

IN AN ALIEN LAND

By JAMES WALSH

IT CAN hardly be coincidental that the Documents of Vatican Council II begin with the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and end with the Constitution on the Church in today's world.¹ Perhaps it is equally significant that a collection of documents concerning the implementation of the Council's deliberations, published in the English language less than five years ago,² prints some two dozen official instructions from two Sacred Congregations concerning liturgical reform, including three which deal directly with implementing the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* itself.³ Nor is this the half of it. The official texts of the reformed rites of the various sacraments do not form part of this collection, nor does the new liturgy of the hours — 'The Prayer of the Church', as it is now called—and the official instruction which accompanies it. At the other end of the scale, there is but one document in the collection associated with *Gaudium et Spes*: that issued by the Secretariat of Unbelievers, on the dignity of the human person, in 1968.⁴

I write this after listening to a radio lecture on 'The Clash of Cultures', one of a series entitled *The African Condition*.⁵ The speaker was at pains to explain that, in contradistinction to far eastern lands, Africa has been consistently exposed, particularly over the last hundred years and with an unprecedented acceleration since the second world war, to a religious as well as to a scientific revolution. Christianity came in with trade and technology, and unknowingly paved the way for the last decade of turbulence and frightening violence by combining (or confusing) the sacred and the secular. It taught a secular education which introduced the African to a

¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was promulgated on 4 December 1963, *Gaudium et Spes* on 7 December 1965. Cf *Sacrosanctum Oecumenicum Concilium Vaticanum II, Constitutiones, Decreta, Declarationes* (Vatican City, 1966), pp 62 and 835.

² Cf *Vatican Council II: the conciliar and post-conciliar documents*, ed A. Flannery O.P. (Dublin/New York, 1975). ³ Flannery, pp 45ff, 98ff, 209ff.

⁴ *Humanae Personae Dignitatem*, Flannery, pp 1002ff.

⁵ The BBC Reith Lectures for 1979. 'Clash of Cultures' was the third in the series, delivered on Sunday, 25 November (as it happened, the Feast of the Kingship of Christ), by a Kenyan, Ali Mazrui, Professor of Political Science in the University of Michigan.

western world where material values reigned supreme, whilst teaching a religion opposed to these values. The God of the Christian was preached in terms of the 'feminine' virtues of humility and submissive obedience, 'of turning the other cheek'; and he canonized the martyr. Whereas the God of the African was arrogant and strong; he rewarded the warrior. What we have witnessed recently is a 'remasculation' of african Christianity — a sea-change from a theology of submission to a theology of liberation. The original missionaries proscribed in many of the indigenous religious songs and dances elements of fertility-cult and of tribal aggression. Post-christian Europe has 'used' its african subjects in two massive world wars; and the fast-developing moral permissiveness of western society, heterosexually at least, has been found to have much in common with pre-christian african morality.

One may be forgiven for seeing an analogy here with Latin America, and indeed with the views of some theologians of Europe and North America. One of these, reviewing the first year of the Papacy of John Paul II in the *New York Times*, writes as follows:

Does he not issue strict dicta in certain decisive questions affecting life and death, good and evil, and especially human sexuality (in such complex problems as premarital sex, abortion and homosexuality), rather than give positive guidance free from anxiety? . . . Is the commitment in the Church to human rights in the world honest, when in the Church itself at the same time human rights are not fully guaranteed — for example, the right of priests to marry, as is guaranteed in the Gospel itself and the old Catholic tradition; the right to leave the priesthood with official dispensation?⁶

It is noteworthy that the emerging african leader, though accepting the anglo-american and french bequest of the West — language, the gateway to knowledge and power, even when this has its development through marxist gift and ideology — is equally uncompromising in his opposition to recent western views on the 'religious' rights of women and the morality of homosexuality. The western theologian is writing in the shadow of 'the cheering masses and the overcrowded audiences', especially of the papal visits to North America, Ireland and, doubtless, his native Poland. What is, however, most noticeable in Küng's article is that he never once mentions liturgy of word or sacrament. Yet it was almost invariably in the context of liturgical celebration that the pope uttered his 'strict dicta'.

⁶ Hans Küng, in the issue of Friday, 19 October 1979, p A35.

