

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

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THIS article is concerned with gestures in religion not with religion in gestures, with the action seen rather than with the prayer prayed as when the hand touches the forehead and completes the sign of the Cross upon the breast. It begins with the story of other actions in a large pageant or spectacle in order to give the setting to so small a gesture as the Sign of the Cross, because that contrast follows my own experience; I saw the *Miracle* many years before the Sign of the Cross ceased, with my conversion, to be merely a sign of superstition!

Reinhardt's *Miracle* happened forty years ago in Olympia, London. It was a good 'period' piece, modern in production, medieval in inspiration, and may be described as an example of religious mime; although its theology was faulty and its actors hired only to reproduce the shape or picture of a medieval pageant, it was clearly intended to appeal to the religious instinct of the beholder.

Since that time (1910) pictures, pageant and mime have become more popular. Europe has suffered the upheaval of great wars. Most big cities have become cosmopolitan with large numbers of inhabitants 'illiterate' save in their own tongue and therefore avid for the common language of picture and spectacle—a fact which propagandists are not slow to appreciate.

Twenty years ago, a branch of the Moscow Olympiad of the Revolutionary Theatre (M.O.R.T.) in New York 'where one of the strongest dramatic councils' then existed (according to a Bulletin of the 'International Workers' Theatrical Olympiad') invited one of my students to repeat a course of demonstration in mime which I had been giving to a Summer School of Catholic Teachers, mostly nuns, in that city. M.O.R.T. asked because 'dumb shows and plays in mime could be given at Street Corners during elections'. A similar call came from San Francisco 'to repeat a mime on the lynching of two kidnapers'; as the 'workers' theatre' (the Waterfront) wished to show that such crimes could not happen in Concentration Camps!

The *Miracle* would have suited them down to the ground had it

been possible to substitute the Kremlin for the convent! It was 'in the round', to be witnessed from all sides as is a scene in a circus. The *Miracle* was made for Olympia; that is, perhaps, the chief reason of its failure, two decades later, when, re-dressed by Messel, it was revived in the Lyceum theatre. Not only had the great arched and girded roof been vast enough to suggest a Cathedral in a way the stucco of false ecclesiastical architecture failed to do, but the spectators were the more prevented from being physically part of the show, i.e. witnesses with the performers.

The high place of gesture on the stage had been hidden from many until the grace of one human body encased in the habits of a nun was to reveal the power of mimed action in its perfection. The human body thus privileged was that of a young Florentine lady, Maria Carmi, untrained in any school of drama, whose walk and simple every-day gestures had caught the master's eye; and she was cast for the Madonna.

Maria Carmi is first seen seated, in the white habit of a nun, and set on a pedestal—in intent and purpose an image carved in stone and venerated in the Convent within whose walls the play opens. The nuns assemble for their devotions, but there is consternation—one of their number is missing, she has run away! The story follows her ill adventures, but first the nuns crowd round the statue representing to them no less than the Mother of God herself—and the miracle happens in answer to their prayers, the image becomes alive, descends from its exalted position and the Virgin takes the place of the fugitive in the convent kitchen until the day of her repentance and return.

That is the simple story; but the wordless telling of it is another matter, the audience held its breath as the 'stone' Madonna so slowly rose, as her hands carried on the same upward movement of her body in order to lift the jewelled crown from her head, then to lower and lay it aside; and all of us in that vast place remained under her spell as she stepped down, faultlessly, and imperceptibly became lost among the community.

At that time it was commonly supposed that grace of movement was a natural if unusual talent, that is a gift not to be acquired by taking thought in the articulation and co-ordination of the body, but a grace expected, erroneously, to go with a pretty face! We had to learn that beauty is not skin but movement deep!

In the medieval pageants of the Market Place both players and people were literally 'in the same street', cheek by jowl, physically present as one body in the great scenes, especially to be noted in the *Passion*. In Olympia, as Reinhardt knew, this physical unity between audience and players would be in sufficient measure obtainable. The focal point of the action could be made more magnetic as its power radiated through arena and auditorium in unbroken waves: that is why Reinhardt's crowds were so effective—they seemed to include the spectators with the cast.

The medieval intimacy between actor and audience, though lessened, had been preserved in the Elizabethan theatre, and we can, I think easily, imagine the effect, for example, of 'Friends, Romans, Countrymen', spoken before we suffered iron curtains, labelled 'safety', to separate what should be united.

These reflections on one particular pageant are intended to suggest a method of propaganda available to quite ordinary people, and in fact practised by them when they make the sign of the cross!

In very many villages a renewed interest in fêtes, fairs, plays and pageants is evident both in revival of old and production of new community displays, sports and pastimes. In schools everywhere, prize-givings, old scholars' and parents' days are celebrated with an additional enthusiasm for 'school-made' entertainment; and, during term-time, music and movement have crept into most unlikely classes with official approbation.

Why are men and women of all ages 'on the move', turning from the straight waistcoat of mass-produced entertainment to that which they contrive themselves? Is it due to a desire for more variety or for more freedom? Is it the result of some subtle propaganda? Propaganda is there, but it is not subtle; rather is it home-made and simple, due to the distrust of discord and the desire for peace. It might be called the propaganda of Unity.

We have discovered that we are all at sea without knowing how we got there, how to get away from it, nor how to speak even as

Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,

Only a signal shown and distant voice in the darkness.

Who does not want to feel the solid earth beneath his feet or at least be able to read other than the sign language of the atom bomb!

In every part of the world men are remembering the sign revealed, *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES*, not only to a Roman Emperor but to continents of souls since.

Constantine's vision told him that 'in this sign shalt thou conquer'; a message since confirmed by many and many millions in the unity of pain and suffering, and by all who have hungered and thirsted after the things which belong to Peacc. At least so I have been taught. All I know of my own knowledge (*sic*) is that the sign of the Cross is an action which speaks without words, a mime familiar to every Christian and the complete answer to the clenched fist, that it is a promise of victory denied to bombs.

We have arrived at the final truth as, may we say, Chesterton reached 'Paradise by way of Kensal Green', by a path that wandereth. A long way to reach the points of our fingers at the end of our ungainly arms making the sign of the Cross with a greater dignity than a few hasty taps upon the chest! And then—what? God forbid classes for liturgical gesture; but we may pray. It was noted of Bernadette that in making the sign, she made it to be full of grace. No pilgrims from Rome nor any who have seen the film of the Holy Year will need to be reminded how the sign is used by the Holy Father. His delicate hands embrace the world and point us all to heaven because, we do not doubt, they are the hands of prayer. It is probable that the house of prayer is to be the only school in which the making of the sign can be perfected.

In the mime of the Stations of the Cross, published by BLACKFRIARS, our Lord 'blesses' his Mother when they meet at the IV Station and most frequently that blessing is given anachronistically with the sign of the Cross because that is probably the form most familiar to a Christian audience, but it may easily give way to the laying on of hands or a similar gesture with one hand—the action adopted in 'The Four Witnesses' to be performed by the Ladies of the Grail at the Albert Hall on Maundy Thursday this year. That public act of worship includes the presentation of the 'Stations'.

But then, why (may the reader ask) why talk of Miracles, pageants and play-acting?

Only because the writer has no other authority to speak; and that being exhausted, this article comes rather abruptly to its end!