

LITURGY AND SPIRITUAL
EXEGESIS (II)¹

BY now we should be able to understand without being disturbed or disconcerted how deeply this process of 'Allegorization' is bound up with the flowering of the New Testament. We have now gone beyond the *form* to the *essence* of the Gospel message. After the explanations we have given, we need no longer fear to say it; the very concepts, the fundamental ideas in the preaching of Jesus and the Apostles are now revealed, not simply in their imaginative clothing but in their most intimate substructure, as allegorizations of ideas in the Old Testament. To prove this we will consider just three ideas, but they are the most central in the New Testament: that of the Kingdom, of the Messiah, and of Sacrifice. On these three themes alone all christian dogma could be reconstructed.

Where do they come from? How do they arise? It is unnecessary to point out the place assigned to the Kingdom in the preaching of our Lord as given in the Synoptics; that preaching is the 'Gospel of the Kingdom' and nothing else. But where does the idea itself come from? One can assign it a double origin; on the one hand the old eschatological concept (going back to the origins of the religion of Israel) of the 'Day' when 'all will be changed', when God will intervene in the affairs of this world as an all-powerful judge and will re-establish all things in conformity with his will. And on the other hand the 'mother-idea' from which the expression 'people of God' arises. This idea goes back at least to the Exodus and breaks out in full force in the debate between Samuel and the Elders when it is a question as to whether or not Israel should have a king like the other peoples. It is God, and he alone, who is king of Israel. So much for transformation. For the 'Day' when God is to establish his reign through crushing the 'Nations' under Israel's feet Amos has substituted the conception of a Day when God shall reign through a justice excluding no man. If there is to be a 'people of God' reigning with him, it is not to be a ready-made people but one which the eschatological judgment itself will call into being, excluding as many Israelites as it calls 'Goyim'. Moreover the later prophets, in the same way, replaced the idea of a 'Kingdom of God' enclosed within the frontiers of Palestine by that of a world-wide kingdom into which all men (even Ethiopians) should be invited. The importance of these first transformations must be stressed; the connection of the new

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conceptions within the old is obvious but their radical novelty is still more so.

In other words, without an allegorical use of what till then had been taken in a purely material sense, the continuity would disappear altogether (unless for the specially acute observation of an 'historian of ideas'). Let us boldly admit that the reign of God which Amos expects is not at all the same as that which his audience was expecting (and he does not fail to tell them so). The kingdom of God for which Isaias was looking is not at all that kingdom which the exiles were hoping to find as they had left it (and the biting remarks of the third and last part of Isaias do not fail to dot the 'i's). With Jesus, the use of the expression *Basileia tou Theou* implies a new transposition which is evidently no less disconcerting for the more carnal-minded Jews. The beginning of the eschatological time when the reign of God will be established no longer follows a cosmic catastrophe; it comes without anybody's noticing it. And the Son of Man, into whose hands its establishment has been committed, so far from coming on the 'clouds of Heaven', is here already; he is the rabbi whom everyone takes for the carpenter's son. As to the kingdom itself, for a representation of it at the time of Christ which is directly taken from the last visions of Isaias, we need only read the 'Psalms of Solomon'. But no word of Jesus's shows better to what a point his own idea allegorises those last prophecies from which he borrows than this: 'My kingdom is not of this world'.

The same remarks apply in the case of the Messias. The reason why Jesus so long refused the title was that he would not accept it without so great a transformation that John the Baptist, let alone the Apostles, when in the end they perceived it, felt unable to 'take the leap'. Originally the Messias is simply the king, liturgically anointed; then he is the king *par excellence*, that is to say, David; later, in the times of misfortune he is a hoped-for king who will restore everything and be a 'new David'. Ezechiel and later Zacharias provoke, rather than themselves effect, the transformation of the conception which amounts to a real *metabasis 'eis 'allogenos*. They do it by a fusion of the idea of king with that of priest, transposing the national hope into a religious hope. Our Lord himself will do the same thing, or rather through an enlargement of the idea itself he will prepare for what one must call a new explosion of it. This time it is a conjunction of the ideas of post-prophetic Messias with Apocalyptic 'Son of Man' and also at the same time, in an intentional paradox, with the idea of the 'Servant of Jahve'. Of all the prophetic conceptions this had been the most entirely without fruit in Israel. Taken over by Christ and the Apostles, and introduced into the very heart of the Messianic idea,

it was to renew it in such a way that an irreparable breach was formed between a carnal and spiritual Israel. It is not too much to say that Israel rejected Christ because it was expecting a literal Christ, and that he who came was not, and would not be, anything but allegorical.

