

ÆSTHETICS IN WORSHIP

IF we consider religious art, not as an end in itself, but from the religious point of view, we may distinguish two processes at work, the one a perfecting, the other a beginning. Just as machinery has two purposes, the one to produce leisure, the other to use that leisure, so two similar purposes may be discovered in religious art. It is either intended to lead from the senses to internal acts of religion—Faith, Hope, Charity and the rest; or it is intended to express these acts in the external world of sense. Men will sing to keep up their spirits under depressing conditions; but they will also sing for the very joyousness felt in their hearts. A sculptor may carve a statue of Our Lady because he venerates her deeply and wishes to express his devotion, or because the priest requires one in the village church to encourage among the villagers devotion to Our Lady.¹ These may be termed the inward and the outward movements of religious art; for the one leads in from sense perception to prayer, the other goes out from prayer to the visible manifestations of prayer. In other types of art these movements may be quite accidental. In religious art they follow its primary purpose.

These two movements are present in an exceptional degree in the highest of all religious arts, the liturgy. The liturgy, especially in the early formative years of its history, was and is still a powerful external expression of the inner workings of the spirit. One who worships God sincerely in his heart, cannot refrain from worshipping Him also with his body and all its powers, thus completing the wholeness of his worship. The liturgy grew into such a stately tree because its roots were nourished by a profound supernatural spirit. It owes its existence to this outward movement. But the liturgy is also an incentive to man, who lives so

¹ cf. *Art et Scolastique*. By Jacques Maritain. 1927 edition; pp. 130, 131.

much by his senses, to worship God with his whole soul. Both these purposes have combined, during centuries of modification and refinement, to make the liturgy the most perfect of all arts. Many of the greatest geniuses of the past, the majority of them anonymous, have been employed to produce its poetry, its music, its drama. But its simplicity and beauty can hardly be called the production of any particular group of artists. It is the great work of the artist, Man. The supernatural ideals and experience present in the Catholic religion are bound to inspire a stupendous art, perfect in all its branches. The outward movement of the art of such a religion must attain a high standard. On the other hand an art intended to lead to these mystic ascents must of necessity be as pure and as beautiful as any human art can be. The beauty of the liturgy is, therefore, enchanting. If the sight of a Giotto or a Cézanne takes one's breath away, this art of arts, which provides food for the æsthetic emotion along all the channels of sense experience, must have a far greater and more powerful effect. In this attraction of the liturgy, however, there lies a subtle deceit which may easily lead to disaster if it is not detected and avoided.

So far we have considered the liturgy merely as a work of art made by man, clothed with a great natural beauty. But this is only half the story, and the lesser half. The liturgy is animated by a supernatural spirit—the spirit of complete submission to a supernatural God and of the union of a fellow-victim with the Victim of Calvary. Here man offers to God praise, glory, thanksgiving, but unable to do so of himself he unites himself to Christ in His offering. In the spirit of sacrifice of self united to the sacrifice of Christ for God's glory, he becomes a living member united to the Head and to all the human members of the Mystical Body. For every detail in this external worship centres round, and derives its life from, the Mass. The spirit of the liturgy is the spirit of the Mass, the continuation of the sacrifice of Calvary. Throughout the liturgical day and the liturgical year each mem-

ber takes up his cross and follows Christ, but it is in the heart of the Mass that he finds his calvary where daily his sacrifice is completed with that of Christ. This underlying idea gives the liturgy its meaning. It catches the natural up into the supernatural. Without it the rest, the chants, the poetry, the gesture should more properly be relegated to a museum with other anonymous antiques. For instance, unless we were animated by this inner life, the use of plainsong in an age which possesses a far more practical system would be nothing less than medievalism. This supernatural element then produces a beauty not man-made, but immediately participating in divine Beauty. The former artistic beauty finds its proper place in a Beauty delightful to angels as well as men. The same artistic beauty however is liable to deceive and hinder the true conceptions of this deeper supernatural thing, if it is approached from the wrong angle.

Several writers have pointed out the similarity between the aesthetic and the religious emotion. The senses are engaged in both, yet both rest on something more fundamental, on an interior faculty of the soul. 'Art,' says Stanislas Fumet,² 'in that it aspires to the beautiful reproduces in an analogical manner the movement of holiness towards God.' Jacques Maritain shows the artist's need of a type of asceticism and of cultivating, *secundum quid*, some of the saint's virtues.³ In the one case an external rhythm acting on the intellect through the senses produces a movement of those faculties, pleasurable and purely natural. In the other case a gift from God working on the whole soul, mind and will, produces a pleasurable and supernatural movement of the soul, which often, though not necessarily, overflows into the senses. The analogy between art and holiness, like wire in a wireless, has many ramifications. So it is that the aesthetic emotion consequent on the natural beauty of the liturgy may be mistaken for a supernatural act of the soul.

