IMITATE WHAT YOU ENACT

By J. D. CRICHTON

PROBABLY the greatest enemy of religion in all ages has been formalism, that is, the separation of its outward expression from its inner content. In worship this has consisted of an undue emphasis on ritual actions and detail at the expense of their inner meaning, with the consequent failure to see that liturgy commits its participants to the expression in living of what it contains. Personal religion divorced from liturgy leads to individualism and an unhealthy kind of introspection, and liturgy performed without any reference to the inner life of the spirit leads to spiritual desiccation. In this age of liturgical renewal it is important that the implications of the liturgy for the life of the spirit should be clearly seen. The desire of the Church is that the content and meaning of the liturgy be laid bare before the people of God, so that they will come to realise that they are committed to living out in their lives what they enact in their worship.

The connexion between life and liturgy has always been prominent in the roman liturgy, though largely hidden from the people by the use of latin and inadequate translations. Pius XII calls the liturgy itself to witness that inner worship and outward liturgy must go together: 'The sacred liturgy itself requires these two elements to be closely combined and repeatedly insists upon it whenever it enjoins some external act of divine worship – as when it exhorts us that our acts of fasting "may inwardly effect what they outwardly proclaim". Otherwise religion becomes nothing but an empty ceremony and pure formalism'.[1] If the liturgy is to have its due effect, worshippers must have the right dispositions. Various parts of the liturgy, e.g. Lent, provide us with the opportunity to acquire such dispositions and prompt us to make the effort as members of the mystical body to unite ourselves with Christ. To this, other practices, less closely associated with the liturgy, retreats, private prayer and so on, all minister and in the practical order are necessary if we are to worship God in spirit and in truth.

The *Constitution on the Liturgy* endorses this teaching and takes it

[1] *Mediator Dei* 25.

further. Popular devotions are commended, but they are to be derived from the liturgy and lead back to it.[1] If the liturgy is not the whole of the spiritual life, it is yet the summit of the Church's activity[2] to which all else should tend and minister. All are called to 'pray to the Father in secret' and we must all 'bear about in our body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodily frame'. This is why we ask the Lord that 'after accepting the offering of the spiritual victim, he may make of us 'an eternal gift'.[3]

The centre of the liturgy is the enactment of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ: 'The liturgy . . . moves the faithful, filled with the "paschal sacraments", to be "one in holiness"; it prays that "they may hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped by their faith"; the renewal in the eucharist of the covenant between God and man draws the faithful into the compelling love of Christ and sets them on fire . . .'[4] The liturgy must find its issue in life which begins with the paschal mystery that the liturgy enacts. Finally, it should be observed that the whole Constitution is built up on the theology of the paschal mystery, which is 'perpetuated' by the holy eucharist and is 'some way' made present by the celebration of the liturgical year. If then we are 'to imitate what we enact', it is to the paschal mystery that we must first turn our attention.

But first it is necessary to ask what exactly we mean by 'imitation'. The 'imitation of Christ' has often, perhaps usually, been regarded as an external copying of what Christ did: 'Endeavour to think of what Christ would have done in the circumstances in which you find yourself'; or 'contemplate our Lord in his passion and excite in yourself sentiments of self-offering, repentance', or whatever it might be. The liturgy goes much deeper than this. It is concerned to form Christ in us, to use the pauline expression. The first collect of Good Friday prays that the heritage of sin may be destroyed and that whereas we have borne the mark of the earthly Adam, we may now be 'conformed' to the second Adam, bearing in ourselves the likeness of Christ which is created in us by his grace. Here very explicitly the liturgy instructs us that the whole purpose of the paschal celebration is that we may be inwardly renewed in the depths of our minds and hearts. It is the message of St Paul: 'There must be a renewal in the inner life of your minds; you must be clothed in

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[1] *Constitution on the Liturgy* 13. [2] *Ibid* 10. [3] *Ibid* 12.
[4] *Ibid* 10.

the new self, which is created in God's image, justified and sanctified through the truth'.[1] The new self is nothing other than Christ; and the prayer refers to the image of the heavenly man Christ, the second Adam, which we must bear within us.[2] He is the Adam who has become a 'life-giving spirit' and through union with him we receive the Spirit who forms us after the pattern of Christ. The imitation of Christ means first of all living in Christ and for this we have to be made like him. He is the Son of God and we become adopted sons of God through him. This is one of the themes of the Christmas liturgy: we pray that, by his grace and the liturgy which we celebrate, the *sacrosancta commercia*, the encounter between God and man (made possible by the incarnation) – we may bear the image *(forma)* of him who made himself to be like us.[3] It is in fact this likeness to Christ that the liturgy communicates to us, principally in baptism, but at other times as well.

