

Parish Dramatics

By BRO. GERALD CORBETT, O. P.



ONE Sunday morning, about three years ago, the more conservative members of a certain parish in a Middle Western city were given a severe shock that savored somewhat of scandal when upon entering the vestibule of the church their eyes fell upon a glaring poster which proclaimed in bold letters:

Wednesday Evening, January 12th,
THE PARISH PLAYERS
will present
George M. Cohan's Comedy Triumph
"SEVEN KEYS TO BALDPATE"
at
The School Auditorium

What did it all mean? How could the pastor countenance such a thing? Was the vileness of the stage to be allowed to corrupt the congregation?

But the pastor had anticipated all this; so, after making the usual weekly announcements, the good people were told that a parish dramatic club was about to make its initial appearance,—then came the "apologia." That Sunday morning the distracted parishioners learned for the first time in their eventful careers of the century-old affiliation of the Church and the theater. They were told that the Catholic Church was the Mother of the Drama; that she had ever regarded the stage as a most powerful moral influence on the lives of her children; that parish dramatic guilds in the Middle Ages were as old as the parishes themselves; that it was through the Church's inspiration and encouragement that the great Miracle and Mystery Plays sprang into existence, and that even today the most significant dramatic performance in the world is the product of a Parish Theatre,—the celebrated Passion Play of Oberammergau.

After Mass when members of the congregation gathered outside the church to exchange a friendly word, the general

trend of conversation was not, "Why should we have a parish dramatic club?" but rather, "Why didn't we have one sooner?" . . . That was about three years ago. Today this same parish boasts of one of the finest dramatic clubs in the States. It has an active membership of over two hundred, produces between six and eight plays a year, and numerous are the social events that are staged under its auspices. It has raised enough money to build a beautiful new auditorium, to redecorate the church, to contribute generously to several charities and it still has a substantial sum in its treasury. The pastor thinks it is the greatest factor for good in the whole parish.

Yet this story is not exceptional. With slight alteration of detail it could be told of a hundred other parishes throughout the country that have joined the advancing ranks of the Parish Theater Movement. However, in spite of its noble purpose and its tremendous power for good there still remains much misunderstanding regarding the real meaning and purpose of the Parish Theater. So with the hope of giving an adequate notion of what parish dramatics really mean and of indicating, in some little way, their immense value as a permanent part of the parish program we have undertaken this paper.

Prejudice and ignorance have always been boon companions, and in the case of the Parish Theater they seem to have done remarkable team work. Practically every parish has attempted, sometime or other, something that bears a resemblance to dramatics. In many cases it has been just a "school entertainment," but more frequently it has been that nondescript quantity commonly called an "amateur show." Both were taken to be representative of the Parish Theater's contribution to the world's progress. The "school entertainment," you know, is one of those delightful informal affairs requiring little or no perfection of production where admiring parents watch with rapture their self-conscious offsprings "perform." The "amateur show" usually means a successful attempt on the part of a few well-meaning individuals to prove conclusively that they were never destined for the footlights. It is merely incidental to this type of performance if the hero forgets his most important speech, if at the crucial moment of the drama a large piece of scenery falls upon the leading lady, or the long black moustache drops from beneath the nose of the soprano-voiced villain. for the eventful

evening is sure to end with a chorus of adulating friends chanting, "You were all simply darling!"

With these the Parish Theater has no part. The parish players are amateurs, to be sure, but amateurs in the true and pristine sense of the word, which means "a lover"; one who puts his whole heart and soul into a work for sheer love of it. But if "amateur" be taken to signify an immature, unskilled and inexperienced dabbler, the parish players most certainly are not amateurs. Nor are they a group of enthusiastic youngsters temporarily banded together to raise sufficient funds to buy a few ink-wells for the school or a noiseless feather duster for the church. The Parish Theater represents a permanent organization, for its members realize that the only way to secure perfect ensemble work, which features the play and not the player, is to become accustomed to working together. They know that they must understand one another personally, as well as their technique and their play. A seriousness of purpose animates our representative parish dramatic societies, with the result that they display real ability while their work is characterized by a finished performance and a satisfying production.

