

THE LIFE OF CHRIST AND THE MASS

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HUMAN creatures hold in deep reverence, and cherish for many years the parting gifts and words of a dear friend. They never tire of recalling the events of the final visit, the final parting. The Apostles of Christ, though they differed in many ways, all revered, admired and loved their Divine Master. During the three years of His public life, He had promised them many things. He promised Saints Peter and Andrew that He would make them *fishers of men*,¹ Saints James and John that they should drink His chalice.² He had given His Apostles power to cast out devils and to cure every kind of infirmity and disease.³ But there still remained unfulfilled one promise, which Christ had made to the multitude. He said that He would give them the "Bread of Life," that bread which would enable them to live forever.⁴

Christ understood human nature perfectly. He wished to give them this supernatural gift. But to impress upon His followers its importance, He reserved it for an occasion which would long remain vivid in their memories. Finally, the time came for the fulfillment of the promise. On the morning of Holy Thursday, He gave explicit directions to several of His disciples as to where and how they should prepare the Passover supper for Himself and His little band of followers.⁵ That night when all was prepared, Jesus and His followers gathered in the Cenacle for what was to be known historically as the "Last Supper."

Truly that was a most important moment for us all. Christ realized its importance and proved how He had longed to give us the "Bread of life." Saint Luke tells us that while they reclined, Christ said to His disciples, "I have greatly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. . . ."⁶ Then Jesus took bread, blessed it and gave it to His disciples saying, "Take ye and eat; this is My Body." Then taking a chalice, He gave thanks and gave it to them, saying, "All of you drink of this, for this is the blood of the New Testament,

¹ Matthew IV, 19.

² Matthew XX, 23.

³ Matthew X, 1.

⁴ John, VI, 27.

⁵ Matthew XXVI, 19.

⁶ Luke XXII, 15.

which is being shed for many unto the remission of sins.”⁷ By these sacred words, Christ instituted the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. After he had finished, He said to His Disciples, “Do this in remembrance of Me,”⁸ and thereby Christ ordained them priests, giving them the power to celebrate Mass and to distribute to men His life-giving Body and Blood.

Quite naturally then the question arises as to when and by whom the second Mass was celebrated. The most trustworthy liturgical writers answer that St. Peter celebrated the second holy Mass after Pentecost Sunday, probably in the Cenacle. Holy Scripture mentions the “Breaking of the bread” by the Apostles only after Pentecost.

With the advent of Pentecost, the Apostles began to preach and to celebrate the Divine Mysteries. Since Christ had left them no elaborate ceremonial, the celebration of Mass was a very simple service. Many prayers found in the Mass today were not added for many centuries. However, even in the beginning lessons were read from Holy Scripture—from the Old Testament since the Epistles had not yet been written. Later the Epistles and Gospels were incorporated into the Mass.

Due to the many years of persecution, the evolution of the liturgy was delayed. After the church arose from the Catacombs, however, churches and cathedrals were built and the Mass was celebrated in splendor and magnificence. Upon one thing, however, the Church determined. Her liturgy must be centered about the celebration of the Mass, and since the Mass was the sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ—a sacrifice identical with that of Calvary, the liturgical year of the Church was made representative of the life of Christ. By examining the liturgical calendar, we find how thoroughly this was accomplished.

This liturgical life or year is divided into two general parts or cycles: first, the cycle of Christmas which brings before our eyes the mystery of the Incarnation; secondly, the cycle of Easter which focuses our attention on the mystery of our Redemption. The cycle of the Incarnation, though very short, is divided into three parts: the season of advent, Christmastide, and the time after Epiphany. The cycle of Easter extends over ten months and is divided into five distinct seasons: the season of Septuagesima, the season of Lent, Passiontide, Paschal-time and the time after Pentecost.

Advent, the first part of the liturgical year, begins on the Sunday closest to the Feast of Saint Andrew the Apostle and continues

⁷ Matthew XXVI, 26, 28.

⁸ Luke, XXII, 20.

for four weeks. During this season we are impressed with the fact that Christ has not yet come and that we are awaiting His arrival. We see passing before our eyes the Patriarchs and Prophets of the Old Law and the Precursor of the New. Mary's rôle in the mystery of the Incarnation is not overlooked. During Advent we celebrate the feast of her Immaculate Conception and in every Mass of the season she is invoked in a special manner. The Masses and the Divine Office of Advent are filled with pleadings for the Redeemer of the world to come and save us from sin and punishment. Though Advent is a season of penance, it is also one of joyous anticipation of the Redeemer's arrival. The Church finds it difficult to suppress her joy of what is about to happen.

