

THE LIFE OF CHRIST IN THE LITURGY

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A CRITIC suggested that Dom Gregory Dix in his monumental *The Shape of the Liturgy* had some brilliant liturgical intuitions,¹ even though he was not always accurate or profound in his details. This criticism may or may not be justified of the book as a whole; but there was surely a brilliancy of intuition in Fr Dix's treatment of St Cyril of Jerusalem and his relation to the development of the liturgy in the West as well as in the East. The realisation that St Cyril introduced a new type of symbolism into the universal prayer of the Church was surely something of a discovery and all its implications may not have been fully appreciated even by Fr Dix himself. At all events, it may be useful to summarise his discovery for the benefit of those unacquainted with this book, and to point to one important implication which bears upon the whole question of the way Christian men express themselves in prayer together.

St Cyril had a character which was peculiarly suited by Providence for the time in which he lived. He lived when the first flush of freedom for the Church, after centuries of the threat of persecution, gave Christians the opportunity their religion demanded of a wholehearted expansion through all the arts and crafts of life so that it could flow like a rising flood into every corner of their homes. It was during this fourth century that Christian art was born and grew vigorously because now at last Christians could express their catholic religion freely. It was also possible for them to move about freely and to flock in crowds to the Holy Places to follow the life of our Lord in the exact setting of hills, cities and seas in which he had lived. This was evidently an encouragement for the dramatic instincts of the peoples of Western as well as Eastern Europe, an encouragement for them to develop a very literal reproduction of Christ's life on earth. In no more fruitful ground could this incitement to the histrionic talents of Christians fall than in the heart of St Cyril himself. He was a man with a great sense of the importance of the places among which he lived, and

¹ 'So suggestive in historic intuitions'—Fr Bevenot, S.J., in *The Month* (p. 317, 1945).

of the possibilities of recalling the past history of those places for the edification and instruction of the faithful. He preached his famous series of catechetical instructions to prepare the neophytes for the sacraments when he was as yet only a priest, in 348, a few years before he became a bishop. He was anxious that the ceremonies of the season during which he preached—Lent and Easter—should be observed in their appropriate places, though it is evident that these were not always so observed. He refers to Pentecost as being more appropriately celebrated in the place where the apostles had received the Holy Spirit: 'It would be a truly fitting thing if, just as we teach of the things to do with Christ and Golgotha here at Golgotha, so we should instruct you on the Holy Ghost in the Church up the hill' (*Catechesis* 16, 4; cf. Dix, *op. cit.*, p. 350).

A year or two after this, St Cyril became bishop and was given a free hand in the ceremonies of the Holy Places for about thirty-five years. Some months before his death brought an end to this fruitful period of liturgical expansion, a nun from the other end of Europe came among all the other hundreds of pilgrims to assist at the ceremonies of the liturgical year in the places where our Lord had lived and died. This was Etheria, who sent back to her fellow religious in Spain a vivid account of the full ceremonial in which the faithful went from place to place describing in their actions and prayers, the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and listening to pertinent passages from the Scriptures where they found the original of what they were themselves doing. Almost every hour of Holy Week was thus devoted to some gathering, as the faithful followed the detailed descriptions of the Gospels. And the enthusiasm of the pilgrims caused a good deal of anxiety to their clergy at home as they returned full of a new kind of liturgical fervour, wishing to see the same ceremonies carried out in their own churches. A few years later St Augustine had to complain of the people who, returning from pilgrimage, urged him to have two synaxes on Maundy Thursday as was done in Jerusalem to give greater scope for the different happenings of that day—the Last Supper and *Mandatum* as well as the reconciliation of penitents. (St Augustine, *Ep.* 54, 5; cf. Dix. *op. cit.* p. 441, n.1.) One can imagine the discomfort of the Spanish nuns' chaplain when these letters arrived from Etheria in Jerusalem, for she was intent upon contrasting in detail the differences between Spanish and Pales-

tinian ceremonial. Many priests today understand the trials that come from such a 'liturgical reformer'.

