


OREMUS

By JOHN FOSTER

FTEN one hears the criticism that the prayer of the liturgy is unsuited to the spiritual needs of the vast majority of the Church's members. It is not unknown, for example, for a parish pastor to consider that the Good Friday liturgy in the *Triduum Sacrum* does not register with the crowds who flock to church at three o'clock in the afternoon, to supply them with the usual Stations of the Cross, and to postpone for a couple of hours the liturgy, for the benefit of a small number with a greater spiritual perception.

The presumption here is that the pastor knows better than the Church what is good for the mass of the people. What he is doing, of course, is treating them as a mass or a collective. Somewhere or other they have stagnated: as individuals they have been prevented from developing into a people, the people of God. Not surprisingly, the relevance of praying as a people in the liturgy means nothing to them. The liturgy is a closed book to them because they have not been supplied with the key to open its treasures.

Only too often the priest himself has failed to find the key. He is satisfied with being merely the director of the proceedings, not the celebrant or guide and leader of the people.

A question put to Christ by the apostles was: 'Lord, teach us how to pray'. They already had plenty of prayers. What they wanted to know was how to pray. Christ's answer was as precise as the question. 'Thus shalt thou pray', he replied, and offered them a model or guide of prayer. Pray, he suggested, not so much in these words but in this fashion. The words of the Our Father were less important than the purpose for which he composed them.

In the liturgy, the Church teaches us how to pray. It teaches us how to pray as the adopted sons and daughters of God. The liturgical prayer of the Church, therefore, is not an end in itself. It is a guide and model of prayer for those who have entered into a new relationship with God and are experiencing life at a new level of existence, the divine.

Liturgical prayer is the mode of prayer which best answers the requirements of those who have been taken into the life of the

Trinity and who will, in the fullness of time, meet God face to face.

If, then, the liturgy is criticized for not meeting the requirements of the average member of the Church at the present time, the fault cannot be with the liturgy. It must be that the average christian is not being formed in the Church to experience the fullness of the christian life. As sharers through baptism in the glorified humanity of the risen Christ, as living temples of the Holy Spirit, christians should be able to enter into the rich spiritual experiences of the liturgy; yet many are not experiencing at depth or in truth the change that has come about in their human nature. They may agree in theory that they have become adopted sons and daughters of God and sharers of the glorified humanity of Christ, but they do not necessarily feel it or experience its new mode of living.

It would be over-simplifying the problems facing the modern sacramental and liturgical renaissance to think that a liturgical prayer-life can be imposed on the christian. He has to grow into it; and this is possible only to the degree that he grows or matures as a son of God. One can understand the difficulty of the pastor who has a trial-run with the Good Friday liturgy and then decides to discard it for the supposedly greater spiritual good of the majority of the parishioners: is he not, however, usurping the role of the Church (and of Christ) as guide and teacher, and doing so because the ambitions he has for the people are no higher than those he has for himself? It is hard to move a mass. A mass is intrinsically inert. Inertia breeds inertia. Inevitably one will succumb to it, and in place of hope, the virtue of maturity, one will substitute despair, the peculiar despair of our times, born of a refusal to face up to the claims of a human nature reconstituted by the risen Christ in the image of the Father.

The fact that today we have to re-discover the real dimensions of liturgical prayer is a sign that christian prayer has lost a great deal of its precision as a *disciplina arcana*. We have to learn again how to pray as the persons we claim to be. The way we pray has to confirm and sustain us as people who have been initiated into the mysteries of God, particularly the pascal mystery. There is no easy answer to the question we must ask: 'Lord, how are we to pray as members of your kingdom?' The easy answer is always the one that has not really understood the question. The christian must first of all discover that there is a need to ask Christ and the Church how he must pray as a christian. Having made the request, all that remains is to take pains to listen to the answer.