Jesus as the Suffering Servant (of Isaias 53) would interpret the task, which this transformed Messiah was to accomplish, in sacrificial terms. But it is at this point that the transposition, the allegorization, inherent in the use of the terms and concepts themselves avails itself of an astonishing freedom.

We know how radical the prophets' criticism of their sacrificial religion could be; the critics of the end of last century, attributing to them their own prejudices, were too ready to see it as a simple condemnation of ritualism.

'I hate and have rejected your festivities; and I will not receive the odour of your assemblies'. (Amos, 5, 21.)

It is easy to see the impression such texts could give if interpreted by an exegesis as rationally logical as un-historic. But the riper opinion of contemporary critics has led most people now to recognize that the aim of the prophets was not the abolition but the *spiritualization* of this ritualism.

The attempt to discover conceptual meaning in primitive sacrifice must be abandoned. It presupposes a childish rationalism in our conception of the history of religions. No idea of divinity or religion has given birth to any primitive rite, but ideas of this nature have emerged afterwards from rites which were in themselves pre-rational. Let us not then attempt to discover the meaning given to sacrifice before the prophets, because before them in the sense in which we are using the word there may have been no 'meaning' in it. The creative newness of the prophetic interpretation only stands out in stronger relief. Henceforward for the prophets the only value of sacrifice is to translate into the concrete life of man the conformity re-established between the will of man and the will of God.

With our Lord and his Cross we may say that the allegorization reaches its climax, in that the interpretation absorbs the symbolic reality into itself and lets nothing of it subsist outside itself. What is called, in the New Testament and then in the Church, the 'Sacrifice of Jesus' will be the realisation in Jesus of that offering of oneself to God through pain and death which the prophets had symbolised by ritual sacrifices.

At the end of this analysis it is important to remember, and if necessary to underline, the two complementary truths it brings to light. The transformations which we have been following are just as

vital and organic as they are thorough and profound. It may not be by a logical process that the new idea emerges from the old, but it is by a process of affiliation which is very sure and continuous from one angle, though from another there is undeniably a *saltus*, a creative intervention of the Spirit.

Pure logic has never been the medium of creative ideas, and less in the domain of concrete thought than in any other. It is more a means of reflex organisation which presupposes a preliminary poetic intuition (using the word in all its etymological force, as meaning creation). This has been shown to be the case in the greatest systems of human thought, particularly in those which have led the spirit of man from purely practical thought, immersed in matter, up to a consciousness of self. It is a transposition of old themes which gives birth to new ones. True spiritual progress is not rectilinear but cyclic; man does not progress in his vision of the world and of himself so much by exhausting the logical consequences of premises once discovered, as by incessantly retraversing a known road in which, however, his renewed vision discovers depths he had never suspected.

God who knows well how our minds work, since he made them, has naturally proportioned his revelation to this rhythm. Nothing is newer in relation to the world without depth of *Homo faber* than the world of the poet, yet it is the same world, except that all things in it have become charged with an intelligibility unknown before. In the same way from elementary experiences in which our spirit, immersed in the palpable and the visible, thinks to grasp, if not the very being of God, at least his action, the Holy Spirit has led us to the highest experience and the purest, to those in which nothing more subsists but the blinding evidence of those two spirits, 'myself and my Creator'.

III

These remarks are not of merely speculative interest. They do not merely explain how spiritual exegesis is embodied in the progress of revelation. They also offer us a touchstone with which to test true spiritual exegesis. Having shown us the legitimate use of allegory, they also help us to avoid exaggerations. And here we find the way in which scientific and spiritual exegesis, both rightly understood, complete each other. If what we have been saying is correct, the validity of spiritual exegesis depends upon its organic relation to the final christian revelation. If it merely lays a veneer of quite arbitrary connections between some element in the Old Testament and some other in the New, without there being any real vital relation, it is of no more consequence than the game in which we try to pick out likenesses in the forms of clouds or in the fire.

