

THE OFFICE OF CORPUS CHRISTI

In the latter half of the thirteenth century there ascended the Throne of St. Peter, under the name of Urban IV, a man whose previous priestly ministry had been characterized by incessant activity in promoting devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Previous to that time limited ecclesiastical jurisdiction had restricted the zealous endeavors of the future Vicar of Christ in behalf of his Divine Master. But upon being invested with supreme authority, Urban IV was in a position to effect the realization of his long-cherished wish to see the Most Holy Eucharist solemnly and publicly honored throughout the entire Church. Accordingly, the Feast of Corpus Christi (Body of Christ) was established.¹ This great feast, celebrated on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday, renders a very special honor to the Blessed Sacrament by a solemn commemoration of its institution.

By virtue of the Bull of Urban IV, the universal Church was urged to gather annually around the Sacrificial Table of the New Paschal Lamb and to chant ecclesiastically approved canticles of praise and thanksgiving. But who was worthy and capable of composing the new canticle in memory of the Last Supper, the Office of the Feast of Corpus Christi? There needs must be another master of psalmody like David able to express in fitting language the Divine mercy as manifested in the Eucharist, the miracle of mercy. The occasion demanded another Beloved Disciple who had rested upon the bosom of the Eucharistic Master and could interpret the pulsations of the Heart of love. The quest for a bard of the Blessed Sacrament finally ended in the choice of a lowly Dominican friar, St. Thomas Aquinas. The honor of composing the office of Corpus Christi was conferred upon him because Pope Urban IV knew that a profound love of the Blessed Sacrament filled the heart of the saintly Friar Preacher, and was convinced that in the execution of his high commission he would be forced to reveal some of the secrets which his Eucharistic King had confided to him. How providential indeed was the choice of the Holy Pontiff, since it resulted in the most beautiful of all contributions to ecclesiastical liturgy!

¹ Bull "Transiturus," Sept 8, 1264.

In view of this result who can fail to see the influence of the Holy Ghost?

The Office of Corpus Christi is unexcelled in sublimity of thought, poetic grace, and theological expression. The general plan is a parallel between the Old and the New dispensations. This parallel is clearly drawn by numerous and apt quotations from both Testaments, which incidentally indicate a familiar knowledge of Holy Scripture. Biblical prophecies are interwoven with their fulfillment, while types are prominently contrasted with their reality. St. Thomas shows that the bread and wine of Melchisedech form the sacramental veil of the eternal offering of the New High Priest, that the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb was a significant preparation for the infinite oblation of the Lamb of God in the immolation of Calvary, and that the celestial manna of the desert was but a foretaste of the True Bread of heaven.

In the lessons of the second nocturn the Angelic Doctor explains Catholic belief in the Blessed Sacrament. It seems hardly possible that so many Catholic truths could be so accurately and comprehensively expressed within the confines of three short lessons. Beginning with a declaration of man's inestimable dignity, the author states the doctrines of the Divinity, Incarnation, Passion and Death of Christ. Then, discoursing upon the excellence of the Eucharist, he concludes with a dogmatic synopsis, employing scholastic phraesology not unlike that later found in the definitions of the Council of Trent.²

When we say that St. Thomas is the author of the Office of Corpus Christi it must not be understood in the sense that he composed every line. The Office may be properly designated a synthesis, which appellation does not in the least lessen the value of the production. To choose such appropriate psalms and to select lessons like those of the first and third nocturns is indeed a task. But to compose corresponding antiphons and responses so poetically theological and so spiritually significant is something which only a saintly genius could have accomplished successfully. The lucid exposé of the dogma of the Eucharist found in the lessons of the second nocturn is the personal achievement of the author himself.

² Sess. 13, Cap. II, VIII.

The portions of the Office of the Feast which elicit greatest praise are the hymns beginning with the words "Sacris Solemnis," "Verbum Supernum," "Pange Lingua," and "Lauda Sion." Here, too, as elsewhere, the theme is dogmatic, yet always attractive and effectively devotional because of its simplicity. So inspiring have these hymns been deemed that the last two strophes, "O Salutaris Hostia," etc., and "Tantum Ergo," etc., from the hymns "Verbum Supernum" and "Pange Lingua" respectively, are generally sung whenever Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament is given. There are many celebrated poets who are not skilled in dogma and vice versa, but there are very few who are at the same time excellent dogmatic theologians and true poets, harmonizing perfectly these two powers in a monumental work. In this latter class of masters St. Thomas attains high rank, chiefly because of the above mentioned hymns.

The Thomistic authorship of the Office is now generally accepted. However, in former times there were not wanting some who attributed it to the devoted Juliana, and the recluse Eva, both noted for their influence in the universal extension of the feast; but historical testimony has disproved these opinions. Many early historians mention the Thomistic authorship, but none so conclusively as Thomas de Luca, "a disciple, fellow traveller and familiar friend of St. Thomas,"³ who, speaking of his master, said that "he wrote the Office of Corpus Christi at the command of Urban IV, i. e., at the request of Urban."⁴

Some maintain that the Pope commissioned both St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas to write offices for the feast, and that when both copies were submitted for his approval the Pontiff judged that of St. Thomas to be the more excellent. This seems to be only a pious legend, for as a reliable historian remarks, "I cannot find this narrative substantiated by any document."⁵

The merits of the Office of Corpus Christi rest upon the sanctity and intellectual ability of St. Thomas Aquinas. Its exceptional beauty as found in its sublime antiphons, its spotless purity and theological accuracy, make it worthy of the Angelic Doctor, for it is indeed an invitation couched in angelic language, bidding us taste the Bread of Angels and see that the Lord is sweet. A better appreciation of St. Thomas and the Office of

³ Echard Scrip. Ord. FF. Praed. Paris 1719, Vol. I, p. 541.

⁴ Op. cit. p. 340.

⁵ Ibid. p. 340.

Corpus Christi has rarely been found than that of Archbishop Vaughan, O. S. B., who says: "He who lived at the foot of the altar and drank of the dew of heaven, he whose conversation was with the saints of God, had learnt, as no other, how to throw into human words an angel's song. He, the champion of the Blessed Sacrament, as if by heavenly inspiration poured out his numbers in a poet's prayer."⁶

—Fidelis Conlon, O. P.

⁶ Life and Labours of St. Thomas of Aquin, London, 1875, p. 484.

THE POET'S DREAM

An Allegory

In dreams I viewed a fair, but blinded youth
 Meander through a mead all blossoming
 With flowers fragrant, and sweet-scented herbs.
 Alone, thus wandering with unsteady step,
 He passed along. Attracted by a Voice,
 He hastened to a laurel, where beside
 In green profusion mossy myrtles grew;
 Here, by an instinct bidden forth, he plucked
 A garland of the thickest leaves, and kissed
 Them in a reverential awe; then fell
 Upon his knees, and prayed aloud to God
 That sight be given to his sightless eyes.
 Whereat he bathed with holy hyssop-dew
 His orbs, so large, and yet so lustreless.
 Betimes, his prayer was heard; all doubtful fear
 As mist, was scattered from his eyes—he saw!

—Chrysostom Kearns, O. P.