

OUR REBELLIOUS WILLS

by PLACID MURRAY

A STUDY of a particular theme in our liturgical texts can be a useful contribution to spiritual theology, provided that one follows an objective method, and does not force the liturgical data into an artificial synthesis. For this theme of 'Our Rebellious Wills' I have limited my investigations to the collects of the missal, in order to take advantage of the systematic treatment offered in the works of the late Dom Capelle and Dom Brou.¹

One basic fact on which both our authors insist, and which has a direct bearing on our subject, is that many of our collects were originally composed with an ulterior motive of stating the Catholic doctrine on grace against the pelagian heresy. Since this is so, we may expect the prayers to offer us some exquisite flowers of St Augustine's doctrine on grace. The formulation of the phrases does not come from St Augustine himself, but the substance of the doctrine is his. Dom Brou has gone to considerable trouble to vindicate as frequently as possible the authorship of St Gregory the Great for many of these prayers; he is assiduous in illustrating the vocabulary of the prayers from parallel passages in St Gregory's scriptural commentaries. In one interesting confrontation of this type, Dom Brou is able to establish – I think, conclusively – that the *pravae cogitationes* mentioned in one of the prayers, are not the 'bad thoughts' of impurity, but the 'evil attitude of murmuring'.

¹ B. Capelle, O.S.B., *Travaux liturgiques de doctrine et d'histoire*. I (1955) 197–266; L. Brou, O.S.B., *Les Oraisons des Dimanches après la Pentecôte, Commentaire liturgique* (1959), and *Les Oraisons Dominicales (deuxième série), De l'Avent à la Trinité* (1960). In the following notes, these three books are referred to respectively as Capelle I, Brou I, Brou II. Dom Capelle's treatment of the prayers dates from about 1930, while Dom Brou's is of the decade 1950–1960. Brou is more minutely historical, while Capelle takes a wider view. Their judgments as to the authorship of the prayers do not always coincide; they differ too in some details of interpretation; but, on the whole, taken together, they provide a reasonably comprehensive treatment of the entire temporal cycle of the missal, sufficient for the purposes of this article.

I have not treated of the season of Lent, although this should obviously come first in any treatment of the teaching of the liturgy on penance and conversion. Nos. 55 and 56 of *La Maison-Dieu* (1958) on *La pénitence dans la Liturgie* contain much excellent material on Lent, notably *La Pénitence quadragésimale dans le missel romain* by Pierre Jounel, loc. cit. no. 56, pp. 30–49.

Since murmuring is the most characteristic state of a will in rebellion, let us have a closer look at the text of this prayer. It is the collect of the second Sunday of Lent, and in these days of ecumenism we may adopt here the translation given in the Book of Common Prayer:

Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul (*et a pravis cogitationibus mundemur in mente*).

Having established, on textual grounds, St Gregory's authorship of this prayer, Dom Brou finds the true meaning of *pravae cogitationes* in a parallel passage of the same author's – his commentary on Job 19, 12. The bad thoughts in question here are precisely those which adversity brings in its train: the urge to complain against God. The opening phrase of this prayer, '... we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves', as well as being a tacit correction of any pelagian or semi-pelagian denial of the necessity of grace, is a sharp lesson to the 'rebellious will' of its inability to subdue its own fault-finding with God's ways.¹

The very phrase 'rebellious wills' occurs in the secret of the fourth Sunday after Pentecost:

Oblationibus (nostris), quaesumus, Domine placare susceptis: et ad te nostras etiam rebelles compelle propitius voluntates. Per Dominum.

The original context of this prayer is a Mass *In tribulatione* of the Gelasian Sacramentary.² Here again, we shall not be far wrong in seeing the connection between 'tribulation' and our rebellion: it is adversity which makes us bridle against God's ways. In this prayer we ask that our unwilling wills be forced by God to turn to him, so that having accepted our gifts, he may receive our wills as well.

The secret of the fifth Sunday after Epiphany, curiously enough, also derived from a similar passage in the Gelasian Sacramentary, has a synonymous phrase *nutantia corda tu dirigas*.³ To explain the

¹ *Deus qui conspicias omni nos virtute destituti*. Cf Brou II, 77–82, on the collect for the second Sunday in Lent.

² Ed. L. C. Mohlberg (Rome 1960), *Liber Tertius XXXIII*, p. 197.

³ *Ibid.*, *Liber Tertius XXXVII*, p. 199.

word *nutantia* Brou refers us to Ephesians: 'we are no longer to be children, no longer to be like storm-tossed sailors, driven before the wind of each new doctrine that human subtlety may propound';¹ and to the Epistle of St James: 'One who hesitates is like a wave out at sea, driven to and fro by the wind . . . a man who is in two minds will find no rest wherever he goes'.² 'Wavering hearts' are those which fail to set themselves steadily on God.