This excellent condition has been brought about principally by competent leadership,—the most important factor for success in any organization. Parish clubs have been blessed by having as their moderators priests who have excellent taste seasoned with sound judgment, and when not skilled in dramatic technique themselves they have had prudence and common sense enough to secure the services of a professional director. In this way parish performances have been brought up to the best professional standards. It is really providential that the Catholic Theater Movement has had men of genius directing its destinies ever since its inception. To name a few, Msgr. John Talbot Smith, the man who founded the Catholic Actors' Guild of America and who did more than any other man to encourage Catholic dramatic art in the United States, is first to come to mind. Up until the time of his death Msgr. Smith was the foremost Catholic spokesman for the drama in America. His writings have educated a large public to measure the productions of the theater by the standards of Christian truth and purity; while his book, "The Parish Theater" is the most accurate and complete treatise ever written on the subject. Father Hurney, director of the

nationally famous St. Patrick's Players, of Washington, D. C., has won lavish praise from professional producers, playwrights, actors and managers, while several members of his organization have received flattering offers to appear in Broadway successes. It was during a recent engagement in Baltimore that a distinguished dramatic critic remarked, "The only difference between St. Patrick's Players and the professionals we have been watching all year is—the professionals get paid." Father Vincent Mooney, C. S. C., of St. Edmunds College, Austin, Texas, has done much to popularize parish dramatics by his tireless research work and his stimulating magazine articles. In Chicago great work has been done by Father Daniel J. Lord, S. J., whose beautiful pageants, "Alma Mater" and "The Drama of the Crusade," have been performed all over the United States. On the Pacific coast the outstanding figure has been Brother Leo, F. S. C., L. H. D., of St. Mary's College, Oakland, Calif., who has written plays that are literary masterpieces, and has directed productions that are epic-making.

The parish players have found success in various fields of dramatic art. For example there has been a definite tendency on the part of both the commercial theater and the Parish Theater towards religious drama. But so far the commercial theater has failed miserably. As an instance of this we might cite two outstanding Broadway productions of the past season: George Bernard Shaw's "Saint Joan" and Morris Gest's stupendous production of "The Miracle." The former was decidedly Protestant in tone and most unsatisfactory in treatment; the latter, in spite of its essentially religious theme, its much vaunted accuracy of Catholic symbolism, and its superb mediaeval pageantry,—wounded Catholic taste. It didn't ring true. Neither of these plays succeeded in obtaining that which was most essential, a true religious atmosphere.

On the contrary, the Passionist Fathers' production of "Veronica's Veil" at Hoboken, N. J.; St. Patrick's Players production of "The Holy City" at Washington and Baltimore; Brother Leo's "Ecce Homo" produced with unprecedented success in both Oakland and San Francisco, are examples of religious drama presented in a spirit of deep devotion and tender piety that we are accustomed to associate only with the sanctuary. The players in these productions not only observed all the fine

points of dramatic technique, but what was far more important, they caught the true spirit of the play, and it was this that made their performance unique.

Although the parish players have won preeminence by their presentation of religious plays and pageants, it should not be concluded that the Parish Theater is confined to this type of drama. The truth of the matter is that the Parish Theater is as catholic in its scope as it is Catholic in its ideals. Tragedy, comedy, farce, comic opera, musical comedy and revue all have their place there. For instance, the St. Joseph's Players, organized some three years ago in one of the oldest parishes in New York City, have confined their work almost exclusively to the production of Broadway successes that have been notable for their cleverness and their cleanness. Under the guidance of Rev. John J. Hickey, pastor of St. Joseph's, and Mr. Edgar C. Foreman, a veteran stage director, the versatility and enterprise of this group has been nothing short of amazing. In the short space of their existence the Players have produced over thirty full-length plays, a great number of short plays, and several musical comedies. Their program has included "Cappy Ricks," "Clarence," "It Pays to Advertise," "Turn to the Right," "The House of Glass," "Within the Law," "The Hottentot," "Adam and Eve," "The Mikado," "Leave it to Jane," and "The Geisha Girl."