²*Le Procès de l'Art*, p. 75.

³*Op. cit.*; pp. 135 sq.

The inward movement may lead the soul to this emotion and stop there, leaving the true life of the liturgy untasted. A symptom of this blockage in the main artery of religion may perhaps be found in the fanatical insistence on rubrics, on the perfect rendering of the chant, on gothic vestments. The emphasis can be laid too heavily on the perfecting of the external beauty. Sometimes it may happen that people of this bent are unconsciously afraid lest, if this beauty be marred by a fumbled rubric, the chasm beneath be disclosed. Again in the outward movement, the plainchant singing or the accurate gesture, may be the expression of a purely natural emotion. Thousands of spectators are delighted to take part in community singing at half-time of a football match.

The danger is real. If this side of the liturgy becomes seriously over-developed it will lead to the mysticism of Mr. Middleton Murry where 'the poetic experience is the perfection of the religious experience,' a mysticism truly profound and delightful but devoid of supernatural life. It will be wreathing 'a flowery band to bind us to the earth.' The natural may be mistaken for the supernatural, especially in this case. St. Augustine recognized the artistic snares of the liturgy in its music and found it difficult to make up his mind as to the desirability of good music in worship.' Thus I fluctuate between peril of pleasure and experience of profit; inclined the rather (though not as pronouncing an irrevocable opinion) to approve of the usage of singing in the church; that so, by the delight of the ears, the weaker minds may rise to the feeling of devotion. Yet when it befalls me to be more moved with the voice than with the words sung, I confess to have sinned, and then had rather not hear music.'⁴ We cannot share St. Augustine's hesitation about music in the liturgy either as a means to, or as an expression of, devotion. But at all costs we must avoid being 'more moved with the voice than with the words,' or with the words than with their hidden

⁴ *Confessions*, x, 33, cf. the whole of the passage.

meaning. It is necessary to recognize the supernatural Beauty at which we are aiming, and to know what we are about in the carrying out of each liturgical function. Jacques Maritain quotes Michaelangelo as saying, 'Neither painting nor sculpture will any longer enchant the soul turned towards this divine love which opens its arms on the Cross to receive us.'⁵ All enchantment must be eliminated, and, sacrilegious though it may sound to the artist, painting and sculpture must be *used* to attain this love.

In certain places the congregation is asked to sing; it is urged to sing; chant practices are given from the pulpit. The people are told to use their missals at Mass, not to go to Communion before Mass unless very necessary conditions demand it. Flowers are removed from the altars and gothic vestments placed before them. All the punctilios in the liturgy are insisted on with extravagance. But unless the congregation is shown at the same time the ultimate aim of the whole enterprise, it will become divided into those who are disgusted by the liturgical revival, and those whose sense of symmetry, rhythm and poetry is pleased and satisfied but who have scarcely tasted through it real devotion at all. They must be taught that the Mass is a sacrifice, that they have a right and a duty to offer this Sacrifice for God's glory and for their own needs. They must be shown that the Mass is a social and united act and that this union is attained by each offering himself as a fellow victim with the one Victim whom they all offer. If this has become a sub-conscious attitude, the more practical ways of achieving this end may be indicated and they will produce great fruit. The people will all sing and use their missals with enthusiasm, and it matters little that the server forgets his rubrics occasionally or that some people sing out of time and tune. All these things will be 'added unto you' with the polish given to details, a polish which may perhaps serve to deepen the authentic spirit already in existence. It is the 'liturgical maniacs' who im-

⁵ *Op. cit.*; p. 140.

pede the rapid growth of the liturgical movement. Many feel that they can manage far better with their rosaries during Mass than by bothering about quilismas and memories.

This is no plea for Puritanism. It is not meant to discourage the patient and meritorious labours of those striving to bring back a true communal participation in the Mass. All the variegated beauties of the liturgy have been most aptly placed there. Nothing could be more fitting than the giving to God of the best of our art, in making our outward word and gesture perfect enough to effect a unity of body and soul in the worship of God. The liturgy in all its splendour must be brought more and more into the lives of Catholics.

Nor do those stand condemned who experience a thrill in assisting with understanding at one of the ceremonies. If the meaning of the Sacrifice of the Mass be really grasped, the true drama of the Victim offered by priest and people, culminating in the Consecration and Elevation, will be enough to pervade anyone with a genuine religious emotion. The emotion caused by a sense of the perfect union in praise of God must be the result of true devotion. It is an emotion far removed from complacent admiration of six handsomely garbed figures moving with dignity about the altar in perfect symmetry and order.

The liturgical movement is one of the most virile features of the Church to-day, and it is of great importance that nothing should stand in the way of its complete fulfilment. This danger of mistaking the natural beauty for the real essence of worship is sufficiently serious to require a note of warning. We plead for first things to come first; that the inner spirit of the liturgy should predominate and not be crowded out by otherwise important details.

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