

WORK AND THE EUCHARIST

By JOHN FOSTER

WORK IS ONE of the requirements of the human condition. There is an evolutionary process present in work as there is in the whole of human history. So one can trace the stages through which human work passes: from the primitive, through the artisan, to the scientific. The contemporary mode of work is highly-diversified and complex. What one should avoid is thinking that human work needs to be brought to the christian altar to receive its validity as a requirement of the human condition.

A pointer some years back was an exhibition in England on *Education and Careers*, sponsored by the National Union of Teachers, where it was noticeable that God was referred to in the kindergarten section in terms of growing plants and furry creatures but not in the sections devoted to scientific and technological education, for the simple reason (one felt) that nobody knew quite how to introduce him. Are the only alternatives open to modern, industrialized man, a devout primitivism and a cultured agnosticism? In some respects this is the position of the eucharist with regard to the contemporary mode of work.

The liturgical act (as Romano Guardini suggests) is so identified with the primitive and artisan modes of work, that it is to be questioned whether man in this age with its new sociological structure is capable of it. 'Instead of talking about renewal', wrote Guardini in 1964, 'ought we not to consider how best to celebrate the sacred mysteries so that modern man can grasp their meaning through his own approach to truth?'¹

Every change in the mode of work holds promise of a new flowering of humanity, and is the source of a true humanism. This is evident in the change from primitive to artisan, and should be even more evident in that from artisan to scientific. Certainly the terms 'work' and 'worker' today cannot be equated with job or

¹ *Herder Correspondence* (August, 1964), 1, 8.

proletariat. 'A new and changing conception of the nature of man, a new and changing conception of the very meaning of human existence', claims Josef Pieper, 'comes to light in the claims expressed by the terms work and worker'.¹ History has suddenly been discovered as a movement towards the liberation of man and the transformation of humanity, and within the process of history itself. This of itself has brought about a great change in the approach to the eucharistic mystery, but the new dynamic conception of the eucharist with all its eschatological hopes for humanity stands in opposition to what, at first sight, looks like a rival eschatology without faith, and a future without God.

As Dr Leach, the social anthropologist, in his Reith Lectures for 1967, forcibly remarked: we ourselves have become responsible. It was essential, he claimed, to say that man has become like a god, and to understand what it meant: 'since godlike we can now alter nature, including that part of nature which is man himself . . . it has ceased to be true that nature is governed by immutable laws external to ourselves'.² Are the two languages of divinization to be found in the theology of the eucharist and in scientific humanism diametrically opposed, or is modern man, with the dominance he has acquired over nature through the scientific mode of work, in a better position to explore the mystery of Christ's passing through death to new life?

It should be admitted that very little of the immediacy of man's salvation comes over in the present liturgical rite of the eucharist. What we celebrate is often felt as an action that took place completely in the past, the fruits of which we share in the celebration. Far more immediate and topical is what is happening to us in the secular dimension. Perhaps a more positive approach to modern unbelief would help here, and become the starting-off point for a new form of collaboration between God's gift and man's achievement. There are many areas of human effort and achievement today where God is not directly involved. If one is an alcoholic, it may be possibly better to join Alcoholics Anonymous than hope to cure one's disability by swearing a solemn vow at the altar: the stability of marriage might be better secured by a greater sexual maturity than by hoping that the grace of the sacrament of marriage will take the place of nature, and so on. If the age of naivety is over, one will more respect a transcendent God the less one makes a

¹ Pieper, Josef, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (London, 1952), p. 29.

² 'Reith Lectures' in *The Listener* (London, 16th November 1967), p 621.

convenience of him, in order to rid oneself of certain disabilities in the human condition capable of solution through greater human care and concern. If unbelief happens to be a norm of human existence in an industrialized, urbanized society, it simply raises the permanent conflict in man between faith and sin, life and death to a different level. A greater sense of the immediacy of the mysterious action of God in the eucharistic celebration would be gained, were those sharing the mystery more conscious of the areas of conflict between faith and sin in their present situation yet to be resolved. The divine saving action is always topical, but it needs to be experienced as such.

The awareness in industrialized society that men individually are responsible for their lives, and are collectively responsible for the world in which they live, disposes one better to enter divine mystery. The mood is one of being on the way, not having arrived before one's time. It is a mood that the modern cinema, born out of the contemporary mode of work, has been attempting to express for some time. It is the theme of 'the unhappy ending'. In life there are no happy endings, no ready-made answers, no neatly-parcelled solutions with a fifty-year guarantee, no room for 'leave-it-to-fate' attitudes. Life is always marked by historicity and involved in continuous development; truth already possessed is the spur to press on to seek it in a further unfolding.

