

LITURGY AND THE CHILD

LITURGY may too easily be thought to include nothing more than a somewhat archaic formula of public and official worship in the Church confined to the Mass and the Office of the day. It is true that these latter constitute the essence or core of the liturgy; but if we care to probe deeper than a mere study of chant and formulae and rubrics will take us, we discover beneath these a spirit emanating organically from the fundamental doctrines of the Church and the more primitive outlook of Christians upon life as a whole. The liturgical rites and ceremonies we now know did not spring from an early and undisciplined urge to worship such as is common in all primitive peoples. Though based upon this universal instinct, they were evolved through well-defined motives for worshipping in a particular way the personal God Whom divine revelation had made known to them with certitude and much understanding. The liturgy as we have it came into being gradually as the expression of a desire at once human, being based on a specifically human urge to worship, and at the same time intensely Christian, being the development and perfecting of that urge by the light of Faith and the inspiration of the Holy Ghost coupled with the human rendering of divine truth in the Incarnation. Thus the liturgy was the direct expression of the Christian mind, somewhat as the music of Grieg was, within a much narrower compass, an expression of the Norse mind and the literature of Shakespeare of the English mind. We might add that in the same way the very absence of effective liturgy is an expression of the Nonconformist ethos and the plain table and severe interior of the Scottish kirk the reflection of the Puritan attitude to life.

The point to be emphasised, then, is that liturgy implies not only the external and formal elements familiar to us, but also the internal spirit and significance of which

they are the external expression, namely the spirit and significance of the whole Incarnation. In this sense it extends beyond the limits of formal Church services and touches every department of human life; so that the modern attempt to resuscitate or popularise the liturgy implies something deeper than the loss of ancient documents, something more than a break in the traditional forms of worship; it implies the destruction of the whole Christian outlook which lay behind that tradition. If the liturgy needs resuscitation (as it does), then the Christian people have lost an attitude to life that is integral to Christianity. As folk-songs disappeared when the people ceased, for the most part, to think as peasants, so the Christian liturgy fell into desuetude amongst those men who had ceased, to a large extent, to think as Christians, who, even while they remained professing Christians, had lost the true Christian view and philosophy of life. Not through their own fault necessarily, many Catholics have lost their appreciation of the true spirit and significance of the liturgy. Its restoration to its due place in their lives can come about only by a return to a Christian way of thinking, a true appreciation of human life as a whole in relation to God and the worship of God—of which the liturgy can be at once the source and the expression.¹

To succeed, the liturgical movement must begin by seeking to inculcate this truth, and perhaps it is to be recognised that it can be done only, or at any rate most effectively, with the younger generation not as yet case-hardened mentally and morally like the majority of its elders. The child has certainly a prior claim to this vital instruction and, moreover, will prove a fruitful ground on which to work. If a man is to acquire a true philosophy

¹ In his recent book, *Liturgy and Life*, Dom Theodore Wesseling has emphasised the spirit which inspired the origins and development of the liturgy; his well-founded conclusions seem to call for a revision of the general outlook on the liturgical revival.

of life and the proper appreciation of the scope of religion in human life, he must begin while still young to be familiarised with the truths and practised in the principles which form their groundwork. So that parent and teacher must begin as soon as possible to form both the understanding and the character of those in their care, not even waiting until the latter have sufficient use of reason to understand the why and the wherefore of all they do. Habits of mind as well as of body are most easily formed early in life and have a more lasting effect. In this matter the leaders in some of our modern states are wiser than the children of light.

The principles which underlie the true Christian outlook on life are, nevertheless, deeply metaphysical and consequently difficult to expound to the young (and indeed not to them alone). At the same time it is a recognised fact that the child responds quickly to even the metaphysical if it can be presented to him in terms that he can understand, and he will, moreover, accept it with a singleness of mind less likely in a grown man who has already made contact with the false or distorted notions calculated to distract him from the main theme and issue. The difficulty is largely one of terminology. Few have the gift of expounding deep principles without the use of technical terms which often resolves itself into high-sounding jargon. Hence the teacher finds that, though his pupil is quick to appreciate such truths if presented to him intelligibly, yet there is often no medium in which to offer them. Even given a suitable terminology there is a further difficulty arising from the fact that the child must not learn such vital truths merely as just another subject in the school curriculum. Religion is not just a school subject occupying three-quarters of an hour each day; it must cover and colour the whole school day, as it must cover and colour the whole of life.

