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LITURGICAL ACTION

OCCASIONALLY, but without sufficient insistence, attention has been drawn to the danger of the present wave of enthusiasm for action among Catholic layfolk. It easily loses its efficacy in a hectic type of activism typical of this century. If we are to direct this precious seed within the boundaries of the good soil and to prevent its falling on the rock where its first vigorous shoot comes to a premature and fruitless end, we must keep constantly before our eyes the ultimate purpose of it all. We must purify our intention and seek first the contemplation of God. Consequently we should look for a type of action, within the reach of every member of the Church, which will tend constantly and directly Godwards, an action unperturbed by the turmoil of all the pressing modern human problems. In this way the urge to *do* something can be given a twist towards God and contemplation, so that all the other forms of activity may spring from a single and solid base, like the varied but permanent vitality of a Gothic cathedral on its foundation of rock. Such a type of action is to be found, of course, in the active share in the liturgy and particularly in the Mass. In the liturgy all action is intended to lead directly to the worship of God, as contrasted with social action which deals directly with charity and justice towards our neighbour.

It is therefore surprising that a book, dealing precisely with this aspect of the liturgy from the layman's point of view, should have received so little notice in England where lay Catholic activity seems to be so much to the fore. True, the book is a French one, but French books on Catholic Action have received considerable attention. This book, published many months ago, is *La Participation Active des Fidèles au Culte*¹ and is made up of fourteen lectures delivered at the Louvain *Semaine Liturgique* in 1933. Historical, theological and practical, it covers the whole field of this

¹ Published by the Benedictines of Abbaye du Mont-César, Louvain, Belgium.

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neglected question, and it should be read by everyone interested in modern action.

Perhaps people have been discouraged by the title, thinking that it is another production of the fanatical liturgical school which will often puff up the idea of the priesthood of the people like the frog in the fable. If such an attribute was the cause of the book's neglect in this country, it was an unjust cause, for every essay in it is marked by a common-sense sobriety that might be expected from a completely detached consideration of the subject. In fact here and there we might even criticize it for a tendency towards understatement, so that there need be no anxiety as to such doctrine and practice diminishing the sacerdotal ascendancy in the Church.

On the fundamental doctrine of the priesthood of the laity Fr. Mersch, S.J., the authority on the history of the doctrine of the Mystical Body, has contributed a paper showing the uniqueness of the priesthood of Christ, from Whom all priesthood is derived. The priesthood of Christ found its expression in the unique sacrifice of the Cross, whereby grace was merited for the whole of humanity, thus constituting, in the efficacy of this sacrifice, a universal priesthood. "For thus all human acts have their last and necessary expression in the religious act, and the religious act has its fulfilment in sacrifice, and sacrifice has its fulfilment in the sacrifice of Calvary" (p. 104). This theme is developed showing how the Mass is none other than the sacrifice of Calvary in a mode such that men may make it their own. The Mass is therefore the centre of the spiritual life, and Christians must join themselves to the centre by offering themselves together with Christ. In this sense is the priesthood of the laity fulfilled, by the people uniting themselves as victims to the one Victim of the unique sacrifice, by offering in union with the offering of the unique Priest. All human suffering is thus placed on the altar and given a sacrificial value, so that by it God is praised and sin is expiated. This is the active sharing of the faithful in the liturgy by means of their "spiritual priesthood," and it is an aspect of the liturgy upon which too much stress cannot be laid.

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Yet Fr. Mersch does not seem to go deep enough into the truth of this sharing by the laity of the priesthood of Christ. He does not place it in its true setting of the baptismal character and the character of confirmation, so that one is left in the end with a feeling that this spiritual priesthood is merely metaphorical. In reality it is an analogical priesthood that is conveyed by the baptismal character just as on a higher plane it is an analogical priesthood that is conveyed by the character of Holy Orders, both being referred to the one unique Priest, the *fons totius sacerdotii*. The main feature of the priesthood of the people is a passive one, consisting in the power, given by Baptism, to *receive* the effects of Christ's priestly act. Moreover no one would be so foolish as to say that the layman was in any sense a ministerial priest with powers of offering gifts and sacrifices in an official capacity as the representative of other members of the Church. Baptism is a sacrament separate from Holy Orders, and the layman is very definitely distinguished from the ecclesiastical priest. But the priestly race has some active share as well in the worship of the Church, a right and a duty springing from the baptismal character. The Church would indeed be unintelligible without it, for she exists as a corporate whole to offer honour and glory to God. Everyone has his duty of worshipping God, worshipping with body and soul, and this is necessarily centred in the supreme worship of the Mass. The Church sees the action of the faithful as a complementary part of the sacrifice so that she demands the presence of at least one person, the server, to speak and act in conjunction with the priest.

