

THE LITURGY AND HEALTH¹

THE EDITOR

WE propose to divide this talk into two sections: first, a general one on the connection between the liturgy and the religious nursing life: and second, the liturgy as a therapy.

We may begin with the first start of religious life as community life. It began with a number of individual monks going out into the desert and living on their own as hermits to seek their own salvation. They undertook certain work, but without much relevance to society. You remember the monks who wove reeds into baskets and floated them down the river just to have some work to do. That phase did not last long, and soon they began to be organised into the cenobitic or community life, which formed a unit rather like the Church in miniature. One of the first to gather a group together like this was St Basil. When St Basil gave his monks their community life, at the gates of the monastery he established hospitals and schools, because he saw the dangers of their being preoccupied with their own salvation and living as hermits thinking only of themselves in relation to God. He saw also that the love and service of God must separate itself out into the love and service of one's neighbour. So from that time onwards nursing, like education, was part and parcel of the religious life and one of the principal ways of showing the worship of God in practice—practical charity, being spent in the service of the Mystical Body of Christ. This has been brought about particularly in education by St Benedict and his monks, but it is also true of nursing, and it is comparatively recently that it has become dissociated from the religious life. It is only since the so-called Reformation that nursing has been separated from the Church, and we are now suffering from the absence of nursing religious in the nursing of the sick. We lack not only religious orders but also consecrated people like St Catherine of

¹ The following pages were read first to a conference of Nursing Orders of Nuns, held at Spode House, February, 1955. The ideas however follow closely on the last Editorial, 'The Liturgy and the Parish', and are not restricted to Religious.

Siena who lived in the world but was able to devote a considerable part of her dedicated life to nursing. Today it is being secularized, and therefore it is much more important that it should be brought back to its essentially religious nature, and being religious also means being liturgical.

Another thing we should remember is the model on which the monastery was constructed and that certain places were given a special importance in every monastery. There was the church, the centre of worship; then the chapter room, not simply the place for the chapter of faults, but the hub of the work of the place; the charges are still given in the chapter room every day, particularly in the Cistercian Order. Another large building was the refectory, and the fourth was the infirmary. It is well to remember these four points in a monastery; they play a large part in, and balance, the life of the monk. I was struck by the remark of an old monk who said one of the signs of a certain falling away in the spirit of the religious life was that monasteries and convents were being built without respect for the infirmary. There was a certain desire to get rid of the ill or the aged; it was thought to be easier to send them off to a nursing home. They are pushed out of the community just when they need the community most. The infirmary is an integral part of the common life.

We must insist on the idea of the community which is one and a whole. There is a whole series of communities within communities. The whole is Christ himself, but each religious community is Christ as a whole, every one playing his part as a member of Christ in that community and in the family. You nurse in relation to different communities, but each community you are nursing in is to be regarded as Christ, whether it is the family, a hospital or home, the society of our own town or the whole of England, or our own religious community. The whole thing is Christ as well as each individual being Christ; the basis is the community.

By liturgy we mean the public praise of God—the 'community' praise and service of God which springs from within and, working outwards, incites all the members to praise God, not merely by inward acts of prayer but by exterior acts, by gathering all the members together for the worship of God all the time among the group. Everybody in the Church is praising God and helping

each other to praise God, and inciting themselves to praise God interiorly more perfectly. The praise of God from the liturgical point of view is the common action which is moving out towards God all the time and also moving back to the individual, with the fullness of love and fullness of vocation, establishing Christ in the community and establishing Christ in each individual.

There are certain points in the Mass which we may underline from that point of view. First of all, the Mass is Calvary now made real again that we may take our part in it. The Body of Christ dying on Calvary is now dying again, not indeed under the species of the bread and wine, but in a sense in all assisting at the Mass in their act of obedience. The Mass is essentially an act of obedience, and it is thus beautifully described in a book written by an Anglican: 'Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; for thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia, for a village headman much tempted to return to fetish because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret, for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman, for Captain So-and-so wounded and a prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively by an exiled bishop who had hewed timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonization of St Joan of Arc. One could fill many pages with

reasons why men have done this and not tell the hundredth part of it. And best of all, week by week and month by month on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the *plebs sancta Dei*—the holy common people of God.' It is now going on constantly, as the very heart of the liturgy. It is an act of obedience which links up very clearly with our own life of religious obedience and which continues in our daily occupations, whatever they may be.

