

THE WORD IN THE LITURGY

HERBERT MCCABE, O.P.

THE people who write in English about the liturgy have mostly read about it in French or German. The great movement of reform in the Church which has as its centre the revival of the liturgy is arriving in England rather late and with a noticeable foreign accent. There are important studies in the liturgy by English writers but none of them are by Catholics. The Catholic who is dissatisfied, as any educated and normally critical man must be, with what was taught him as Religious Instruction at school gets in touch with the new life in the Church usually through translations of continental books or else through second-hand works based on continental originals.

Readers of *BLACKFRIARS* will presumably not need a detailed account of the manifestations of this new life. Like every other movement of reform within the Church, it has been essentially a return to sacred Scripture. There have been a good many other motives and movements, some good and some not so good, connected with the change: there has been a concern for the reverent and meaningful performance of the ceremonies of the Church; there has been a certain nostalgia for the past—whether the thirteenth or the fifth century—there has been a weariness with a certain kind of seminary textbook theology in which the great rivers of the Fathers and the Scholastics have been reduced to so much damp sand; there has been a characteristically twentieth century emphasis upon the social and communal as against the private. But in the first place it has been a matter of the Scriptures.

When modernism and anti-modernism had died their natural deaths a great deal of dust had been blown off the pages of the Bible. The Catholic exegete was no longer concerned with refuting the errors of heretics about particular biblical texts. In the spirit of e.g. the encyclical *Divino Afflante* he approached the Bible positively as the Church's book, read by the Church to the Church; not a device for tripping up heretics but a fountain of truth for the man who already has the faith. With this livelier approach to the Bible there went inevitably a new vision of the Church. The Bible is not just the book which the Church reads, it is the book about the Church. It was once more emphasized

that revelation comes to us as the sacred history of the people of God, whether under the old alliance or under the new law of grace. Today we do not collect proof-texts to show that Christ founded a church, we show that to deny this would be to miss the significance of the whole Bible. Again, today we realize especially clearly that the normal way of reading the Bible is to read it in the assembly of the people of God. It is sometimes said that Protestants regard reading the Bible as a sort of sacrament. Whatever may be true for them it is certainly true that for us it belongs to a sacrament; normally the reading of the Bible is a part of the celebration of the Eucharist. Of course there is nothing abnormal or wrong about reading the Bible privately, any more than there is something abnormal or wrong about a play-reading; but it remains that plays are meant to be acted. A play-reading would be all wrong if those who took part did not realize that plays are normally acted on a stage, and similarly, private reading of the Bible would be all wrong if the reader did not realize that normally the Bible is the book of the assembly of the people of God. Once this context is understood it is easy to see that the Church has authority to interpret the Bible. If one forgets the picture of the Bible as that heavy book with brass clasps that lies about the house gathering dust, and pictures instead the normal Christian assembly, the Mass at which the word of God is proclaimed and the Bishop explains what has been read, then it becomes obvious that the interpretation of the Scriptures belongs first of all to the successors of the Apostles. The work of archaeologists and linguists and exegetes and theologians is all subservient to this. It is not simply that the Church *uses* the Bible in this way, for it seems clear that in great part the Bible was written and arranged for just this purpose:

‘Critics now think that the Gospel of St Matthew, for instance, has been very definitely arranged to provide the synagogal worship of Christian communities with a series of readings about our Lord, a series which would fit in with the already existing system of Jewish readings of the Old Testament so as to show how everything in his life and teachings was a fulfilment of “Moses and the Prophets”.’

This quotation is taken from a new work by Fr Bouyer,¹ which consists of lectures delivered at the University of Notre Dame and

¹ *Life and Liturgy*. By Louis Bouyer. (Sheed and Ward; 18s.)

