

THE LORD'S DAY

By PLACID MURRAY

THE christian idea of Sunday is a major point in the liturgical renewal proposed by the Second Vatican Council, with Sunday mass as the living focus of community worship and the chief source of fresh christian life. Truths that apply to any celebration of mass are particularly applicable here, when the faithful assemble for the Sunday mass of obligation. It is for no mere reasons of convenience that this mass of obligation is fixed for Sunday: our traditional Sunday gathering goes back to a remote period before Sunday had become a day of rest from work. It was not abstention from servile work which lay at the root of the christian Sunday, but a different idea altogether, taken from the new world of christian values. Christians met together to celebrate Christ's resurrection in a weekly feast, and they did so on the very day of the week when Christ rose from the dead.

What has Sunday mass to offer us over and above week-day mass? Principally, of course, the presence of the faithful as a body, as a people: in fact as the people of God, to use the title employed in the Council's *Dogmatic Constitution* on the Church. There is no doubt that in popular centres like the Birmingham Oratory one can get the feeling of community at weekday masses, like the lunch-hour or evening dialogue mass. And it is undeniable that very often there is a note of repose and recollection at these masses which will be achieved only with difficulty at the long succession of packed congregations at Sunday mass. And yet, in spite of the crowds and the fuss, it is the Sunday mass that we must try to see with fresh eyes, particularly in the light of the newer insights on the eucharist offered to us in the Council's two great constitutions, that on the liturgy and that on the Church.

Sunday mass and the people of God

Speaking of the mystery of the Church as God's people, the Council says:

God called together the company of those who look with faith on Jesus the author of salvation and the source of unity

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and peace, and he established the Church to be to one and all the visible sacrament of this saving unity.¹

This visible sacrament of the Church becomes plain to view when the faithful assemble for Sunday mass; as with all sacraments, it is only faith which can decode the message and read the symbol. There are of course other visible manifestations of the Church besides the liturgical assembly; but none is so near to hand and yet so mysterious, if only we have eyes to see: here gathered around the altar is the pilgrim Church, with a place in this world, yet on her way to a city that is one day to be. God calls each soul one by one, but he does not call them alone; baptized into one body, they have here their rightful place and share in offering mass as the people of God. 'The sacred nature . . . of this priestly community is realized in act through the sacraments and through faith'.² The effect of Sunday mass celebrated with and for and by a community should be to display the unity of God's people: a unity which has sacramental bonds stronger and deeper than any human rule could forge.

Sunday mass and the word of God

To this people of God thus assembled on the weekly commemoration day of Christ's resurrection, the risen Saviour is still proclaiming the gospel.³ We should seize eagerly on this new dimension of mass, which the Council has revitalized by allowing the use of modern languages for the liturgy of the word. Up to now the barrier of language, though circumvented by individual reading of the missal texts, effectively blotted out the living sound of a living voice proclaiming the message of the scriptures to the assembly. The readings for the ordinary 'green' Sundays are based on a plan of continuous passages from the New Testament; it is to be hoped that the eventual enrichment and re-planning of the readings, as promised in Article 35 of the Constitution will make the Easter character of the Sunday mass stand out even more clearly.

Some priests have misgivings about the importance given to the homily in the Constitution; they feel that scriptural homilies will not cover the ground systematically enough for the instruction that the people need. The true answer to this stock objection is that even if

¹ *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, Ch 2, No 9.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

³ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 33. For a commentary on this presence of Christ in his word, see *The Furrow* (May 1964), pp 278-282.

scripture is unsystematic it is highly thematic: one can hardly open a page of the New Testament without soon alighting on one of the major themes of the biblical image of our faith – the ventures of faith, the cross of Christ, the gift of the Spirit, the kingdom of God.

