EASTER CUSTOMS IN POLAND

SAINT PAUL insists, as we know, on the idea that the whole of Christianity depends on the fact of Christ's Resurrection. 'If Christ has not risen', he says, 'our faith is vain and our hope groundless', adding at once, 'No, Christ really has risen from the dead, and I am witness to that'.

In Poland this thought of Christ's Resurrection in addition to being a fundamental article of religious faith, had also a deeply patriotic and national meaning. During the period of enemy domination the feast of the Resurrection, the Christian Easter, became as well a symbol of national resurrection. Each of the faithful who spoke of the risen Christ, the conqueror over death, joined thereto in his heart another thought and sentiment—his lively and fundamental hope in the resurrection of Poland. That is what gave Easter, on both the traditional and the religious side, a very special colour which made its old popular customs still dearer, more intimate and more venerable. We do not know how the Easter festival can be observed in Poland at the present day, but we may be sure that no Pole behind the Iron Curtain ever lets go his steadfast hope of seeing his country really free and returning to life.

The season of Lent has had in Poland for centuries a special popular service, the singing of the *Lamentations*, or *Bitter Mourning for the Passion*. This must not be confused with Tenebrae in Holy Week. It is sung in church several times a week, usually on Wednesdays and Fridays and also on Sunday evenings. It consists of meditations in dramatic form, written in rough Polish verse, sometimes with only one part, but more often with two, on the sufferings of our Lord or of the Blessed Virgin, and on the share which Christian souls should take in them. At one time the soul speaks, at another Christ or the sorrowful Virgin. Again it may be a kind of nameless choir of souls, reminding one of the choir in Greek tragedy. The tune of this recital, intoned by the priest and sung by the whole congregation, is a grave, united chant which produces a deep impression of extreme anguish and, if I may be allowed to use the expression, exuberant compassion. It is emotion pure and simple, though the theological basis stands unshaken. In Poland and wherever Poles live this service is much loved and affords an outlet for affection and hope. Coming to Palm Sunday, there are certain popular traditions connected with the budding twigs which are used as palms. Lastly, apart from the liturgical services of the Latin rite, there is in Holy Week a series of customs belonging to the country and amounting, it has been said, to a popular Polish deutero-liturgical cycle.

First there are the *Sepulchres*, then the *Resurrection Office*.

There were Holy Sepulchres in Italy once upon a time, but they

were suppressed. I think it would be almost impossible to suppress them in Poland. On Good Friday and Holy Saturday, when the churches have been without the Blessed Sacrament since Holy Thursday, the faithful come one by one, or in groups, to visit the Sepulchre. This is a chapel, or an altar, or even a miniature church, arranged for the occasion so that a high scaffolding with two or three stories rises from among masses of flowers and greenery. In the lowest is a grotto with a statue or a picture of Christ laid in the tomb. In the middle, often, is the actual table of the altar; above, surrounded by decorations, the Blessed Sacrament is exposed behind a veil, i.e. a veil of white muslin or gauze covers the monstrance. Thus the consecrated host can be seen, yet this is a lesser exposition, an exposition half denied, a symbol of Christ's presence in spite of and in the very midst of death. So too their country, even when denied existence by their oppressors, always remained a living thing in their minds and hearts, however different real life might be. I need not say what a wealth of ingenuity was freely used to make wonderful, monumental and rich sepulchres. Custom required that one should visit at least two of them. In town some people used to spend all day on Good Friday and Holy Saturday running from church to church. Never was there such a crowd or so regular an attendance. And while this Eucharistic stage, if it can be so called, stood in one of the aisles, the middle of the church was occupied by the regulation cross laid upon the pavement. The faithful would come and kiss it, go round it on their knees, venerating each of the traditional five wounds. Then they went to adore the Blessed Sacrament which drew all hearts, for in Poland, that wheat-growing land, the eucharistic bread constitutes the foundation, so to speak, of Christian piety and requires practices that are unknown elsewhere. Sisters of Charity and priests used to distribute pictures to the children and to those who left an alms for charity. This joy in mourning, tempered by love of the Eucharist, became the joy of the little ones, who would go from church to church, collecting holy pictures, that living catechism for simple souls, so much appreciated by the Poles with their taste for bright colours and pictorial decoration.

Yet this joy is grave, as befits these days that recall the divine compassion, stir up in one's heart remorse for sin—one's own and all mankind's—and at the same time promise deliverance. Whoever has known the Sepulchres in Warsaw, when it was still subject to the Tsarist régime, can recall the extent to which purely religious feeling in those days satisfied a sentiment which was not only human but national as well. Truly in those days of Holy Week and Easter, though no king reigned in the Palace of Warsaw, now put to a baser use, and no troops paraded in front of the ministries of the old

republic—for Poland's official name was the Royal Republic, as if to express the kingly character of democracy—there was so much strength, so much hope already realised in this Blessed Sacrament exposed above an empty tomb, that for a while one ceased to notice the invader's presence. And how do they feel nowadays in 'free and independent' Poland, while the very essence of the nation's soul is being there attacked?

The company of adorers in white veils and guards of honour watched before the veiled Sacrament of the Sepulchres—*Groby*—in Poland. During the period of independence before the present war it was often the Boy Scouts who used to mount guard, and in the important churches detachments of soldiers were on duty. I am sure that at the present time all souls mount an interior guard for fear lest the Blessed Sacrament of our Faith and the right to the Eucharist in the unity of the Church should be taken away from them.

As the Sepulchres in Poland correspond to the Christmas cribs, the Office of the Resurrection at Easter, unknown to the official Roman liturgy but granted to Poland for centuries, corresponds to Midnight Mass.

