

SEEK THE FACE OF THE LORD

By PLACID MURRAY

THE PASTORAL CONSTITUTION on the church in the modern world opens with the phrase: 'The joy and hope, the sorrow and anguish of the men of this day . . . are the joy and hope, the sorrow and the anguish too, of Christ's disciples; nor is there anything human to be encountered which does not find an echo in their hearts'.¹

These words surely imply that Christ's disciples are conditioned, like other 'men of this day', by all the signs of the times, and this even in their search for God. It will be only the part of wisdom then to include ourselves and our congregations in the picture sketched in the constitution on man's condition in the world of today,² and in the passage on the church and man's vocation.³ If I may catch here at a tiny straw in the wind, who would have thought that, in a predominantly rural and catholic area like county Limerick, Sartre was being read to such an extent that a book by him acquired for the county library two years ago has been on constant loan ever since?

Although *Gaudium et Spes* refers only once (as far as I can ascertain) explicitly to the constitution on the liturgy, yet as Cardinal Léger has pointed out, '... the whole concept of man described there leads to it'.⁴ Without attempting an exhaustive commentary on the whole constitution, we can select important themes from it which develop the relevance of liturgy to man's religious condition in the modern world.

The need for wisdom today

The Council tells us that there is a greater need of wisdom at this time more than in any preceding period of history, if we are to succeed in humanizing the expanding frontier regions of knowledge.⁵ We are invited to look in two directions for this wisdom: on the one

¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

² *Ibid.*, 4-10.

³ *Ibid.*, 11-45.

⁴ 'L'Eglise dans le monde de ce temps', in *La Documentation Catholique*, No 1487 (5 February 1967), col 269.

⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 15.

hand to the so-called 'underdeveloped' countries, and on the other to the gift of the holy Spirit. Now where can we look for a constant source of this wisdom with more confidence than to the Spirit who speaks to us through the liturgy of the word? The wisdom literature of the Old Testament which we can listen to there, even at its lowest and most obvious level of prudential living¹ in this world of men, is a type of the wisdom of an underdeveloped country; it bears out the remark of the Council that, in spite of economic underdevelopment, these countries may be richer in wisdom than are other countries which are better off economically. Moreover, dating as it does from a period when Jewish thought was turning rather more to the God of creation than to the God of the covenant,² the wisdom literature is attuned to the thinking of modern man as expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*, whose anthropology, although thoroughly biblical, is not limited to Jewish salvation history.³ In our present transitional state of liturgy, the lectionary for weekdays has been at one and the same time a breakthrough and a disappointment. A breakthrough because it has offered a wider variety of readings; a disappointment because it neglects the wisdom literature so much in favour of the historical books. Any single passage from the wisdom books would be more intelligible to, and relevant for, a modern congregation than some of the passages about Sennacherib which we have been ploughing through this summer.

The prayer of the faithful and man's quest for God

Here too there was a breakthrough and a halt. A breakthrough because the idea, so long promoted in the liturgical movement of 'putting our whole life into the mass' could be here at last put in a prayer-form which could do justice to the many-sided reality of life. The halt came in many places where the clergy settled too easily for a routine formula, not even availing themselves of the scope allowed to the *Rector ecclesiae* in the choice of formulae, and even of adding some of one's own composition.⁴

An excellent and practical study of the prayer of the faithful by Henri Denis makes some valuable points which it may be useful to

¹ Cf *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique* (1962), art. 'Sagesse', cols 975-7.

² Breen, C., O.S.B., 'The Psalms of the Law', in *The Furrow* (August 1964), pp 516-525.

³ Moeller, C., 'L'Eglise dans le monde d'aujourd'hui', in *La Documentation Catholique*, No 1477 (4 September 1966), cols 1499-1502.

⁴ *De Oratione communi seu Fidelium*, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1966), p 12, § 19.

outline here.¹ Since the basic scriptural text of the *oratio fidelium* is Paul's first letter to Timothy, which speaks of prayer for *all* men, and in particular for those men who exercise authority in human affairs,² our intentions in this *oratio fidelium* should cover the whole of human life (and not only the life of the church). Moreover, we should pray not only when things break down here and there in the vast machine of human life; we should at all times commend all that is good and honourable, wherever it is to be found, in prayer to God. Finally, we must not turn the *oratio fidelium* into a mere footnote to the news of the week; rather, our effort must be 'to read the bible and the newspaper', to read the current news in the light of the insights of scripture. What a difficult task this will be, particularly in this age when so many spheres of human thought have been borrowed from and then purged of the christianity which first inspired them! The priest himself, in his weekly preparation of the *oratio fidelium*, will be a learner in this school of seeking the face of God amid the confusion of daily living. But we may safely say that his success in leading his congregation to a christian view of life will depend to a great extent on his own inner, prayerful grasp of the hand of God working among the affairs of men.