But the 'reform' these pilgrims hoped for was a new development rather than a revival or return to the past. Before St Cyril's time when the Church was still under the pressure of persecution the liturgical expression was in character almost identical with that of the Jewish worship from which it had sprung. And the Jewish expression of praise and dependence upon God dealt with the mystery of the Jewish race. With some notable exceptions it attempted to display not so much the historical happenings of God's work among his people as the total dependence of the people upon him. A great exception to this rule was of course the Paschal Meal in which the history of the Exodus was re-enacted with something like literal accuracy. But it was the sense of their dependence on the Lord God for salvation in that event that stood out most clearly. And the dramatic representation lacked personification—no one, for example, took the part of Moses or of Aaron. It was the meal and the eating of the memorial sacrifice of the lamb that really held the attention of the participants as they listened to the account of God's mercies to his people. So the great Jewish feasts were spring, summer and turn-of-the-year feasts. The physical year with its seasons, upon which the life of the race depended, was the foundation of the liturgical year of the feast of Tabernacles, the Pasch and Pentecost. There was something more sacramental about these feasts, more sacramental, that is, than the realism of dramatic representation. Thus the desire for rain and for the green of new life in the crops was given expression by the carrying of water to the altar and the waving of evergreen boughs to draw down the rain and greenery from heaven. This was sacramental because by means of the outward display they wished to bring about some special effect in their life, a divine effect upon their crops. So their liturgical year and their ceremonies in Temple or Synagogue were basically sacramental in this strict sense. The Christians had adopted this same style of symbolism, perfected and brought to culmination by Christ himself, when he took bread and said 'This is my body'. Bread does not *look like* body, the breaking and eating of the bread does not *look like* the death of Christ. But by means of such things an effect is attempted—something is achieved for man's spirit—it is a sacrament. And the Christian, too, celebrated his sacraments within the seasonal

cycle of the liturgical year. He continued to express his dependence on the Father through Christ in terms of the turn of the year when the seed was to be sown and the Word had been sown in the Earth by the birth of Christ at Christmas. Our Lord himself had shown how he had fulfilled this feast in his own person when he stood in the Temple; as they poured out the water round the altar he cried out that the waters of the Spirit would flow from inside—'if any man thirst. . .'. Again, as they lit the ceremonial lamps, he was the true light. Thus he prepared the way for the fulfilment of Pasch and Pentecost, as he observed the old ceremonial step by step and refashioned it as a Christian year. The immediate followers of Christ simply carried on what they had inherited from this greatest of Jews. They did not even break with the Temple worship till the Temple itself was broken. They observed the symbols of sowing—the new seed of Christmas; of reaping—the new life of Easter; and of laying up the harvest—the fulfilment of Pentecost. Their life depended upon God in all these ways through Christ Jesus. The new life of redemption and salvation was centred on the Christian Pasch. That was the centre of the Christian's life cycle.

So far the liturgical year showed the rhythm of spring, summer, autumn—birth, maturity and completion. And this was seen in its perfection in the life of Christ—but the life of Christ as a sacrament of the inner life of every Christian, not as a dramatic historical episode. Good Friday therefore had no liturgy, a day of watching and waiting for the culmination of the New Life. But now that Christians were free to organise their own display in the worship of God, they soon found the dramatic symbolism of Jerusalem a fascinating way of meditating on the fact of redemption. Rapidly the ceremonies of Good Friday were developed as the Bishop exposed the relic of the true Cross for veneration, and the moving gospel account of the Passion was read aloud to stir the pent-up emotions of the pilgrims. And so the new symbolism caught the enthusiasm of the people and spread like wildfire throughout the faithful of those days. Many centuries later when the liturgy itself had been finally stabilised the same process was repeated with even greater pictorial realism with the 'Stations, or Way, of the Cross'.

The liturgical revolution that had taken place at Jerusalem is strikingly illustrated by the ceremonies of Palm Sunday. On the original day when Christ was conducted with such splendour into Jerusalem his enthusiastic followers were simply adopting the

sacramental symbolism of waving evergreen branches to call down God's green and fruitful blessing upon them and upon their leader. But when St Cyril and his flock read this out in their Jerusalem basilica they were soon out upon the hillside acting this event. The Bishop himself must obviously personify Christ; he therefore rode upon an ass while the crowd sang *Hosanna*, waving their palms before him. What had originally been a sacramental gesture had now become a liturgical drama centering round an event in the life of our Lord. From that time onwards the liturgical year began to acquire a secondary character. It was no longer a simple declaration of an immediate and seasonal dependence on the Father for life and livelihood both natural and supernatural. Christians were now trying to epitomise in a single year the historical life of Christ which lasted three and thirty years. More and more of the gospel events were made the occasion of a liturgical celebration or feast. Eventually the Annunciation appeared in the calendar nine months before Christmas and the days preceding Easter were planned with historical accuracy to follow the movement of the gospel account.