If *Sacrosanctum Concilium* had its immediate source in the liturgical renewal inaugurated by the Encyclical *Mediator Dei*,⁷ then we will remember that Pius XII, whom Küng casually accuses of 'personality cult',⁸ was anxious to forge a close link between the beginnings of that renewal with the restoration of 'peace among nations after the long and brutal war that has set a barrier of hatred, and slaughter between them':⁹ and it is this which has been the incessant theme of all the recent 'dicta' enunciated by John Paul in his travels. Furthermore, it is in *Mediator Dei* that the aphorism *Lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of praying is the law of believing), is given its proper interpretation, with the help of a citation from one of the Church's greatest theologians — who also happened to be a western-educated African:

The worship she (the Church) pays to God . . . is a continual profession of Catholic faith and an exercise of hope and divine love. 'God', St Augustine says, 'is to be worshipped by faith, hope and charity'.¹⁰ . . . Whenever some doubtful question was under discussion, it has been the practice of the Church and the Fathers to ask for light in the holy and sacred ritual. This is the source and context of the time-honoured principle, 'the law of petitionary prayer must determine the bounds of belief' (*Legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*).¹¹

The Church, then, ever mindful that 'there is one body and one Spirit . . . one hope held out in God's call to you', must strive, in each generation, across time and space, to be perseveringly faithful to the work that she has inherited from Christ himself — the building up of his body; 'until we all at the last attain to the unity inherent in our faith and our knowledge of God's Son: to that maturity which is measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ',¹² crucified and glorified. It is a task which the Eucharistic celebration, and all that the mystery implies, must constantly mirror to the world: God's reflection on the face of Christ,¹³ who is 'the light of all the nations'.¹⁴ But she also exists, in the same Christ, as the sacrament or sign or instrument of intimate oneness with God and the unity of all humankind:¹⁵ a sign that is always destined in the present moment to be contradicted, and an instrument which is constantly being blunted, of a unity whose hope would indeed be disappointed

⁷ Cf Pius XII, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol 29, n 14 (2 December 1947), 5.

⁸ *New York Times*, art. cit. ⁹ *Mediator Dei*, 10. Cf 5. ¹⁰ St Augustine, *Enchiridion*, ch 3.

¹¹ *Mediator Dei*, 50-52. ¹² Eph 4, 4-6, 12-13. ¹³ Cf 2 Cor 4, 5-6.

¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium cum sit Christus*: the opening words of the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. ¹⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

were it not that 'God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Spirit of God who is given to us'.¹⁶

It follows, then, that her liturgical celebrations must both appeal to the world and reject the world's values, sanctify it and offer it the means whereby it might respond to God's correction of its sinfulness. A Collect composed in the fifteenth century sums up the western tradition on the eve both of our world's renaissance, and western Christianity's most enduring and self-perpetuating fragmentation:

O God, Power which never falters and Light which never fails, look with your merciful love on mystery of your Church, and finish the work of man's salvation: so that all the world may see and feel that what was thrown down now stands, and what was grown old becomes young again, and that through him all things are on their way to him, who is the source of them all.

'... On their way to him'. The johannine account of the first Eucharistic celebration reminds us that the washing of the feet, with its subsequent *mandatum* — that the apostles should show their love for each other in the way in which their Lord and Master has signalized in this solemn and enduring paschal moment — is motivated by the knowledge that 'his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father ... that he had come from God and was going to God'.¹⁷ It is in this same context of the ministry of word and sacrament that we originally find, not so much a clash of cultures, but a clash of worlds: 'I am no more in the world, but they are in the world ... these things I speak in the world; but they are in the world, and I am coming to you ... I do not pray that you should take them out of the world ... sanctify them ... as you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world'.¹⁸ The paradox is intensified when we recall the earlier dialogue with Nicodemus on baptism, the Spirit and the Kingdom: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. ... God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him'.¹⁹

The texts, and the paradox they imply, are so familiar as to be platitudinous; were it not they have always been, for the Christian, so expressive of the reality of salvation history that they continue to highlight the antinomy inherent in the following of Christ —

¹⁶ Rom 5, 5.

¹⁷ Jn 13, 1-3; cf 13, 15. 34-35.

¹⁸ Jn 17, 11. 13-18.