Once we have been engrafted into Christ, we can begin to live with him. Here again the starting point is the liturgy, and in particular the whole of the liturgical year: the means by which the members of the Church are able to encounter Christ in all the phases of his redeeming activity, set before them and made present to them in the recurring feasts and seasons of the year. It is here that personal prayer and personal spiritual effort also become important. For if we do not seek Christ in the pages of the gospel and if we never learn to speak to him in our hearts, the great festivals of the year will be largely without spiritual effect upon us. Given this personal effort, the celebration of the paschal mystery will show us the way to living with Christ; it will form or re-form us in his image.

Palm Sunday

At the opening of the great week we are left in no doubt about what the liturgical celebration requires of us. The procession of palms might seem to be no more than an external ceremony, or even a bit of play-acting. The liturgy seems to be perfectly aware of this charge: in the first prayer of the day, the outward observance and inner commitment are distinguished from one another. The Church prays that the outward bodily observance may have its effect in the soul, that the rite may be performed with complete

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[1] Eph 4, 23–24. [2] 1 Cor 15, 45–49.

[3] Secret prayer of midnight mass; and cf the postcommunion prayer of the third mass: 'as the newly-born Saviour of the world brings about our own rebirth to the life of God, so may he give us this life for ever'.

self-dedication *summa devotione*. This *devotio* is to be expressed in two ways. First, in her celebration of Christ's earthly triumph, the Church begins her re-enactment of the supreme struggle between good and evil, Christ and Satan. Our outward participation signifies that we share in Christ's power over the enemy, and that we accept his invitation to take up the fight so as to share in his victory. Secondly, this *devotio* means love, love of Christ's redeeming work *opus misericordiae diligendo*. On the threshold of Holy Week, when the Church will enact the redeeming work of Christ which was totally permeated with love, the liturgy calls for love on our part, a love that is no disembodied virtue but the response of man in his concrete condition: i.e. as one redeemed by this divine love and whose only response is a return of love. The liturgy is never impersonal, never objective. Far from overlooking the response of those who celebrate it, the liturgy engages the whole of the personality, mind and will and body; and if we are to remain faithful to its spirit, we must realise that the imitation of what we enact calls for a love which, if it is infinitely less than God's, is yet its correlative.

It should be understood that the mass that follows is a celebration of the whole paschal mystery, with however a heavy emphasis on Christ's suffering and desolation. The collect, with the epistle[1] that it interprets, gives the whole programme of Holy Week. Christ lowered himself, came down to our level, taking upon himself the form of unredeemed man, the form of a slave, and underwent the suffering and shame of the cross. He, says the collect, is the pattern of our living. Like him we must learn to suffer if we are to have a share in his resurrection. Here, set out very clearly and simply, is the meaning of the paschal mystery for the individual christian. Christ passed from this world through suffering and death to the glory of the resurrection. It is this 'passage' of the Lord that the Church is celebrating, it is this that is contained and conveyed by the liturgy and it is this that must be reproduced in every christian.

The principal psalm of the day is the psalm of desolation: 'God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It would be impossible here to go into the complexities and difficulties connected with this psalm.[2] It is sufficient to note that the Church does not hesitate to give it a prominent place in the Holy Week liturgy. Here in the

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[1] Phil 2, 5–11.

[2] Ps 21. That Jesus was reciting this psalm on the cross eases the difficulties a little, but we have to ask: why did he recite it? What did he wish to express?

liturgy is Christ praying the psalm, and it is reasonable to hold that it expresses in some way the sense of desolation he experienced as he hung upon the cross. It is the logical conclusion of his emptying of himself of which the epistle has spoken. Perhaps we do not always realise that our Lord was fully human, that he had real feelings. Although he remained always in serene communion with his Father, yet as he felt the sin and savagery of man working their will with him, his body, his flesh cried out for succour. This is the Christ who is set before us at the beginning of Holy Week; and we, the Church, pray the psalm with him. Are we being asked to put on this Christ, the one who felt abandoned, and as it were powerless in the face of evil? It would seem so, and it is an indication of the depths of 'inwardness' to which the liturgy can take us. Here, indeed, we are called to sympathy, to compassion, to suffering with Christ, as St Paul so constantly bids us. We may go further and say that at least the implication is that even in our failures, we can be with Christ, can be like him. It is through this extreme of suffering that we may be called on to share with him, that we can begin to see how our very failures can be redemptive.