is the first in a series to be called the Notre Dame Liturgical Studies. Few who read it are likely to quarrel with our judgment that it is the best book of its kind in English. It begins with a brief investigation of the meaning of the word 'liturgy' conducted in terms of a criticism of some of the ideas of the baroque and romantic periods. This is followed by a brief critical account of the liturgical movement, defined as 'the natural response arising in the Church to the perception that many people have lost that knowledge and understanding of the liturgy which should belong to Christians, both clergy and laity, and in consequence, have lost the right use of the liturgy also.' Here it is interesting to see that Fr Bouyer traces the beginning of the return to the true liturgical tradition to the *Caroline divines of the seventeenth century*. He admits that he runs the risk of 'appearing to suffer from that too common delusion which causes French and Belgian Catholics to view Anglicanism through a golden cloud'. It is to be feared that these pages may not help to commend the liturgical movement to English Catholics, who often find the greatest difficulty in taking Anglican liturgical activities seriously. It is not a bit of use Fr Bouyer saying solemnly that 'heretics may sometimes have some useful truths to tell us'. Enlightened English Catholics who are perfectly willing to learn from Marxists and Buddhists and Calvinists too often find Anglicanism, and particularly High Anglicanism, merely mildly amusing. It is an additional complication that a great many Anglicans are more enthusiastic about French and Belgian Catholics than they are about Lancelot Andrewes and Richard Hooker. This is a very great pity, for Fr Bouyer is perfectly right in saying, 'What was admirable about their work, and what had such a measure of success that it has endured even until our days in the larger Anglican churches . . . is a Divine Office which is not a devotion of specialists, but a truly public Office of the whole Christian people.'

There follows a short historical sketch of the fate of the liturgy since the seventeenth century, ending with a review of the contemporary liturgical movement. In these early chapters Fr Bouyer is by no means uncritical of some aspects of the movement; especially he notices a 'striking similarity . . . between the attitudes of mind responsible for the Baroque use of the liturgy, and those responsible for many modern methods'. It was characteristic of the Baroque ceremonies to 'retain somewhere in the

background of the ceremony the substance of the rites and texts of the traditional liturgy . . . and to dress up these . . . to resemble as closely as possible the profane performances of the culture of that period. . . . But do not many people today do exactly the same thing when they try to disguise a rubrically correct low Mass by readings and singing in the vernacular, to make it resemble as closely as possible the style of public meeting now popular? This is an extremely relevant remark; American T.V. sets are said to be provided with a 'Blab off' switch for cutting out the sound when the commercial interrupts the programme; there is a certain type of commented Mass which makes one wish that churches were similarly equipped. One of the great obstacles to the liturgical movement in England is the perfectly legitimate distrust that is felt for a certain sort of high-pressure salesmanship amongst its advocates.

Fr Bouyer then arrives at the central core of his book, which is an exposition of the sacramental theology of Dom Casel. Dom Casel's theory is one that the present writer can only accept with considerable reservations, but such detailed criticism must be reserved for another article, partly because of space, but mostly because it would be a pity to discourage anyone from giving the theory the sympathetic hearing it deserves. There is perhaps no better starting point for sacramental theology than an appreciation of the 'Mystery' in Dom Casel's sense, but it is a beginning and not an end. It would have been helpful if Fr Bouyer had at least mentioned the strong criticism which has been made of the theory not merely by students of comparative religion (these he refers to), but also by theologians within the liturgical movement itself. No less a liturgist than the great Fr Jungmann, S.J., remarks concerning it, 'Ceci est une hypothèse qu'on ne trouve pas sous cette forme dans la tradition chrétienne, elle n'en est tirée que par déduction et cette déduction fait appel à des présupposés sujets à caution.'² Whether or not Fr Jungmann is right in this, the opinion he represents is surely deserving of mention.

Fr Bouyer cannot possibly be ignorant that an enormous amount of what he says is the doctrine of St Thomas Aquinas, but he shows considerable ingenuity in avoiding mention of this fact, even when the temptation to use one of St Thomas's concise phrases must have been almost overwhelming. This is all of a

² *Missarum Solemnia*. French edition, Aubier 1951. Vol. 1, p. 229.

piece with a curious tendency throughout the book to oppose patristic to medieval thought. One would not suspect from this book that St Thomas and St Bonaventure thought of themselves as doing just what Fr Bouyer thinks he is doing: interpreting and transmitting the patristic heritage. We find such grotesque assertions as that the intellectualism of the medieval Dominicans (presumably St Thomas is included) has as its aim 'to expose and interpret Christianity along the lines of a scientific cosmology'. This is the sort of judgment we might expect from someone whose acquaintance with Thomism was confined to seminary manuals, but it is a little shocking to find it here.

