

# *Beauties of the Mass Liturgy*

By BRO. ANTHONY FOLEY, O. P.



HOLY Mother Church has adorned the liturgy of the Mass with a beauty beyond words. Through the immemorial ages, from the Catacombs to our own day, it has taught men the truths of God. In a simple beautiful way marked by all the charm of the romantic it tells of things eternal. It speaks a message to the heart that eloquence is powerless to repeat. Pauper and lord, ignorant and learned, saint and sinner, all have been impressed but none have translated into words the deep significance of this symbolical liturgy. In attempts to explain it countless volumes have been produced and even now the divine story is only half told. We do not, then, in this short article, presume to accomplish what the ages have declared impossible. Our purpose is merely to step into the vast garden of the liturgy and to pick here and there a flower as we pass through.

We pass without notice the altar, the candles, the vestments, the liturgical colors and many other interesting and beautiful features of the Mass liturgy. We sacrifice our desire to linger here not because we judge them unimportant or uninteresting but because we have other beauties in mind. We are to follow the priest as he proceeds through the beautiful liturgy of the Holy Sacrifice.

The altar having been prepared and the candles lighted, the priest properly vested comes to the foot of the altar to prepare his soul for the worthy celebration of Mass. There he bows low and acknowledges to all present that he is a sinner and asks them to pray for him. Ascending the altar-steps he prays that God will remove all his imperfections and make him worthy of the high office he is performing. Reaching the altar he places his hands reverently on it, bends and kisses it out of respect both for the Saviour Whom it symbolizes and for the saints whose relics it encloses.

The priest next announces the character of the feast he is celebrating. Going to the Epistle corner of the altar he reads the Introit. Then in accordance with the dictates of Christian

piety he asks for grace worthily to celebrate what he has just announced through the Introit. Nine times he calls to God for mercy—three times to God the Father “Kyrie eleison” (Lord have mercy on us), three times to God the Son “Christe eleison” (Christ have mercy on us) and three times to God the Holy Ghost “Kyrie eleison.” After that, if the feast has a particularly joyful character, he returns to the center of the altar and intones the “Gloria in excelsis Deo.” To announce the joys of the day’s feast he reechoes the hymn through which the angels announced the joys of Bethlehem on the first Christmas night. The preparation is now over. The Confiteor and the kissing of the altar have served to prepare the priest’s soul; the Introit, Kyrie and Gloria have disposed the people for the celebration of the day’s feast.

The most important components of the part of the Mass that follows immediately are the prayer of the day called the “Collect,” the Epistle, the Gospel and sometimes, as a profession of faith in the Gospel just read, the Credo. These together with the parts mentioned in the preceding paragraph, comprise the “Mass of the Catecumens”; for, according to the early discipline of the Church, the unbaptized were not allowed to stay for the Mass proper. They were, however, greatly privileged in the permission to be present at this second part—the reading of the Scriptures. Here they could benefit by the Church’s solemn prayer and here they could listen to the words of life as they were dictated by the Holy Ghost Himself.

The prayer of the day is simple in composition but pregnant in thought. It is offered by the Church to God for her own and her children’s needs. It is a prayer which expresses these needs so exactly and so sublimely that we can scarcely believe it to be the product of unaided human genius. In every one of these short prayers there are four elements—the elevation of the soul to God, thanksgiving, petition and supplication. This is very beautifully illustrated in the prayer for Pentecost Sunday. “O God, Who today by the light of the Holy Ghost didst instruct the hearts of the faithful, give us by the light of the same Holy Spirit a love for what is right and just and a constant enjoyment of His comforts through our Lord Jesus Christ . . .” Thus by the words “O God” we elevate the soul; then thankfully we recall the workings of the Holy Ghost in the hearts of men; and ask in the next part that we may experience the same favors;



St. Dominic's Altar at Bologna

finally we conclude with the supplication "through our Lord Jesus Christ," for it is through Him alone that we can obtain graces. Should any one think that our praise of this simple prayer is somewhat exaggerated we suggest, with Cardinal Wiseman, that he try to write one.

The readings of the Epistle and Gospel are surrounded with beautiful symbolism and we could easily spend all our time here. But we must content ourselves with the explanation of just one very beautiful feature of this ceremony—the fact that the Epistle is read at one corner of the altar and the Gospel at the other corner.

In the early days of Christianity churches were built facing the east. Today this is not always practical. However, the custom has been preserved in a mystical sense, for liturgically the Church considers her edifices to face the east. Hence, even today, we may say that all Christian altars face the east, and that the Epistle is read at the south corner, the Gospel at the north corner. To borrow our expression from nature we might say that the Epistle is read in a warm fertile land, the Gospel in a cold barren land. This is the Church's thought. The reading of the Epistle represents the preaching of God's Word to the Jews, a people already blessed with the warmth and fertility of divine revelation. To represent their hard heartedness and rejection of Christ in contrast to the humility and joyful acceptance of Him by a less favored people, the Gospel is read at the opposite corner of the altar. The Church orders the priest to go to the north corner of the altar and there read the Gospel not facing towards the front or east but towards the side or north. There over a land frozen with the ice of idolatry the bright sun of the Gospel rises and the once barren useless land becomes the beautiful garden of Christ.