¹⁹ Jn 3, 16-17.

flight from or contempt of the world and transformation of the world, with each successive generation seeking, in hope, its own particular synthesis. The liturgy, naturally enough, has always been the focal point at which the Christian has hoped to find the resolution — a *via media* between an inordinate attachment to the good things of God's creation which leads to claiming a full possession of it and, in fact, to a refusal to seek God's rightfulness in it and for it, and its wholesale rejection. T. B. McAuley's image of the Church as balancing on a knife-edge across the centuries has much to recommend it; or at least G. K. Chesterton, no admirer of the historian, applauded it, in his brilliant essay on *Orthodoxy*. There is no question that in our generation there has been a swing from orthodoxy, or perhaps, better, from its excesses, to what many presume to call orthopraxis; but which others, perhaps not without reason, think is a synonym for heterodoxy. And nowhere do these incompatibilities in the everyday struggle to find the appropriate means show so much as in liturgical celebrations, with all the confusion, argument and hasty invocation of principle that it has tended to evoke in the last decade and a half, on such apparently simple issues like communion in the hand or the discarding of the maniple: to the extent that its more outspoken critics, within and without, when they read some of the recent documents on liturgy, accuse Rome of fiddling whilst the world is burning. Yet these are merely symptoms of profound antitheses in the arena where the sacred and the secular must meet.

The well-known text from the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus*, written not much more than a century after the Lord's death and resurrection, is a typical case in point. It was penned when the apostolic expectation of the actual imminence of the parousia — if indeed there ever was such a literal expectation amongst the first christian communities²⁰ — had already passed. Yet the dichotomy it makes between Christians and the rest of the world is as sharp, if not sharper, than the later pessimistic division of Augustine between the chosen and the *massa damnata*:

Christians are no different from the rest of humankind from the point of view of country, speech or customs. They do not build separate

²⁰ It is in Mark (13, 32) as well as in Luke that the saying is recorded, 'but of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father'. As Vincent Taylor has put it, 'it is of the glory of the Incarnation that Christ accepted those limitations of knowledge which are inseparable from a true humanity' — cited in D. E. Nineham's *Saint Mark* (London, 1963), p 361.

cities for themselves, they have no distinct language of their own, there is nothing odd about their way of life. . . . Yet every foreign land is their home country, and every home country a foreign land. . . . They pass their lives on earth, but they hold heavenly citizenship. To put it briefly, Christians are in the world as the soul is in the body . . . so Christians are kept prisoner in the world, and yet they hold the world together . . . they dwell amongst mortal things, and yet they look forward to an incorruptible dwelling in heaven. Such is the position which God has assigned to them; and they must not resign from it.

'They have no distinct language of their own'. Yet the holy scriptures are indeed a sacred language. And it is their language which gives sacramental ministry its point of departure, and draws its dimensions. This is in fact how it has been in the Catholic Church (East as well as West) for a thousand years and more. Yet St Jerome translated the Bible into Latin from the Greek and the Hebrew in the middle of the fifth century, in order that the sacred word might become intelligible, not so much to the learned, but to ordinary folk. The Vulgate was quite literally produced for the *vulgus*, the illiterate. He speaks of the simplicity and the poor quality (*simplicitate et quasi vilitate*) of the latin vocabulary he employs, so that the peasant and the unlettered might be instructed with greater facility; and he was well aware that he might lay himself open to charges of irreverence or even lack of erudition by choosing to write in a popular style.²¹

Gradually, however, this vulgate Latin in its turn became understood only by the *literati*, the vast majority of whom were clerics. Philologists, sociologists and other students of the medieval western world are still trying to assess the effects of the class-distinction created by this 'education'. Its influence on the developing form and shape of liturgical celebration — on ministry of word and sacrament — certainly shows in the accusations and counter-accusations of heretical tendencies or of arrogance and pride, as popular pressure for intelligible liturgical language became more insistent. Nor is it difficult to envisage how the anxiety for the preservation of sacred language transferred itself to a uniform retention of stylization of sign, in gesture and in dress; so that detailed rubrical observance became a primary concern of ecclesiastical authority. Such concern bridges the gap between Trent and the

²¹ From a letter to the priest Paulinus: *Ep.* 53, PL 22, 549.

industrial revolution, which heralded the emergence of socialism: not to mention the de-christianization even of those parts of Europe which remained at least nominally Catholic well into our own times.