The Easter tonality of the Sunday mass

There is a certain practical difficulty in bringing home to people on an ordinary Sunday that we are celebrating the Lord's resurrection at mass, because in point of fact the texts of our roman mass for the 'green' Sundays do not make such explicit reference to the resurrection as do, for example, the Sunday texts of the byzantine liturgy.¹ It is then by emphasizing certain Easter elements which are present in every mass that we shall best bring out the Easter character of our Sunday mass.

Here the Council comes to our aid with an enriched theology of the mass, at least in broad outlines and in basic insights. In presenting the mass as a renewal of Christ's paschal mystery, it invites us to a share in this same mystery. Hitherto we have generally been accustomed perhaps to look on the mass as the sacrifice of Christ, with the idea of his death (chiefly) in the foreground; the Council explicitly adds in the idea of resurrection.

... he wished to entrust to his beloved spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection, a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten ...²

Death and resurrection are here seen as intimately correlated both in Christ and in us; through his death Christ passed over into a new sphere, rising to a new life, where he invites us to follow him, by a similar pattern of death and resurrection. This is the most secret recess of the enclosed garden of the eucharist; the risen Saviour encounters us in our faith and communicates to us the likeness of the new Adam.

Sunday mass, the community paschal banquet

In the passage of the Constitution just quoted, the Council refers to the mass as a paschal banquet. Sunday mass should manifest this dimension of the mass in a double way, in its Easter character and in

¹ Dalmais, I. H., O. P.: 'Le dimanche dans la liturgie byzantine', *La Maison-Dieu* 46, 1956, pp 60-66.

² *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 47.

its community nature. We should not be afraid that the idea of a sacrificial meal will turn the mass into a simple eucharistic service. The mass is a meal, but not only a meal: it is the sacrifice of Christ, the liturgy of his Word, the renewal of his covenant; it is the liturgical celebration of his paschal mystery.

How far should we try to give our Sunday mass the very appearance of a sacred meal? Or should we be content to distribute holy communion, resigning ourselves to the fact that, in practice, the mass has shed the outward form of a meal?

In a brief but extremely satisfying essay on the basic shape of the mass,¹ Fr Jungmann has recognized the merits of the case made out by recent authors, particularly Professor Pascher of Munich, emphasizing the mass as a sacred meal. But he adds:

It is quite another question whether or not it is necessary or even correct to regard the meal symbolism as the decisive and fundamental thing in the outward transaction of the Mass.²

Jungmann then proceeds to show that the sacrifice-symbolism is present in the mass, not very perceptibly indeed as regards Christ's own sacrifice, but quite perceptibly in the prayers and gestures which encase the core of the rite:

Christ's sacrificial oblation remains veiled, but the veil is composed of those very forms in which the self-offering of the co-redeeming co-sacrificing Church is expressed.³

Here then, as always in the liturgy, we must keep a balance between all the many-sided facets of the riches of our faith, and not impair the full truth by undue emphasis of a partial truth. This said, there remains no doubt a great practical task before us if we are to recapture once more the sense that our Sunday mass is a paschal banquet. Where large numbers of communicants approach the altar, the temptation will always be present for the priest to cut right across the true structure of the mass by distributing holy communion at any available time. Any such measures of expediency effectively stifle any genuine effort at following the directions of the Council.

The rite of the mass is to be revised in such a way that the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, as also the connection between them, may be more clearly manifested...⁴

¹ *Pastoral Liturgy*, 1962, pp 282-287.

² *Ibid.*, p 284.

³ *Ibid.*, p 285.

⁴ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 50.

A meal of course implies food, and when we are invited to someone's table, it would be discourteous to bring along our own food. But this invitation to the Lord's table is not to a stranger's house: it is our mother the Church who brings us to table, and Divine Wisdom, her bridegroom, feeds the Church's children with his own body, his own blood. The Church offers her gifts of bread and wine, earthly gifts, in order to receive the gifts from heaven. She loves to offer them, not in a mere perfunctory way, as the bare materials for the sacrifice, but in a deliberate way, associating the offerers with the gifts.

