

Life of the Spirit

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PAROCHIAL SPIRITUALITY

II—SOME APPLICATIONS

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If it be true that the rhythm of parish life should be accepted as the Church's normal means of bringing her members to their vocation of holiness, the danger of a false *mystique* must yet be faced and avoided. It is easy enough to envisage an idyllic order in which social circumstances and personal integrity alike encourage the growth of the Mystical Body as manifest in a local congregation of the faithful. But the facts are often painfully otherwise, and an appeal to a high achievement may trickle away into the lowest common denominator of what is customary.

The immediate difficulty springs from the fragmentation of parochial life, reflecting as it does the broken unity of social life everywhere. The crowded congregations at Mass may deceive; they must certainly be related to the crowds who have fallen away. And even the faithful, so often pitifully unaware of the deep resources of the faith they cling to, have largely ceased to be conscious of the God-given bond that brings them together. There can be no substitute for what is essential in any organism, and the Church is animated by the Holy Ghost himself. He is the principle of life: inviolable, assured to the end of time.

But the acceptance of that principle is another matter. It is a human activity, whose efficacy must depend on an intelligent awareness of what is being done. The Catholic faith is not merely a series of propositions to which the believer assents: it is a life in which he shares, and that a divine life communicated through grace. The faith must be known, but knowledge leads to the thing known as applied and actualised.

Humanly (and the Church is on earth at work among men, using human means), the communal setting of Catholic life needs to be realised afresh. The very assembly of the faithful is itself a sacramental reality, in that it is an external symbol of the unity of the Mystical Body. Just as the material fabric of the church,

and especially its foundation, the altar, declares the heavenly city, so does the congregation represent its inhabitants: 'Behold the dwelling of God with men, and he shall dwell with them.' (Apoc. 21, 3.) And, while avoiding anything like rigidity, the faithful will find in the unity of their assembly a powerful means of growth in holiness.

Hence, for instance, the *spiritual* importance of punctuality. Late arrivals and early departures may be often excused by the pressure of material tasks elsewhere, and are perhaps not unaffected by a certain legalism which proposes what is 'essential' to the 'hearing' of Mass. But the assembly of the people of God is not a casual gathering of individuals concerned with private obligations. It is the family at prayer, realising its divine vocation as a family, and, as with any assembly, its coming together and its dismissal have a profound psychological importance.

The solemn procession which preceded the principal Mass on Sundays in medieval England (and which is still provided for in the rituals of both Cistercians and Dominicans) had more than a merely ceremonial significance. A solemn work must be solemnly inaugurated. The sacrifice of the Mass, as the supreme act of divine worship, demands its human setting, the concrete realisation in voice and gesture of its spiritual power. So it is that the slightest action of the priest is regulated: the tone of his voice, the stretch of his arms, all is accommodated to the spiritual reality that is being enacted. And the faithful no less (though obviously in a different degree) need to be aware from the first moment of Mass that this sacrifice is theirs also, demanding of them therefore a physical participation to match the worship of their minds and hearts.

But this does not mean the mechanical uniformity of a barrack square: rather is it the loving unity of the assembly, with all its human potentialities responsibly engaged. If the congregation is to grow in prayer, it must above all do so at Mass, the source as well as the consummation of all prayer. And the material setting of Mass is providentially able—such is man's nature—to make the work of prayer a *totally* human activity and yet totally transformed and supernaturalised through grace.

In the circumstances of today there should be no embarrassment about adopting modifications in this material setting, so long as what is essential is preserved. A ritual procession may no longer be practicable, but its purpose may be served by a vernacular hymn before Mass begins, setting the pitch, as it were, of what is to come. Again, the full solemnity of High Mass, with the congregation

taking an active part, is, for most parishes, an ideal remote and unattainable. But even a Low Mass in the humblest chapel-of-ease can be endowed with the joy and grandeur of a solemn assembly. The 'dialogue Mass' is admittedly a makeshift; but where it is carefully prepared, where the people are encouraged to see in the commonly uttered prayer of the people a natural expression of the unity of the Mystical Body, then to *omnibus circumstantibus* new ways of holiness are certainly at hand.

The pity is that such a means of joy and unity too often seems but the 'liturgical' whim of an individual priest. Here patience and long instruction are the only remedy. Its introduction can be the fitting conclusion of a mission or a parochial retreat. At evening services the 'dialogue' of the Mass can be an admirable form of 'mission prayers', and after a week's repetition they will be known, so that on the final Sunday the answer to *Dominus Vobiscum* or *Sursum Corda* will be familiar and understood. Again, the Creed is the 'act of faith' *par excellence*, and, solemnly recited at the final Mass of a parochial retreat, it sums up the week's work and is in the truest sense a pledge of its fruitful continuance.