Sacramental confession, perhaps, provides the clearest image of the difficulties which we are trying to describe: of signifying the separation of the two worlds which the Christian inhabits, and of the re-creation which his or her presence in the sinful ambience is intended to effect. For 'religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is . . . to keep oneself unstained from the world':²² a world in which the gospel, as we receive it and witness to it, is to bear fruit and grow.²³ The gesture and formula signifying God's compassionate and loving action in Christ's body through his minister were unseen (the 'signing' still is, in a vast number of cases) and unintelligible: totally distinct and separate from that human dialogue between priest and penitent absolutely essential for the creation of the sacramental environment.

'Every foreign land is their home-country, and every home-country a foreign land'. The allusions to Paul's letter to the Philippians are unmistakable.²⁴ For St Augustine, writing in another context, Paul was one of those rarities amongst God's creatures who could live 'with his head in the clouds and his feet firmly planted on the earth'. Yet who could deny that, in his agonizing over the rejection by the Jews of their Messiah, Paul was grieving over his own flesh and blood?²⁵ Or even that Christ himself, coming to his own and being rejected by them,²⁶ wept human tears over the city of his human forebears, and used an image which seems dangerously close to the sentimental?²⁷

What appeared to be the road to a permanent resolution of the dichotomy happened during the reign of Charlemagne in the ninth century, when the Roman Empire, under whose foreign domination Christ had suffered and died, became the *Holy* Roman Empire; and when the Europe of the high middle ages became Christendom, with a host of people and cultures conquered for Christ in the literal sense of the phrase. Yet over these same centuries, the Jews were savagely persecuted in the name of Jesus, who had promised his apostles: 'They will put you out of their synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering

²² Jas 1, 27.

²³ Col 1, 6.

²⁴ Cf Phil 3, 4-8. 20-21.

²⁵ Cf Rom 9, 1-5.

²⁶ Cf Jn 1, 11.

²⁷ Cf Lk 19, 41; 13, 34.

service to God'.²⁸ The great St Bernard, whose sermons on the Song of Songs remain a model expression of contemplative love and devotion to the person of Christ, also founded the Knights Templar to win back the Holy Places from the power of Islam: a quasi-religious order which ended as an army of glorified mercenaries.

A nationalism very closely allied with religion grew out of situations such as this. During the Elizabethan persecutions, it became a test of loyalty to the crown to attend the 'reformed liturgy', and high treason to be a sacramental minister of the old religion. When the ancient faith returned to England in the shape of a restored hierarchy in the second half of the last century, a hymn was composed to St George, the country's patron saint. One of its stanzas reads:

The land of thy love is a desert,
Its temples and altars are bare;
The finger of death is upon it,
The footprints of Satan are there.

Nor has the pastoral letter of the Irish hierarchy, published to greet the recent visit of the Pope to Ireland (full of passionate pleas for peace in the north between 'protestant' and 'catholic'), escaped the trenchant criticism of some English Catholics:

The Pope has chosen Ireland as one of the first countries to be visited during his pontificate. Ireland comes next after his native Poland. This is no accident. By his visit Pope John Paul is paying tribute to the faith of Ireland. He is honouring Ireland's unbroken fidelity to that faith.

'For God and St Patrick and our native home', is sung with liturgical fervour at least on his feast-day, by Catholics of Irish descent everywhere, including the present writer! The pastoral letter is itself an introduction to the liturgical texts of the various celebrations presided over by the Holy Father.²⁹

'As it was in the beginning . . .'

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. . . .

How shall we sing the Lord's song in an alien land?,

particularly when we recall that the Psalm, so breath-taking in its pathos, ends with a malediction conjuring up the insane cruelty

²⁸ Jn 16, 2.

