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LITURGICAL PRAYER

WHEN Liturgical Prayer is spoken of as an excellent and perfect prayer, as an exercise in meditation and even as a source of contemplation, two common objections are raised: (1) that it is purely vocal and too much a matter of words; (2) that it is too impersonal and not easily adaptable to individual needs. Let it be said at once that these objections are not serious. We may readily admit a certain incompatibility between private vocal prayer and meditation; but it is quite a different matter when Liturgical Prayer is in question. The Divine Office, even when celebrated with the joyous briskness of Dominican custom, leaves ample scope and full play for mental activity, in whatever direction that activity may tend. Besides, the divine praise—through the consideration of created things—goes straight to God: it fixes the attention firmly on the Supreme Object of all prayer. It is GOD we are concerned with, not the words, which are but the vehicle of our prayer. Thus, the Liturgy makes it easier to transcend the facts and circumstances of our earthly condition; it enlarges the field of vision; it leads *per ea quae facta sunt* to the *invisibilia Dei*.

Liturgical Prayer is, in a sense, like the double ladder of Jacob, by which we ascend and descend: that is why it implies an intense interior activity.

As to the second objection, there may be some particle of truth in it; but if liturgical worship eliminates "self," that is no bad thing. The following considerations will show how much can be said for and against these objections. I will begin by speaking of the mental state which liturgical prayer requires, and I will call it *the liturgical spirit*. Then I will go on to show how the sacred Liturgy raises the act of prayer to a wonderful degree of perfection.

The state of soul we describe as the liturgical spirit comprises several elements. It presupposes, in a certain degree, the acquired habit of prayer and, what is more, a profound knowledge of our Faith—I mean the great objects, the great monuments and the massive doctrines of the Faith. Indeed,

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all the expressions used in the Liturgy offer in the fullest sense God's Revelation, since they are taken from inspired texts, in which Truth is presented under innumerable aspects and with an infinite possibility of moral application. Once the inspired texts have passed into the Liturgy, there is no longer any question of the different senses of Scripture; one might say that, now that they fall *sub ratione Liturgiae*, they can be used to express whatever may be desired. They respond to the mood of him who thus prays. They are endowed, as it were, with a kind of second canonicity—the fruitful source of a thousand mystical and moral meanings. So that it would seem to be an accurate statement to say that meditation is subordinate to liturgical prayer: the two are interdependent and by no means hampered or enfeebled by each other.

An equally important element in the liturgical spirit is docility to the moulding power of prayer. I will readily grant that the effects of Liturgical Prayer are not immediately apparent, for they must be won by patient training and perseverance. Those who will not or cannot overcome the instinctive reluctance felt by many modern people to joining in the Church's public, official prayer, will never, of course, experience its priceless benefits. I maintain that, if people throw themselves whole-heartedly into liturgical prayer, it cannot fail to take possession of them, body and soul. It will colour their thoughts with the varied hues of supernatural light, imbue their wills and hearts with strength and love, and even stir their sensible faculties and their whole being, so that they will be able to cry out: *Cor meum et caro mea exultaverunt in Deum vivum; my heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God*. If unhappily we seldom experience such effects in this kind of prayer, it is because, from the ingrained prejudice of centuries, we have been brought up to regard it as a dead or merely mechanical formality, good enough for musty old clergymen, but destitute of life or power to stimulate any but uncultured congregations. It is sad to see even intelligent people unable to understand the beauty of liturgical worship. How little they would understand us if we were to compare our liturgy to the

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sacred dances of old. In order that the Liturgy may exert its moulding power and establish order in men's personality and life, they must live in and by it. They must enter with sincerity into its smallest rites and seek the sap hidden in the least of its formulas. In this way the Liturgy will have a positive effect on their conduct and will lead them to practical resolutions and heroisms beyond their human weakness. While disengaging them from petty anxieties, it will act on them unconsciously and mould them into greatness.

Though we cannot admit that Liturgical Prayer is unconcerned with private and personal needs, yet we must lay stress on the fact that it transcends all personal considerations; the prayer is bigger than anyone engaged in it; detachment and disinterestedness are the last and finest qualities of the liturgical spirit. In the Liturgy personal individuality is merged into the supernatural life of the Church and the individuals become one with her in her invisible action in the world. Or, perhaps it is more exact to say that it causes them to lose their personality in that of Our Lord Himself. Those who take part in the Liturgy become the living instruments of the prayer and praise of the Church, the living echo of the life of the Glorified Humanity of Christ. They need have no wistful longings for the peace and quiet of private meditation: the Liturgy throws open to them a door leading into the joy of contemplation; they have but to enter in. To follow that way is to follow the way of perfection and in the greatness of that way men will lose sight of self.

