

# 'SPACE' FOR WORSHIP

By MADELEINE SIMON

**T**HE SPACE where we worship is essentially a spiritual space, and the space where we externalize that worship is also essentially a spiritual space: God at the centre of our own being, God at the centre of those who are gathered together in his name.

In the Eucharist we celebrate this abiding, dynamic, creative presence of God, through, with and in Christ. Christ at the centre of our own being, Christ at the centre of those gathered together in his name. This is the mystery of faith spoken of in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: 'The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of *faith*, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators'. . . .<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, it is Christ's faithful who actually create the sacred space for this celebration by the quality of their presence.

It is, therefore, of secondary importance whether we gather to worship under a palm tree or in a cathedral, on a mountain or in Jerusalem; whether we are a million plus in Phoenix Park, Dublin, or a humble half-dozen in someone's back room. What matters is the quality of our presence. Our intention, then, is first to examine the quality of presence in the current environment of the Church in England; and secondly to describe and reflect upon our attempts to foster this 'space for worship' in both the individual and communal context, in one inter-racial parish in south-west London, a few miles from the great international airport, Heathrow. This is a parish in which a group of us, sisters and priests, have ministered for ten years, until recently under the leadership of Fr Michael Hollings.

### *The current scene*

Our churches are filled, or partially filled with real people, who come with cares and worries, inhibitions and prejudices, sinfulness and shame, joys and ecstasies. They come as they are, conditioned by their own personal histories; and for many, a part of this conditioning is 'going to mass', Sunday after Sunday. Cheek

<sup>1</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 48.

by jowl we find the staunch dyed-in-the-wool Catholics, whose religion has always been an integral, unassailable element of their nationality; other cradle Catholics, whose faith has developed as part of their growing personality, with a serenity untouched by any serious psychological disturbance. There are others whose untroubled pious childhood has later suffered a-religious or anti-religious influences. They have been tossed out of their cradle, so to speak; but they are present, alert and expectant, even if they now carry a certain intolerance. There are still others who have come to Catholic belief from other traditions, other religions or none at all; those too, from other countries, who do not speak the language, and who tend to sit when we stand and kneel when we sit; and those from very different cultures, who bring colour to the congregation with their saris, sarongs and boardings. And, of course, there are the people who fit none of these categories.

Educated, uneducated, committed, semi-committed, they all come. What they have in common is in itself a wonder: they are all committed to *coming*. One may ask oneself with some perplexity why those who leave before the communion come at all, yet they do come. What if our churches were entirely superseded by house and 'location' liturgies, as some liturgists and theologians are currently advocating. Would all these still come? And would the Church be well rid of those who ceased to come? Such speculation, we feel, should be left alone. Our task, we believe, is to fan the smouldering flax and tend the bruised reeds: including those whom we sometimes presume to call nominal Catholics, or those who attend Sunday Mass simply out of obligation. After a decade of mixing very closely with our Sunday Mass-goers, one would hesitate to make such a judgment on any of them.

Our task then, in the parish, is twofold but interlocked: to foster the growth of worship space in the individual, and to provide the kind of liturgy through which this can be given expression. Quality of presence is elusive of definition. It is governed by the degree of involvement of the individual in any given situation, ranging from a merely physical presence to the total involvement of the whole person. Further, the degree of involvement is itself greatly influenced by the type of scene provided; does this help or hinder the individual to express his worship?

In the western christian tradition, 'ways' to God have for centuries been stylized according to stages or successive levels of achievement in one's pilgrimage towards holiness. It may be more useful today to

consider such ways according to varieties of human temperament. From this point of view, we might single out three main approaches to God. Experience has shown that some, perhaps the majority, find it natural to worship by way of loving devotion, expressed in vocal prayer, hymn-singing and imagery; others will be happiest in their worship by being active, by offering themselves through a selfless service; whilst a minority will find 'peace and fulfilment in silence and stillness rather than song and ritual action, drawn very strongly inward rather than outward, hampered rather than helped by much imagery and outgoing movement'.<sup>2</sup> A cursory appraisal of our typical Sunday congregations might lead us to judge that these last are in the majority; but a second glance will reveal that the silent ones are reading prayers from much-thumbed books, or are doing the rounds of the statues or the Stations of the Cross.

