation, worked out in rite and symbol as well as in words. The liturgy is action, and above all God's action, the action of God in Christ. That is why St Benedict calls it the *Opus Dei*—the work of which God is not only the theme and as it were the beneficiary, but also the agent. Christ is its Pontiff, worshipping the Father and incorporating and assimilating us with himself and with his action; that is why, whether *ex opere operato* or *ex opere operantis Christi et Ecclesiae*, the liturgy acts upon us in the measure in which we strive to attune our thoughts and our lives with it: 'proficiendo celebrare et celebrando proficere'.³

For our association with the liturgy is something which should grow in depth and purity. Manuals of spirituality sometimes briefly indicate vocal prayer as the lowest degree of prayer, and then pass on with relief to describe the growth of mental prayer from discursive meditation to the heights of contemplative prayer. But vocal prayer and mental prayer are not successive rungs on a single ladder, they are two manifestations of one life of prayer, and both should deepen in proportion to our growth in charity.

If our association with the action and prayer of the liturgy is to have this vital and interior character, we must be prepared deliberately to attune ourselves to it. The first condition is that we should regard the liturgy and the office as an important element in our life of prayer, and treat it accordingly. This may seem a truism, yet it is curiously easy to regard our meditation and our spiritual reading as our principal spiritual exercises, to be safeguarded at all costs, while we think of the office as an obligation, a duty, to be faithfully carried out, but as an element of self-discipline rather than as a principal function in the life of prayer. And so, if our timetable gets upset, we find ourselves hustling the recitation of an office in order not to lose five minutes of our meditation. If we give to the office the place to which it has a right in our scale of spiritual values, we shall recite it as far as possible at suitable times and in suitable places, we shall not grudge the very few extra minutes which make all the difference between a hasty and a recollected recitation, we shall not regard it as an archaic survival irrelevant to our spiritual life except as a duty, to be fitted in conscientiously but expeditiously with an eye on the clock. We have seen radical liturgical reforms, and heard rumours of others more

³ Roman Missal, collect for SS. Simon and Jude, Oct. 28th.

radical to come; it is worth remembering that they have been made, not because the office has come to be recognized as a mere burden to be eased, but in order that its recitation may be less material, more calm and more spiritual.

But the liturgy and the office cannot really have this place in our spiritual life, unless we attune ourselves to them mentally. It must be said frankly that the thought-world of the Breviary is very different from that of the religious instruction given in our schools, and even from that of our manuals of theology. If the psalms are ever to become the spontaneous expression of our relationship with God, it will not be because we have read commentaries upon them; it will be because our minds and souls have been gradually formed by the prayerful and intelligent reading of the Scriptures as a whole, of which the psalms are the concentrated expression—though indeed the liturgy is in its turn the best key to the full significance of the Scriptures. Unless we attempt to bridge this gap and to acquire sympathy for a different spiritual culture, we shall find ourselves in a strange world as we recite the ferial and seasonal hymns and read the lessons from the Fathers. The Breviary is the product of the culture of that *lectio divina* with which it was in continuity; and it will come alive to us in the measure in which we bring ourselves into contact and sympathy with its sources. This is why the Holy Father, in *Mediator Dei*, emphasizes the need for a liturgical formation in the seminaries, ‘that the clergy of the rising generation . . . shall be . . . taught to understand liturgical ceremonies, to appreciate their majesty and beauty’,⁴ and thus the people may learn from their clergy how to ‘live the liturgical life, and nourish and foster the liturgical spirit in themselves’.⁵ For clergy and religious, the divine office is an inescapable obligation; it depends in a large measure upon our own reverence for the office and our own efforts to attune ourselves to it, whether the obligation remains merely a burden faithfully born, or a joy and a source of growing communion with the mystery of Christ not only as theme but also as agent.

For the tradition is constant that, just as mental prayer should become steadily purer and deeper, so also should the vocal prayer of the liturgy. St Paul sees the whole Christian life as a growing surrender to the influence of our Lord Jesus Christ and of his

4 English tr. by Canon G. D. Smith, C.T.S., n. 211.

5 *ibid.*, n. 210.