On the other hand to restrict it to those few cases in which the human author of the Scripture has consciously expressed himself in parable would be an unjustified impoverishment. In such cases it is the symbolic sense which is the literal sense; but to admit these cases only would simply end either in limiting the New Testament to saying clearly what the Old had already said in enigmas, or else in depriving the Gospel of its most authentic Old Testament preparation. Only examples can make all this clear.

One cannot overestimate the importance for the religious history of Israel of a fact like the Exodus from Egypt, with the passage of the Red Sea and its consequences. It is through meditating on this purely material deliverance that the prophets reached the deeply spiritual conception of a Redeeming God, that is to say of a God who delivers his people not merely from an historic servitude, but from the servitude to sin. At the end of this process we find the baptism of John offering a means of passage (at the price of *metanoia*) no longer to a promised land in the world but to the eschatological 'Kingdom'. Christ in his turn, making use of the same theme, introduces into it the supreme conception of a passage to the Kingdom through the Pasch in which he himself will be the Lamb sacrificed. Finally when all had been accomplished that Jesus was still preparing for at the Last Supper, St Paul explicitly declares that we have been transported by God from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of the Son of his love, thanks to the baptism which has given us a share in the Resurrection of that Son, through our association with his death. We have an excellent example here of what we may call the 'organic' allegory. Far from contradicting anything in the findings of scientific criticism, it simply retraces the development of a revealed idea as scientific exegesis has enabled us to verify it.

For a foil to this example it is easy to take a case of the imaginary symbolism so common in the Middle Ages (of which the Fathers themselves afforded examples at times). For instance, the interpretation of the waters of Mara being made sweet by the wood, as the bitterness of sin dissipated by the Cross.

But, although scientific criticism, understood rightly, not only justifies but re-enforces allegorical exegesis, it must not be supposed that before its time the Church had drifted at random between artificial adaptations and accidental results. The same spontaneous movement of the human spirit, enlightened by the Spirit of God which directed the working out of the data revealed in Scripture from one Testament to the other, could direct and has in fact directed their exposition in ecclesiastical tradition. Here, as in biology, it is quite true to say that 'ontogenesis' reproduces 'phylogenesis'.

The Church in the formation of her liturgy, as in the progressive elucidation of her dogmas, ceaselessly confronts the final revelations (in the light of the Holy Spirit) with the Scripture that is the record of their germination. She bears these revelations indeed within herself, within that consciousness of hers which is simply a communication from the consciousness of Christ himself, the *nous Christou*. It is, then, very natural that the spirit of Christ, the *Pneuma Christou*, living in her, should enable her to pick out instinctively those main lines on which deep understanding of the Christian truths depends.

We should like to speak of several of the great themes into which these truths have been progressively condensed, not according to an abstract logic but according to a logic of life. The procedure of the Church in this regard cannot be justified on any purely rationalistic basis. On such a basis only could one find fault with it at almost every step; but the use of a deeper, more subtle intelligence, one better adapted to the spontaneous movement of the spirit of man as well as of the Spirit of God, makes contact with a whole network of lines of energy whose substantial solidity can stand the most penetrating criticism in retrospect. It is in this that the liturgy and patristics (or better still, the liturgy replunged in its own source which is the 'ensemble' of patristics) are like a vast pattern of allegorical themes. This pattern constitutes what may be called the 'traditional interpretation of Scripture' and it will always remain the foundation of all spiritual reading of the sacred text. The interpretation we envisage is indeed merely a development of that already outlined in the Synoptic Gospels and much more than outlined by St Paul and St John. Today, the revival of this spiritual exegesis holds the promise of the newly ripening harvest of a whole combination of great themes, of great organic ideas. Their roots are grounded in the most ancient strata of the Old Testament, and their fruit is offered to us in the liturgy and by the Fathers, through the unfolding of a flower which is the Gospel itself.

We have quoted the central motif of the Exodus and of the Pasch; let us add the wandering in the desert followed by entry into the promised land, the Exile and return of the exiles, the ruin and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Within these great dynamic conceptions, the more limited themes of the Kingdom, the Messiah and of sacrifice (as we have outlined their development), regain their perspective. In inverse order one all-embracing theme will emerge, dominating all the rest, enriched by all the others as it unifies them all in itself. It is the theme which St John at its climax calls 'the Marriage of the Lamb', while Hosea sketched its beginning as the betrothal of Jahve to his people. Along such guiding lines which the liturgy itself will

furnish to anyone familiar with it, the reading of the whole Bible will, in its turn, revivify the least liturgical allusions with an immense weight of scriptural experience abounding in life. We can see here how the double level in the allegorical sense, typological and anagogic, which we pointed out in the beginning, so far from adding an extra difficulty, emerges of itself. The Word of God, particularly in the liturgy, remains a living word addressed to us who read it *hic et nunc*.