The book proceeds with an excellent treatment of the Mass and of the other sacraments in the context of the Mass. This is followed by a discussion of the liturgical year and of the Divine Office, and the book ends with some more general chapters on the spirit of the liturgy. There is a useful appendix on the history of liturgical studies, and a worthless index. This latter part, though not particularly original, is extremely well done. It is here that he most justifies the title of his work. 'In the sacramental world, therefore, the liturgical year leads us progressively to a full assimilation to the power of Christ's death through all the elemental details of our temporal lives, and so enables us to exchange a life born only to die, for a death which will bring us to life.' These chapters do really fulfil the promise of this sentence. The reader must not, however, expect absolute scholarly accuracy here. There are some strange howlers, such as the quaint notion that the Easter season properly ends at the Ascension (a feast unknown to either Origen or Tertullian) and that Pentecost is some sort of addition. He seems to give credence to the very unpalatable theory that the *Dies Irae* was written as a sequence for the last Sunday after Pentecost, since he finds in it 'no connection with the Epistle or Gospel' of the Requiem Mass; the usual view that it is not in origin a sequence at all, but a poem based on the last responsory of the Office of the Dead, is passed by in silence. His laudable desire to correct the false notion that Advent, Christmas and Epiphany are principally concerned with the birth of Christ at Bethlehem, and to show that they are to do in the first place with the second coming of Christ, leads him to exaggerated and slightly absurd denunciations of devotion to the infant Christ. He even maintains that the feast was introduced

because the established Church of Constantine 'was in danger of losing the fervour of its hope for the world to come'. It is, of course, the common view that it was introduced because the Church of Constantine was in danger of losing its faith in the divinity of Christ. All these, however, are minor blemishes in the best introduction to the spirit and practice of the liturgy that has yet appeared in English.

'Of course the Mystery is not only "word"—in so far as for men "word" can be opposed to "deed" or to "being". But since the Mystery is a personal love that desires to communicate itself to living persons it must be accepted by us first of all under this aspect of word; and the other implications of the Mystery can be revealed to us only in dependence on this primary aspect. Herein lies the profound difference between the celebration of the Christian Mystery and the celebration of the pagan mysteries . . . in the celebration of the Christian Mystery everything depends on God's word and on our hearing it with faith. No magic can find place in the rites which are performed in the Christian Mystery, for from beginning to end everything is ruled by the most free and generous disclosure of God's heart to his children in his only Son.'

This passage from Fr Bouyer's book may serve as a background to a consideration of two other works on language in the liturgy. Cyrille Korolevskij is a Byzantine rite priest and a recognized authority on non-Roman rites. In his book on living languages in the liturgy³ he discusses both eastern and western rites. This book has become almost an essential preliminary to any discussion of 'vernacularism' since it gives us for the first time a reasonably short but scholarly account of the use of vernacular in the whole Church throughout its history. In the East, Christianity came to peoples whose languages were already highly developed and, in general, as a matter of course, these people prayed in their own languages. This gave rise to the 'eastern principle' first formulated in the twelfth century:

'Those who are orthodox in all respects but who are wholly ignorant of Greek, shall celebrate (the liturgy) in their own language, provided that they have accurate copies of the customary prayers, translated and clearly inscribed in Greek letters.'

³ *Liturgie en Langue Vivante*. By Cyrille Korolevskij. (Les Editions du Cerf; Lex Orandi, no. 18; n.p.)

The first part of Fr Korolevskij's book is concerned with the vicissitudes of this principle in the East; there is an especially valuable discussion of the fate of the Byzantine rite in Hungarian at the hands of Roman officials who, in the first years of this century, were only partially informed of the ecclesiastical geography and even less informed of the involved politics of that country. This is agreeably contrasted with the state of affairs in 1929 when Fr Korolevskij was himself appointed to study the possibilities of approving a liturgy in Estonian. It was in the course of these studies that the present book began to be written. The Pope was now Pius XI, a man of much wider knowledge and sympathies than his predecessors, and, since the beginning of the century, the nascent liturgical movement had begun to make its influence felt. The story of the Estonian affair ends with the official sanction of the papacy for the 'eastern principle'.