Both these practical difficulties are met by the liturgy. Children are particularly susceptible to the historico-

dramatic method of teaching. The schoolboy is always eager for a story, and preferably a true story; a straight narrative is easy to understand, and if it has action is easy to remember. This method combines incident and fact; it dramatises life; and by making a vivid appeal to the imagination first of all, its significances are more easily assimilated. Where this method can be pressed into the service of religious truth, there is a simple and effective way open for the informing of the young mind with those fundamental principles of the Christian life to which we have referred. And it is precisely this that is ready to hand in the liturgy of the Church.

Since liturgical forms sprang from the common Christian mentality of simple people, they have the widest appeal to the normal man. Doctrine is presented through its agency clothed in a story or, better, in a drama wherein the parts are taken by the priest and the people. The great wealth of liturgical symbolism was gradually stored up throughout the centuries and crystallised into the liturgy as we now know it. Thus the ceremonies of Holy Week are a re-enactment, either in representation or in symbol, of the last few days of Our Lord's life, the crisis, as it were, of redemption through the Incarnation. Giving, in both word and gesture, this vivid drama of the culminating act of God's love, the Church instructs us most effectively, not only by example, but also by participation, in the doctrine of the Incarnation and our own absorption into the body of Christ. The deepest truths are thus expounded in human terms that can be understood by the simplest and succeed in expressing by outward forms the internal experience of the soul. Again, the Mass itself is the daily enacting of the drama of Calvary, designed to express in arresting gesture and impressive word its own inner significance which centres round the great act of sacrifice in the Consecration. And what is true of the Mass is true of all the lesser expressions of liturgical prayer in all their familiar variety—at any rate for those whose eyes have been opened to see

and whose appreciation has not been dulled by un-instructed familiarity.

The liturgy, therefore, presents in dramatic fashion a history embodying dogmatic truths and principles; and this is the most intelligent and attractive way in which such truths and doctrines can be presented to the child. It is a method already commonly used in other contexts in schools; as, for instance, where children are taught 'safety first' principles by taking actual part in a staged demonstration, where, with suitable props and assigned parts, they carry out the routine of a pedestrian crossing and learn practical wisdom by putting it into practice. This is what the liturgy does for them in an immeasurably more perfect way; for while much of this school teaching is only in the realm of 'Let's pretend,' they can begin at once to participate actually in the real drama of Christian truth. From the very fact of thus encouraging an appreciative interest in the liturgy of redemption, the child is weaned from his self-made world of make-believe by an equally attractive world of spiritual realities presented in a form he can well understand. And from the outset he is unconsciously impressed with the significant fact that this is not just something more to 'learn,' but something to do and to be. Thus religion is removed in his mind from the ordinary school-subject level, and indeed given a peculiar, and wholly right, interest of its own. The interest will not be in the theory; children are seldom interested in theories. It will be in learning 'how it works.' This is shown in the instinct of the boy to take things to pieces. Even though he is incapable of putting them together again, he would gladly possess the knowledge and ability to do so. His curiosity to know how things work is in fact only the sign of his desire to make it work. The use of this quality in the teaching of the great truths of human life by means of the liturgy is obvious. By its means the pupil is not just told something that he must learn which will become part of his merely mental make-up, if indeed it persists

at all, and stand little chance of becoming part of himself as a whole; he is shown the part he has to play in a great drama and the true significance of something he has already begun to experience, and he will be glad to help 'make it work.'

To put this into practice it is clear that re-adjustments in school life will be required. It is essential that there should be some corporate Catholic life between teachers and pupils. Above all must there be the common and intelligent share in daily Mass which they attend together, as well as morning and evening prayer made in common. Moreover, opportunities must be seized throughout the day to interpret the details of work and play and life in general in terms of relationship to God. This will obviously depend for its success upon the teacher's own understanding of liturgical life and the doctrine of the Mystical Body; certainly it must not mean just 'pious' talk, but rather the attempt to suggest the correlation of the ordinary things of life with the central notion of the Incarnation more formally shared in by the hearing of Mass and the saying of prayers in common.

Though this type of activity is not normally looked upon as part of the liturgical movement, yet it will play a notable part in bringing back and perfecting a general understanding of the organic life and worship of the Church. The liturgy will no longer be regarded as something rarefied and difficult for the layman to follow, but will rather be taken for granted and lived by all. We are conscious that we have done no more here than throw out a general suggestion; but at least it touches upon a very important point that has largely been overlooked and may open the way to a more detailed plan of action to give to the younger generation the great heritage of the Christian liturgy which it needs and of which it seems otherwise likely to be deprived.

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