The aspect of that which is most *à propos* to us is this sacrificial act, a sacrifice participating in our Lord's offering of his own life through physical suffering to physical death. This shows the relation between the chapel and the infirmary or hospital. It is a meal also, and as a meal it is connected with the refectory. In community you are eating a common meal, the gift of God, in the refectory. We do not segregate the church from the refectory and infirmary, but, especially for religious, it is continued in that way. We have a sacred Meal in the chapel, but it is also a sacred meal surrounded by the liturgy in the form of grace in the refectory. I think meals in nursing homes and hospitals should be linked up in your minds with this daily Meal of the altar.

For us immediately it is the infirmary, the sick, we are concerned with. These are the members of Christ who are now suffering, filling up in themselves what is wanting in the passion of Christ, participating in a special way with the sacrifice of Calvary, and therefore in a special way linked up with the Mass. There is a distinction which might be made here: we tend to mix up curing of the sick, which is proper to the doctor, with caring for the sick, which is proper to the nurse. Whereas the doctor is occupied with trying to cure the sick person and bring him back to health, the nurse is concerned the whole time, and much more constantly, with the care of the sick. For one dying, incurable, no longer able to receive any profitable treatment from the doctor, the nurse is there caring for the suffering body and limbs of Christ. The nurse is much more concerned with the sacrificial element of the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. The nurse, more than the doctor, has to face up to this necessary suffering which is inevitable and unavoidable, and therefore closely linked up with the necessary suffering of Christ—'It must needs

be that Christ must suffer'—the Son of Man must suffer in obedience to the will of God. So we come back to the act of obedience.

There is a parallel here between nursing, tending the suffering body of Christ, and our Lady. Our Lady was quite conscious, certainly after she had heard Simeon's words if not before, that this was *the* sacrifice, that her Son was the Victim for the redemption of the world, and her care of our Lord from that moment had that end in view. Her clothing and feeding him, attending to his health, all the services she rendered him, were a preparation of our Lord on the physical side, and she was quite conscious that what she was doing was making him a pure and perfect Victim for the redemption of the world. You can see the parallel; your care for the members of Christ is in this special way preparing them to be victims, especially as their suffering is in obedience to God. There is no division between what you do round the altar and what you do in your community. Your work may be simply caring for the sick in the infirmary of the Order, or in the community of the family, nursing in the homes of the sick, or it may be that it is in a hospital which is part of the wider community of the town or country; but whichever way you look at it, you are specially concerned with the sacrificial element of the common worship of God through Calvary, through the Mass. Calvary is re-enacted on the altar, but it has to be re-enacted in each community and in every life. It is this which draws the community together and makes it charitable in a sacrificial way. It shows that St Basil was quite right in seeing the Church and hospital as one thing in the worship of God, the religious service done by the chanting of hymns and tending to the sick body.

Now for the second section of this paper—the liturgy as a sort of therapy—the liturgy is the one great challenge to the tendency in ourselves to Manicheism, to think of the body as evil, as being merely utility, or even a hindrance to the life of the soul. We are always inclined to divide ourselves into body and soul and to regard the body as in some way evil and getting in the way of our praise of God and that without it we should be able to love God much better. The liturgy has always insisted that the body and soul work together in harmony in the praise of God, and that we must have our body subject to the spirit if we are going to gather ourselves together in this act. Grace only works normally