It is no accident that the same mood has been restored to the eucharistic mystery, prepared for chiefly in the work of Odo Casel, monk of Maria Laach, and expressed in Vatican II's *Constitution on the Liturgy*. Commenting on Casel's mystery theology, Charles Davis contrasts a static view of the eucharist with the dynamic: 'Very often we think of grace in a static way as a sort of fluid poured into the soul as a vessel when we receive the sacraments. It is indeed a quality inherent in a soul, but it is at the same time a dynamic force that penetrates and changes our being, and then impels us onward in a movement of loving return to the Father'.¹

Eucharistic devotion today is no longer adequately expressed by regarding Christ as the prisoner of the tabernacle: such hymns as Faber's *Sweet Sacrament Divine* lull rather than excite. A better understanding of the eucharist should impel one, not to remain in some spiritual ivory tower sitting in judgment on the world, but to come to grips with one's times, and to give added significance to the historical

¹ Davis, Charles, *Liturgy and Doctrine* (London, 1960), p 67.

process in which one is involved by the very fact of one's human condition. How this is to find expression in existing ritual and practice may call for a complete revolution in eucharistic celebration.

In the mass of the word, reforms can make and have made to a limited extent the mass more relevant and topical, particularly through imaginative and informed prayers of the faithful, and a homily that uses contemporary history equally with the scriptures and the Fathers for its sources. In the *anaphora* or canon of the mass, a new mentality is necessary if the 'memorial' of the Lord's death is to mean more than reference to a past event. But here biblical research helps one to re-capture the biblical mentality, and to celebrate the memory of an event in the past as something also happening at the very moment it is celebrated. The average mass-goer has to become increasingly conscious that Christ's mystery is also in his own history and in the history of his times. It is to be questioned, however, whether the *anaphora* in the roman rite encourages this kind of consciousness. Certainly a trend among some who have been inspired by the *aggiornamento* is to by-pass the formalistic eucharistic celebration and meet Christ rather in the historical human community. For these the *aggiornamento* or up-dating of the Church is no mere window-dressing, but a definite transition from classicism to historical consciousness. If the Church is the sacrament of the world, then the agenda for the Church is the world.

Recent research into the history of the canon of the mass (and research in the Church is fast gaining ground, as it is in industry, as of primary importance in increasing the fertility or catholicity of its mission) shows that at each stage in its development it gave proper expression to the theological pre-occupations of the times. Any change in the *anaphora* today should give expression to the new insights the Church has discovered about its nature and mission. As the sacrament of the world, it exercises its God-given task within the life of the human community and of the times. There is very little indication in the roman canon of this concern. Rather God's saving act appears to be restricted to the Church as community, not to the Church as movement, and leaves unmentioned the incorporation of universal humanity in Christ. Yet in the *Constitution on the Church* one reads: 'The conditions of this age lend special urgency to the Church's task of bringing all men to full union with Christ, since mankind today is joined together more closely than ever before by social, technical and cultural bonds'.¹

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

As the sacrament of unity, the eucharist often fails to express in its celebration that catholicity which is the concomitant of its unity, the inner quality that achieves its unity. By contrast, people cannot fail to notice the extreme catholicity or fertility of modern work. In *Pacem in Terris* are listed events and happenings that have been brought about within the industrial system, so many signs of the times indicating the direction in which modern society is developing, and to be read aright by the people of God: the emancipation of the labouring-classes, the recognition of woman's place in public life, the emancipation of peoples who were once or still are colonized, universal planning, the unification of the world, the progressive socialization of various aspects of human life, economic, cultural and spiritual.

Odo Casel described the modern liturgical movement as the most significant and the most promising phenomenon in modern catholicism, no doubt having in mind that famous sentence of Pius X in the *Motu Proprio on Sacred Music*, which he gave as the basic plan of the sacramental apostolate:

Animated as we are with the most ardent desire to see the true christian spirit once again in every way re-awake and grow strong among all the faithful, the first thing to which we must attend is the holiness and dignity of the temple in which our people assemble for the one purpose of acquiring that spirit from its first and indispensable source, namely their own active participation in the sacred mysteries and in the solemn public prayer of the Church.¹

The third missionary era of the Church was inaugurated at this moment. Its special characteristic has been a new organic concept of unity among men, a new understanding of the relationship between unity and catholicity. Human values in their great diversity all have their proper place in the Kingdom: kings bring their glory and nations their treasures. The greater the diversity and complexity of human life, the more evident becomes its underlying unity. This is why today, the need for the Church to listen to the world is accepted as prior to the need for the world to listen to the Church – an important first principle of all missionary action.

So it is not surprising, though sometimes exceptional, that a parishioner in a London suburb, who gives no welcome to the

¹ *Motu Proprio on Sacred Music* (Conception, Missouri, 1945), p 3.

introduction of the vernacular into the eucharistic liturgy in his local church, discovers for the first time in his life what unity means in its divine sense while attending mass in the vernacular whilst on holiday in France.