Although these two secrets deal with our wills and our hearts in an immediately eucharistic context, oddly enough most of the texts which treat of our subject are to be found in the collects rather than in the secrets; nor is there any explicit reference to the effects of the eucharist in them. From a close scrutiny of these prayers, one can see what a mistake it would be to make any of our future liturgical prayers too self-consciously 'liturgical'. Although these collects were composed for liturgical use, they do not hesitate to draw on the most explicitly theological language to formulate their petitions. Incidentally, we may recognize the validity of Baumstark's 'law', that theological prayers of this nature always betoken a developed, not a primitive state of the liturgy.³

In the last text which we were considering, *nutantia corda*, there occurs the incisive word *dirigas*. The collect of the Sunday after Christmas makes the specific request of God: *dirige actus nostros in beneplacito tuo*. In a fine commentary on this prayer, Capelle notes: 'certainly our will regulates and directs our acts. But how weak it is! and on what disastrous paths does it entangle so often our life! Then the christian, taught by experience, or by a secret fear and hope, turns to God. He knows that God holds the helm of the soul, and that with a skilful hand, without violence, he is able to influence hearts . . .'⁴

The need for God's direction of our acts is expressed equivalently in several other prayers by the phrase *sine Te*, without thee. The translations in the Book of Common Prayer run as follows:

¹ Eph 4, 14.

² Jas 1, 8. According to Bruylants' *Index Verborum* of the Roman Missal (P. Bruylants, O.S.B., *Les Oraisons du Missel romain, Texte et Histoire*, I (1952) 217-281) the word *nutantia* does not occur elsewhere in the missal, and Brou tells us he has not come across the word in St Gregory's works. To have recourse then to the New Testament is justifiable since, as a recent study by Dom Ashworth points out (H. Ashworth, O.S.B., 'Some Missal Prayers in the light of Pauline Theology', *Liturgy* Vol. XXXII, no. 2, April 1963, 31), biblical theology is one of the important sources of our missal texts.

³ A. Baumstark, *Liturgie comparée*, 3rd. ed., revised by B. Botte O.S.B., 1953, 68-69.

⁴ Capelle I, 213.

... and because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without thee (First Sunday after Trinity),
 ... that we, who cannot do anything that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will (Ninth Sunday after Trinity),
 ... because the frailty of man without thee cannot but fall (Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity),
 ... because it cannot continue in safety without thy succour (Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity),
 ... without thee we are not able to please thee (Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity).

This is indeed an eloquent litany of man's incapacity; in these prayers, however, it is always joined to a petition full of confidence. We appeal to God's *miseratio*, which is something much richer than his forgiveness of our sin. God's mercy works beforehand with us, it forestalls our difficulties by fortifying in advance our weakness.¹ This is expressed in the collect of the eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost:

May the working of your merciful goodness direct our hearts,
 we pray you: because without you we are incapable of pleasing you.²

A frequent petition in these collects is that we be given the grace to love what God commands. The collect of the fourth Sunday after Easter puts this grace before us in a most attractive light. First of all, it acknowledges that God alone can give inner harmony and unity to our minds, *unius efficis voluntatis*. This refers to the concentration of the soul in a tendency which it will share in common with all the faithful. Next we glance at the glittering *mundana varietas*, the kaleidoscope of earthly change, and pray to have our hearts steadied against these fluctuations by fixing them there where real joy abides. This will be achieved if we love what God commands, if we long for what he promises. We must take the phrase 'what you command' in its most comprehensive sense, to include the detail of God's intimate demands over our own secret loves. The *mundana varietas* solicits each of us in a thousand ways: we pray for the grace to love what God commands in order to keep to the one safe way, *unius efficis voluntatis*.³

¹ Capelle I, 261-262. It is in this sense that Our Lady is the greatest masterpiece of God's mercy.

² *Dirigat corda nostra, quaesumus, tuae miserationis operatio: quia tibi sine te placere non possumus.*

³ Capelle I, 235; Brou II, 124-125.

It is not enough however to steady the wavering, to subdue the rebellious, will. We must produce the fruit of action, *et voluntate et actione placere*. The first Sunday after Epiphany has this thought developed in its collect:

O Lord, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people which call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same.