²⁹ *Celebrations during the visit of his Holiness Pope John Paul II to Ireland*, edited by the National Sub-Committee for the Liturgy of the Papal Visit (Dublin, 1979).

and dehumanizing disregard for human life with which our current world seethes — so often in the name of religion, whether in Pakistan or Iran, in the Lebanon, Israel or the north of Ireland:

Happy shall he be who requites you
with what you have done to us!
Happy shall he be who takes your little ones,
and dashes them against the rock!³⁰

It is surely right that liturgical celebration, the perpetuation in the christian world of Christ's loving service — 'do this in memory of me' — of his Father, and by that very fact, of all his brethren — should express the two faces (*personae*), of God, sovereign Power and sovereign Wisdom, whose mysterious and irrefragable link is the third *persona*, sovereign Goodness: and all in terms of the complex variety of humankind, each one of them and each corporate group bound together by an indefinite diversity of unity, manifesting in their very humanity all its frailty and limitations, fashioned and re-fashioned in the image and likeness of God himself. 'Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name. . . .' It is equally inevitable that liturgy and all the ministry which leads to it and lends it support, should express everything that is best, and least attractive as well, in human behaviour, discipline and style; and hence suffer from the exuberance of human excess as from the withering monotony that is prone to attach itself to every form of human routine. Its history, as far as we know it — and this is a knowledge that can never be fully comprehended — mirrors that of the pilgrim Church, which will hunger after the fleshpots of what seems permanent, homely, and dearly familiar, whilst irresistibly beckoned onwards to a consummation shrouded in mystery. For, as the author in the Letter to the Hebrews intimates, in Liturgy

You have come not to what may be touched — a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that they hear no more. . . . Rather you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; where are gathered in festal throng thousands upon thousands of angels, and the assembly of the first-born whose names are written in heaven . . . before Jesus the mediator of the new covenant. . . .³¹

We find ourselves roaming backwards and forwards over the meditative reflections of the Church on such scriptural passages,

³⁰ Ps 137, 1. 4. 8-9.

³¹ Heb 12, 18-19. 22-24.

and on the deceptively simple narratives of the evangelists — such as Luke, when he writes of the Upper Room and Emmaus³² — from the earliest Fathers to the liturgical scholars of our own day. And it would seem that, at no time, or at least for any length of time, has any generation in the Church succeeded in resolving the basic christian antinomy. In the human condition, liturgical celebration has consciously or unconsciously been used as a weapon of controversy over and again, rather than as the Lord's loving legacy, his sacred banquet which is the 'earnest', the pledge of the future glory and joy of God's kingdom, to adopt the phrases of the great antiphon for the feast of *Corpus Christi*.³³ When Samuel John Stone, the Anglican Divine, wrote his justly famous hymn, *The Church's One Foundation*, in the closing decades of the last century, it was stigmatized as anti-Catholic (Roman).³⁴ Yet it has made its way into practically every catholic hymnal of repute published in the last fifteen years, as one of the most harmonious syntheses of the Church's sacramental ministry.

Joseph Gelineau has recently asked whether the liturgy today is not more preoccupied with itself than with the kingdom it proclaims, and whether the modern Church is not too self-conscious of the 'image' it should present to the unbelieving world. He is of the opinion that it should care more about its Lord, proclaim his word, offer the signs of his resurrection and show forth the love of the Spirit; and he adds:

How much more should the liturgy, which is addressed to believers and those seeking faith, be preoccupied with him whose living mystery it celebrates . . . his saving actions which forgive us and bring us back to life. . . . Like Jesus, the liturgy is a 'call' (mass=*missa*), a gift to the Father.³⁵

These seem to us wise words, redolent of the true tradition, and open to the future.

³² Cf Lk 22, 14-20; 24, 13-35.

³³ The *O Sacrum convivium*, attributed to St Thomas Aquinas, and rendered (very prosaically, if not inaccurately) in the renewed *Liturgy of the Hours* (London, etc., 1974): 'O sacred feast in which we partake of Christ: his sufferings are remembered, our minds are filled with his grace, and we receive a pledge of the glory that is to be ours' — Antiphon for the *Magnificat*, Evening Prayer II, Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ.

³⁴ A controversy revived in certain quarters as recently as 1970, when it was sung in St Peter's during the canonization ceremony of Forty English and Welsh Martyrs of the Reformation.

³⁵ *The Liturgy today and tomorrow*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (London/New York, 1978), pp 121-22. One wonders if the translation here is not too dense: and whether 'sending' would render better the parenthesis, 'mass=*missa*'.