A whole history attaches to this gesture of offering, and an authentic tradition on this point is vindicated in the Constitution on the Liturgy.¹

That more perfect form of participation in the mass whereby the faithful, after the priest's communion, receive the Lord's body from the same sacrifice, is warmly recommended.²

Priests often dismiss this practice of consecrating the hosts offered at each mass as being unrealistic in view of 'pastoral conditions'. In a now famous retort to such an objection, Fr Herman Schmidt, S. J. answered that one 'should think more of possibilities than of difficulties'. Where one thinks of what can be done, it is relatively easy to arrange for hosts to be brought to the altar at the moment of the offertory for consecration at this very mass. If I may quote my own monastery's practice, we have it done every Sunday by one of the boys of the school. We use a special shallow metal dish (made in the Abbey metal-workshop) for the purpose.

The practical problem then is how to distribute holy communion to large numbers, at the correct time only, and make it evident that all are receiving together the one Bread – and still not lengthen mass unduly. We priests need expert help here, not only from our architects, but also perhaps from such lay professional men as work-study experts. At all costs we must maintain a reverent attitude towards each communicant, giving him time to answer Amen. An excellent Catholic mother recently remarked that her young children found that their second and subsequent communions were not at all like their first! Our duty is to see that each Sunday mass would be as recollected a ceremony as is the mass for first communicants.

¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

² Cf *Studies in Pastoral Liturgy*, 2 (Dublin, 1963), pp 157–8.

Sunday mass and the new covenant

A further aspect of the mystery of the mass is that it is the renewal of the covenant in Christ's blood. The word covenant no doubt sounds dour, and perhaps we shall be able to find a better one. But the mere difficulty of a word or phrase should not deter us from exploiting the riches of the doctrine. Here again, the Sunday mass, where a full congregation is present, is the appropriate setting for the people to learn this basic scriptural truth of the New Testament in the blood of Jesus. The doctrine of transubstantiation, while true in itself, could risk being a barrier to a development of this doctrine. We might be content to affirm that our Lord changed the substance of the bread and wine into his body and blood, as if this mystery had no reference to God's earlier dealings with his people. The change subserves a sacrificial purpose, and this purpose itself is revealed in the light of the former covenant of which the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks at such length. Here again, the people come into view:

The scene of your approach now is mount Sion, is the heavenly Jerusalem, city of the living God . . . here is Jesus, the spokesman of the new covenant, and the sprinkling of his blood, which has better things to say than Abel's had.¹

A Sunday mass, celebrated in an atmosphere of recollection, with the congregation aware of themselves as part of the people of God, listening to the word of God, entering into Christ's paschal mystery, partaking of a sacrificial banquet, and taken up in God's favour through his renewal of his covenant with men – this is the deep christian idea of Sunday.

The rest of the day

What of the rest of the day, when the family have come back from mass? How are they to spend Sunday in the spirit of Easter? When the Church has had her say at mass, should her faithful submit passively to the barrage of triviality, and worse, that is offered them in the Sunday newspapers and in a good deal of viewing time on television?

Conditions vary so much, not only from one country to another, but even within the same circles of society, that it is impossible to give any sort of adequate answer to this question without some preliminary empirical survey. Such a survey has not yet been undertaken here in Ireland, and the few remarks which follow are based merely on a limited personal experience.

¹ Heb 12, 22–24.

If I may be allowed to begin at home: Sunday during term time in a Benedictine school is a very busy day indeed, with a full round of debates, outings, games and so on. Our boys attend and participate in the community mass, and after that they have a free day with no study. One needs in the evening an acceptable evening service to punctuate the round of school activities and entertainment, and to strike once more the note of a Sunday community assembly. Since autumn 1964 we have substituted a scripture service instead of compline, which the boys were understanding less and less with each successive generation. The scripture service is planned on themes within the boys' capacity: the readers are taken from among themselves; suitable psalms and the *Magnificat* are sung; the whole service – including benediction – taking just twenty minutes. Both liturgically and psychologically we found it important not to omit benediction: liturgically because it links the celebration of the word with the sacrament, and psychologically because it prevents the idea that radical change is the essence of liturgical reform.