But never has the original sacramental character of the year been abandoned. That scheme of the rhythm of the seasons becoming the rhythm of grace has formed the ground plan of all liturgical worship. Admittedly the result of the confluence of the two streams of liturgical symbolism has been somewhat bizarre. To the literal-minded it sometimes seems strange that the whole historic life of Christ is packed in between Christmas and Easter, leaving a long stretch of uneventful liturgy after Pentecost, rather surprisingly studded with sudden reminders of historical occasions such as the Visitation and the Transfiguration. Had the dramatic symbolism been the only principle of the liturgical year it could have been well spaced out over a twelve-month, to begin with the Annunciation and to end with Pentecost with the other events interposed in their historical sequence. But happily the more fundamental symbolism still obtains, and Christians are still fed by the consecrated bread, with their devotion to the pictorial crucifix as a powerful reminder. They still centre their lives upon the Pasch with a vivid preparation for it on Good Friday; as they creep to the Cross they are preparing for the outpouring of sacramental grace. These paschal sacraments were poured out from the side of Christ on the Cross, but they are given to the

faithful on the day of Resurrection in the form of water that fructifies the seed, of bread and wine and oil that nourish and sustain life.

After St Cyril had inaugurated this new method of dramatising the life of Christ in the liturgical worship of the Church, the literal representation itself became modified so as to show the meaning behind the physical actions of Christ. In other words the drama itself began to be accepted in a sacramental sense. Thus the events of Palm Sunday described so vividly by processions and palms and even donkeys began to be interpreted as meaning something for the present life of the Christian. It meant, among other things, the harrowing of hell as Langland interpreted the ceremonies in *Piers Plowman*. The children singing the praises of Christ in the Temple—*Gloria Laus*—stood for the souls in Limbo waiting for the release of his redeeming presence, or the men now held under the bondage of sin till Christ strike the door of the soul demanding entrance for his love. The ceremonies of this sort were thus reabsorbed into the liturgical nature of the worship surrounding them, so that the two elements so different at once in origin and in character became welded into the whole worship of the Church even though the two cycles of the seasons and of the historic life of Christ were never fully amalgamated.

This double aspect of liturgical prayer has always been recognised, for eventually the histrionic enthusiasm of the medievals developed the dramatic side of the liturgy to such an extent that it had to be led from the altar to the market place to become the delightful miracle plays which even now linger in some parts of Europe. But no one has perhaps looked for the origin of this religious drama at so primitive a time as that of St Cyril of Jerusalem. For the most part people have been content to look for its beginnings a good five centuries later, when the clerics began to personify the three Marys at Eastertide as the choir sang the sequence, its sentences pregnant with dramatic power: *Quem quaeritis? Dic nobis Maria quid vidisti in via?* It was only then that what St Cyril had set on foot was beginning to run away with itself. Instinctively the faithful began to realise a fundamental difference between the gesture of the priest as he opened his hands to say *Dominus vobiscum* and that of the three white-albed clerics as they peered in and out of the stalls to the tune of *Quem quaeritis?* They felt that when the dramatic gestures of the latter

reached certain limits they would be more appropriate outside the church. But the principle of the dramatic ceremony has never been denied as right and fitting for performance in the consecrated building. The miracle plays may have moved to the church porch or 'place', but still the spirit of St Cyril inspired new feasts such as *Corpus Christi* with its procession and even the realism of the priest's gesture at Benediction. For the most part it has remained at peace within the framework of the liturgy, becoming as time went on welded into a more sacramental atmosphere as we have seen in the Palm Sunday ceremonial.

But the dramatic urge has always shown a tendency to unruliness, and consequently tends from time to time to produce bizarre effects. For example, the great 'sacramental' occasion when a monk or a nun hands himself over in one act of holocaust to the service of God has tended to develop a dramatic ceremonial which lacks the depths of the eucharistic liturgy. The monk is literally covered with a pall and the nun is literally clothed in a wedding dress and attended by bridesmaids. St Cyril might have enjoyed elaborating the ceremonies of religious clothing and profession, but one supposes that he would have made a more professional job of it.

However, such examples of the *joie de vivre* of Christians in their worship of God need not be criticised or discouraged. At the present day we have learnt to welcome once more the miming of the Stations of the Cross within the walls of the church, not to mention the hair-raising pyrotechnics of the nineteenth-century mission preachers. These things are surely to be welcomed. But it is very necessary to retain the sense of what is essentially liturgical and sacramental and to preserve this undisturbed at the heart of the prayer of the Church. The wheat ground and baked and converted into the body of Christ; the water, which refreshes and draws life from the seed, poured over the head of the neophyte, the candle which is the light of Christ shining into the heart, the sacred fire, the sacred oil—all these symbols spring from the natural rhythm of man's life and have been consecrated by our Lord for his supernatural work of redemption. This is the essential symbolism of the Mass and the Liturgical Year.