This then, is the make-up of the congregation for whom we are preparing our liturgies: an assembly diversified in the quality of presence by variations of culture, temperament and personal history. We become increasingly aware that in our liturgical presentations we have taken no cognizance of personal, let alone cultural differences. I have assisted at Sunday Mass in several islands of the West Indies where the congregation had no scope for spontaneity, joy and bodily participation which are so natural to the majority of the people there. I might have been assisting at Mass some thirty years ago, in an Irish village, except for the colour of the faces surrounding me. Their introduction to the faith by Irish missionaries had been such that they would most probably have felt embarrassed rather than relaxed by this song from their Yoruba brothers in Nigeria:

He is patient, he is not angry,  
 He sees you even when he is not looking.  
 He stays in a far place — but his eyes are on the city.  
 He stands by his children and lets them succeed.  
 He causes them to laugh — and they laugh.  
 Ohoho — the Father of laughter.  
 His eye is full of joy.  
 He rests in the sky like a swarm of bees.

Yet the descendants of these people form part of our Sunday congregations. If we ask whether they should have their own

<sup>2</sup> Cf Sara Grant R.S.C.J., 'Hindu Religious Experience', in *The Way*, vol 18, 1 (January 1978), pp 13ff.

liturgies, or be encouraged to do their own thing during our conventional celebrations, we are simply asking the wrong question; as indeed we are with questions like, 'Should we have masses in vast churches with unwieldy congregations, or group-liturgies? Should we have our Sunday Masses every hour on the hour, or less frequently? Should the obligation be attached specifically to the Sunday, or should there be an obligation at all? The only line of enquiry valid *per se* is that concerned with people, with these christian people among whom I worship, and with the fostering of sacred space, worship space within each person, and consequently within the group when they meet as a worshipping community.

### *Highlight celebrations*

The time is nine o'clock on a Sunday evening in June. The Cardinal is processing down the centre aisle at the end of the Confirmation ceremony, when an ordinary working man is moved to turn and say to me: 'The Church really is a comforter'. He was not the only one who had been moved by the Spirit, the Comforter, that evening. There had been eighty-seven *confirmandi* with their families and friends and many parishioners present; and, as I mingled with the crowds afterwards, the outpouring of the Spirit was palpable in the pervading sense of joy and serenity. It was not simply a euphoria evoked by the ceremonial panoply; rather it was an authentic spiritual experience, which came as the culmination of eight months of communal preparation.

Three young people had come forward in response to an invitation issued the previous November. They had little idea of what it was all about. Fourteen adults (one priest, four Sisters and nine lay-people) each adopted a group of six or seven of the candidates, for whose preparation they assumed responsibility over the intervening months. They made it their business to get to know them as persons, meeting with them frequently, inviting them to their houses, taking them for outings, getting to know their families: all this with a view to leading them, according to their capabilities, into a growing understanding of the Sacrament of Confirmation. Some of the candidates dropped out: a healthy sign. Nine months later, each group had become a small christian community, each with its leader, who themselves had been strengthened and supported by regular team meetings (whose focus was a house Eucharist) with the co-ordinator, our full-time parish worker. The ceremonial itself was planned by these group-leaders, along with the priests and the

Liturgy Committee. They took a full part at the Ceremony: one gave brief instructions from the pulpit to help the whole congregation to participate, others acted as marshals, others again were on the sanctuary, to pin a small cross on each candidate, and to administer communion. At the end, the newly confirmed were handed their certificate by their group leader.

We began to involve the wider community of the parish about a month before the Ceremony: the *confirmandi* were prayed for in the bidding prayers each week, and paintings began to appear in the church; others were asked to volunteer for the immediate preparations, such as the cleaning and decorating of the church, the providing of cakes and flowers for the get-together in the Parish Centre afterwards, the clearing of rubbish from the forecourt, the organization of facilities for the extra number of cars, and the ferrying of house-bound parishioners.

