

CHRISTMAS AFTERGLOW

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"Mysteries revealed by God cannot be harmful to men, nor should they remain as treasures hidden in a field, useless. They have been given from on high precisely to help the spiritual progress of those who study them in a spirit of piety. As the Vatican Council teaches, 'reason illumined by faith, if it seeks it earnestly, piously, and wisely, does attain, under God, to a certain most helpful knowledge of mysteries. . . .'¹



WITH THIS EXCERPT from the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis* as the point of departure, we shall try to indicate the character of the liturgy which is immediately consequent upon Christmas.

Contemporary Catholics face a psychological paradox posed by external circumstances which tend to foster anything but the mind of the Church. In the wake of such uncondusive conditions as dislocated and misguided holiday music and sales jargon, the temptation arises to consider the liturgy as nothing more than the official formula for external worship. But there should be a concomitant awareness that the Christian life is vitally nourished through the liturgy.

"God's presence is revealed to us by the very words of the liturgy; God's voice, heard in the Scriptures and in the Church's formularies, brings us healing and so performs within us the work of our salvation."²

Assuming then that the reader rejects the temptation to minimize the liturgy's importance, we shall try to indicate its vital character by tracing the line of continuity in spirit between Christmas and the feasts immediately following it.

LITURGICAL UNITY

"The Christian cycle is one and unchanging, a *totum simul*, only for the Blessed in heaven who see it in the Beatific Vision."³

By reason of this essential unity each mystery selected and em-

¹ Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, Eng. trans., Washington, D. C., 1943, n. 10.

² Trethowan, Iltyd, O.S.B., *Christ in the Liturgy*, New York, 1952, p. 68. Acknowledgment is made of Trethowan's influence upon these pages.

³ *Ibid.*

phasized in the temporal cycle will necessarily involve the others, at least implicitly. Since we are subject to time, however, and can understand things only in succession, it is impossible for us to have an immediate and exhaustive grasp of all that is divine. The presentation must be a gradual one. The infirmity of our present state permits no alternative, if we seek the knowledge and love of God Himself.

It would be a serious error, of course, to assume that the present sequence of the liturgical calendar and arrangement of texts represents a perfect order, perhaps even divinely inspired. The situation is far from hopeless, however. Fortunately there is much today that has survived from the classical era of liturgical composition, when the Psalter, Proper of the Mass, and Station were employed to achieve uniformity and beauty. A Belgian Benedictine, Dom Lambert Beauduin, in 1909 proposed a practical working principle which permits ready access to this harmonious beauty:

"The liturgy belongs to the Church; let us, then, take it just as the Church of today has treasured it for us and as she offers it to us; let us try to know it, to understand it, to carry it out *as it is*, as perfectly as we can. Let this work suffice for us now; when we have done our best to accomplish it, then will be the time to see whether there is also something further to be attempted."⁴

Upon such a working principle, faithful to both the mind of the Holy See and modern liturgical movements, the remainder of this consideration will pivot.

CHRIST THE LIGHT

In every divine mystery the full meaning reaches a depth that far surpasses the grasp of human intelligence. Seizing then upon a single theme in no way denies the presence of other elements of richness; but we believe we are correct in following competent authorities who select the theme of *light* as being most in evidence during the Christmas liturgy.⁵ *The Light of the Redeemer*—in this we find the root cause of that joy which is the spirit of Christmas. The symbolism of light is repeatedly crystallized in language of mystical splendor throughout the three Christmas Masses.

⁴ Bouyer, Louis, *Liturgical Piety*, Notre Dame, 1955, p. 62.

⁵ This essay is especially indebted to the writings of Dom Pius Parsch and Dom Otto Haering.

"O God, Who hast brightened this most holy night with the shining of the true light, grant . . . that we may enjoy in heaven the delights of Him whose mystical light we have known on earth."

—From the Prayer of the Midnight Mass.

"A light shall shine upon us this day: for Our Lord is born to us. . . . He is clothed with beauty."

—From the Introit of the Daybreak Mass.

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. . . ."

—From the Gospel of the Third Mass.

Even the psalm *De Profundis*, apparently inappropriate for Christmas Vespers, becomes meaningful in the thought of light and redemption.

"More than night watchman for the coming of dawn does Israel await the Lord, because with the Lord there is mercy, and with him there is plentiful redemption."

THE CHRISTMAS OCTAVE

The octave of Christmas is not a pure prolongation of the feast. But at least the three saints' solemnities immediately following on December 26, 27, and 28 are intimately related to the spirit of light which marks the Nativity celebration.