Liturgical change and the sense of the presence of God in worship

The *Consilium* for the liturgy, in its document on the prayer of the faithful, invites pastors to compose some formulae of their own.³ There is an implicit recognition here of the rights of the local community to have the texts related to the interests and needs of the particular congregation which is taking part in the celebration. Such a local and personal note in prayer makes the celebration more 'meaningful' (to use a much-abused cipher) to those present. This raises the whole question of liturgical change, which for the ordinary person is the most outstanding characteristic of the liturgy over the last four years. Does this change in fact foster the sense of the presence of God in our worship? There can be no doubt that, in order to worship in spirit and truth,⁴ we all need to possess what St Peter calls that 'hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious'.⁵

¹ Denis, H., 'La Prière universelle', in *La Maison-Dieu*, 84 (1965), pp 140-164. See also Gy, P.-M., O.P., 'Signification pastorale des prières du prône', in *La Maison-Dieu*, 30 (1952), pp 125-136.

² 1 Tim 2, 1-4.

³ See above, note 4, p. 42

⁴ Jn 3, 23-4.

⁵ 1 Pet 3, 4 (RSV).

We should see the liturgical changes not only from within the church building, as a laudable effort on the part of the *Consilium* for liturgy to make the rites and prayers ever more translucent. We should rather keep in mind the accelerated pace of change in life outside the church building, in the whole City of Man, where the din of over-communication drowns the stillness which is so necessary if we are to perceive the hidden God among us. Man and his multiple, noisy business makes this world rather like a turbulent boarding school, where all the boys are talking at once, and the quiet, soothing thought of home is only furtively present in the letter read during break. We should not make the liturgy resemble the boarding school, but rather the healing stillness of a united home.

This is not to say that we should revert to the silent mass: we are pleading rather for a greather sense of the sacred in our efforts to implement liturgical change. Perhaps here, in line with *Gaudium et Spes*, we might learn a great deal from the sense of the sacred such as is traditional in the great eastern non-christian religions. A friend, keenly interested in the educative value of the cinema, and who had an intimate acquaintance with our catholic liturgy, once told me that he had never seen anything in his life to equal the sense of the sacred such as he had witnessed it in a japanese non-christian religious film. I wonder does our restored liturgy yet convey such a striking sense of the presence of God? While there should be no hypocritical or histrionic striving after effect, we do nevertheless need to break through the inhibiting mutism which would prevent a spontaneous turning of our whole being, *body* and soul, to God in worship.

Arbitrary experimentation

The changes introduced by the *Consilium*, sanctioned as they are by authority and matured already by experimentation on a limited scale before being proposed to the church at large, often fail to 'come across' either because the priest has not realized in himself the true role of *leitourgos*, or because the people are unsympathetic to liturgical change. What are we to think then of arbitrary experimentation on the part of some clergy, which has produced the 'alarming situation' referred to by Cardinal Lercaro in his recent circular letter?¹ Besides obedience, which is thus openly flouted, the sense of belonging to one universal church is sappd, the sense that the

¹ *Notitiae*, 31-33 (Iulio-Septembri 1967), p 291.

local assemblies, with all their legitimate characteristics, make up one sole Body of Christ, through whom all we worship the Father in spirit and truth. If the faithful feel that their priests are experimenting without permission and in a capricious way with the most sacred rites of the faith, they cannot but be disturbed. How could they take part with equanimity in such a celebration? How could they be enabled to seek the face of God with a 'quiet and gentle spirit', if their pastors are manifestly lacking in that christian submissiveness which is the only true climate in which such a spirit can thrive?

The inner reality of the eucharist: the paschal mystery

All adaptation – whether legitimate or arbitrary – can only reach the outward setting of the eucharist. Such a setting could exist to perfection even outside the catholic church: in fact, a noted catholic liturgist is said to have remarked that the german lutheran mass (according to the form of the *Michaelsbrüderschaft*) is the most perfect form of the eucharist in existence today. While the *Consilium* is doing its utmost, then, to improve the setting and the shape of our celebration, we must never forget that, as has been so well said in a recent study,

The christian ought to come away from the liturgical sacrifice not with the satisfied sense of having accomplished something, but inwardly strengthened, and with the ardent desire, in the words of so many post-communions, to realize in his life what has just been sacramentally enacted.¹

This is what the first instruction on implementing the liturgy had in mind when it stated:

Pastoral activity which is centred on the liturgy aims to make the paschal mystery expressed in men's lives. It was in the paschal mystery that the Son of God incarnate, having been obedient unto the death of the cross, was raised so high by his resurrection and ascension that he was able to share his own divine life with the world, in such wise that men who 'had been dead to sin and were now made like to Christ' 'may not now live to themselves, but unto him who died for them, and rose again'.²

¹ Von Balthasar, Hans Urs, *Church and World* (1967), p 32.