The prayer of the Easter vigil is, for example, a prayer that defeats analysis and is only made meaningful when experienced at some depth of christian living. Odo Casel was among the first to rediscover the meaning of the Easter vigil as the celebration of the death and resurrection of Christ as a *transitus*.¹ Quoting him, Father Charles Davis describes the christian Sunday as the weekly passover of the christian: the Easter vigil is the Sunday of Sundays when christians celebrate the passage from death to life, from penitence to festivity, and thus enter into the pascal mystery.² One could only be indifferent to the liturgy of the Easter vigil or of the christian Sunday if one had failed to recognise the essential mystery of the christian life as a continual *transitus* or passage from death to life.

To understand liturgical prayer, it is necessary to be aware of christian mystery, of the mysterious process that the Spirit of God is working in us at every moment, releasing us from the former bondage of fallen human nature and translating us into the new glorified humanity of the risen Christ.

It could be said, of course, that this is the precise work of the liturgy itself. The christian liturgy is the public worship of God by the people of God, through which they hear the voice of God, speak to him as his sons and daughters, and enter into complete communion with him through the celebration of the Eucharist. Yet it has to be admitted that despite the great care taken in recent years to re-invest the liturgy with its original meaning and significance, the kind of life people live today in a scientific age appears to impede the full force of the modern sacramental movement in the Church.

A liturgical life is a sacramental life. It is all-embracing. The everyday, ordinary events of human earthly existence are gathered together into a coherent, organic meaningful unity. In this unity they receive a significance and a value proper to them as events and happenings in the lives of those called to be God's sons and daughters. With their new value they enter God's history, become the occasions on which God intervenes in and changes human history.³

In a primitive, artisan way of life divine intervention in the affairs of men is easily acceptable. This is not so in the more self-conscious, rational, techno-scientific world of today. During a recent exhibition on Education and Careers, sponsored by the National Union of

¹ *The Mystery of Christian Worship* (London 1962), pp. 13, 59.

² Talk given to London priests at the Grail Headquarters, March, 1962.

³ Cf. Collect: Friday of the fourth week in Lent.

Teachers, it was noticeable that whereas God was prominent in the kindergarten section of the exhibition and described with reference to growing plants and furry creatures, in the main part of the display, with its heavy bias towards science and technology, he was not mentioned: not (it seemed) by any malicious intent, but because of the difficulty of introducing him into a world so completely man-made and self-sufficient.

The liturgical feast of St. Joseph the Workman, however, addresses God as 'Creator of all things, who made work the law for all mankind'. The suggestion it makes that human labour is a law of life and growth, and one of the basic necessities of man's earthly condition, contains a natural truth of great depth. The special importance of this new liturgical feast would seem to be that, before the diffused theology and the symbolism of liturgical prayer can penetrate the modern mind, steps have to be taken to prepare the natural psyche to receive such a message. The liturgy today needs the help of such sciences as psychology and sociology to fit it or attune it to the contemporary mind.

The feast of St. Joseph the Workman suggests that the ultimate value of human labour and work transcends all human valuation, has a symbolic and mystical meaning and associates the human workman with the Divine Workman in a common task of creation and redemption. If this teaching is to find its mark, we must start from the situation in which contemporary man finds himself, his techno-scientific world. Probably one of the root causes why the liturgy does not find the response it should in the heart of the average christian is that it fails to relate to the world in which he lives.

Two cases can be quoted where the symbolism of liturgical thought and prayer often fails to relate to everyday life in the twentieth century, but where it could become considerably enriched were it to embrace the whole content of modern industrial, commercial life.

The anointings with oil in the administration of the sacraments easily appear as merely archaic rites, requiring a leap back through the centuries before they can be invested with any significance. For these anointings to mean anything to people today, they should (we suggest) embrace the vast world of the oil industry with all its ramifications, social, political and economic, and also the whole cosmetics industry. People today spend more time and expense than any other people using oil as a source of energy; they also devote a considerable amount of time and money in anointing their bodies

with such things as face creams, lipsticks, hair unguents, etc. Most, if not all, never think of relating all this human effort to God's designs on their behalf. Liturgical prayer is only the prayer of the redeemed when it brings all human effort into its unity. It can only remain symbolical and suggest the infinite and the unknown when it starts from where human beings are, in the here-and-now of contemporary existence, and in the body.