Even if the Liturgical Office could be separated from the Mass, we should still be able to say that it unites those who take part in it to the intentions of Christ and His Church; but the two cannot be separated. The Divine Office is the prelude and preparation as well as the setting and sequence of the Eucharistic Mysteries. Archeologists have traced the many relationships between the Divine Office and the Mass. For example, the office of Matins presents a striking analogy with the night or morning service held in the primitive Church as a preparation for the Mysteries, a reminiscence of which is still to be found in the early part of Holy Mass as

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we know it. The Psalms of the Nocturns correspond to the *Introit* and *Gradual*; while in the Lessons from the Old Testament or from the Epistles, in the second nocturn giving the legends of the Saints, in the Homily on the Gospel, there are relics of the Prophecies, the Apostolic Messages to the Churches, the Acts of the Martyrs and the parts of the Gospel, which were read in those early celebrations. Then, the Catechumens were dismissed, and this *Missa* was followed by the Holy Sacrifice. According to some scholars, the *Te Deum* may be nothing else but an ancient kind of *Illatio* or Preface. This close dependence of the Breviary on the first part of Mass is at least a very plausible theory. (See *Illatio ou Te Deum* by Dom P. Cagin.) Thus, from its connection with the Divine Mysteries and because it is the official prayer of the Church, the Divine Office leads to union with the purposes of God and with the intentions of Christ and His Church.

This is, indeed, another aspect of the fulness to be found in the prayers of the Liturgy: the fulness of intention. The four ends of the Holy Sacrifice¹ embrace in themselves all possible ends, which fall within the sphere of Faith, Hope and Charity. They are to be found ceaselessly repeated in the Divine Liturgy, like a kind of keynote which attunes the worshipper much more to the thought of God than all the details of his personal intentions. No greater sign of devotion to Our Lord and His Church can be given than the surrender of one's personal interests and their absorption in the universal interests of God. The act of prayer thus expands to the measure of the Church itself; it sheds its imperfections and its narrowness; it loses itself in the great harmony of adoration, reparation, petition and thanksgiving, which rings unceasingly in the ears of God. There is a practice, adopted by some of the faithful nowadays, called the "heroic act," which consists in the abdication of one's merits in favour of the suffering Church in Purgatory. I venture to say that he who strives to identify himself with the intentions of the Church, in the way described, makes as

¹ Adoration, Thanksgiving, Reparation, Petition.

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noble an act of disinterested surrender and becomes an even more generous and universal contributor to the welfare and glory of the whole Church of God.

Finally, I need merely name a third kind of plenitude which, through the Liturgy, brings the act of prayer to its perfection: I mean the plenitude of power or effect. Personal intentions may be frustrated, but the intentions of Our Lord and His Church are certain of fulfilment, even if only in a mysterious and incomprehensible way.

For those who are bound to the choral and public celebration of the Divine Office, there are surer guarantees of communion with the intentions of Our Lord and His Church than for those who have to content themselves with its private recitation. There always seems to me something of a parody in the private and individual, low-toned and almost silent, use of expressions essentially collective, for instance the simple *Dominus vobiscum*. It is to be noted that the Church has never exempted the individual priest who says his Office alone from these collective expressions; so there is reason to hope that she relies with greater confidence on those who carry out in reality the collective character of her prayer. She more gladly rests on their shoulders the burden of her intentions, and recognizes in them the privilege of a special conformity with her spirit of intercession.

That spirit of prayer in the Church is the very breath of Christ's soul. When the Eucharistic Elements have ceased to be present in the communicant, there still remains in the soul an invisible influence of the soul of Jesus Christ: *Anima Christi sanctissima, sanctifica me*, and nothing can better preserve the precious power of that influence than the daily practice of Liturgical Prayer. Those who have this privilege of Liturgical Prayer may, in a new form but with the essential meaning of the words of St. Paul, say of themselves with truth: "I pray, now no longer I, but Christ prayeth in me."

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(Revised and adapted by Bernard Delany, O.P.)