Ours is an age of exchange: this marks the fourth stage in the evolution of modern work. First there was the age of competition, then the age of direction; the age of human relations in industry followed, now giving place to the age of exchange. One should see this pattern emerging in liturgical life. Gone are the days of the mass-produced member of the Church, sometimes no more than a means to be used for an institutional or ideological end. Now every member of the Church must represent at the banquet of the eucharist what in his own humanity he represents of the human race. To be a valid symbol of the gathering of the nations, his own presence in his local christian assembly around the table of the Lord has to correspond to the part he is playing as worker in the world industrial complex. 'The more I examine myself', wrote Teilhard de Chardin, 'the more I discover the psychological truth: that no one lifts his little finger to do the smallest task unless moved, however obscurely, by the conviction that he is contributing infinitesimally (at least indirectly) to the building of something definitive – that is to say, to your work, my God'.¹

The isolation of the eucharist from a world of total work exists because the christian finds it difficult to relate his human condition to his divine calling to work with the Father as co-partner in the joint enterprise of human salvation. There are many reasons for this. It has often been taught that work is a result of the fall, neither natural to man as flight to a bird, nor as a requirement of his earthly condition. The human being has for long been regarded in christian thought and practice as some kind of angel minding the machine of his body: as an embodied soul, not as an animated body. Present reform in the liturgy tends to correct such mis-representation, distortion and parody. 'Before bearing the image of the celestial man', wrote the doctor of asceticism, St Bernard, 'we must begin by bearing that of man terrestrial. That which is spiritual does not precede that which is animal: on the contrary, the spiritual comes only in the second place'.²

If one of the blemishes of modern industrialism has been to re-

¹ Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin* (London, 1964), p 55-56.

² St Bernard, *Letters*, 'Letter XI to Guigo I, prior of the Grande-Chartreuse'.

place history with technology, and to use the human person as a mere means to a technological end, the human worker himself has proved to be a very recalcitrant cog in the vast wheel-work of material production. Industrial psychology is indeed no more than an aid to a more personally satisfying and fulfilling mode of work, but its findings confirm that, to be fully productive, the modern worker must be regarded as a whole person, as a complete psychosomatic unity. Far more important than the discovery of new materials and the use of new energy for higher production of material goods, are new and better human relationships within the working group. Group dynamics as a science has thrown much-needed light on how people work and live together. Communications, as a science, has also taken as its starting-point the worker as person.

Today we live in an industrialized society where such matters as the status of the average worker, subsidiarity of function in running an enterprise, joint management-worker consultative bodies, and so on, are taken for granted. Much more of this awareness of the human person as workman should come into the celebration of the eucharistic mystery. To sense in the mystery that he is a co-partner with the Father, the christian around the altar must be more aware that he is learning the art of partnership every moment of his working life. In using his hands, his eyes, his ears, his tongue in building the earth, he is preparing them for their final transformation when his transfigured body will grasp the eternal presence and enter into divine glory.

God's gift and man's achievement: these are not irreconcilables. The scriptures teach, of course, that there is always a contradiction present between the bread won by human effort and the bread from heaven; a conflict of two wills, as there is in human wisdom and the wine that is God's wisdom. In the eucharistic mystery we celebrate the passage from sin-laden nature to the glory of the one member of the human race who was sufficiently open to the Father's will to win the right to become his partner in the work of human salvation. He ate the bread of perfect obedience, and himself became that bread: he drank the cup of his Father's wisdom, and himself became that wisdom. He gives to those who believe in him as the long-awaited messiah, the perfect man and the perfect Son. The liberation and transformation of humanity that the Father achieved in his own Son is the mysterious action which he completes in every member of the human race. It is a work that is going on in a variety of ways: in a George Stakhanov, miner of the Donetz Basin,

who lifts with his team more coal in a single stint than ever before achieved, because of an ideal, the current five year plan, which transforms both himself as a worker and his work; in british factory workers during a war, who, after a tour by Battle of Britain pilots will daub on their gun-parts, bombs and aircraft crates 'with love to Hitler' and 'first stop Berlin'; in even the lowest-paid industrial worker, who, with a sense of human solidarity, works to cure some industrial dispute; in any young worker with a growing social conscience, who wants to help common humanity and volunteers to work for the spread of justice in any newly-developing country.

There still remains the task of the human worker gathered round the christian altar. Without his presence in the world, the world has no knowledge of the truth that the plenitude of its humanity lies in Christ's blessed hold upon the universe. 'Our work', writes de Chardin, 'appears to us, in the main, as a way of earning our daily bread. But its essential virtue is on a higher level: through it we complete in ourselves the subject of the divine union; and through it again we somehow make to grow in stature the divine term of the one with whom we are united, our Lord Jesus Christ'.¹

Has the eucharistic ritual to some extent hidden from us the eucharistic mystery itself that works itself out in life, in its everyday tasks, conflicts and achievements? Certainly the eucharistic celebration as we now have it needs the counterpart in its own production lines of the trouble-shooter, expediter and problem-hunter in industry, if it is to be as obedient to the human condition as it is to the divine call to act with the Father.

Man's dreams have always been of boundless wealth. He stands now at a point in human history when there is almost nothing he cannot make with the help of technology, a process that knows of no unforeseeable end. If the christian can convince him that still he is content with too little, and that the eucharist is the pledge of the plenitude of a self-giving Father, he will become the good workman, competent and skilled in revealing in human work, in this day and age, its full significance as also the work of a son of God. What we celebrate in the eucharist is man and his work passing through death to new life, and receiving back its proper signification. Without Christ's priesthood, the world of work, despite its massive achievements in ennobling mankind, remains a dead world.

¹ Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin* (London, 1964), p 63.