With the Eucharist, the position is similar. One can speak of eating at the Father's table, of the divine banquet, of the wedding-feast, quite forgetting the materials which supply the food and drink. Bread and wine are significant; but they can only be significant in our own times when the passage of the bread and wine through men's hands to the christian altar includes all the human effort and industry which has brought them to the meeting-place of God and man. Today, when we know so much more through science of the chemical composition of bread, for example, when so much more care and attention is given to the choice of seed and the yield of wheat, when hardly any type of work is not involved in preparing the earth, sowing the seed, harvesting, processing, etc., the work of the whole world is present in each small host by the time it has reached the altar. As it passes through each new pair of human hands, the value of its own content is increased; it becomes more representative of humanity.

These examples help one to understand the main characteristic of liturgical prayer: its universality or catholicity. Liturgical prayer is the prayer of the Church with her special divine gifts of unity and catholicity. Her prayer reflects the mission she carries out, forming man in his essence as *capax universi*, capable of seeing himself as a whole and life as a whole.

It is difficult for liturgical prayer to evoke such a response by contemporary man to his human situation. He lives in a world sometimes described as a meccano-model of a world, a world of pieces lacking any coherent, organic unity. He has developed a critical sense of exactness and sober realism. The exact exploration of nature together with the historical sciences have taught him to be critical and autonomous.¹ He has lost the sense of mystery of the primitive and artisan, and with it a sense of oneness and identity with the forces present within the physical world.

This would suggest that a completely different human condition

¹ Cf. Albert Dondeyne: *Faith and the World* (Duchesne University Press), p. 12.

today offers unrivalled challenges to the modern liturgical apostolate to carry out a dialogue with contemporary man with a view to restoring to him an organic relationship with the world: not by giving him back the primitive's view of the world but a more personal and authentic life of faith, one in keeping with the great steps he has taken in recent years in discovering nature's laws and his own autonomy. It suggests, also, a deepening of the liturgical approach, along the lines on which the Church herself is developing, in order to clarify her essential mission to the human person. To carry out this mission today, the Church is becoming more organically present in the society to which she brings the glad tidings of renewal; she is collaborating more closely with all those other influences at play in the world, in order to bring man to a greater fullness of life and a higher degree of freedom. As Canon Dondeyne observes, the Church has no monopoly of truth or of morality.¹ She needs to collaborate with the findings of modern science about the nature of man in the universe, if her own message is to take root in the contemporary situation.

The liturgical movement in this country has tended to remain shut-off from the important sociological and psychological findings of our times about the human condition of modern man. Karl Jaspers speaks of the world of today having lost its naivety, and Gustave Jung refers to the drying up of the archaic and archetypal in the natural soul of industrialized man. Pope Pius XII (addressing the fifth International Congress of Psychotherapy and Clinical Psychiatry in 1953) expressed his satisfaction with the new paths opened by psychotherapy, and was confident that this science could achieve precious results for the knowledge of the soul and for the religious dispositions of modern man. For liturgical prayer to be the call from deep to deep that it is meant to be, the liturgy needs the help of such a science as psychotherapy to dispose the natural psyche of modern man for its message and glad tidings.

Because the depth of liturgical prayer is resisted by the contemporary mind, which takes refuge from mystery in the restless search for the novel and the sensational, one often meets the complaint that such prayer has no meaning for the average member of the Church, that it is opaque and unintelligible. There would not be much agreement today with the second claim made for liturgical prayer: that it is by its very nature lucid and crystal clear, taking

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

one to the very heart of christian mystery without any detours or deviations.