With the sacred days at the end of the week we come to the celebration of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From Maundy Thursday evening until Easter morning the Church is commemorating and making present the Christ 'who suffered, was buried and rose again':[1] it is his passover which must become the centre of every christian's life.

Maundy Thursday

The Church's celebration of the Lord's passover opens with the message of love: 'Before the paschal feast began, Jesus already knew that the time had come for his passage from this world to the Father. He still loved those who were his own . . . and he would give them the uttermost proof of his love':[2] he would give them an example of loving service in the washing of the apostles' feet; he would institute the holy eucharist, 'the sacrament of love, sign of unity and bond of charity'; and he would consummate this love in the total giving of himself on the cross. It is this same love that is communicated to christians when they gather together to take their part in the mass of the Lord's supper. The christian's response to

[1] Cf Pastoral Instruction attached to the Restored Rite of Holy Week.
[2] Gospel of the day, Jn 13, 1.

this love is expressed in the washing of the feet that takes place after the message of love has been proclaimed in the gospel. The priest's 'impersonating' our Lord re-enacts what was done at the last supper: the liturgical actions and the accompanying antiphons preach the meaning of love: '*Mandatum novum* . . . I have a new commandment to give you: Love one another as I have loved you, says the Lord'; and again: 'This is what will mark you out as my disciples: the love you have for one another'. This is driven home and expounded in the lovely hymn, *Ubi caritas et amor:* 'Where love and loving-kindness are together, God is in their midst. Christ's love has gathered us together in one company . . .' God's love in Christ is creative of the worshipping community but the response must first be to God in awe, reverence and love: 'Fear and love the living God'. The second response to God's love is love of others: 'Let us love one another without reserve or deception' and 'We must not be divided from one another in our feelings; spite, quarrelling and strife must not be found among us. May Christ, who is God, be in our midst'.

Nor is the special quality of this love overlooked: Christ is the servant; he came, not to be served, but to serve others, and to give his life a ransom for many. The message is not a vague exhortation to be kind, nor is it confined to our fellow christians. The love that is set before us is a deeply searching one, issuing into a humble service of our neighbour at the most practical level.[1]

The demands this same love makes upon us are spelt out in the prayer over the offerings, in the epistle and in the very canon itself, where our Lord's giving of himself to his Father and for men is repeatedly stressed. When we have given our token of self-offering and as we are about to enter, through Christ, into a deeper giving of ourselves, we pray that Jesus, our Lord, may make our sacrifice pleasing to his Father: 'for it was he who gave himself' to his disciples in the rite which he told them to renew in memory of him: the model of our own self-giving can be nothing other than Christ's. Again, in the epistle, which is the pauline account of the last supper, we have the words: This is my body (given) for you.[2] In the special *Hanc igitur* of the canon we read: 'We make (this offering) in memory of the day on which our Lord Jesus Christ gave to his disciples the

[1] Cf also the final collect of the Maundy in which one can observe a deep interiorization of the preceding liturgical act. By this act of service both celebrant and participants are cleansed from sin.

[2] The verb given is wanting in the greek but the sense must be the same.

mysteries of his body and blood . . .' The meaning of the giving is finally interpreted for us immediately before the words of consecration: 'He, on the day before he suffered to save us and all men, that is, on this day, he took bread . . .' Jesus gave himself in service to his apostles when he washed their feet, he gave himself to them and to us in the holy eucharist; but this giving, to reach its consummation, must go as far as the complete abandonment of self, the total and final giving that is death. Even so St Luke included in his gospel the words: 'Into thy hands I commend my spirit', and all the evangelists record that at the end he gave up his spirit.

This willed self-giving, transfused with love and prompted by complete submission to his Father's will, made the death on the cross the central act of redemption; and while there is a certain incongruity in comparing any human death with that of Christ our Lord, one thing that the Easter liturgy teaches us is that our dying must be a dying 'in Christ'. It should be like his, the summing up of our whole life and as complete an offering of self in submission to God's will as his was. Death is not an accident, not the mere separation of the body from the soul, but a sharing in Christ's death, a passage with him from this world to the light of eternity.[1] But paradoxically, christian dying is a matter of christian living; it is something with which we must be concerned throughout our lives. The annual celebration of Christ's paschal death provides us with an opportunity for reflection on the last things; and also, through our participation, it conveys to us the ability gradually to make ourselves like Christ, even in his death. 'Christ was made for us obedient unto death, even the death of the cross . . .', the gradual of the mass, is a constant refrain in the divine office of these days. St Paul sees this humbling of himself as the central element in all Christ's coming down to our level, and of his exaltation after the death of the cross.[2] The whole of Christ's life was taken up with his doing of his Father's will, which he embraced with an infinite love. So far as we can penetrate into these deep mysteries of the life of the Godhead, it was this loving obedience that made possible Christ's complete giving in death; it 'explains' the redemption of mankind. Year by year in the Easter liturgy, and Sunday by Sunday in the mass, we are con-

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[1] Cf *Constitution*, 81, 'the paschal character of christian death'.