The Mass itself explained, with its stages intelligibly distinguished and its principal themes translated, can achieve far more than a whole series of sermons *in vacuo*. Such catechetical instruction *perdurante Missa* is envisaged by the decrees of the Council of Trent¹, and is in some form essential to the realisation of the Mass as a common sacrifice in which the faithful are meant to share not only in intention but wholly, heart, mind and voice. Simple direction from the pulpit as to responses and posture is essentially a means of instruction and not a matter of eurhythmics. It is, besides, exceptional, and once the congregation has seized the spiritual reality which the external discipline subserves, the need for it will disappear.

The Offertory and the Communion are two stages of the Mass which present special opportunities for emphasising the unity of the faithful. Without reverting to former practices (such as the 'real' offering of the bread and wine by the faithful), which can only have an antiquarian interest nowadays, it is yet possible to recover the sense of a common purpose, especially at Communion, through common prayer and gesture. No one who has assisted, for example, at Communion at Notre Dame—Saint Alban near Lyons, where the congregation approach the altar singing the *Magnificat* or a psalm, can remain unconvinced of the value of such an expression of unity, leading to the sacrament of unity. English

¹ On this cf. *La Messe et sa catéchèse* (Editions du Cerf, 1947).

Catholics might not find such a form congenial, and there must be a realistic accommodation to legitimate custom.

What is essential is the showing-forth of the Christian family made one about the altar. It may need no external expression, and indeed it will come to be seen as the culmination of any Mass that has been truly prayed in common. Holy Communion is the bond of unity, and it must never become the individualised act of piety which separates the initiated one from the common herd. That is why 'special' communions for children, or for any other category can cut across the primary unity of the parish as such. And the First Communion of children is a wonderful opportunity for renewing the family life which parochial life presupposes and sanctifies. The first communicant belongs not to other first communicants, but to his family, and the family belongs to the parish.

Achieved within the setting of the parish, individual holiness is in no sense diminished. Rather it is made stronger, more fruitful, because the danger of self-love is reduced. Those who are seeking to lead a life of contemplation in the world have a special obligation to contribute to the life of the community to which they are bound in virtue of their baptism. Even at the sacrifice of their own preferences (we have met 'contemplatives' who never go to a sung mass because it interferes with their prayers, who avoid evening services because they are 'unliturgical', who indeed recite 'their' office during Rosary and never join in the hymns) they should find in the common life of the faithful the most contemplative of all activities. Our Lord is in this, as always, the perfect model. He accepted the obligations of the life he found on earth, he shared in the worship of the Temple even though he was come to supersede it.

There is a danger that an extension of the contemplative ideal beyond the traditional boundaries of religious rule and life may seem to establish a 'people apart' within the parochial community. St Thomas More in his surplice, serving at the altar of Chelsea Parish Church, is a reminder of the ideal. No one could be more singly devoted to the pursuit of holiness: no one was more parochial than he.

But what of the Church's approval of bodies of tertiaries, confraternities and the like? Such categories are in no sense opposed to a primary allegiance to the parish: indeed they are designed to enrich the common life. It might be said that the test of their vitality is how far they contribute to the intensification of the sense of unity we have been considering. Their zeal should be a potent source of strength, for instance, in building up the community Mass

realised as such. A tertiary chapter or a guild should be a nucleus on which a priest can depend, whether it be for the singing of the Mass or the cleaning of the church or the innumerable works of charity that await generous souls in any parish. The more concentrated unity of the group looks to the unity of all the faithful people of God.

But no amount of communal prayer and life can dispense with the hard work of personal sanctification. The Curé of Ars built up a parish which was a model of unity, but it was the fruit above all of his own mortification and prayer. The need for penance cannot be commuted, and in the confessional the sinner is alone with God. It is scarcely necessary to insist that the common life presupposes the constant individual work of purification and perseverance in grace. But it is perhaps valuable to recall the relation of that personal vocation of holiness to the shared vocation of the faithful as members of one Body, and that the Mystical Body of Christ. There is a double movement here—from the individual soul outwards to the Church; and from the Church inwards to the person, single and alone. Historically one can discover shifts of emphasis: in one generation individual sanctification may seem to be emphasised, in another the call is to a greater realisation of the communal vocation of the faithful. Both are necessary, but in our own time, with its special disasters and its special opportunities, the need may be for a deeper understanding of the Church's oneness as the answer to a broken world. Where unity is everywhere so tragically destroyed, the spiritual unity of our incorporation in Christ takes on a deeper significance than ever before.

And the unity of Christ and his Church is made known wherever two or three are gathered together in his name. The vocation of holiness begins in the soul that is re-created by grace, it flows out to the community of men and women raised to the same destiny, and it turns back enriched and strengthened at that final moment of death when the soul is single once more. Heaven is the fulfilment of the unity of the faithful people of God.