All too rapidly we now pass the Offertory antiphon and the Offertory itself and stop only to inquire why the priest washes his hands. This ceremony takes place immediately after the priest offers to God the bread and wine which in a few moments will be consecrated. It brings back to us a very beautiful custom at one time in vogue. The people who were about to receive their Lord in Holy Communion brought gifts, principally of bread and wine, and offered them in connection with the Holy Sacrifice. After accepting these offerings it became neces-

sary for the priest to wash his hands. To this day the ceremony remains as a link between us and the past and it still has a message. The hands, as representing the principle of action, are washed with water, which is the sign of cleanliness, in order that this ceremony may remind the priest that all his actions should be pure and that at this solemn moment, when he is about to begin the most sacred part of the Mass, he should make a special effort to purify his intentions. Thus, the Church calls the priest's attention to higher things by attaching a mystical meaning to something occasioned by necessity. While she preserves a ceremony hoary with the traditions of our forefathers, she teaches a lesson as sublime as the ceremony is venerable.

After the washing of the hands the priest comes again to the center of the altar and turning towards the faithful with extended arms asks them to pray that his sacrifice and theirs may be acceptable in the sight of God. Then he ceases, for a moment, to pray publicly and reads the Secret Prayers. Often during His lifetime our Saviour withdrew from His disciples and prayed in secret for them. This was true of Him in the tranquil days of peace and in the trying days of adversity. It was especially true of Him on that dreadful night of His passion, when, in the ghastly solitude of Gethsemani, He conversed with His heavenly Father. It is to imitate his Master in this respect that the priest withdraws, in spirit, from the people and prays secretly. As Christ's ambassador he goes apart and prays for them; as a priest incorporated into the eternal priesthood he enters the solitude of Gethsemani to converse with God before sacrificing.

The time is now approaching for the Canon—that is, for the Consecration and the prayers that surround it. As a fitting introduction to this the priest breaks forth into the sublime words of the Preface—a prayer of adoration, praise and thanksgiving. Like the Collect, it is so simple and beautiful that it defies description. It expresses man's emotions in a way that seems to exceed his capabilities. It tells of the fitness of man's praise for Him Whom all the heavenly court adores. In the sweetest and most elevating language it gives utterance to our desire to unite ourselves with the Cherubim and Seraphim that we may praise as they praise. Each moment it grows more exultant until it concludes in the joyous hosannas that open the Canon proper.



At the conclusion of the Preface the priest again prays in secret, this time, however, for a different reason. When the priest of the Old Law entered the Holy of Holies he was unaccompanied, since he went there in his official capacity as priest. At the Canon of the Mass the priest of the New Law begins to exercise a function that is reserved to him as priest. In the consecration of Christ's Body and Blood no one can take part but him whom God has ordained for that purpose. Hence throughout the entire Canon,—from the end of the Preface to the beginning of the Pater Noster—the priest prays in silence. He is within the Holy of Holies.

The Pater Noster (Our Father) marks the conclusion of the Canon. It is worthy of note that this is the only place in the liturgy where this prayer is said in a loud tone. This fact recalls the great veneration the early Christians had for the Pater Noster. At all other services the unbaptized and the public sinners were present and hence the Pater Noster had to be said in secret; it was considered too sacred for their ears. But during the Canon of the Mass the unbaptized and public sinners were not present and hence it seemed proper that the Pater Noster should be publicly and solemnly recited.

Shortly after the Pater Noster the priest reverently takes the consecrated Host in his hands and breaks it in half. From one of the halves he breaks a small particle which he drops into the chalice. This simple ceremony has a manifold and profound signification. In the first place, it is done in imitation of our Saviour who broke the Eucharistic Bread before distributing it. Again, it is done to represent vividly the sacrificial character of the Eucharist—to represent the violent and bloody death on the Cross. The breaking over the chalice indicates that the Blood contained in the chalice came from the mangled Body of our Saviour and is one with it and also that the two together constitute one sacrifice. Since by the breaking of the Host the separation of Christ's Blood from His Body is mystically represented, the small particle of the Host is dropped into the chalice to signify that in reality there is no separation but that under each species Christ is wholly present.

The time now approaches for the priest's Communion. Still holding in his hands the Sacred Host he prays silently for peace and mercy. For a brief moment he breaks the silence and in a

solemn tone wishes the people the peace of his Eucharistic Saviour. Then after calling three times to the Lamb of God—twice for mercy and once for peace—he resumes his suppressed conversation. For a moment longer he speaks in terms of loving intimacy with his God until finally he receives Him into his heart. A few silent moments pass and he turns to the people to administer the same God to them. Before them he holds a small Host and in the words of St. John the Baptist bids them, "Behold the Lamb of God! Behold Him Who takest away the sins of the world!" Then three times in the words of the centurion he asks God to supply for the unworthiness of those about to receive Him, "Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof; but say only the word and my soul shall be healed." Going to the altar railing he places our Eucharistic Saviour on the tongue of each communicant praying that He will guide each soul to eternal life.

After the Communion the priest purifies the chalice, reads the Communion antiphon and the Post Communion prayer and gives the people his parting blessing. At one time this was the end of the Mass. Today, however, another portion of the Gospel is read. In the sixteenth century Pope St. Pius V ordered that the local custom of reading the opening verses of St. John's Gospel (1-14), in honor of the Incarnation, be observed in the universal Church. This short selection contains the entire doctrine of Christ's Divinity and Incarnation and of man's redemption. It is hardly possible to find a more fitting summary of the act just completed—the sacrifice of the incarnate God for man's redemption.

After all, our view of this beautiful liturgical garden has been very superficial. We have not had time to pause, to examine and to admire many significant actions of the priest as he proceeded with the Holy Sacrifice. The raising of the arms in supplication, the striking of the breast in humility, the many signs of the cross on the altar, on the priest's person and on the Sacred Species, the inclination, the genuflections, the use of the paten and the pall, all have been passed over in silence. The examination of everything was beyond us; yet this we know and can appreciate: the Church has done all in her power to enshrine the Mass, her most precious treasure, in a fitting and decorous ceremony.