

# Life of the Spirit

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## LITURGICAL FORMATION IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE<sup>1</sup>

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IF we ask ourselves what is the place of the liturgy in a Christian life, we can only find an answer by going back to the origins of both. The origin of the liturgy is to be found in the Last Supper. Whether or not this was strictly a Paschal meal, as it would appear to be, there is no doubt that it was one of those sacred ceremonial meals which were customary among the Jews, at which certain ritual blessings were given, a ritual offering was made, and prayers and hymns were sung. We have here clearly all the elements of a liturgy. If we want to see what was the place of this liturgy in the early Church we cannot do better than turn to the Acts of the Apostles, where we read that after Pentecost, the disciples 'occupied themselves continually with the Apostles' teaching, their fellowship in the breaking of bread and the fixed times of prayer' (Acts, 2, 42). So Mgr Knox: but another reading of the Greek gives an even better sense. 'They were all occupied in the Apostles' teaching and the common life (*Koinonia*), the breaking of bread and the prayers.' Would it be an exaggeration to say on the basis of this that the Christian life in the apostolic church was essentially a liturgical life? It consists of four elements: first the Apostles' teaching, which was the source of one's faith as a Christian; secondly, the common life, the Christian community, into which one was incorporated by baptism; thirdly, the breaking of bread, the eucharistic sacrifice, which was the bond of union among Christians and the sign of one's membership of the Body; and finally 'the prayers', or as Mgr Knox translates it, the 'fixed times of prayer', that is the regular 'hours' of prayer, which were later to develop into the Divine Office as we know it.

Let us now consider each of these elements in detail: first of all the 'teaching of the Apostles'. It is evident that we are concerned

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here with the original 'tradition' of the faith, before the 'scriptures' of the New Testament came to be written, and which, in fact, was the basis upon which the Gospels, as we now know them, came to be constructed. This 'apostolic teaching' became in time a regular method of catechesis, and it is probable that we have in our present 'Mass of the Catechumens', especially in Lent, a relic of this original catechesis. But it is important that we should ask ourselves what was the nature of this 'apostolic teaching' and what is its relation to the liturgy: on our answer to these questions will depend our whole conception of the liturgy in the Christian life. We must be quite clear in our minds that it was not an abstract system of doctrinal propositions like our modern catechism or our modern theology. It was first of all a record of certain divine 'events', in particular of the life and death and resurrection of the Saviour, and the 'teaching' arose out of these events and was directly connected with them. Moreover, these divine events of the New Testament were prepared and pre-signified by certain divine events in the Old Testament, in particular the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, the passage through the Red Sea, the journey through the wilderness under a cloud, the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, the crossing of the Jordan and the entrance into the Promised Land, the establishment of the Kingdom and the building of the Temple. All these things were seen as 'types' of the events of the New Testament. The Exodus signified the deliverance of the Christian people from the power of sin by the sacrifice of Christ; the passage through the Red Sea signified its baptism; the journey under the Cloud its confirmation by the power of the Spirit; the manna and the water from the Rock signified the Eucharist. But above and beyond this there was a still deeper signification. Just as the events of the Old Testament prepared and signified the events of the New, so these in turn prepared and signified a new order of being, a new creation, which was to take place at the end of time. The final Exodus was the passage from this world to the next; the crossing of the Jordan and the entry into the Promised Land signified the return of man to Paradise, his entry into the Kingdom of heaven: the new temple at Jerusalem was the City of God which St John saw coming down from heaven 'as a Bride adorned for her husband' (Ap. 21, 2). Christian doctrine, then, was originally based on this ancient symbolism, in which there are always three levels of significance which we have

to keep in mind. There is first of all the past of history, which is contained in the Old Testament and prepares the way for the revelation of the New Testament. There is secondly the present order in which we live, which was inaugurated by the New Testament and which we may call the 'sacramental' order. There is finally the order of eternal life, which the Old and the New Testament symbolically represent and for which they prepare us.

What then is the liturgy? It is the dramatic re-presentation of this whole mystery of our salvation, past, present and future, by means of which we are enabled to *participate* in it and to receive its saving power. Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist are the three stages of our initiation into this mystery of Christ, each bringing us a stage nearer to complete participation, which is only fulfilled in the world to come. The function of the liturgy therefore is to *make present* the mystery of our salvation by means of *sacramental signs*, and the 'apostolic teaching' or catechesis is the means by which we are prepared for our participation in the liturgy and instructed in the system of symbolism upon which the liturgy is based.