Here, again, the problem is one of communication: the liturgy is related to a conventional pattern of christian living that is often a parody of its real truth.

For some time now it has been deemed sufficient to supply the laity with a pattern of christian living which is somewhat stereotyped, arbitrary, text-bookish. This pattern aims at supplying the Church with a sufficiency of so-called 'practising' Catholics, who will conform to a certain number of rules and regulations: like saying one's morning and night prayers, hearing Mass on Sundays, and keeping on the right side of the ten commandments. Such a pattern must of necessity over-simplify the position of Catholics as members of the Church, especially as it leaves out the element of growth or maturation in the spiritual life. One could of course support such a programme in the interests of 'fundamentalism', and claim that the main objective of christian education is to supply the faithful with the wherewithal to get them to heaven. But this would be to leave out such vital elements as human originality and differentiation, the whole question of the Church becoming 'a people', the uniqueness and value of each individual person, the present need of the Church for a laity of sufficient competence and commitment both to witness to and create mystery in the highly-variegated, complex and plural society in which they are situated.

The simplicity and lucidity of liturgical prayer is in direct contrast to 'fundamentalist' over-simplification and stultification. Liturgical prayer is a call of deep to deep, a call from the infinite God to the individual person with a capacity for the infinite. Because the universal nature of liturgical prayer corresponds so truly to the nature of the human person who is capable of steeping himself in the whole reality of creation and of becoming its centre of animation, it bites deep into the heart of man, releases a host of new feelings and emotions, establishes a new order in his powers of being, and disposes him better for his meeting with a personal God. Faith is described as the meeting of one person with another, the meeting of God with man, a call and a response. *Lex credendi: lex orandi*. We pray as we believe. It is the light which faith throws on his human situation that enables a person to enter and share God's plan for the world: he begins to see as God sees. This inner vision is of the very substance of liturgical prayer. Its lucidity is of the order of divine mystery. It is an insult to human intelligence and will, to human

feeling and intuition, to suppose that such lucidity and vision are beyond the capacities of the general-duty member of the Church. Furthermore it is a denial of the efficacy of the Holy Spirit whose purpose is to form the human person, endowed with the divine energies of faith, hope and charity, in the likeness of the Son of God.

A third characteristic of liturgical prayer is that it is missionary. Liturgical prayer is missionary in that, through its universality, it adapts itself to the earthly, human condition in all its complex differentiation. 'We offer thee, O God, the chalice of salvation . . . for our own salvation, and for the salvation of the whole world'. Certain deviations and distortions in current liturgical prayer hide this missionary character. We have the example of the collects of the Mass. Theoretically, the priest who presides over the assembly collects all the petitions of those present and then proceeds to synthesize them under one central theological theme. The people (in theory) have presented their petitions, given voice to their needs, informed God of their human situation. In fact, the 'Oremus' or 'Let us pray' is a call to pray which nowadays by-passes the people. With the exception of the Good Friday liturgy (the prototype of christian worship), the people's voice or intentions are never nowadays heard in the collects. It is true that a period of silence between the 'Oremus' call to prayer and the reading of the collect, as practised by a growing number of priests, is a movement back to the original meaning and purpose of liturgical prayer; but liturgical prayer will not return to its proper origins unless it starts from where people are, in the here-and-now of earthly existence, and themselves conscious as the people of God of the mission they have in the Church to inform her of the contemporary needs of humanity.

How can the christian community claim to serve humanity if it does not voice these needs in its prayer as a christian community? One knows, of course, that the distortions that have appeared over the centuries in the Church's liturgical prayer, distortions which destroy its normal appeal to the people, are a direct result of 'clericalism' and the relegation of the laity to the position in public worship once reserved for catechumens. But it would be useless to try to reinstate the laity in their rightful position as the consecrated people of God unless one was clear about the nature of their special contribution in the public worship of the Church. It is in no way different from the role they carry out in the mission of the Church. The role of the laity is distinctive yet complementary to that of the clergy. They form in their duality the only authentic weapon of the

christian apostolate. It is the christian community that is the weapon of the mission of the Church which is to bring each and every human person to the fullness of their development and growth. Similarly in the liturgy it is the community that prays for humanity. Not until the laity can voice these needs in liturgical prayer, and inform the clergy who lead and guide them in worship of the exact state of the human situation with its need of christian understanding and love, will liturgical prayer become again what it is meant to be in christian worship: missionary.