Capelle comments on this prayer: 'Man's intellectual weakness and his moral impotence are presupposed here: the ability to see and to be able to act must be asked from God with supplications . . . it is the agony of so many souls that they do not see what they ought to do (*quae agenda sunt*), and numberless too are the feeble wills which beg to be supported in order to have the power to do (*ut convalescant*).¹

Most of the foregoing texts make no direct reference to any one mystery of Christ; each of them expresses in its own way some facet of christianity. For a more direct consideration of Christ's influence over our wills, we must turn to the collects of the greater feasts. Thus, on Palm Sunday, we hear of Christ's example of humility: the passion of Christ is seen above all from the moral point of view, as an example. It is pride which caused the fall of man; obedience and humility, after the pattern of Christ, will be the way for each of us to return to God . . . 'that we, who have the lesson of his suffering before us, may enjoy the companionship of his resurrection' (*ut et patientiae ipsius habere documenta et resurrectionis consortia mereamur*).²

The prayer for Easter Sunday is the occasion of a friendly quarrel between our authors: Capelle finds our present text disappointingly weak in its conclusion, and opts for a variant reading: Brou energetically defends the text as it stands, both as being the original and as offering a perfectly satisfying meaning. The following table will enable the reader to judge the differences in the texts:

Hadrianum 88, I & Roman Missal.

*Deus, qui hodierna die, per Unigenitum tuum,
aeternitatis nobis aditum devicta morte reserasti;
vota nostra, quae praeveniendo aspiras, etiam
adjuvando proseguere. Per Dominum.*³

Almighty God, who today through thine only-begotten Son

¹ Capelle, I, 214-215.

² Capelle, I, 229.

³ Table as in Brou, II, 100.

Jesus Christ hast overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life:

We humbly beseech thee, that as by thy special grace preventing us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect; through Jesus Christ our Lord . . .

Gelasian I, XLVI: Dom Paschae

Deus, qui per Unigenitum tuum aeternitatis nobis aditum, devicta morte, reserasti;

da nobis quaesumus, ut qui Resurrectionis Dominicae solemnia colimus, per innovationem tui Spiritus, a morte animae resurgamus. Per Dominum.

Almighty God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life:

grant we beseech thee, that we who celebrate the solemn liturgy of Easter day, may, through the renewal of thy Spirit, rise again from the death of the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord . . .

Capelle feels that the second half of the prayer (in the missal text, i.e.: the 'Gregorian' text) does not do justice to the paschal mystery outlined in the first half. Brou, on the other hand, having argued from textual evidence that the existing missal text is the original one, finds the link between the two parts in the meaning to be given to *vota*. St Gregory (the author of the prayer according to Brou) leaves the content of *vota* very general and indeterminate. It covers all those intimate movements of soul aroused in each of us by God's anticipating grace. The object prayed for, then, in this Easter collect is that these *vota* would be brought to an effective fulfilment, now that the gates of eternal life have swung back to admit entrance to us through Christ's paschal victory over death. Here again, the clause *quae praeveniendo aspiras, etiam adjuvando proseguere*, has a distinctly, if not obtrusively, anti-pelagian note.¹

The four collects of Advent have a biblical background: partly Psalm 79 *Qui regis Israel, intende*,² and partly the *Benedictus*. Though addressed directly to Christ in the present ending, *Qui vivis*, they were not originally so, since Brou has clearly shown this is a later

¹ Brou, II, 198.

² Note particularly v. 3 'Rouse up thy power and come', *excita potentiam tuam et veni*.

substitution for the formula *Per Dominum*.¹ What are the *imminentibus peccatorum nostrorum periculis*? Brou is inclined to see in them the political upheavals of St Gregory's day, looked on by the saint as a punishment for the sins of rebellious men.

The collect of the third Sunday of Advent is particularly relevant to our theme:

Lord, we beg a hearing for our prayers.

By the grace of thy coming light up the darkness of our minds.²

Capelle here opts for the variant reading in the Gelasian as being the original text: *cordis* (heart) *nostri tenebras, lumine* (light) *visitationis illustra*. He then proceeds to comment: '... the heart of the sinner is more sombre than his mind. The mind deprived of light desires to see, while the blinded heart dreads the light. It is this poor heart which Christ is to light up by his coming. An intimate and secret activity, penetrating to the marrow; a radical conversion which makes us long for the truth from which we had shrunk. How near the mind is to enlightenment when the will desires the light'.³

In the prayer for the feast of the baptism of our Lord, we have a clear indication of Christ's action on us – or rather in us:

*Deus, cuius Unigenitus in substantia nostrae carnis apparuit: praesta, quaesumus; ut per eum, quem similem nobis foris agnovimus, intus reformari mereamur.*⁴

We recognize Christ *foris* by our profession of faith in the Incarnation, *similem nobis*: we pray that we may become like him inwardly, *similes intus* – *intus reformari*.

The influence of the eucharist on our wills is expressed in those secrets and postcommunions which emphasize the propitiatory character of the Mass. These texts are very frequent in the missal, and Dom Brou has shown that in almost every case they come from St Gregory, who both in his Sacramentary and in his other works has insisted on this effect of the Mass.⁵ It is interesting to find such an explicit statement of the propitiatory nature of the Mass dating from practically a thousand years before the Council of Trent.

¹ Brou, II, 9.

² *Aurem tuam, quaesumus, Domine, precibus nostris accomoda: et mentis nostrae tenebras, gratia tuae visitationis illustra.*

³ Capelle, I, 202–203.