We come now to the second element in our liturgical life, the 'community'. What is the Christian community? It is the people which has been chosen by God that this mystery of divine grace may be enacted in it. It is the people of whom it was said in the Old Testament, 'If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant then you shall be my peculiar possession above all peoples . . . and you shall be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Ex. 19, 5-6): and of which St Peter said: 'You are a chosen generation, a kingly nation, a purchased people' (1 Peter, 2, 9). It is in us therefore as members of the Christian community that the mystery of the Exodus, which took place historically and typically among the Jews in the Old Testament and was accomplished and fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ, has to be enacted mystically and sacramentally: and the liturgy is the means by which this mystery is accomplished. We can therefore see clearly how our life as Christians is essentially a 'common life': its very essence consists in membership of a community, and our prayer is essentially a common prayer. But we can see the nature of this community still more clearly if we consider the use of the word in the New Testament. St Paul tells us that God has called us to the *Koinonian* of his Son, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1, 9); and St John says: 'Our

*Koinonia* is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ' (1 John 1, 3). This shows us clearly enough the nature of the Christian community: it is a divine society, in which we are called to a participation in the life of God through our adoption as sons in Christ; and this adoption is itself the work of the Spirit, as St Paul again says, 'We have received the spirit of adoption of sons which makes us cry, Abba, Father' (Rom. 8, 15). Our 'common life' as Christians is therefore nothing less than a participation in the personal life of the Holy Trinity: it is a common life which we receive from the Father, through the Son, in or by the Holy Spirit. In other words at our baptism we are born again as sons of God through the gift of the Spirit. In the ancient church, as we know from St Basil's treatise on the Holy Spirit, the commonest form of the doxology was: 'Glory be to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit'. It is worth emphasising this Trinitarian character of Christian worship, because the basic structure of all Christian prayer as we find it in the liturgy is an offering to the Father through the Son in the Spirit and we want to retain this as a permanent feature of our liturgical formation.

But what concerns us most at present is that all Christian prayer is offered 'in the Spirit'. Perhaps we might suggest that while the Holy Spirit is given us in our baptism, it is the special function of Confirmation to perfect this work of the Spirit in us, to bring the gifts of the Holy Spirit into operation and to enable us to take our place in the Church as *pneumatikoi*, men of the Spirit. Our Confirmation is, then, our anointing with the Messianic gifts, the gifts of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and knowledge, of fortitude and piety and of holy fear. We receive that gift of wisdom of which St Paul said: 'We speak "wisdom" among the perfect'. We would emphasise that we cannot take our proper part in the liturgy of the Church, unless we are disposed, at least, for the operation of these gifts. As we have seen the liturgy is the re-presentation of the mysteries of Christ: but the power to understand these mysteries; to enter into them and participate in their saving power, is only given us through the Spirit. We must insist that this is not merely a question of theological knowledge. The symbols of the liturgy and the Scriptures, which we have been considering, are not intended to provoke theological speculation. Their purpose is to dispose us to experience the reality of the things they signify, that is to say, the mysteries of faith. A liturgical

formation is not the same as a theological formation; it is different in kind. Theology is a science, and its method is that of logical, discursive reason: but the liturgy is an 'action'; it belongs rather to the practical order of art and it is wholly directed towards the sphere of *affective* knowledge. St Thomas distinguishes clearly between the knowledge of reason and discursive thought, on the one hand, and affective knowledge or knowledge by sympathy and *connaturality* on the other. It is with this mode of knowledge that we are concerned in the liturgy and this is also the mode of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We know that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are habits which dispose us to respond to the action of divine grace: they render us 'connatural' with God. The knowledge which we have of the mysteries of faith through the operation of the gifts is therefore a knowledge by connaturality. It is supernatural not only in its essence but in its mode of operation: it gives us experience of the reality which we contemplate. It is towards a knowledge of this nature, a supernatural experience of the mystery of faith, that we would suggest that the whole work of the liturgy is directed. The symbols of the liturgy are intended precisely to dispose us for an experience of this kind.

This is true not only of the literary symbols of the Scriptures but of all the wealth of symbolism which surrounds the liturgy, of candles and incense, of vestments and ritual, architecture and chant. We can see here what is the place of art in the liturgy. The function of Christian art, that is of architecture, painting, sculpture, and music, in so far as it serves the purpose of the liturgy, is to present an order of symbolism by means of which the mind is led to the contemplation of the thing signified. It is a wholly supernatural art, of which the end is contemplation. In this sense one can say that all Christian art from the fifth to the twelfth century was a liturgical art: its function was to serve the purpose of the liturgy and to lead the mind to the experience of the mysteries which it represented. (The most perfect example of this is, perhaps, plain chant, of which the whole function is to awaken the affections of the soul and dispose it for the contemplation of the mysteries represented in the liturgy.) The moment that the attention of the mind is withdrawn from the thing signified, that is the supernatural mystery of faith, to the sign itself, the music, the picture, the sculpture, whatever it may be, though it may be an excellent work of art, it will cease to be religious in the proper sense.