The season of Advent ends with the vigil of Christmas. Christmastide is ushered in by this day whose Mass and Office repeat again and again that "today you shall know that the Lord will come and save us: and in the morning you shall see His glory."⁹ Then at midnight, the temporal birth of Christ into the world is celebrated with all possible solemnity. The happiness of the human race in possessing its Saviour is unbounded. The Angelic choirs arouse us at midnight with the joyful tidings, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will."¹⁰ The Church casts off the purple vestments of Advent and clothes her ministers in white and gold vestments of joy. The organ is again played and intones the tidings of the angelic host. On this day, the Church permits her priests to celebrate three Masses to commemorate the threefold birth of Christ: His temporal birth in Bethlehem, His spiritual birth in our hearts and His eternal birth in the bosom of His Father. In the three Masses of this day, are found petitions that God will illumine our hearts and souls so that His Son's birth may be for us the occasion of our spiritual rebirth. Christ is called the "true light of the world," "the Prince of peace." The fact of His eternal kingship is clearly impressed upon our minds by the words of Isaias the Prophet, "A child is born to us and a son is given to us: whose government is upon His shoulders; and His name shall be called, the Angel of great counsel."¹¹

During this season, we celebrate the Feasts of the earliest witnesses of Christ; Saint Stephen the Protomartyr, Saint John the Evangelist, and the Holy Innocents who died for Christ in Bethlehem. Then on January 6th is celebrated the Feast of Epiphany.

⁹ Exodus, XVI, 6, 7.

¹⁰ Luke II, 14.

¹¹ Isaias IX, 6.

Christmas Day had dealt with Christ's birth to the Jewish nation. On this day, we commemorate His manifestation to the Gentiles. In our Christmas cribs are placed the figures of the three eastern kings or Magi. The Mass and Office of this day and its octave allude constantly to the adoration of the King of Kings by all the rulers of the earth. During the season after Epiphany, which varies in length, the Church brings before our minds the miracles of Christ proving His divinity: the changing of water into wine at Cana, His cleansing of the lepers and the calming of the waves. Thus does the Church convince us of the divinity of Christ the King.

Immediately after these Sundays the second part of the liturgical year begins, the cycle of Easter, which explains how Christ merited our redemption for us and communicated it to us. This season opens with Septuagesima Sunday, nine weeks before Easter. At the earliest, Septuagesima falls on January 16th, at the latest, February 22. The season consists of three weeks. On the three Sundays of this season, the Mass and Office bring to our attention the fall of Adam and its consequences, actual sin and its consequences, the flood, and the sacrifices of Abraham and Melchisedech. The Gospels of the Sundays remind us of God's mercy toward us: the parable of the sower points out the universal effects of Christ's redeeming sacrifice, the invitation to all laborers to enter His vineyard and the cure of the blind man fill us with the hope of our restoration to Divine favor.

On the Wednesday after Quinquagesima Sunday, the third of the Septuagesima season, we observe Ash Wednesday the first day of the lenten season. This season like Advent is one of penance. During it, the Church imposes upon her children the works of prayer, fasting and penitential exercises. On Ash Wednesday, she signs the forehead of each of them with blessed ashes, saying, "Remember, man, that thou art dust, and to dust thou must return." The *Gloria in Excelsis* and *Alleluia* are suppressed in the Mass, while in the Divine Office the hymn *Te Deum Laudamus* is omitted on all but solemn feasts. The priest is clothed in purple vestments, the deacon and subdeacon are deprived of their dalmatic and tunic, and the organ is silenced. Formerly, the Church permitted during this season only the celebration of the feasts of Saint Matthias and the Annunciation. Later other feasts were added, but her ministers are admonished to remember the spirit of the season and celebrate the ferial Masses as often as is possible. In the Masses and Divine Office, we see our Divine Master overcoming the temptations of the devil and showing us how to become detached from created things. We also witness

His glorious Transfiguration, the driving out of devils and the multiplication of the loaves. This last moves us to renew our penitential exercises and to prepare worthily for our Paschal communion. On this day, the Gospel relates how the hatred of the Jews increased after Christ worked this miracle. Their leaders were even more resolved to slay the Nazerene. Their anger knew no bounds when the multitude sought to crown Jesus king. He, however, fled to the mountains and hid Himself from them.