Of course a school is a captive audience, and what is viable in a school may not work outside in a parish church. At last year's Irish liturgical congress, after an excellent paper on this very theme of the christian idea of Sunday,¹ an objector from the floor made the point that no evening devotions could compete with the popular *Telefis Eireann* light programme, *The School around the Corner*. The obvious retort (alas! not thought of till afterwards) was 'What are you doing, Father, in the Church around the Corner?' The decline in attendance at Sunday evening devotions, it was pointed out some years ago,² is due to lack of variety and interest, which in turn, stems from the lack of initiative on the part of many of the clergy. In Ireland at present there is a televised bible service every Sunday evening. This was so novel that many viewers wrote to enquire what religion it belonged to, not realizing that it was a Catholic service on the lines of the new Constitution on the Liturgy!

In between the morning mass and the evening scripture service there lies the rest of the day: this must also be sanctified. Prescinding here from the activities of organizations like the Legion of Mary and the St Vincent de Paul Conferences, what ideal can one hold out for family life on Sunday? It is certain that the relative leisure of a

¹ Dom Vincent Ryan, O. S. B.: Every Sunday an Easter Sunday, *The Furrow* May 1964, pp 298–311. Further reading matter on the christian Sunday will be found in the references supplied in this article.

² *Studies in Pastoral Liturgy*, I (Dublin, 1961), p 251.

suburban family (and even Ireland today is more suburban than rural) can bring with it many spiritual tensions and temptations, not perhaps to grosser sin, but which may weaken the discipline of charity within the family. The pressures of the weekday timetables being withdrawn, people are thrown more upon themselves and are more likely to get on one another's nerves. Greater vigilance is needed in watching over one's own reactions to small irritants. Newman, in one of his hymns to his patron, St Philip Neri, prays for the grace not to get 'mad at trifles, complaining of heaven and complaining of earth'.

The future liturgical reform of the readings at mass might come to our help here, with a larger selection of the less abstruse passages of St Paul chosen for the Sunday epistles. These moral sections of St Paul need hardly any commentary: they need only one thing, practice!

Sunday and weekday

The french have a phrase about the *tristesse des lendemains des fêtes*, which refers not merely to the hang-over after a party, but also to that certain touch of melancholy which follows after our religious festivals. How quickly even a feast like Christmas passes away! Courage is needed to buckle on one's armour again for the daily round. If we succeed in giving the desired Easter tonality to our Sundays, particularly with the help of participation in a renewed liturgy, will the contrast between Sunday and the rest of the weekday become even more accentuated? The personal and family values which are elicited by a christian Sunday would seem to find little recognition or scope in the increasingly anonymous weekday world. The weekday world is not built to the scale of the family or of the human person, but to that of the world of business. The motive which dominates the weekday scene is profit, not christian service. The christian assembly, which looked so numerous and compact as a Sunday congregation at mass, is now wrenched out of recognition and splintered among the streets, the shops, the bus queues and the factories.

The liturgy of itself would not be sufficient to solve this problem, since, as we know from the Constitution:

The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church . . . she must prepare believers for the sacraments, teach them to observe all that Christ has commanded, and

invite them to all the works of charity, piety and the apostolate. For all these works make it clear that Christ's faithful, though not of this world, are to be the light of the world and to glorify the Father before men.¹

If the liturgy cannot train us in the details of a system able to cope with this modern problem, it can still contribute something very significant: the spirit which should animate the christian apostolate. This is excellently summed up in the collect for Low Sunday, which prays for the grace to hold on to, in conduct and in life, the Easter feast we have celebrated; in the same way, each Sunday should cast the light of Christ over the coming week.

¹ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 9.