The whole Bible is in fact simply the history of the people of God, a history which is more precisely that of its marriage with the Word, with the Divine Word which is addressed to the human mass in order to raise up from it a people, the *genos 'eklekton*, which is the Church. But what is the pattern of this history? It is, as has been pointed out, the curve of a systole followed by a diastole. From the wicked multitude of humanity dispersed by sin (*ubi peccatum, ibi multitudo*, according to the phrase of Origen), we pass by successive stages from all Israel, from Juda, from the 'remnant' of Juda, to Jesus alone, to the only Son dying on the Cross. Then from the re-creative unity of the risen second Adam, we come back to the multiple unity of the Catholic Church, recapitulating all creation in herself. In this way the typological sense, which makes all the apparently disparate words of Scripture converge on Christ and the Church, develops of itself into the anagogic sense, which comes back to us in our turn, endowing us with all the riches of Christ.

If I may be allowed one last remark, it is a plea for patience in any working out of these suggestions. This vital principle of interpretation cannot be too hastily applied to every traditional detail as though it were a magic formula. We must remember that we are dealing here with processes of the spontaneous intelligence which are far more disconcertingly complex than those of the logical intelligence.

In the material furnished by tradition do not let us be in too much hurry to draw a hard and fast division between sound intuitions and outworn conceits. The poetic explorations of *Anima* are often disconcerting to the rough good sense of *Animus*, but if he tries to confine them to well-worn paths he runs the risk of destroying her impetus altogether. Some traditional interpretation of a text, which seems entirely fortuitous if the single passage is considered alone apart from its context, may still be found to have a certain indirect value. Take for example the wood thrown into the waters of Mara; according to the standard we have laid down, it is obvious that there is here considerable artifice. This episode has played no part, or at the most an insignificant part, in the theology of the Cross, but it is also very certain that a juxtaposition of images such as the 'Tree of Life' and the 'Tree of the knowledge of good and evil' has played an instrumental

rôle of the first importance. And because of this the projection of the Cross onto all kinds of Old Testament images of 'wood that saves' is not without a certain value, though the value may be derivative. It is a kind of poetic translation of the recognition already accorded to this fundamental truth by the Church. The whole story of redeemed humanity, from the original sin to the glorious passion, from the Tree of Eden to the Tree of Golgotha, is inscribed there. The interest in such a process is merely reflex and must not be confused with that of the creative intelligence, but it need not surprise us to find that even the inspired writings themselves have made use of such reflex processes. We need only call to mind the 'brazen serpent' in St John, or the 'Rock which was Christ' in St Paul. What is above all essential is the true vision itself, and let us repeat, true vision has nothing to fear and much to gain from sound scientific criticism. But we may only hope to attain this vision, this *theoria* as the Fathers called it, through a holy contagion, through the sympathy of a living communion with the tradition of the Fathers and of the Church; nor is there any other means to such communion than prayer and mortification, and meditation nourished by the *lectio divina* of which the Scriptures will provide the matter, the Fathers give the light and the living Church direct the course.

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Translated by Rosalind Murray.

O B I T E R

EFYRDIAU CATHOLIG, the annual volume of studies published by the Welsh Catholic Circle, (Llyfrau Sulien, Aberystwyth, 2s. 6d.) maintains in a newly published second number the distinction of its first. Mr Saunders Lewis has a notable article on 'The Protestant Theory of the Church', in which he examines the strange travesty of history conveniently summarised by Bishop Burgess in 1815:

'The church of Britain, which in the fourth century was an independent Church, was also, at the commencement of the seventh a truly PROTESTANT Church, protesting against the corruptions of superstition, images and idolatry, and refusing all communion with the Church of Rome'.

The appeal to the testimony of the 'ancient British Church' by the Welsh Protestant reformers three centuries before was, Mr Lewis maintains, based on the alleged Welsh 'learning' of the Britons, as yet uncorrupted by Rome. The argument ran: Protestantism is the Christianity of Learning; the ancient Britons were learned Christians; *ergo*, Protestantism was the religion of the ancient Church of