⁴ O God, whose only-begotten Son appeared in the reality of our mortal flesh, grant us, we beg thee, that through him whom we recognise as like to us in outward form, we may be re-formed to his own inward likeness.

⁵ Brou, II, 36–39.

In these postcommunions, our texts take on a more intimate and urgent note. They endeavour to express in words, or at least to suggest in words, that operation of Christ's Spirit over us which takes place through holy communion. This wrestling of the Spirit of Christ with our rebellious will operates at a level where words are inadequate: the soul is momentarily arrested in its wilful way, and like the psalmist can only say:

Truly I have set my soul
in silence and peace.
A weaned child on its mother's breast,
even so is my soul.¹

We know, however, from bitter experience that this momentary lulling of self-will can prove to be evanescent, and that is why the postcommunions constantly pray that our conduct may be brought into line with our eucharistic faith and experience. Commenting on the postcommunion of the eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Brou shows us one example from among many of this petition. The original text (Leonine Sacramentary) runs: *Sit nobis, Domine, reparatio mentis et corporis caeleste mysterium et cuius exequimur actionem sentiamus effectum.*²

Actio here must be taken in its splendid antique meaning of 'sacrifice'. We are told in this prayer that the sacrifice which we render to God *exequimur cultum* is the very means by which God will restore our bodies and our souls.³ Again, on the eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost we ask to be made worthy of the gift we have received: *Gratias tibi referimus, Domine, sacro munere vegetati: tuam misericordiam deprecantes: ut dignos nos eius participatione perficias.*⁴

Here we do not stop at thanksgiving, but go on to a prayer of petition, of almost disinterested love: to be made more worthy, not for our own satisfaction, but on account of the *sacrum munus*.⁵ The postcommunion of the twentieth Sunday after Pentecost brings the thought one step further: *Ut sacris, Domine, reddamur digni muneribus: fac nos, quaesumus, tuis semper obedire mandatis.*⁶

The object demanded, obedience to God's commands, is asked not merely for its own sake, but in view of the eucharist. Our moral

¹ *The Psalms: A New Translation*. Fontana Books (1963). Ps 130: 2.

² May this heavenly sacrament, Lord, renew us in mind and body, that we may feel the power of the mystery we celebrate.

³ Brou, I, 47-49.

⁴ Thou hast fed us, Lord, with thy sacred gift. We give thee thanks and beg thee in thy mercy to make us worthy of our share in it.

⁵ Brou, I, 95.

⁶ We beg thee, Lord, make us ever obedient to thy commands so that we may become worthy of thy sacred gifts.

life is a condition for our eucharistic union, and not *vice versa* (the eucharist one among many supports of our moral life).

The secret of the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost links up our eucharistic offerings with our conversion of heart. Having made a reference to the receiving of the gifts offered by God's people, together with their prayers, we beg God to turn all our hearts to him. Freed from earthly lusts, we may then pass over to desires of heaven.

To sum up. Liturgical prayer is often reproached with being too cold, too formal, too ancient, too roman. I think the excellent studies of Capelle and Brou should, on the contrary, make us vibrate in sympathy with these prayers. The anti-pelagian origin of many of them has only increased their usefulness for us, by their insistence on the necessity for God's grace at the very root of our supernatural activity. They have rightly seen that the lessons of adversity may be lost on us, because we become embittered against God's ways. They put us on our guard against these 'bad thoughts'. Their authors have felt the powerful tug of the *mundana varietas* with its insidious claims on our attention. They teach us too that the real relation between moral life and eucharistic union is that human life is to be submitted to Christ.

One prayer of the ordinary of the Mass, which lies outside the material for this article, but which is relevant to the theme, is the second prayer before the priest's communion, *Domine Jesu Christe qui ex voluntate Patris*. Father Jungmann says that 'in bold strokes, the whole pattern of christianity is presented to view . . . the things we ask are of magnitude: deliverance from all sin, the strength to be true to his commandments, and – the same petition which we made in the instant before the consecration – the grace of final perseverance, so that we may never be separated from him . . .'.¹ *Fac me tuis semper inhaerere mandatis*: In spirit and text this prayer is allied to the medieval 'apologies' of which we still have a splendid example printed in our missals, amongst its prayers of preparation for Mass. The passage of the prayer of St Ambrose for Thursdays contains a sentence which would well deserve to be used by any 'rebellious will': *Aufer cor lapideum de carne nostra et da nobis cor carneum, quod te amet, te diligat, te delectatur, te sequatur, te perfruatur*. 'Take from us our hearts of stone, and give us hearts of flesh to love thee and long for thee and delight in thee: hearts that in following thee shall find the consummation of all joy'.²

¹ *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, 2 (1955) p. 350.

² *The Missal in Latin and English* (1949) p. 668.