[2] Here Paul is echoing the gospels and especially St John: 'My meat is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish the task (his redeeming work) he gave me'. Jn 4, 34; cf 17, 4; 17, 19; and 19, 30 . . . 'it is accomplished'.

fronted by this obedience freely given in love. If we are to 'put on' Christ, we must take it seriously.

Obedience is the most crucifying of the virtues. It is the giving over of one's will to another; it is a kind of death and it is only tolerable, or even possible, if this giving is made in Christ and through the strength he communicates to us by his own submission to his Father, even to death. Obedience does, however, involve a person to person relationship; and if the liturgy helps us to see that obedience is a surrender to one who first submitted himself to his Father, we shall be able to give ourselves to those who represent him. Yet this is only one part of christian obedience; what the liturgy is calling us to is submission through Christ to the Father; it is upon this that we should concentrate in Holy Week. The practical consequences are drawn out later on.

Good Friday

On this day the Church celebrates the triumph of the cross; so that the liturgy of the day is shot through with thoughts of the resurrection. Secondly, there is an austere concentration on Christ himself with very little reference to those who are celebrating it. At the same time, the striking feature of the Good Friday liturgy is the sense of solidarity with Christ and with all men, jews and christians and with all who do not know Christ. As the drama of his passion and death is set before us, we realise that it is as our head that he suffers and dies. The second lesson reminds us that this is the passover, the Lord's passage; and in the responsory we hear the voice of Christ in his agony which is also the voice of the sinner who needs his redemption: 'Rescue me, Lord, from the evil man; free me from the power of the wicked . . .' Once again, as on Palm Sunday, we see the Lord in his weakness and humiliation: 'Shield me, Lord, from the power of these sinners (among whom we must count ourselves); rescue me from the violence of the wicked . . Lord, Lord, my powerful defender, shield my head in the hour of battle . . . Do not forsake me . . .' Yet, already the victory is in sight: 'But the sinless will praise your name, the upright will dwell in your presence'. This victory we shall achieve through the sinless One who through his victorious passage through death will bring us into his presence.

The unity of mankind is equally strongly marked. It is the burden of the first collect. The Church, as she celebrates the salvation of all mankind bears the weight of every man's sin; there is no counting

who is more guilty than another. All are included in the common fate; all need the same redeeming grace. But it is in the reproaches that the lesson is written out plain. Christ is on his cross, surveying the whole human race, past and present, in the Church and outside it, and entirely in words from the Old Testament he addresses his reproaches to us. Here is revealed the whole meaning of the history of salvation, of the saving mercy of the Most High who visited his people throughout the ages, offering them his love; and now at last he has redeemed them through his Son, Jesus Christ. As the people slowly move towards the cross to venerate it, we meditate on these moving words which are intended to strike us with compunction as we think of the sins of mankind, including our own, which have made necessary this divine tragedy. But as always, we are not left merely to think; we are asked to respond and the reproaches themselves demand our answer: 'My people, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me'. The people's answer can only be a cry for mercy: 'Holy, strong and immortal God, have mercy on us'. With this divine mercy renewed in our hearts by the liturgical celebration, we shall be able to respond in our lives to the demands God makes of us.

Throughout the liturgy of the day, amidst all the humiliation of the Saviour, there is the message of victory and the foreshadowing of the resurrection. This is suggested in the first lesson and is made plain in the unveiling of the cross. The *Ecce Lignum Crucis* is a cry of triumph. The veneration of the cross ends with a song of joy over the power of the cross which leads to new life, the resurrection: 'Lord, we worship your cross; we praise and applaud your holy resurrection. For in virtue of the wood of the cross, joy came to the whole world'.