One of the greatest advantages derived from parish dramatics is what we might call the "ethical value"; that is, the excellent moral effect the drama produces upon the people. The drama is one of the very best ways of presenting the truths of religion in forceable, every-day terms. There people can see life reflected, its problems presented and their proper Catholic solution given. In her book, "Choosing a Play," Miss Gertrude Johnson says that, "the theater is in a position to teach more lessons to more people in a more attractive way than is any other force. Its scope is unlimited, and it reaches people when they are receptive and unrestrained, through the pleasing medium of story and music and spectacle." There are so many problems in life that we pass by without a thought, but put the same situation in dramatic form and let them be acted out on the stage and you will find much discussion and editorial comment in the newspapers, all with the sole aim of giving the proper solu-

tion. When Charles Dickens saw the hardships imposed upon respectable people who were imprisoned for being unable to pay their debts he wrote a novel dealing with the subject. The novel was then dramatized and presented throughout England, and in a short time the English public demanded the absolution of this terrible law. If the commercial theater, which is so frequently ruled by pagan principles and materialistic motives, can effectively bring about moral reform how much more should this be true of the Parish Theater which by its very name is a certain right to teach.

A few years ago the Most Rev. Michael J. Curley, then Bishop of St. Augustine, Florida, was planning a religious service that would fittingly commemorate the solemnity of Good Friday. Just about this time the Cathedral Dramatic Club presented Msgr. Robert Hugh Benson's beautiful drama of the Passion, "The Upper Room." After attending the first performance the Bishop's problem was solved. The service for Good Friday evening merely consisted of the Stations of the Cross, and immediately after that the entire congregation attended the parish players' production of "The Upper Room," which their Bishop considered far more impressive than any sermon he could give them.

But the Parish Theater does not have to preach a sermon in order to be of great moral value. Any play that can provide an hour or two of good, clean recreation is bound to have a wholesome effect upon its audience. People of all classes, cultured and unlettered, rich and poor, love the theater because it offers them something that they can get nowhere else. The dramatic instinct is fundamental in man. Rare indeed is the human being, immature or mature, who has never felt the impulse to pretend he is someone or something else. The human being who has never felt pleasure in seeing such pretending is rarer still. Back through the ages of barbarism and civilization, in all tongues and in all climes, we find this instinctive pleasure in the imitative action that is the essence of all drama. The instinct to impersonate produces the actor, the desire to provide pleasure by procuring impersonation produces the playwright, while the two together produce the dramatic performance. The Church has ever recognized this strong emotional instinct, has pronounced it good, and desires to see it legitimately

satisfied. That is why she became "The Mother of the Drama," that is why she has sponsored the Parish Theater.

A good play is re-creation in the literal sense of the word. It creates a new world in which we live for awhile far above our customary altitude. For those who take part in the play, as Father Daniel J. Lord, S. J., has expressed it, ". . . it means living for a time a richer emotional life; it means plumbing depths in one's soul that would otherwise lie unfathomed. It means moreover the pleasure of delightful companionship, of working with congenial spirits in a common artistic production. It means the most wholesome of recreations in the most wholesome environment."

Our government realized the value of dramatics as a means of strengthening the morale of the army when it expended thousands of dollars for the construction and up-keep of "Smilage Theaters" throughout the training camps of the country during the late war. And in Europe, some of the dough-boys have told us, entertainers were sent into the very front line trenches and there, midst the roaring of cannons and the shrieking of shrapnel, sang their songs and told their tales. However not only to those shouldering arms but also to those carrying the cares of state was entertainment necessary. During those troublesome times John Golden, the producer, attended at a Washington theater a box party which included the late President and Mrs. Wilson and Doctor Cary Grayson. As the President was laughing heartily over something that had happened on the stage, Dr. Grayson learned over Mr. Golden's shoulder and whispered, "Just look at him. That's what does him good. I've stopped giving him medicine and have prescribed the theater instead."