Spirit. And it is above all in the life of prayer that this influence is operative. If the goal of the Christian life is that we should be able to say 'it is no longer I that live, but Christ that liveth in me',⁶ it will be more and more Christ that prayeth in me. And in the liturgy, of which he is the Pontiff, our union with his prayer, more exterior in its beginnings, should become more and more vital and interior; at Mass, we offer him as his members increasingly assimilated to him and responsive to all the movements of his grace; in the psalmody, we come to recite the psalms not merely in his name but in the closest union with him. To look at the same reality under another aspect: if the 'sons of God' are those who 'are led by the Spirit of God',⁷ then we must expect this leading to manifest itself in prayer, liturgical as well as mental. St Paul himself indicates this double vital communion of our prayer with the Spirit and with Christ:

Be ye filled with the Spirit,
 speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and
 spiritual songs,
 singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord,
 giving thanks always for all things
 in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ
 to God the Father.⁸

St Thomas' teaching on the gifts of the Holy Ghost brings home the same truth; the gifts perfect the activity of all the virtues, theological and moral; if contemplation is the fruit of the perfecting of charity by wisdom, our religion, of which liturgy is the expression, is perfected by piety and by the fear of the Lord; and since Christian liturgy can no more be confined to the sphere of the moral virtue of religion than can its source and focus, the sacrifice of Calvary, and the *mysterium fidei*, the *sacramentum caritatis* which represents it, we must count also upon the influence of the contemplative gifts in our liturgical prayer. It is striking that for Cassian, as for Origen and St Jerome, insight into the spiritual sense of the Scriptures and psalms is not merely a branch of exegesis, but a part of *theoria*, an aspect of that contemplation which is the fruit of purity of heart, the goal of the ascetic life. So the recitation of the office *in persona Christi* grows from a juridical

⁶ Galatians ii, 20 (Westminster Version).

⁷ Romans viii, 14 (Westminster Version).

⁸ Ephesians vi, 18-20 (Westminster Version).

delegation into a vital communion with him. Such a communion, and prayer in virtue of such a communion, is a manifestation of the life of supernatural grace, and as such it belongs to the sphere of faith; it may be unfelt and unrealized, it may be accompanied by aridity and distraction, but it is not the less a reality for that.

We have seen something of what the liturgy is, and of the character of our association with it. To consider now the other element in our problem: what is contemplative prayer? For our present purposes it can be defined as the exercise of the theological virtues in their simplest and purest form, hope and charity absorbed in their object revealed by faith, under the influence of the gifts of the Holy Ghost. Because such a prayer is not discursive or reflective, and because it is not outwardly social but rather solitary, it is easy to forget that it draws its life from our union with Christ in his Mystical Body, from his indwelling Spirit, from the grace of the Sacraments. We can apply to such solitary prayer what the Council of Trent says of private Masses: 'illae quoque missae vere communes censeri debent'.⁹ Christ and the Spirit of Christ are the vital principle of all supernatural activity, and especially of all prayer, solitary as well as social. And if contemplative prayer is the exercise of pure charity, then at least implicitly it includes all the members of Christ, potential as well as actual, in the sweep of its movement towards him 'who wisheth all men to be saved'.¹⁰ This is why the author of *The Cloud* tells us that 'this is the work of the soul that most pleaseth God. All saints and angels have joy of this work and hasten them to help it with all their might. All fiends be mad when thou dost thus, and try for to defeat it in all that they can. All men living on earth be wonderfully helped by this work, thou knowest not how. Yea, the souls in purgatory are eased of their pains by virtue of this work.'¹¹ It is not necessary—it is not possible—for the contemplative to advert explicitly to this double reference of all prayer to Christ and to his Church; but the reference is always there, and without it the prayer would not exist. Contemplation and liturgical prayer may differ in their setting and in their psychological mechanisms, but they are different expressions of

⁹ Sess. xii, *De Sacrificio Missae*, cap. 6 (Denzinger 944).

¹⁰ I Timothy ii, 4 (Westminster Version).

¹¹ Ch. 3.

one life and belong to the same sphere. The attempt is sometimes made to show how liturgical prayer may itself become mystical in a manner which safeguards the essential simplicity and non-conceptual character of contemplative prayer as analysed by the mystical theologians.¹² Without questioning the value of this approach, it seems sufficient and simplest to accept the variety and essential unity of these two manifestations of the life of prayer, and to recognize the necessity of both, and the support which they give to each other, the gifts perfecting each in its own order.

It is important to insist that both are needed for a full and integral life of prayer. In spite of superficial appearances to the contrary, they have always existed together; the absence of set periods of prolonged mental prayer must not mislead us here. The primitive liturgy allowed of pauses for silent prayer, of which our *flectamus genua* and *levate* are a token survival to which the restored Holy Week liturgy has given back a measure of reality; and Cassian, describing the psalmody of the Egyptian monks, shows us how, after each psalm or section of a psalm, a pause was made for private and wordless prayer.¹³ In ancient and medieval monastic life, the hours of *lectio divina*, continuous in theme and sources with the liturgy, were intended to be hours of prayer as well as of study. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, partly perhaps as the more scientific and metaphysical study of theology replaced the older, more devotional and more readily prayerful *lectio divina*, provision was made, both among monks and frairs, for set periods of mental prayer; and this obligation has passed into Canon Law¹⁴ and into the constitutions of all religious families. There is no need to resent this as an obstacle to freedom of spirit; it is only prudent to accept it as the expression of the Church's mind. Already in the seventeenth century, in words which are perhaps even more true now than when they were written, Father Baker showed how the growing complexity of our mental furniture and the more extroverted character of life requires to be compensated by more prolonged and regular periods of recollection.¹⁵ In any case, the novelty lies only in the obliga-

¹² See a remarkable article by Mr E. I. Watkin, 'Praying the Psalms', in *Liturgy*, July 1952, pp. 57-64.