December 26: St. Stephen. The angelic character of this first martyr couples clarity of life and vision with the shedding of blood. The very Introit of the Mass echoes the Christmas theme:

"Princes sat, and spoke against me. . . : help me, O Lord my God, for Thy servant was employed in Thy justifications. Blessed are they whose life is spotless, who walk in the law of the Lord."

December 27: St. John the Evangelist. Again the radiant light of purity is stressed in the Apostle whom Jesus loved so much as to allow him to rest upon His Sacred Heart.

"Of Thy loving-kindness, O Lord, shed light upon Thy Church, that, being enlightened by the teachings of blessed John. . . ."

—From the Prayer of the Mass

"Peter saw . . . the disciples whom Jesus loved, the one who, at the supper, had leaned back upon His breast."

—From the Gospel of the Mass.

December 28: Holy Innocents. From the Proper of the Mass we have repeated indication of the pure praise of Christ's white-robed army of martyrs. The night-flight into Egypt suggests the ignorance of unbelief, the conflict between the Eternal Light and the darkness.

"These were purchased from among men, first-fruits unto God and unto the Lamb, and in their mouth there was found no lie; they are without blemish before the throne of God."

—From the Lesson of the Mass.

Cf. also the Introit, Prayer, Tract, and Offertory.

The other feasts are adapted with some difficulty, but liturgists offer reasons of convenience for their presence within the octave.⁶ Although such reasoning is not the strongest, their explanations do aid in keeping the Christmas setting in mind:

December 29: St. Thomas of Canterbury After the Innocents' blood testimonial for the Infant Christ, it is fitting that one of the most powerful prelates of the Middle Ages should do the same in the name of the whole Catholic episcopate. (Cf. Schuster, *The Sacramentary*, London, 1924, vol. I, p. 391.)

December 31: St. Sylvester: The glory of the Christmas octave is graced with this confessor representing the whole choir of the unmartyred saints. Pontiff of peace, make known and loved today the mystery of the Infant Birth as you once confirmed the Symbol of Nicaea—bidding all to acknowledge the Christ as *God of God, Light of Light, begotten not made, consubstantial to the Father.*" (Cf. Gueranger, *The Liturgical Year*, Dublin, 1886, vol. I, p. 390 ff.)

As the Christmas octave unfolds we find that the Mass for the Sunday within the Octave is closely allied to the Mass for the Vigil of the Epiphany. Both lay their stress upon the redemption.

"And coming up at that very hour, she (Anna) began to give praise to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all who were awaiting the redemption of Israel."

—From the Gospel of the Sunday within the Octave.

"But when the fullness of time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, that He might redeem those who were under the Law. . . ."

—From the Epistle of the Vigil of the Epiphany.

The octave day of Christmas is the feast of the Circumcision. Besides drawing attention to the true manhood of the Incarnate Word and the first expiating Blood of the Passion, the Church commemorates the official naming of the Infant. His name is Jesus, i.e. Savior. His Incarnation is for our redemption. The Feast of the Most Holy Name, the Sunday between the Circumcision and the Epiphany, is logically very close to that of the Circumcision. In the Lesson of the Mass, St. Peter insists that salvation is impossible through any other name. St. Bernard has beautifully explained it too in terms of light.

⁶ A similar situation occurs in regard to the feasts of the saints previous to the Purification.

“. . . where comes so bright and sudden a light into the whole world, if not from the preaching of the Name of Jesus? Was it not by the light of this Name that God called us into his admirable Light? Where-with being enlightened, and in this light, seeing the Light, we take these words of St. Paul as truly addressed to ourselves: *You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.*” From the fifteenth sermon on the *Canticle of Canticles*.

EPIPHANY AND BEYOND

Withered evergreens and bedraggled tinsel present meager stimulus for the majestic Feast of the Epiphany sustained through a privileged octave. Complete reliance on the liturgical texts, then, is a necessity. Happily the exquisite composition of the Mass effects surpassing compensations. Nowhere in the Christmas cycle does the theme of light and purity flame so perfectly. In the present dispensation of the Church it is allowed to flicker until February second. The very Feast of the Nativity leads to this terrestrial manifestation of the God who will make eternal salvation possible for both Jew and Gentile. Arise, the light is come and the glory of the Lord is risen: we have seen His star and with gifts have adored Him, alleluia!

From the lips of the boy Christ we have the reason for His manifestation: His Father's will. The Feast of the Holy Family, the Sunday within the Octave, links the period between the divine infancy and the public ministry. These repeated manifestations serve the purpose of progressively delineating the stages in the theme of redemption. Thus on the octave day itself the children of light are presented with the baptism in the Jordan, and in the Postcommunion the Church prays:

“Let thy heavenly Light, O Lord, go before us always and in all places, that with pure eyes we may behold the mystery. . . .”