In these ways the hearts of a large number were prepared and opened; there had been colour, movement, singing, proclamation of the word, some moments of deep silence, and much opportunity for devoted service on the periphery of the main action, where all, of whatever culture or temperament, were accommodated. 'Worship-space' had been created in the individual, in the group, in the whole. This is one example of small groups, each with its own identity, but all the while building towards a plenary parish celebration of the Eucharist: the groups of *confirmandi*, of catechists, of the parish team, of church cleaners, of caterers and so on.

### *Sunday celebrations*

While this kind of preparation is feasible and also important as a build-up to the liturgical highlights of the year — Christmas, the Paschal Triduum, Whitsun, it is in no way desirable that such an intense preparation should precede the normal Sunday masses. But preparation there must be, both on the side of the priests and of the people: inner preparation towards what can be called 'inner worship-space', issuing in practical preparation towards community worship-space.

A deadly priest makes a deadly liturgy.

A deadly people cramp a lively celebrant.

A deadly priest cramps a lively congregation.

A deadly priest plus a deadly congregation get by for now (alas),  
but will take their toll.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf 'Liturgy alive', by Michael Hollings, in *The Universe* (12 October 1979).

Since the Eucharist is all about community — at the Last Supper Jesus gave himself to Peter, John and the others as individuals certainly, but as individuals within the community gathered at his table,<sup>4</sup> it seems of paramount importance that preparation for the Sunday Eucharist should take place within the context of community. This means that priests should support one another in their prayer life, that those who inhabit the presbytery should form a community, however small, that the liturgy be prepared together. Our own preparation takes place over lunch at the presbytery on the previous Monday. Present are the priests, the deacon, the parish worker, the Sister in charge of religious education in our Middle School, the lay-teacher with responsibility for music in the school who also leads the Youth Choir in church, the lady responsible for training the readers for the principal masses, and myself. During the meal, the theme is teased out from the lectionary-readings. Thus each homilist hears the theme discussed and experiences the support of the group. It would be ideal to have one or two parishioners present at the meal, to provide a sounding-board for the discussion.

Equally, the background preparation of the congregation for the Sunday Liturgy needs to take place within the context of community. All community activities and 'organizations' are here brought into loving service: prayer-groups, active membership of the parish council, or of one of its sub-committees dealing with general maintenance, race relations, ecumenical enterprises, youth work, old people's welfare, the parish-centre activities or the liturgy. There are other groups as well: the 'Mothers-and-toddlers', the marriage advisory council, the Catholic Women's League, the Legion of Mary, Alcoholics Anonymous, and so on. Again, for many this service has its place through the deepening of the christian spirit in the primary group of the family, whilst others experience a need to relate to the general parish community as individuals: for example, in the maintenance of the public address system, the loop-system for the hard of hearing; in cleaning up inside the church at off-peak times, by flower-arrangement, sweeping the forecourt of the church, in providing a transport service for fetching and carrying; in electrical maintenance for the cost of the materials. In some indefinable way, all these miscellaneous forms of commitment produce an atmosphere of comradeship, happiness and worship at the celebration of the Eucharist.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

*Week-day masses*

These have a different dimension from those of the Sunday. It is possible to have less formality and greater participation with the smaller numbers. The majority of the people know each other and want to chat either before Mass or on their way out. People who would quail before a Sunday assembly are often prepared to read at a week-day Mass; nor does the offertory procession need to be organized, as people sitting near will bring up the bread and wine from the table. The bidding prayers have a special flavour: they are a touchstone of quality of presence, when people feel free to be themselves, colour and culture forgotten. Among our regular week-day participants we have several west indian women who make prayers unselfconsciously, totally free from inhibition. With two teenage children beside her, one was heard to pray 'That my two children follow my good example, Lord hear us . . .'. For several weeks another prayed: 'I ask the Lord that my daughter who is pregnant, may have happy labours and a safe deliverance . . .'. We all genuinely rejoiced when the safe deliverance was thanked for, and were really concerned when, a few weeks later, there was a bidding prayer 'For my daughter's baby girl who is sick'. The earnestness and genuine depth of feeling behind these prayers draw the congregation together in response. Then there was the indian child of eight the other day whose poignant prayer was: 'For my dad who died a year ago today'. The mother, beautiful in her sari, and his little sister stood silently beside him; and I remembered the year before, when the father had succumbed to a heart attack. These are real people, speaking real prayers to a real God through a living community of faith. In this atmosphere the kiss of Peace is alive and full of meaning, and leads naturally to communion under both kinds and the silent thanksgiving. Again, the worship of the individual, finding free expression, enriches the worship of the community.