¹³ *Institutes*, Bk II, ch. 7.

¹⁴ For clerics, can. 125, 2; for religious, can. 595 I, 2; for seminarists, can. 1367, 1.

The only indication of duration is 'per aliquod tempus'.

¹⁵ *Holy Wisdom*, pp. 166-171.

tion to set periods; at all times, vocal liturgical prayer has been nourished by and overflowed into solitary and wordless prayer.

Our mental prayer will not draw upon our liturgical prayer merely in the mechanical sense that the liturgy will furnish 'themes for meditation' and formulae for affective prayer—though it may do these things admirably. The liturgy will give us in the first place that profound and prayerful grasp of doctrine which meditation was designed to provide, and upon which any deep interior life must depend. The great realities of the Incarnation, the Redemption, the sacraments, will come to us not primarily in the cerebral form of treatises *de Verbo Incarnato* and *de Redemptore*, but concretely, as lived in a climate of prayer, in all the texts and rites of the great liturgical feasts and seasons, Advent and Christmastide, Lent and Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost. They will be lived and experienced before they are studied and analysed, and they will take possession of our souls at a deeper level than that of the *ratio ratiocinans*. But the liturgy is the greatest of spiritual educators, not only by the grasp of doctrine which it gives, but also by the religious sense which it forms. We can say of the psalmody, and indeed of the whole liturgy, what St Thomas says of the Our Father: 'format affectum':¹⁶ by the place it gives to adoration and praise, by its sense of the sovereignty of God over the soul and over events, by its sense of our dependence upon grace, it forms in us a temper of religion and prayer which is of incalculable value towards the growth of contemplative prayer. And in assessing the influence of the liturgy upon the life of prayer, we must remember above all that, behind and beyond its role as a spiritual educator, the liturgy in its integrity, sacraments and psalmody and liturgical year, is the indispensable condition through which we are brought to the *consortium mysterii salutaris*,¹⁷ that communion with Christ and his redemptive mystery which is the source of all supernatural life and especially of all prayer.

Conversely, our vocal liturgical prayer should become more pure and more deep, depend less upon the peripheral spheres of feeling and emotion, derive more and more from the deepest supernatural energies of the soul. It will do so in the measure in which we live increasingly in those regions; and of this progressive purification of sense and spirit our mental prayer is both an

16 Ila-IIae, qu. lxxxiii, art. 9: 'Oratio . . . informativa totius nostri affectus'.

17 Roman Missal, Postcommunion of Ember Friday in Advent.

expression and a principal source. Without this progressive deepening in which mental prayer has such an important role, our liturgical prayer will remain exterior and shallow. A few decades ago, in face of the revived interest in mystical theology and interior prayer, the liturgical movement appeared to many as something concerned primarily with the externals of worship. In recent years, the situation has altered considerably, and it is realized more and more that the liturgical movement is concerned with things that vitally affect the spiritual life, not only of a few souls, but of all Christians. The Encyclical *Mediator Dei* has set its seal on the liturgical movement as primarily a spiritual issue. But *Mediator Dei* also warns us of the danger that the liturgical revival may be impoverished through lack of interior life and depth; and lack them it will, if it leads in any way to a neglect of mental and contemplative prayer, and of the revived appreciation of traditional teaching upon them which was mentioned above. It is essential to consider liturgical prayer and mental prayer, not as competitors, still less as alternatives, but as two indispensable expressions of a single life of prayer *in Christo*, accepting their diversity not as a tension or a problem, but as an enrichment, convinced of their mutual dependence and of their power to deepen each other indefinitely.



VOCATIONS AND THEIR RECOGNITION—I

COLUMBA RYAN, O.P.

HOW often people put, rather anxiously, the question: How do I know if I have a vocation? It is not easy to answer, and part of their anxiety comes from the fact that, as likely as not, they are looking for a cut-and-dried answer that can seldom, in the nature of the case, be given. The following of a vocation is a venture of faith. But it still remains true that the venture ought to be made with prudence. My aim in these articles is to examine first what a vocation is, and secondly what kind of answer can be given to the question just put. It is, after all, a question that many, besides those who feel themselves drawn to consecrate their lives to the service of God, may be called upon to