Let us say, then, for our second element in liturgical formation that through the liturgy we participate in the 'common life' of the Christian community, and that this 'common life' is essentially a supernatural life, which is communicated to us through the Holy Spirit. But while our life as Christians is essentially spiritual and supernatural, yet at the same time it is deeply rooted in matter and makes constant use of material things: in other words, it is sacramental. This brings us to the third element, the breaking of bread. Our life as Christians begins with baptism: it comes to maturity in confirmation; but it is continually nourished and sustained by the Eucharist. At each stage we can see how deeply it penetrates into the material universe. Our baptism is a descent beneath the waters, a return to the womb. Our confirmation is an anointing with oil; and the central act of our religion is a sacred meal, a 'breaking of bread'. By the offering of the bread and wine, which we make, is signified the offering of the material universe to God. All things come forth from God in his creative act, and all things have to return to God, redeemed and sanctified, through the offering of the Mass. The offering of the Mass is therefore the sanctification of the material universe. In it and through it is sanctified all human science and art, all industry and technique by which the material world is transformed for the use of man. A Christian spirituality which is founded on the Mass must therefore extend to all material things: it must embrace the whole economic life of man. By the sacramental nature of our religion we are rooted in the material world and we can never escape the obligations which arise from this. It gives a sacramental character to all human work, especially the work of our hands. For all human work is part of that process by which matter is being redeemed and transfigured, so that it may take its place in the 'new creation', which is the City of God.

In the same way the character of the Mass as a sacred meal redeems and sanctifies all human relationships, in particular the family and the dinner table. We are told of the first disciples that they 'broke bread in this house or that and took their share of food with gladness and simplicity of heart' (Acts 2, 46). Thus by the mystery of the eucharist the ordinary taking of food is sanctified and all those natural relationships which arise from a meal shared together. In other words the social life of man, like his economic life, is an integral element in Christian spirituality, and this obliga-

tion of charity extends to the whole human race. All mankind is included in the offering of the Mass: it is the sacrament, precisely, by which the lost unity of mankind is restored. Every time we assist at Mass, therefore, we are taking part in that redemptive action of Christ by which the warring nations of the world are being brought back to peace and are being prepared for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Our spiritual life, therefore, in so far as it is centred in the Mass, cannot stop short of any of the demands of economic and social justice: it is necessarily implicated in all the conflicts of this world. And yet at the same time it must always transcend them. We may express this fact by saying that all our prayer is ultimately directed 'to the Father'—*ad Patrem*. In the Mass and the liturgy we enter into that action of the Spirit by which all men and all things are being brought back to unity in the Son, as members of the Body of Christ. But the term of this action is always to be found in the Father, that is, in the source of Being. All things come forth *from* the Father, *through* the Son *in* the Holy Spirit, and all things return sanctified in the Spirit through Christ, the Redeemer, to the Father. This is the direction, as it were, of all Christian life and prayer. Thus through all the sacramental order of the liturgy, through all the obligations of work and family and social life, we are always moving towards an order of Being which totally transcends this world, that is, the Kingdom of God. Everything in this world has value only in so far as it prepares for and signifies the coming of that Kingdom: that is the meaning of a sacramental universe.

We come, finally, to the last element in our liturgical formation—'the prayers', or as Mgr Knox rightly interprets it, 'the fixed times of prayer', which developed into the divine office. This is the means by which the action of the Mass is extended so as to sanctify the Christian day, the Christian week and the Christian year. Of this we can only say that we shall never receive a true liturgical formation until we have begun to make the psalms the basis of our personal prayer. This is the traditional prayer of the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit, which formed the spiritual life of all the early centuries of the Church. But if we are to do this, we have to recover that ancient tradition of symbolism which, as we have seen, underlies all the Scriptures and the liturgy. So we are brought back to where we started, to the need to understand this traditional

symbolism, and not only to understand it intellectually, but to appreciate it affectively. The Psalms are poetry and we have to approach them as we approach poetry: the liturgy as a whole is more like a play of Shakespeare than a treatise by Aristotle. We have to learn to appreciate the symbolism of the liturgy as we appreciate the symbolism of Hamlet and Macbeth: to share the affections of the Psalmist as we share the passions of Lear and Othello. But for this we need not merely the natural gift of poetic understanding but the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit, by which the mysteries of faith, which the liturgy represents, are communicated to us. If this seems beyond our capacity, let us remember that we all received these gifts, together with the virtues of faith, hope and charity, at our baptism: and that the effect of confirmation is precisely to make these gifts stronger within us and so lead us on the path of Christian perfection.



### 'BACK TO THE FATHERS'<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE last part of a book that an author writes is the Introduction, and usually it is read to the best advantage at the end of the text. A well-known Professor of Scripture in Rome used to advise his audience to study Biblical Introduction after one had acquired a working knowledge of the Biblical text itself.

Not by their own choosing but by force of circumstances over the last fifty years Professors of Scripture have had to concentrate on Biblical Introduction. Rationalists and Modernists were attacking the very nature of the Bible as the Word of God, and the Higher Critics were elaborating theories about the origins of movements among the Israelites and about the origin of the particular Books of the Bible, and the Church had to give guidance. This has not always had its desired affect; for good people went away with the impression that the less they had to do with the Bible the safer they would be, and those whose calling de-

<sup>1</sup> The substance of a paper read to the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT Conference held at Hawkesyard Priory, October, 1951.