*House Masses*

These have a different flavour from masses in church, whether on Sundays or week-days. The initiative for the invitations and the preparation is with the host and hostess. Some house masses will be family affairs, celebrating anniversaries or special occasions; they strengthen the bonds of the family community, and it sometimes happens that the family make a public confession of faults to one another. Normally, however, these parish-based house masses are

celebrations for more localized communities, sometimes attended by those who do not go to Sunday Mass, by people of other denominations and of non-Christian religions; all these will be quietly drawn into the joy of a small community.

There are also masses in special locations for those who would not otherwise come to Mass: either because of the distance from the church or because they have been alienated by 'a deadly priest plus a deadly congregation'. In Southall we could do more about this if we had the personnel. In some industrial cities, with their high-rise flats and small housing-estates, worshipping communities are being built up outside the established parish-structures, and the location-liturgy is becoming the focal point in the dynamics of the small community.

Parish boundaries are being broken down in other ways, by the initiatives of the people themselves. A church easily becomes less accessible, and neighbouring parish-churches are better served by local transport. This is a two-way process. People from outside our boundaries worship regularly with us. Others go to the church of easiest access, especially in bad weather — not many have their own cars; but they come to Southall for the high celebrations of the liturgical year. In one part of the parish, local initiative has created a 'chapel-of-ease', with its own committee to organize the preparation of the place, the readings, the singing and the welcoming of the hundred or so who come there every week. In another area, a group of elderly people meets every Saturday afternoon for Mass at a small house where three Sisters run a parish house of prayer. When a priest is not available, one of the Sisters leads a Eucharistic celebration. All these people used to have communion at home in isolation; now they have grown together into a genuine worshipping community.

Behind all these different expressions of faith, the quality of presence of the individual is enhanced through the concrete situation, leading naturally into a liturgy which expresses the group's worship.

#### *The relevance of men and women religious*

There exist unparalleled opportunities for religious Sisters and Brothers in the parish situation, both full-time and in special areas. The former, working in specific areas of concern, would have certain contacts within their own town or city and beyond: housing, youth work, community work, work for old people's welfare. Others would have a more diffuse apostolate, in direct collaboration with the priests in the general running of the parish. This might include visiting and taking communion to the sick and the house-bound,

involvement in the administrative work and the home-visiting resulting from it. Many of the normal calls which come in to a presbytery can be taken by a Sister and satisfactorily dealt with in conjunction with a priest. One example is visiting the bereaved. The priest is essential: but a Sister's feminine touch can add another dimension to the visit. She can also help with the practicalities: death certificates, grant applications and so on, thus freeing the priest for the more directly ministerial apostolate.

It would be a mistake to look upon religious who have a full-time work in other fields as merely 'part-time' helpers in parish service. They can identify very closely with the wage-earners and their problems in a way that those who are unacquainted with the professional and industrial scene find much more difficult. Like other working parishioners, they can give of their spare time to serve in the parish and be an inspiration and encouragement to others. In a similar way, student sisters and brothers can relate immediately to their own age-group in college, and thus find their own specific form of apostolate. Another area of crucial need, particularly suitable for Sisters or Brothers with training and experience, is that of adult catechesis. Child catechesis, whether in the school or home-based, is often a waste of time unless parents are involved and supportive. Initial experimentation in this work with parents is already yielding a high degree of co-operation, especially where the approach is sensitive and tactful. Parents are most approachable when their child is of first-communion or confirmation age, or when there is a baby to be baptized.

Just as the 'missioning' of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist and of catechists reinforces the value of lay-commitment, when this is done in the solemn atmosphere of the Sunday mass, home-preparation finds its ideal culmination when a baptism or marriage is celebrated in the same environment. The practical difficulties of prolonging the Sunday mass usually prevent this from happening except very occasionally. But the new rites are directing us to change our attitudes here. Nuptial masses and baptisms are meant to be community rather than private celebrations.