So on Saturday evening, or on Easter Day at four or five o'clock in the morning, a procession is formed to go and look for the Blessed Sacrament in the Sepulchre, to bring it back to the high altar, to remove the veil from it and, after a kind of popular Vespers or Matins, to take it in a triumphal procession, one of the acolytes carrying the Easter cross and another the statue of the Risen Christ: *Vexilla Regis*. These statues also are peculiar to Poland, and remain on the altars until Ascension.

The Christian people delights in following the Resurrection Office in crowds, and in singing lustily thereat. Many people who are rather slack in their religious duties would think it quite uncivilised to miss the Resurrection. It is a service which has very probably been adopted from the East, for on Poland's ancient land there has been a marked interaction between East and West, certain Latin customs passing to the faithful of the Eastern rites and vice versa; but it is yet another of the strong connecting links between the Roman Church and the soul of Poland which emphasise still more clearly how variously the Church's universality reveals itself, satisfying also the national character's requirements.

Turning now from the sacred to the profane, let us deal with the signs of temporal rejoicing called forth by Easter. An Easter dinner is prepared, sometimes for the whole of Easter Week, a meal which is laid out on tables to be blessed. On Holy Saturday afternoon parish priests and curates, deacons and even seminarists in the great episcopal cities, members of religious orders, etc., start their rounds

from family to family to bless the Easter dinner. Each house must have its visit, and sometimes the faithful wait till late into the night for it—a custom which is evidently derived from the Last Supper and which too has its Eucharistic aspect. If the parish is too big the people come in front of the church on the Saturday evening or Sunday morning to get a blessing at least on the Easter eggs and the few specimen items that can be put in a basket.

Easter dinner, or the holy dinner!

What wonders of culinary art and of gastronomic imagination! But I must point out at once that it is less a question of elegant gluttony, pure and simple, than of the first fruits of all the earth's products.

Easter eggs, first of all, those ancient symbols of life, of spring, of renewed and still innocent fecundity. The Polish people employs its genius in decorating these blessed eggs, according to various systems of illumination, with designs, arabesques and vignettes that are often collected and studied. Then comes the regiment of meats, sausages, puddings and pies; then, still more important, the army of everything that can be made with flour, the land of Poland's sacred gift. Buns in variety and special loaves, cakes of every colour, stuffed with all possible ingredients—finally the 'babas', tall cakes of pure sugared wheaten flour into which are put spoonfuls of yoke of egg, butter, almonds, raisins and currants. It would not do to forget the one decoration that all must have, the Easter lambs, those beautiful and pious symbols which you see in the children's hands and on the food that loads the tables. They are fine lambs, made of sugar, chocolate or plaster, sometimes gilt, always carrying a flag on a cross, the sign of the Resurrection. They stand on a globe or on the book with the seven seals. These lambs are a joy, such fair symbols of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the Lamb of the Apocalypse who is dead and yet living, who reveals the mysteries of God, a distant and popular echo of the old frescoes and mosaics in the primitive churches. What displays there are of lambs of every size in the pastry-cooks' windows or among the flowers in the market, minute ones to be had for a halfpenny, others one or two feet high. Here again the Polish instinct shows itself Eucharistic.

During the two or three days of Easter neighbours and acquaintances visit one another, make merry and chat as they sit round the dinner that has been prepared. This dinner is as lavish in the peasants' homes as on rich men's tables, and is represented by some few scraps even with the poorest. For I think that a veritable death signal, a signal for revolt, would fly over Poland if they reached the stage when they could no longer celebrate at least a memory of the Easter dinner. Not even the Nazi during the recent occupation suc-

ceeded in suppressing it. One would rather sacrifice all else in order to keep it in spite of everything, for it is a sign of free development to which one clings, Poland and the Pole being unable to live otherwise than in a freedom that is signed with the sign of the Resurrection.

A. KREUTZA

(*Translated by* J. Augustine Greene, O.S.B.)

FATHER GARRIGOU-LAGRANGE, THOMISM AND THE 'NEW THEOLOGY'

I SUPPOSE there is no greater and more devoted authority on the classic Thomist tradition than Father Garrigou-Lagrange. For well over forty years he has been writing in defence of that tradition. His first works were written at a time of crisis, when the very bases of faith were attacked by the Modernists. He was an apostle of Thomist realism against the immanentist, evolutionist and phenomenalist philosophies before modernism was condemned by Pius X. Writing now in his old age, long after that struggle of his youth, Father Garrigou feels that there are once again danger-signals of a falling away from St Thomas, and he is as convinced as he ever was that such a falling away will bring disaster to many. 'Whither goes the new theology?' he writes at the end of his book.[1] 'It is returning to modernism.'

In view of the urgency, as he sees it, he considers it timely to give us a constructive and concise statement of the whole system of philosophy and theology of St Thomas. In all controversial questions he takes, as he always has done, the more traditional view, almost always under the guidance of the classical commentator, Cajetan.

An English Catholic, aside from the main stream of Catholic thought, must wonder that there could be any foundation in present-day Catholic thinking for Father Garrigou-Lagrange's fears. It is more in France than in England that much of the older theological tradition has been questioned in recent years. There are, for instance, more and more positivist theologians who question in one matter after another the historical accuracy of Cajetan's interpretation of St Thomas. There are other positivist theologians who, through their concentration on the historical aspect, develop into eclectic

1 R. P. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., La Synthèse Thomiste, 1947, 8vo, 740 pages; English Agents, Blackfriars Publications; price 18s.