The clerical conspiracy to change a sacramental religion into a mystery-religion is a recession. The *hiericus*, Hebrew as well as pagan, was concerned only with public worship in the confines of the temple or grove. In the Old Testament, the High Priest alone entered the Holy of Holies: the priestly caste alone was allowed beyond the forecourt of the Temple. The people had no part in the celebration of the mysteries. Christians should have no desire to repair the rent veil of the Temple. Those whom Christ calls to share his glorified humanity and whose bodies become the temple of the Holy Spirit are not excluded from the act of mediation in the sacrifice of the Church. The Mass is the sacrifice of the whole christian community, clergy and laity. Liturgical prayer is the prayer of the Church, of the community, not of a priestly caste.

The missionary character of liturgical prayer highlights the new thought current in the Church today about the clergy and laity being partners in a joint enterprise: the work of the world's salvation. Like every other living thing, liturgical prayer grows and develops by adapting itself to and realising the creative possibilities in the changing human situation. When we examine this situation today, we notice the emphasis placed on social relationships. In *Mater et Magistra*, the Pope refers to the increase in such relationships as one of the principal characteristics of our age; and, in commending this increase, he shows the advantages that follow in making it possible for the individual to exercise many more of his personal rights and to participate in human events the world over.

To experience to the full the flavour of liturgical prayer, it is necessary to relate it to this present increase in social relationships and to the new form of a more organic society that is emerging in social and political life. Here is a form of prayer that measures up to the new requirements of the age. When we examine the peculiar structure of liturgical prayer, we see it clearly as a form of prayer that goes beyond, indeed cuts across all narrow individualism,

and promotes an authentic personal living within the community.

At first sight, the structure of liturgical prayer strikes one as rather the reverse of this. To many it is far more impersonal than private prayer. The reason can only be that too few of us distinguish between the individual and the person. By his very nature the individual is a social being, heir from the moment of birth to a million and one personal relationships. In the liturgy one prays not only as a member of the Mystical Body but as a member of the whole human family. As the prayer of a corporate body, liturgical prayer must be free from the natural extravagances of private prayer and popular devotions: free from particularity and individuality, in order to be free for universality and solidarity. No man can speak to God except through Christ, the Christ who is head of a spiritual, social body. It is as members of the Mystical Body of Christ that men speak to God and listen to him. This does not restrict the aspirations of the individual person; rather it takes him out of himself in isolation and restores him to himself in association with the whole of humanity and with the whole of creation. What one should expect in liturgical corporate prayer are ideas and aspirations which transcend those of the individual, private person, and lead him away from subjectivism and acute narcissism to an objective view of reality. In this direction lies his truth and freedom. Gustave Thibon remarks: 'the great mistake is to raise the problem of freedom in terms of independence. Man is a 'relative' being and to be related means to be bound to someone or something. At the root of all freedom there is an attraction, a desire, and that is a bond. One can choose a living dependence that develops personality or a dead dependence which cramps and suppresses it. Freedom, therefore, means nothing by itself; its value is that of a man himself which is measured by what may be called the 'density' of his being and by the depth of his love'.¹

Liturgical prayer strikes deeper needs than private prayer, though this is not to say that corporate liturgical prayer relieves one of the necessity of private prayer. Both are necessary to the human person. The fault is that too often private prayer is thought to be sufficient in itself, the means by which a person voices all his personal needs. What liturgical prayer does is to evoke in man the needs which in his extreme selfconsciousness he has tended to forget: his needs as a member of society, as one living in the world. It awakens him to the fact of what it means to be a christian: that kind of person who is

¹ *Christianity and Freedom*: a symposium, Hollis and Carter (London 1955), pp. 1-3.

most in love with his times and most responsive to them, because he has been initiated into the whole of God's plan for the world.