The Easter Liturgy

The first part of the vigil service is a festival of light. Here, light is first of all a sign of joy, as is clear from the procession of the candle and the *Exultet*. The whole church is flooded with light and at the same time resounds with the joyful voices of the people. The reason is that the new light is the light of the world, the risen Christ, who comes once more to take possession of his Church. The mourning is over, and christians are bidden to rejoice in the Lord now risen from the dead. In church, on Easter night, this rejoicing is perhaps not difficult; but we are meant to carry it over into our daily lives. The joy of the resurrection is as demanding as the compassion of the

cross and this is what many of us have to learn. We need to recall the pauline injunction to rejoice always, even in tribulation. It is the ability to do this that is communicated by the Easter liturgy.

As the procession into the darkened church teaches us by dramatic action, the light which is Christ is also life: 'I am the light of the world; he who follows me can never walk in darkness; he will possess the light which is life'.[1] This life is the life of grace, which in St John's gospel is constantly connected with knowledge.[2] It is a love-knowledge, a combination of faith and charity. One consequence of our participation in the Easter liturgy is that our faith, our adherence to Christ, will be strengthened: a living faith, transfused with charity which unites us to the Father through Christ in the holy Spirit. The effect intended, then, is that we shall come to know Christ our Lord better, that we shall gradually penetrate ever more deeply into the mystery of Christ and his redeeming work, until at the end we shall be ready to pass over into the light of heaven, the eternal festival of light. In the practical order, this means that we should prolong the celebration of the liturgy, as St Benedict urged in his Rule, by silent prayer, by a quiet pondering on the word of God in the gospels, seeking to respond to the promptings of the divine faith and charity that dwell in our souls.

When we recall that in the early church baptism was called the sacrament of enlightenment, we find that light has an ever wider reference. The second and longest part of the vigil service is taken up with baptism; and here another dimension is given to the light-symbol. The light which is life now becomes creative, bringing forth new members of the Church,[3] who by water and the holy Spirit are made sons of God. The image of the second Adam, the Son of God is formed in the souls in the newly baptized and they are able to call upon God as their Father. It is at this point that the new element is introduced: 'My soul yearns for you, my God, as a deer yearns for the flowing streams. My soul is athirst for the living God'. This chant, sung in procession to the font, is interpreted by the collect that follows: 'Almighty and everliving God, look with favour on the devotion of your people who like the deer seeking the living spring, long for the water of rebirth; grant that their thirst for the faith, slaked in the sacrament of baptism, may hallow them in mind and body'. The new element is simply desire or longing. It is true that the prayer belongs immediately to those who are ap-

[1] Jn 8, 12. [2] Cf Jn 17, 3. [3] Cf Blessing of font.

proaching baptism; but since the sense of this part of the service is that the grace of our baptism should be renewed in us, we can make these words our own. Too often, faith and even charity are allowed to be static. We have, we trust, both; but rather as a possession than as a dynamic force within us. Here then is the Church's message, that through the faith and charity given to us, we should desire to see God's face; that even in this life we should long for a union with God that becomes all-absorbing. Sometimes the liturgy has been thought of as anti-mystical; but here we see it leading us to the ardent search for God which is the very essence of the contemplative life.

It is at the end of the liturgical celebration that we find the deepest message of Easter: in the homily and the renewal of the baptism promises. In the homily, the Church, in the words of St Paul[1] teaches that as baptism is death with Christ to sin, so our lives must be a continual dying to self if we would have a part in his resurrection: 'he who would save his life must lose it'. The various demands of the ascetical life, ennumerated progressively through the whole of the lenten liturgy, are presented to us *in toto*, here at the heart of the feast of joy and light for our loving acceptance. This we do formally in the renewal of the promises that follow. We renounce Satan and all his works, all that can entice us away from the following of Christ in humility and self-denial; and make response in faith and love to the Christ who has redeemed us, and who, through his Church, has renewed within us the grace we received when we were first made children of God and his brothers and sisters.

This tiny rite is in fact a re-enactment of the whole mystery of Christ as we have to live it: a dying to self through his death that we may rise again and again by the power of his resurrection. So we pray in the collect of the first mass of Easter that renewed in mind and body we may serve God in all purity of life. Henceforth and now that we have risen with Christ, we must seek, desire, long for the things that are above: the glory and radiance of Christ who is exalted at the right hand of the Father, now Lord indeed, the source of the new life for us and for the whole Church. It is with this mind, 'the mind of Christ Jesus', that we give thanks, in the preface, to God for his Son, Jesus Christ, our passover victim who was sacrificed for us, and, by his own dying, has done away with our death, and by rising from the grave has restored us to life.

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[1] Rom 6.