In the West, Latin, originally the liturgical language of Africa, had by the end of the third century come to be used even in the hitherto Greek-speaking church of Rome. Since the barbarians who swept over Europe had no developed literary languages of their own, they adopted Latin for the liturgy together with much else of Roman culture. Since then, throughout the West, Latin has remained practically the only language of the western rite. By the time the new European languages began to develop from Latin, the western liturgy had begun to lose touch with the people who spoke those languages; it was becoming more and more a private affair of the clerks for whom Latin was a second mother tongue. Nevertheless there have been some interesting cases of the liturgy of the West being celebrated in the vernacular. The most famous of these, of course, is the Slav liturgy of SS Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century. This attempt came to very little because of the opposition, by violence, forgery and fraud, of the German clergy. The tragic story is well told by Fr Korolevskij, and it reinforces an implicit moral of his work, that the liturgical movement, and in particular the vernacular movement, cannot afford to ignore its political implications. Every time it has failed there have been political causes at work. Besides the well-known Slav liturgy, Fr Korolevskij discusses several minor ones, including the Dominican liturgy in Armenian (a fourteenth-century product of the misguided policy of imposing the western rite on oriental converts from schism) and the

Chinese Missal of Fr Buglio, S.J., for the suppression of which the seventeenth-century ecclesiastical enemies of the Jesuits must bear most of the responsibility.

Having read this book it becomes quite impossible to regard the vernacular movement as a new-fangled modern invention. 'In the Christian Mystery', as Fr Bouyer says, 'everything depends on God's Word and on our hearing it with faith.' The question of language, and hence of intelligible language, is always a fundamental one for the liturgy. We must therefore welcome the symposium on English in the liturgy which has recently appeared.⁴ It has an introductory chapter on liturgical languages, largely based on Fr Korolevskij, and two good chapters dealing with practical problems of a vernacular liturgy. The one on translation by Mr H. P. R. Finberg, whose work in the Burns Oates Missal will be familiar to many, contains some valuable criticism of various attempts at liturgical translation, from Cranmer to Mgr Knox. The article is marred by a strangely bad-tempered tone but it has the great merit, which it shares with the chapter on music by Mr Anthony Milner, of getting down to actual examples and discussing them in detail. Fr Clifford Howell contributes a lucid argument for using vernacular in the readings, prayers and processional antiphons of the Mass, while retaining Latin for the consecration prayer and the rest. Fr Howell is cheerfully dogmatic about a number of disputed liturgical points, but on the whole his history (based on Fr Jungmann) is sound enough and as a practical proposal he seems to this reviewer to make his case. The article will doubtless be a fund of useful arguments for others who may wish to debate the matter. Fr John J. Coyne, in an article with the question-begging title of 'The Traditional Position' makes out a respectable, but to our mind very unconvincing, case against the use of living language in the liturgy. In general the most striking and disturbing thing about this symposium is the almost complete absence of a theological approach to the liturgy. The chapter supposedly dedicated to this by Fr J. McDonald, D.D., confines itself to a competent exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14, and the decisions of the Council of Trent, together with a discussion of two curious arguments against the vernacular. The first of these is that

⁴ *English in the Liturgy: a Symposium*. Edited and introduced by Charles R. A. Cunliffe (Burns and Oates; 8s. 6d.)

Latin is a divinely constituted sacred language. This can hardly seriously have been maintained by any modern theologian. The second is that Catholics will lose their respect for the liturgy if they understand its language; to have the liturgy in the vernacular is to run the risk of casting pearls before swine. The swine in question are what St Peter called 'a royal priesthood and holy people' and Fr McDonald does not fail to point this out. But nowhere, except perhaps in the last chapter, an unpretentious article called 'The Conversion of England', does one find anything in the great tradition of speculative theology. There is not much attempt to think hard about what language is and what the liturgy is, and how they are to be understood in the context of God's revelation about God. Dom Oswald Sumner in the last article has something of this, but in general the contributors are content to debate this or that point of law, or practical difficulty or piece of historical evidence; there is no re thinking of the theological foundation which alone makes this discussion important. It must be said that this book shows once again that the liturgical movement has not yet taken root in England; some of its fruit is here but its theological roots are planted overseas. It seems likely that more people will come to understand the significance of, and hence the need for, the vernacular in the liturgy by reading Fr Bouyer's reflections on the theology of the Christian Mystery, than by reading the arguments of this symposium.