There is, too, another aspect of the priestly activity of the faithful who may in a certain sense be regarded as mediators. As members of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ the Priest, they are the representatives of the whole world, the chosen race whose duty it is to offer sacrificial worship and satisfaction for the sum of humanity. They stand between God and the great multitude of the unregenerate. The laity therefore have a definite duty to fulfil in this respect, and an active duty. They are not assisting at Mass merely for their own individual needs, but for the needs of the whole world.

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Is it necessary to emphasize the fact that this mediatorship does not entitle the *individual* layman to be spoken of as a priest? There is no question of this because what active powers he has are not exercised, and cannot be exercised, by him as an individual, but only as a part of a whole, as a member of "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people." He has no active sacramental or authoritative powers; he is not, in any official sense, a minister. The layman's priesthood comes to him through admittance by baptism into the Mystical Body as a member of the one Priest, and in this sense he offers, or co-offers, the Victim of the Mass officially, since it is his right and duty to do so in virtue of this initial consecration.

We may turn now to practical considerations. How can the people take an active part in the Mass and so completely fulfil the exigencies of their priesthood? Almost at once our view is blocked by the question of language. The voice plays the major part in the external action of the liturgy, so that to share in the action implies above all other external activities a taking part in the liturgical prayers and formulas. But here the priest pronounces the words in a dead language, generally unintelligible to the people. Though the universal Latin has many advantages, it is a decided handicap in this particular point; and yet the legislation of the Church is strictly in favour of the speech of the Romans. What does the Church allow in the way of vernacular prayers in the liturgy? Dom Anselme Veys, in one of these lectures, describes briefly the obstacle and then sets forth the law and the practice of the Church as a whole in this respect. To anyone hoping to find a loop-hole leading out towards some type of vernacular liturgy this essay will be definitely disheartening. Outside the realm of strict liturgy great freedom is allowed, even to the extent of encroaching on the liturgy itself, for during Low Mass one can sing almost anything in the common tongue except the very prayers of the Mass. The recitation of the Rosary during Mass has been indulged for the month of October. But this is not exactly a proper active share in the liturgy, since the latter demands some immediate and mutual relation between the voice of

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the people and the voice of the priest. Apparently within the liturgy itself the vernacular is practically limited to the prayers after Low Mass, if these can be considered as liturgical, to the essential words of the marriage service, and to the prayers for the sick. Any other strictly liturgical prayer in the "vulgar" tongue seems to be forbidden. This is quite true, yet Dom Veys may have laid more than necessary emphasis on the rigidity of the legislation, and he would have been more encouraging had he not refused to discuss future possibilities and developments. He would perhaps have given greater completeness to the picture had he given more prominence to the fact that the existing legislation is a law of the Church, based not on immutable natural laws but on the experience that Latin is the best for the Latin Church. These laws can be, and are, dispensed as in some parts of Czechoslovakia where the Epistle and Gospel may be sung in the popular language. Elsewhere in the same country the old Slavonic is used throughout the Mass. These facts are only mentioned in a footnote (p. 140) with the comment, apparently unfounded, that the people do not understand the old Slavonic. Such examples show that where there is a real necessity, permission to use the vernacular is sometimes granted by Rome, though we should not forget that an anathema has been levelled at those who say that the Mass ought to be celebrated only in the common tongue (Council of Trent, Sess. 22, Canon 9).

The problem is realized acutely in Missionary countries where the Latin culture has never had any influence. But by degrees these places will probably receive particular legislation as regards the vernacular liturgy, while in Europe the difficulties of language must surely be diminishing. The present civilization has at least given us cheap printing—so that Missals in English and Latin may be bought for very little—and education for all. By these two means it should be possible practically to eliminate the problem of the vernacular. Enough liturgical Latin can be taught in Catholic schools to enable the pupils to follow at least the general meaning of the words, and for those that cannot do this the parallel columns of the missal should prevent the words they

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speaking or singing from being a meaningless incantation. Then the Dialogue Mass will put the finishing touches to an intelligent co-operation between priest and people.

It is on the question of the Dialogue Mass that Dom Gaston Lefebvre, O.S.B., has written by far the best paper of the series, and *La Participation Active* might well be bought for this essay alone. It is indeed a summary of the whole question, for it treats not only of the practice and history of this type of active worship but also of its theological roots in the characters of baptism and confirmation, showing that the Dialogue Mass is a very perfect form of worship for the laity. In this country the practice of the whole congregation answering the priest and reciting with him the communal prayers, the *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*, is only beginning shyly to appear perhaps in half a dozen places. There is a feeling that it is forbidden or at least discouraged by Rome. Such an impression is false and this essay shows exactly how the practice stands officially. The Congregation of Rites, replying to a question on the subject, left it to the discretion of the bishop of the diocese (the Ordinary), at the same time advising adherence to the old mode of assisting at Mass for fear of distractions.¹ This is however the minimal position, for the Provincial Council held at Malines in 1920, and approved by Rome in 1922, recommends the practice as praiseworthy at least in schools and religious houses. And surely the practice of the Church on the Continent since that date is a sufficient proof of the orthodoxy of the Dialogue Mass? It has spread rapidly in many places especially in Belgium and Holland.