In the structure of liturgical prayer we find none of the individual flights of fancy, none of the excesses or sentimentality often found in private prayer. Instead we are faced with sober theological truths which keep us in touch with reality and are in themselves inexhaustible sources of contemplation. 'O God whose only-begotten Son has appeared in the substance of our flesh, grant that by him whom we have beheld in our outward likeness, we may merit to be reformed within'.¹

In private prayer the individual breaks away from his origins and roots in common humanity, concentrates on his own self-conscious, self-centred needs and problems. In the public prayer of the Church, he is brought back out of his isolation into a less morbid and healthier climate of thought and feeling. But he has to pay a price, one which many in our restless times find difficult. He has to learn to listen. He has to discover that deep spirit of leisure which is the highest of all the requirements of the human condition. This resting in truth will become the main integrating force in his life. One of the great discoveries to be made about liturgical prayers is their hidden power of suggestion. It is not so much what they express which reveals the hidden depths of God's mysteries but what they leave unsaid. Like every true work of art, liturgical prayer suggests more than it expresses.

Objective rather than subjective, silent rather than effusive, liturgical prayer achieves its effect of suggesting the mystery of christian living by something common to all genuine artistic work: rhythm. The rhythm of the liturgical prayer of the Church, through which it conveys its interior spiritual movement and makes suggestive to the hearer of its words what in the order of mystery is inexpressible, is achieved through what is known as the *cursus*.²

The intellectual Luddites may, of course, voice the opinion that the built-in technique of the *cursus* in liturgical prayer and the spiritual movement it creates have no part to play in christian formation today.

¹ Collect for 13th January: Commemoration of our Lord's Baptism.

² One identifies in liturgical prayer three main *cursus*, a three-fold distribution of accent: e.g. in the Postcommunion prayer for the feast of the Annunciation, which is the prayer of the *Angelus*: *Gratiam tuam, quaesumus, Domine, mentibus nostris infunde* (the *cursus planus*): *ut qui, Angelo nuntiante, Christi Filii tui incarnationem cognovimus* (the *cursus tardus*); *per passionem eius et crucem, ad resurrectionis gloriam perducamur* (the *cursus velox*).

But here again is a potentiality that needs to be actualized in bringing to maturity the kind of member the Church needs today to fulfil her mission in the contemporary world. Pope John, in *Pacem in Terris*, writes: 'It happens that, in many quarters and too often, there is no proportion between scientific training and religious instruction: the former continues and is extended until it reaches higher degrees, while the latter remains at an elementary level'. Nowadays, when we equate the mission of the Church with bringing the human person to his fullest development in the whole of his life, the liturgical movement needs to use everything in the liturgy to form the individual christian to the fullness of his powers, artistic as well as religious. Liturgical prayer uses the art-form of spoken and sung word to achieve its objectives. Christians need to be initiated into an appreciation of this. The poetry of the liturgy is an admirable balance to the excessive use of prose from which many in the Church suffer today.

All in all, we see the divine economy expressing itself admirably in the structure of liturgical prayer. In this prayer one is led to God, to the essential, to the heart of mystery directly. Maybe it is ungenial to the contemporary mind which has lost heart for depth and intensity in living. But it should provide just the right incentive in the pastoral apostolate today, where the growing consciousness that the essence of the christian mission is to form man in his wholeness, inspires one to exploit to its fullest possibilities a form of prayer that restores man back to his centre, and makes it possible for him to become one with himself and one with the world. A renewal of the contemplative attitude which liturgical prayer fosters and demands is a desperate need in contemporary society.