The social value of parish dramatics is not less remarkable than their ethical and recreational advantages. The production of a play is a medium in which every member of the parish can participate. In this regard one writer observes: "There is no one thing that the Church can do that so perfectly harmonizes all its varied branches and unites all groups in one aim. It utilizes every one from the choir to the janitor. A class of boys can build the stage and make the scenery; a class of girls under expert guidance can study the costumes at the library and secure the necessary historical background to assist the Ladies Aid in making them. If the Church is to compete successfully with the

allurments of the movies and the dance halls and the enticement of secular Sunday recreation, it must offer some equivalent attractions. In the drama work, the young people find that they can have a good time at the church and more fun in acting and studying plays than in outside recreation. They look to the church club for their recreation instead of going outside of it."

The results of a painstaking and thorough investigation into this matter made by Father Mooney, C. S. C., testify to the truth of the above statements. From a pastor in a rural community Father Mooney received this reply: "My parish dramatic club has been in existence for twenty years, and it is the only organization that has succeeded in keeping my young people together." While a city pastor reported: "Two years ago the young people of the parish organized a club to raise funds to pay off a part of the church debt. During that time the club has been financially successful, but we no longer consider that the important part of the work. The social benefits are remarkable, and though the club never makes another dollar, I will consider it the greatest single factor for good in the whole parish." After citing numerous advantages gained from his dramatic club a priest-director concluded by saying: "It keeps over a hundred young men and women together three nights a week, over a period of nine months. This fact alone warrants its maintainance." These instances are not exceptional but representative. Last year the writer conducted a similar investigation in the city of Washington alone and found the results to be quite similar to those gleaned by Father Mooney.

However, in spite of the great worth of dramatics to a parish from an ethical, recreational and social standpoint, it is to their financial value that most parish dramatic clubs owe their existence. When we realize that there are over three thousand of these groups functioning in the United States; that over twenty-five per cent of these clubs have been in existence for years; that the average attendance at each performance is above the three hundred mark; that admission prices range between fifty cents and two dollars and, finally, that the costs of production is comparatively nothing, we can begin to understand what an asset such organizations are to the parish treasury. We have no record of a pastor confessing, "I cannot afford a dramatic club," but we can recall several instances where pastors have

remarked, with a slight twinkle of the eye, "I cannot afford to be without a dramatic club."

The educational and cultural advantages of parish dramatics also deserve thoughtful consideration, while the golden opportunities offered to individual members of a club for cultivating a literary taste, acquiring self-confidence and poise, and for developing oratorical ability are simply inestimable.

All of which compels us to conclude that parish dramatic clubs have unlimited power for good, and should be made a vital part of parish activities. The Parish Theater has a glorious mission. This has been the century-old tradition of the Church and it is as true today as it was in the days of the Moralities and Mysteries. The Parish Theater has the power to salvage the noble drama from the mire into which it has sunk and restore it to its pristine beauty and grandeur. It can bring the blessings of happiness and contentedness to any community. It is one of those providential human agencies that lighten the labors of the pastor by leading souls nearer to God.

FRIENDSHIP

By BRO. MAURICE M. O'MOORE, O. P.

*"O friends, friends, firm friends, friends firmer than rock, who quail not,
friends of the living Faith. . . . Oh! friends—where are you?"*
—Pere Didon, O. P.

Those ties of Friendship olden,
Whose linking bonds are golden,
They bind us every firmly—to a ne'er forgotten Past.
Tho' Time may rudely shake them,
It can never, never break them.
They cling yet e'en more closely—unto the very last!