The Sundays following the Octave of the Epiphany are influenced by the Christmas theme, but, strictly speaking, are not of its nature. According to Dom Otto Haering in *Living with the Church*, the kingdom of light established by Christ radiates *externally* as emphasized by the six Sunday Gospels (a history of God's kingdom upon our earth), and penetrates *internally* through love, as St. Paul points out in the corresponding Epistles.

Second Sunday after Epiphany: Cana. The miracles of Christ are for us, for our redemption. The best wine is indeed ours in this latter day through the Mass, through this present manifestation. It is difficult to overlook the fact that the mother of Jesus was closely associated with most of her Son's manifestations.

Third Sunday after Epiphany: Cure of the leper and the centurion's servant. Additional disclosures of Christ's power are read in the Gospel together with Christ's own words on the salvation of the Gentiles. The Introit from psalm ninety-six (also that of the next three Sundays) echoes the glory of the Epiphany.

The Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Sundays are sometimes omitted in the liturgical calendar, but they incorporate teachings of our Savior on the nature of His Kingdom, its citizens and outcasts. They relate the story of the tempest on the lake (Fourth Sunday), the parable of the cockle (Fifth Sunday), and the parable of the mustard seed and the leaven (Sixth Sunday). Obviously, the strength of the Christmas cycle is dying. The form for the Pascal cycle is in embryo.

THE PURIFICATION

The term of the cycle is reached on a feast of sheer beauty, the Purification. Many spiritual threads meaningfully seem to gather and spin transparent. The Child offered, the Victim surrendered, the Immaculate purified, two turtle-doves there, five shekels unbear, the precursor prepared, forty days completed, two yearning old testaments—Simeon forewarned and Anna ascetic—the meeting, the embracing, the offering: all this and so much more when, in St. Bernard's phrase, the Lord of the temple came to the temple of the Lord. In today's Church the sung antiphons and flame of the blessed candles borne in procession lend a bridal-feast modality reminiscent of the lights and acclaims accorded Oriental royalty, the joy of the shepherds, the star of the Magi, the events at Cana, the Dove at the Jordan. This Feast of the Purification is the connecting link between the two cycles of Easter and Christmas, between the God-man slain and resurrected and the God-infant offered as victim.

PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Having seen the fact of the prolonged celebration of Christmas *after* December twenty-fifth, we would be remiss without some attempt at application. Without doubt, not all souls draw spiritual sustenance from the liturgy in the same degree. Its dignity and efficacy, however, make it inexhaustible as a sublime source of grace.

As Dom Pius Parsch, O.S.B., points out, liturgical texts possess several strata: first an historical level (the past); then the level of grace and the sacramental level (the present time with reference to particular graces and the day's Mass and Office); finally the eschatological level (the future).

"About one thing we must be clear in our minds: that liturgy means present reality. The past is only figure and likeness of the present conferring grace; and the future is motive and at the same time symbol of the present. The liturgy has the object of giving and dispensing grace to us, and that in the present; but it presents this grace in the garment of the past and the future. . . . It is of capital importance to our grasp and utilization of the liturgy that we so transpose all past and future events described by the texts into the present Mystery.

. . . (The) Mass is so to speak the focal point where all four levels of the liturgy come together as so many rays . . . rays of the work of redemption and of the economy of grace.

Thus the liturgy serves our one treasure, the precious pearl of our life, grace; and the Church year becomes a year of grace and salvation."⁹

⁹ Parsch, Pius, O.S.B., "How to Interpret the Seasons," *Orate Fratres* (Colegeville, 1947) November, XXII, pp. 1-5.

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With joy the Christmas liturgy focuses our attention on the Light of the world, for it guarantees that the Light no longer shines in the darkness—uncomprehended. Through the mystic unfolding of the liturgy the Light who is the Life of the world again comes to His own. And as many as receive Him are empowered to become the children of God, conceived through His love, born of His will, nourished in His grace and truth.

GOD FOR THE EYE, THE EAR, THE TOUCH

"Even the discourse we utter, in which we use varying tongues, is an incorporeal discourse; not visible to the eye, or palpable by the hand. But when the discourse has clothed itself in words and literary form, it is visible; it may be comprehended by the eye, and touched by the hand. So likewise does the Son of God become visible, Who, by His Nature, is Invisible; and what by nature is incorporeal, is now found palpable."

Council of Ephesus