where nature is also working. In extraordinary circumstances, God can supply the grace without all the externals, as for instance in the concentration camps when the bread and wine are smuggled in, and the priest lying hidden in the long grass with no vestments or altar, murmurs the words of consecration and gives communion to the prisoners lying round him, with no ceremony at all. But as a rule we need to have body in harmony with spirit and working together if grace is to abound. We see that, in the case of the imbecile, he can get the essence of the spiritual life through baptism, but because his body is not in harmony he does not prosper and grow as a person with all his faculties. All the things which God has made are brought into man's life, are brought into the supernatural life of the Christian, through the liturgy, the Mass and all that goes with it. The lights, the candles, the gold and silver vessels and ornaments, give joy to man and to God, but since everything he has made gives joy to God it is in a way really for ourselves that we use the silks and satins, silver and gold. God does not need them, but it is to help us, using all the good things in and for our religious services but also for ourselves. Remember that wine, oil, bread and water represent all the things necessary for man's life. So also all the good human things in man, not merely his mind and heart, but also his physical faculties which are satisfying for himself are used in relation to God, and not only for himself but for the community, that they should work together in a sort of rhythm in song and dance and speech. All these rites are employed in the liturgy, and in these rites you will find the fundamental signs and symbols which the psychologists seize hold of. In every primitive religion you will find something of the same sort of signs and symbols that we have. All the signs of the earlier religions were in some way fulfilled in Christ. The liturgy is not only these external things, but it receives its integrity and wholeness through the inner acts of our mind and heart in our Lord. All these things taken together are harmonising man, bringing harmony into his physical, psychological and spiritual life, so that he can work in unison with other people's minds and hearts. He sings to God, not because God has an ear for music, but because this is the way he most nobly expresses his love of God with other people.

It is necessary to insist on this because we have tended to isolate

the Mass instead of spreading it through the liturgy and sacraments and all the sacramentals. It would help us to be more harmonious in ourselves and more harmonious with others, and in that way it is a kind of therapy. We have tended to stress what is essential to the sacrament, and to forget to a large extent the sacramentals that build it up. It is part of the building up of the liturgy to elaborate the essence of the seven sacraments with innumerable gestures, movements, words which are now technically called 'sacramentals' as distinct from the seven 'sacraments'. All these sacramentals are outward signs, and if we can think of everything as being sacramental we are making towards a new integrity. The whole human being, physical and mental, must be disposed for the reception of grace. That is why, in the old days, the people were prepared for forty days right through Lent up to the Vigil of Easter as it was so important that the whole man, body and soul, should be disposed for the grace of the sacraments.

To show the harmony between body and soul, perhaps for a moment we may look at the action of the Mass from this point of view. Primarily the Mass is the High Mass, all a great movement in which everybody is taking part, being drawn towards a point. It is only after about half an hour that the moment of Consecration arrives, and after about 35 to 40 minutes the whole thing is over. It is all preparation, drawing men together for participation in the great final act. First of all we get rid of our sins by the *Confiteor*, bending down, the lowness of tone; then the priest comes near the altar and the *Kyrie* and *Gloria*, the people answering all the time so that they are more disposed to worship God; in the Epistle and Gospel their minds are drawn to God and made receptive. Then at the Offertory the people come up to the altar bringing their gifts of bread and wine (unfortunately done now by putting coins in a plate). All that is man's part in the liturgy; it is all something for the people to do. Once the offering is placed on the altar the people have done all they can. In the early days (and in an Episcopal Mass you see it now), the bishop walks up to the altar 'entering into the Canon'. This was the one central prayer; nothing else happened, the bishop sang right through the Preface, Consecration and on to the *Pater Noster*. Everything was static from the people's point of view. God turns the gifts we have given him into the Body of Christ. That is our own offering, and we have to surrender

ourselves as far as possible to him, and God turns our obedience into Christ's obedience. It is not therefore simply a miraculous changing of the bread into the Body of Christ, but the miraculous changing of the body of the faithful into the Body of Christ. Our own little offerings are transformed with the bread into Calvary. That peak point is held until the moment when the Bread is given back to us for our life; in other words, it is held from the period from Good Friday until Easter Sunday, from the Consecration to the Communion.

By means of Calvary we are now burst open, our wills, our minds and everything else, so that we can now receive the final act—unity in the Body of Christ. The reality of the Real Presence ultimately is the Actual Love of God in us; in this body, in this particular community round the altar, our Lord is here living in us. By changing our own act of offering into his act of offering which is love, it links up with the contemplative life, which is a life of love. If we are prepared in this liturgical way for this gift, then we are set on fire with this love, and we are essentially contemplatives. All this act of the liturgy leads up to this point of contemplation, which is an act of charity. St Thomas says the reality of the Eucharist is the unity of the Mystical Body and also is the fire of the act of love within the will of the Christian.

It should be clear, then, that the liturgy centred as it is in the action of the Mass brings health of soul and so of body to the individual and by inserting him more firmly and more actively in the community in which he finds himself spreads this health among those whose common life he shares.

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