² *Vatican II: The Liturgy Constitution* (ed A. Flannery, O.P.), 5th ed 1966, p 117, § 6 of the Instruction of 26 September 1964.

This inner reality of the paschal mystery is the one best put at the centre of all our liturgical effort to bring people to God through the mass. The emphasis on participation in the mass should not be based on the too facile argument 'The mass is an action, therefore all present should be active'. No, the argument in favour of participation is not merely pastoral and practical, it is also doctrinal and ecclesiological. Participation should be lit from that inner flame of love of which St Peter speaks:

Without having seen him (Christ) you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy.¹

If participation were taken to mean merely getting the people to do something which can be seen and heard while mass is in progress, we should quickly have exhausted it. Participation should be seen rather as a way of manifesting something, of revealing to each member that the worshipping church is co-extensive with all its members, though there are 'different orders and ministries' within the total body.

The paschal mystery is the point of greatest synthesis in the eucharist: it is the great unifying idea or 'view' (to use Newman's word) which gathers up into a living whole what would otherwise remain unrelated, even if important elements, of the mass. It opens out easily to all the other truths about the mass, giving each one its due place, and furthermore relates the eucharist to christian living outside the time of mass. We have only to look at catholic and protestant theology and devotion in the past to see how any other point of synthesis fails to maintain *all* the elements in balance. Thus, an over-insistence on the eucharist as a meal or memorial tends to rob it of its sacrificial content. Our own catholic insistence on the central truth of transubstantiation was accompanied in the past by a devaluation of the liturgy of the word.

The advantages of taking the paschal mystery as the central truth about the mass are manifold: it presents the mass as the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, thus safeguarding the primacy of Christ's action over ours; it presents the mass as the new covenant in Christ's blood, thus bringing out the mass as a memorial; it presents the mass as the thanksgiving, the consecratory prayer said over the bread and wine: this, in strict imitation of Jesus' last supper, shows in what

¹ 1 Pet 1, 8 (RSV).

sense the mass is a sacred meal, thus safeguarding the doctrine of transubstantiation, while at the same time (following Pope Paul VI in *Mysterium Fidei*) giving due place to the theology of sign. Moreover, the doctrine of the paschal mystery links up the liturgy of the word (as being also an action of Christ) with the liturgy of the eucharist: and it shows clearly in what sense we offer ourselves at mass. Finally it draws the whole week around sunday, and then draws all the sundays and the whole year round easter. Christ's redeeming act of redemption is thus shown forth as the great standing fact around which the life of the church revolves.¹ It offers a clear programme of 'living the mass' according to the context of the second letter to the Corinthians quoted above, 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies'.²

There is one further advantage, and an inestimable one: by placing the paschal mystery at the centre, we rejoin the thinking of *Gaudium et Spes*. Mgr Moeller has demonstrated that in the first four chapters of the first part of this constitution, there is a sort of gradual development, beginning in each case with a biblical theme presented under its most human aspect and culminating each time in Christ.³ In each of the four culminating passages the doctrine of the paschal mystery is mentioned expressly or in equivalent terms.⁴ This shows a determination on the part of those who drafted the constitution (and on the part of the Council Fathers who adopted it) to present Christ to the world under this aspect of redeemer of the world through his paschal mystery. The message to the world and to the church is basically the same then, and could be expressed in broad terms: 'At the heart of the church, in the eucharist, the risen Christ himself is at work, in the fulness of death and resurrection'.⁵

The canon of the mass as the expression of this synthesis

The reports on the synod of bishops (September 1967) mention the possibility of alternative canons to replace the venerable, unchanged roman canon. Such a step, the most daring in all our liturgical reform to date, can only be inspired by the over-riding principle of the constitution on the liturgy, the good of souls. While the

¹ Cf Newman, J. H., *Meditations and Devotions*, (2nd ed 1893), p 561: 'If that great deed was what we believe it to be, what we know it is, it must remain present, though past; it must be a standing fact for all times'.

² 2 Cor 4, 10 (RSV).

³ Moeller, C., *op. cit.*, col 1504.