This is the prelude to Passiontide which begins with the fifth Sunday after Ash Wednesday. It is known as Passion Sunday, for it was then that the leaders of the Jews planned how to ensnare the Master and destroy Him. To focus our attention more closely on the Divine Mysteries, the Church veils all statues and crucifixes in purple. The *Gloria Patri*, a prayer of joy, is omitted from the Mass. During this season, the Church keeps us close to Christ as He suffers persecution from the Jews. She tells once again the miracles which aroused the people's admiration but their leaders' fury: the raising of the widow's dead son, the resurrection of Lazarus. We re-live the time when the accusations of blasphemy were hurled at His claims to be one with His Father in Heaven, when the jealousy of the Pharisees rose to a higher pitch because the Magdalen anointed His sacred feet.

All this is culminated by the enthusiasm of the mob displayed at Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which is commemorated by the blessing and procession of palms held in our churches on Palm Sunday. All during this week, appropriately known as Holy Week, we follow Jesus step by step after His triumphal entry into the holy city. We see Him institute the Holy Eucharist, leave the Cenacle for Mount Olivet. We witness His bloody Passion, His trial, the climbing to Calvary and His death on the Cross. These days are days of sorrow and desolation for Christ's church and are marked by the reading of the four versions of Christ's Passion in the Masses of Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday. Only once does the Church pause briefly from her grief during this week. On Holy Thursday she joyously celebrates the institution of the Holy Eucharist and carries the Sacred Body and Blood of her Founder in solemn procession midst singing, the burning of incense and the strewing of flowers. Immediately afterwards, she strips her altars and focuses all attention on the unveiled crucifix, symbol of Christ's love for us. On Good Friday, no Mass is celebrated. The grief of the Church for her spouse is too profound to concentrate on such a joyful celebration as the Divine Mysteries.

With the Mass and Vespers of Holy Saturday, however, the sorrow of the Church is ended. The strains of *Alleluias* herald the glorious resurrection of Christ from the tomb and usher in the Paschal season. All the doubts and fears of her members are overcome, and they are bidden to come and partake of the Paschal triumph. Once again her priests are clothed in vestments of white and gold, and the angelic hymns and the *Te Deum Laudamus* resound in the Mass and Divine Office. During this season which lasts almost eight weeks, the Church celebrates the three glorious mysteries of Christ's Resurrection, His Ascension, and the Descent of the Holy Ghost. We see Christ, glorious and triumphant from the tomb, appearing to His Apostles. He teaches them further the truths of religion. He bestows the Primacy and Infallibility on Saint Peter, thereby laying the firm foundation of His Church on earth. Finally, after promising to be with them forever in their labors, Christ ascends into Heaven.

Immediately afterwards, the Apostles returned to the Cenacle and awaited the coming of the promised Paraclete. Ten days later, on Pentecost Sunday, they were strengthened by receiving the Holy Ghost. That very day, the Apostles began to preach the word of God and to spread His faith throughout the world. During this season of Pentecost, the Church clothes her ministers in red vestments, symbolic of the tongues of fire. She repeats in the Mass and Divine Office the gifts we have received from the Paraclete and invites us to partake of these gifts by receiving the Sacraments.

The Paschal season ends with the last day of the octave of Pentecost. Now comes the last part of the Easter cycle, known as the "Time after Pentecost." Advent had represented the reign of the Eternal Father over His chosen people. From Christmas to the Ascension, we had seen Christ ruling the human race. This new season, however, signifies the reign of the Holy Ghost Who, Christ promised, "would remain with us forever." The longest season of the Easter cycle, it extends from twenty-four to twenty-eight weeks. During this period, the Church shows her children how to reproduce in themselves the virtues of her Divine Founder. She clothes her priests in green vestments, the sign of hope. She celebrates the feasts of the Most Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi and places before our eyes for imitation her canonized children, whose feast days are solemnized daily in her churches. On Sundays, in the Mass and Divine Office, we read the Epistles and Gospels which impress upon us the necessity of sanctifying ourselves by the aid of the Holy Ghost. Each Sunday brings out some new phase of God's omnipo-

tence, His mercy towards us and the need of practicing charity towards our neighbor.

Thus does the Church, in her liturgical year, focus our attention on the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption. She tries to draw us to God by impressing forcibly upon our minds His Divine solicitude for us and His desire for our sanctification. She urges us to center our hearts on the liturgy, for the liturgy is bound up with the Mass, the Mass is bound up with Christ, and it is only by being one in mind and soul with Christ that we can fulfill His divine precept: "Be ye perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect."¹²

¹² Matthew V, 48.

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