A fairly new idea is that of a parish-based house of prayer. Here a small group of Sisters, living in an ordinary home among the people, is, as it were, a silent centre of prayer at the heart of the parish, the town, the world. The 'external' apostolate of such a group varies: one or two may have to work to support the community; but, in general, their mission will be to people's homes, encouraging

individuals and groups of neighbours to pray. There are also the evening prayer sessions in the Sisters' house, where neighbours gather to pray in whatever way best suits their circumstances and individual temperaments: silently, vocally, charismatically. The Sisters have a structure of prayer which is flexible enough to meet the requirements of charity. In our house, for example, an Anglican and a Methodist come every working morning for silent meditation with the Sisters, and stay for breakfast before their day's work.

The most important contribution of Sisters and Brothers to the parish is the quality of their own community living, of their presence to each other. In order to overcome the isolation which can easily occur when a small community is living 'out on a limb', far removed from other houses of the Congregation, I foresee Congregations choosing to concentrate on a particular area. Thus there might be a dozen members of the same Congregation working in one parish, but living in three or four places; two running a house for homeless people, another two in a flat on a housing estate, three in a house of prayer, and a group with varied apostolates in a slightly larger house, with one, possibly two, from the most senior age-bracket. Sometimes all would meet together; but their day-to-day support would come from their common interest in the parish, and how this is the real response to their shared vocation.

Through all these calls, commitments and work-contacts, close relationships between parish team, parishioners and others are developed, which act as leaven in the living parish community and enhance the quality of presence at the Sunday Eucharist.

### *The parish team*

Our parish team is open-ended. It consists of the priests, all the Sisters living in the parish and the parish-worker, who are the permanent members; less permanent are the deacon who is with us for his one year's pre-ordination apostolate, a member of the Grail who works two days each week, and a retired teacher. Sometimes there is a visiting priest or seminarian who will be involved for the duration of his stay. The majority of us meet together socially over lunch at the presbytery on Sundays, and every month or so we have a morning or evening of prayer together. The rest of the time we work very closely together according to our varying commitments. The deep sense of support and sharing has its centre in the Eucharistic community. Sharing the joys and burdens of the day, we believe that the faith which is in us is communicated by the Spirit as we

welcome the people to Mass, chat with them afterwards and share our life with them.

### *Conclusion*

There is no doubt that we need structures, but they must be flexible enough to accommodate all manner of people in every type of situation. Just as 'the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath',<sup>5</sup> so with structures. We need intelligent pluriformity, retaining the structures which are still relevant, creating new ones to meet new situations, and in every case bearing in mind the requirements of these people, in their current circumstances. There will be a need for different types of Sunday liturgy within the same parish, from quiet Masses without singing, to those with maximum participation. The interior aspect of the church-building, too, should reflect the needs of those who come to worship there. For many people, adornments like the Stations of the Cross and the various statues, especially when known and loved since childhood, remain necessary for the growth of their inner worship space.

We need people more than structures; and, if people are to mature into fully loving persons, there must be room for an indefinite patterning of relationships, which form the invisible structure for that maturing process: priests to parishioners, to children, to townspeople, to priests again, to parish councillors, to Sisters, to parishioners, to catechists, to work-mates, to children, and so on.

The gospel-formulae of the Eucharistic meal, 'Take . . . and eat. Drink *all of you* from this',<sup>6</sup> sacramentally linked with his sacrifice on the Cross for all and each within the community of mankind, is given to us in the johannine context of the priestly prayer: 'May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me'.<sup>7</sup>

Our endeavour, then, in obeying his command, 'Do this as a memorial of me',<sup>8</sup> must be to grow into this unity with each other and with him in the Father.

I have tried to show how in one parish situation we are working with both the individual within the community and the community itself. In the Lord's Body, it is never a question of simply 'doing your own thing'. The more we are involved with each other round the Eucharist, the more we shall be caught up into the perfect community of the Trinity, so that the prayer of Jesus may be realized in us in worship and in awareness of love.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Mk 2, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Lk 26, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 17, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Lk 22, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Jn 17, 23.