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 22, 32, 39, 45.

⁵ Cf Newman, J. H., *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol VI, Sermon XI, p 136.

merits of the ancient roman canon are very real, it does nevertheless contain defects and limitations in structure (not in doctrine) sufficiently grave to hinder its pastoral effectiveness as a source of spirituality for people and clergy alike.¹ We can only look forward in hope to that great day when the very heart of the mass, the eucharistic prayer itself, will, in the very unfolding of the rite of mass, speak clearly to all present of the mystery of Christ in our midst.

Seeking the face of the Lord in prayer

Apart from the eucharist, the other great liturgical way of entering into dialogue with God is to use the psalms as christian prayer. In praying the psalms, we learn gradually to pour out our heart to God as to someone who is listening to us, *effunde sicut aquam cor tuum ante Dominum*.² What one might call the frigid or neutral language of worship (such as is found in some elements of the missal),³ is entirely absent from the psalter. Here in the psalms, free rein is given (even excessively at times) to all the feelings and longings of the inmost heart of man. Here those great basic questions of which *Gaudium et Spes* speaks are posed afresh: '... what is man? What is the meaning of pain, of evil, of death, which persist among us in spite of such great human progress?'⁴

By taking these prayers on our lips, and learning to pray them with Christ, each of us can 'contend with God' about the meaning of life and death. This confrontation with the living God will release the personalizing forces inherent in liturgical prayer. There is no doubt that the quest for personalization is one of the great signs of our time. The liturgy as a way of life might, on a superficial examination, seem to foster community attitudes only, and neglect (or at least render secondary) personal values. But it would be a bad mistake to think of personal commitment in the liturgy as a mere subdivision of the community celebration. Thus, for instance, if a hundred people are praying the psalms together (say, in the restored rite of vespers), the personal values for each are not just one-hundredth part of the whole. It seems to me that personal and community values are, to borrow a scholastic phrase, two different types of quality. It is rather like an artist in enamels who is designing a

¹ Cf Vagaggini, C., O.S.B., *The Canon of the Mass and Liturgical Reform* (1967), p 107.

² Cf Walsh, L., 'The Psalms as Christian Prayer', in *Studies in Pastoral Liturgy* 3 (Dublin, 1967), pp 29-73.

³ Ellebracht, M. P., *Remarks on the Vocabulary of the ancient Orations in the Missale Romanum* (Nijmegen, 1963), p 198: 'Borrowings from the highly stylized language of the court have in their turn, also led to a relative banality ...'

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 10.

richly enamelled cross: he gets the shape right first in his mind, and the colour follows. The Council and its successor, the liturgical *Consilium*, are concerned with getting the shape of the liturgy right: it is up to us to make the colours follow.

The liturgy a fundamental sign of the times

In scrutinizing the signs of the times, *Gaudium et Spes* singled out atheism, and indeed unbelief generally, as one of the most disturbing signs of our time: 'atheism is to be reckoned among the most serious matters of this age'.¹ This expression, the signs of the times, it has been well said, 'in order to be fully significant at all, presupposes at least two elements: an accumulation of facts which all point in the same direction and the fact that men are aware of this direction'.²

How far are we believers affected by this prevalence of the various forms of unbelief in our world? Besides the fact that we all (believers included) are so engrossed in a man-centred world that access to God becomes difficult for us,³ there are further difficulties arising out of the trials of faith itself. We are all tainted with Peter's weaknesses: doubt, fear and conformism, as Pope Paul told his listeners at one of his general audiences during the year of faith, 1967-8.⁴

Over against this current of modern life, the liturgy stands as a great implantation of the City of God in the heart of the City of Man. It urges us to come and seek the face of the Lord through Christ who can save us. For salvation is indeed the great, urgent message which the liturgy proclaims: nor is there anything which modern man needs as much. To quote a writer who has plumbed the whole range of twentieth century literature in order to confront it with Christ,

Modern man is he who asserts that he has no need for salvation; he sees in this 'non-necessity' the very foundation of his own dignity and responsibility as man. And yet at the same time, he is the one whose whole history shouts out the need for some salvation, some meaning and some underlying sense to his life.⁵

¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

² Vanhengel, M. and Peters, J., 'Signs of the times', in *Concilium*, Vol 5, No 3 (May 1967), pp 68-72, esp p 68.

³ Cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 19.

⁴ *La Documentation catholique*, No 1493 (7 May 1967), col 785.

⁵ Moeller, C., 'The theology of Unbelief and the salvific action of the Church', in *Concilium*, Vol 3, No 3 (March 1967), p 22.