

THE EXALTATION OF HOLY CROSS

THE EDITOR

THE danger of progress or development is that the original starting point may be left behind. What impressed thinkers like Hegel when they viewed human progress was the way man had jumped from one extreme to another, as though he were to follow the course of a stream by jumping from side to side. He leaves one foothold to gain the next.

The great wonder of the development of truth in human experience is that it does not progress by leaving original conclusions behind. It stands its ground, like the tree, spreading in a widening expanse of branches, twigs and leaves; but it cannot leave its roots behind. Truth remains the same living principle and man's experience and grasp of it accumulates through the centuries.

Yet the danger for the individual man remains. He can easily forget or remain unaware of the experience of his forbears and move on to some further aspect of the truth leaving the life-giving roots of that truth behind. He gazes at a facet of the truth discovered most recently and so most entrancing in its novelty; and his enthusiasm for the novelty leads him to ignore the whole reality.

An example of these facts may be seen in the attitude to the Cross which is fittingly celebrated in September by the feast of the Exaltation (September 14). The feast itself commemorates the somewhat legendary story of the recovery of the relic of the true Cross and its enthronement in Jerusalem. Having regained the relic from the infidel the Emperor bore it in triumph into the Holy City but was unable to enter until he had cast his royal robes aside and donned the garments of a beggar. So runs the legend. But the feast itself has preserved an aspect of the truth of the Cross which might otherwise have come to be overlooked. Indeed the exaltation of this instrument of torture has for some centuries been practically forgotten. The Cross as a Christian sign is primarily a sign of triumph, the victory of our Lord over sin and death. The original Christian approach to the Cross was to

exalt it, to cover it with precious stones and carry it or set it up in a place of honour in all its glory. These gemmed crosses were linked in their significance with the glorious wounds of our Lord after the resurrection—those jewels in his hands and feet and side which were the price of redemption of the world. The final and complete view of the sacred wounds as of the Cross was the shining figure of the victim always making intercession for us.

Evidently however this image of cross and crucified contained another facet, that of the man of sorrows in whom there was no comeliness; the faithful first began to show this side of the picture by placing the figure of the crucified on the glorified cross, but he himself was conceived more in terms of the victim than of the agonized sufferer. Christ reigned on the Cross as the victorious King, or he slept peacefully there in the death already pregnant with the new life. By degrees however the pain and utter desolation of the 'Why hast thou forsaken me' came to overshadow all the other aspects of the crucifix. The desire for realism increased and, since the reality of pain normally impresses itself on human experience more vividly than that of quiet rest, so the reality of our Lord's agony came to be the rule in making this sign of the Cross either in statuary or gesture.

The danger of leaving the original perception of the truth behind here showed itself forcibly. The spirituality of the Christian at the time of the Reformation and after came to be dominated by pain and struggle rather than by victory, by death to sin rather than by the new life, by Good Friday rather than by Easter. And this view of the cross has remained almost to our own day as the only view. The joy of the glorified Christ forever with us became a rare experience, and religion was taken to be a gloomy thing for a depressed Sunday service. Even the reality of the crucifixion contained in the Mass was but dimly apprehended. Theologians tried to discover a 'mystical sword' in the consecration which shows forth the death of the Lord until he come. As it shows forth death it was supposed necessarily to portray in some way agony and bloodshed rather than the triumph of the eternal victim. That view of the Cross must surely have been responsible for the desertion of many from the serious practice of any true religion.

Yet the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross has remained in the liturgy of the Church an important feast at least in that it

marks for the religious a turn in the year, the beginning of the fast that continues till Easter. It is a fitting reminder that asceticism and penance, death to sin, are not the gloomy core of Christian life but the triumphant introduction of new vitality and peace. With the reintroduction of a liturgical or sacramental attitude to Christianity this feast can therefore stand for a central aspect regained in the Christian's apprehension of the Cross. Not that the experience of the agony of Calvary should now be set on one side. That is the same temptation—to stress only one aspect, to leave our heritage behind in our enthusiasm for some novelty. The whole tree can now be seen once more in all its beauty. Indeed it seems that in this mid-twentieth century we stand a chance of entering into our full inheritance in a way unparalleled in history—if only we keep our heads and prevent ourselves from grasping at novelties. We have come to realize something of the full sacramental life of the earlier ages of the Church but at the same time we inherit the individual piety of the post-reformation period which contains so much of value to the Christian's experience of our Lord in his death as in his life. We must reaffirm the full significance of the exaltation of the Cross without denying the validity of the type of crucifix that our grandparents have left us.



THE VISION OF THE HOLY ROOD

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WHEN Augustine, Columba and Aidan converted the English in the sixth and seventh centuries, their devoted labours profoundly affected the national literature. Despite the hazy general belief that English History and Literature set off together in 1066 on their long march, England from before the time of Alfred had had a great tradition of prose and verse. Indeed, in the ninth century, she had a considerable body of prose literature when other languages had hardly even begun verse.