Why then should we still hesitate to adopt the Dialogue Mass? It is the most practical means of assisting at Mass and of taking an active part in the central act of our religion. For one thing it demands a careful preparation, for those who take part must acquire some knowledge of the various parts of the Mass, and must study its words. There is no question of inaugurating the Dialogue Mass without carefully training the congregation beforehand, otherwise it would easily fall a

¹ See note at the end of this article.

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prey to the abuse which the Congregation of Rites was anxious to avoid. The effort entailed will necessarily be most salutary since it will prevent the common evil of literally "hearing" Mass without any conscious attempt at worship. It teaches the people to concentrate on what is happening at the altar instead of on what the author of their prayer-book has to say. It fosters a true sense of co-operation between priest and people so that the latter can really feel that they are necessary, as the server is necessary, for the celebration of these holy mysteries. But is there any need to enumerate all the many advantages of this method? At all events the general result is to give the people a truly sacrificial action, so that as well as receiving the Blessed Eucharist during Mass they can offer themselves, and offer themselves as a body, in union with the one Victim of the unique sacrifice. Such an activity engages the body along with the soul in a work directed immediately to God, leading ever closer to Him and filling the soul with the strength and vigour required for the other types of Catholic activity which have a more directly social purpose. This type of active participation in worship leads to contemplation as the Mass leads to the presence of God, from Whom all our grace and power descend as a divine gift enabling us to continue our labours in the vineyard. Personal activity thus finds an outlet in the contemplative sphere; for "the active life has its end in exterior acts," says St. Thomas, "but if these are referred to the repose of contemplation, they already belong to the contemplative life." The Dialogue Mass is the best way of taking an active part in the Mass, and such an activity leads directly to contemplation and sanctity. Such is more or less the thesis of Dom Lefebvre, who states it in these terms: "The Dialogue Mass is the most liturgical way of assisting at Low Mass for two reasons. First because it actualizes most completely the sacramental characters which destine us precisely to the active participation in the holy Sacrifice; and secondly because it makes more use of the external elements of Catholic worship for the glory of God and the sanctification of our soul" (p. 164).

These are but three of the more important essays of a very

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important book. The others all contribute in throwing light on the theory and practice of the active share of the laity in the Church's worship. Among them, too, is to be found an historical treatment by Abbot Cabrol. The book concludes on the note with which it began, for Mgr. Picard, in a tail-piece, shows that Catholic Action cannot go far without her sister, Liturgical Action. We may add that such a liturgical orientation is demanded not only for Catholic Action but also for all kinds of Catholic activity, be it apostolic, social, or devotional.

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NOTE. Lest there should be any doubts as to the meaning of the reply of the Sacred Congregation of Rites on the Dialogue Mass we quote the main part of the text, together with a common interpretation, supporting that of Dom Lefebvre, from the *Ephemerides Liturgicae*.

"I. An liceat coetui fidelium adstanti sacrificio Missae, simul et conjunctim respondere, loco ministri, sacerdoti celebranti? . . .

Ad I. Ad Rmum Ordinarium juxta mentem. Mens autem est: Quae per se licent, non semper expediunt ob inconvenientia quae facile oriuntur, sicut in casu, praesertim ob perturbationes quos sacerdotes celebrantes et fideles adstantes experiri possunt cum detrimento sacrae actionis et Rubricarum. Quapropter expedit, ut servetur praxis communio, ut in simili casu pluries responsum est." (Decretum S.C.R., August 4th, 1922, n. 4375.)

". . . Equidem ex decreto generali S.C.R. . . . spectat *ad loci Ordinarium* permittere ut, si prudente ejus judicio nullum inconveniens timeatur, coetus fidelium rite edoctorum simul respondeat, una cum ministro, sacerdoti Missam privatam celebranti, *in omnibus Missae partibus* in quibus clericus Missae inserviens respondere solet." (From a reply to a dubium on the subject. Eph. Liturg., Rome, January-February, 1934, p. 121.) The author, Primus Battistini, C.M., then proceeds to show how the Rubrics of the Roman Missal provide for this method of assisting at Mass. Moreover in a previous issue of the same periodical (March-April, 1933, p. 181) he attacks very thoroughly the interpretation of P. Capello, S.J., who maintained that the S.C.R. desired by this to abolish the practice.