

BREAD OF LIFE

BY

GERALD VANN, O.P.

IMAGINE a priest-worker gathering his friends together in his shabby little room in the industrial slum: the day's work is over; he is going to say Mass, but first he will talk to them: what might he say? Perhaps something like this:

'If you look out of the window there, you can see nothing but factory and tenement buildings; down there in the grey street there are children who have never heard the chuckle of a brook or seen a meadow filled with buttercups or felt the clean wind sweeping across the hills; all around us there are men and women who have grown up like that, and who have lost touch with reality because they are severed from their roots: almost, you could say, they have ceased to be part of the universe, and when a man ceases to be that he ceases to be a human being in any full sense. Modern man has used his intellect, his reason, to great effect within certain narrow limits; but he has lost the instinctive life, the intuitive life: he has no symbols. Once you lose the water and the wood, the wine, the oil; once you make love a question of sophisticated glamour, and work a question of a dull uncreative routine; once, in other words, you agree to forget your roots in the universe, you doom yourself to unreality. For the unnatural is the unreal. Even the christian who forgets the graciousness of nature forgets in the end the naturalness of grace, and finds himself in a sort of spiritual vacuum.

'Man is reason; but he is also instinct, intuition, emotion. Why go to Mass? people sometimes say: and one answer which is very relevant today is that the Mass is the Church's way of making us, even naturally speaking, sane and healthy.

'Look what we have here. This table on which the Mass will be said: I helped to make it myself, on the farm where I was born: you can feel the goodness of it, the grain is a joy to the eye; this bread, these hosts, my sister made them from the corn that grows there, green and then gold and then white; and the wine too is from our own hillside; and if I hold it up like this the great leonine sun gives it, even in our dun grey world, a new glory;

and here is the cup we shall use, the wide hospitable cup to show that man can try to be generous to copy the generosity of God.

'If you lived here in this slum, in these conditions, and had no God, you know well how lack-lustre, how etiolated, how pointless, your life would become. The Church teaches us to be human. Perhaps in one way we are lucky to meet like this, away from all the pomp and beauty of the great churches, the great cathedrals, where things are done with such complicated ceremony that you may forget what exactly is being done. The Church teaches us to be human: you need the soil, the trees, the water; you need the rhythm of nature.

'In a healthy world, of course, men would not have to learn these things. But ours is a very unhealthy world; and we have to start again from the very beginning, and be taught how to be human. Only, this is a lesson that cannot just be taught to the mind, to the reason: it needs to go deeper than reason; and while the Church does indeed try to educate our minds, it also has other and deeper lessons for us, it tries to form us, to fit us back again into the universe, to make us live the deep human and natural realities.

'Soon we shall kneel, clasp our hands, cross ourselves: these are all ways in which the Church teaches us to gather the personality together, in strength, and enter the world of eternal reality. We shall offer the bread and the wine and water to God, and with them we shall put our own lives, and the lives of those we love, and the world we love, that they may be made holy; and then we shall listen as bread and wine are changed into God; and then finally, at the Table, we shall receive the God who thus takes possession of us.

'Gender is a much wider concept than sex. Male or female, the human soul is meant in the last resort to be feminine in regard to God, to reality. The first sin was an attempt to be masculine, to dominate and dictate; and all through the ages the same desire has inflicted on the world the scourges of war and rapine, of tyranny, cruelty, exploitation. But the great poets and artists, the philosophers and scientists, the sages and mystics, who have learnt how to sit still and *receive* reality and let it take possession of them, they are the ones who have benefitted humanity and made the world a better place.

'Why go to church? True, some churches are so big and so

filled with wonderful furniture and works of art, and there are so many people moving about in rich apparel, and the altar is so far away and so dwarfed and concealed by it all, that you could easily miss the point of going there. Certainly churches do not need to be as small as this little room (though it is better to have many simple churches than one vast cathedral), but they should be as simple, as free from distraction, as free from unreality. Then you can answer the question easily: You should go to church because, in the first place, quite apart from the immensities of grace and eternity, you will learn how to accept reality, how to become real, how to live, for these are the living waters for lack of which the modern world is dying.

'The valley where this corn grew and was ground and made into bread, where this wine was trodden in the press: how remote it seems from us here, and how unreal this world seems by comparison. There is no reason why life in the city should be cut off from these things; on the contrary; but alas in our case there is no question about it. And so we have to learn again, like little children: have to look and listen and feel, have to learn the blade of grass, the stream, the sky, the stars; have to learn the great fundamental symbols, learn them consciously first of all with our reasons but only in order that then the lesson may sink deeper and become part of us. We go to church in order to learn consciously the Church's even natural wisdom, but then to *become* that knowledge by living it, constantly, in the acts of worship.

'So in the Mass, the greatest and richest of all symbols, the Sign of the Cross, we learn to live, to be wise; we learn to understand, long for, receive, divine life; and so the sacrament makes sacrifice possible for us, for only the humble and contrite of heart can offer sacrifice; and so we return to our roots not only in the universe but in God.

'For sacrifice means essentially two things: the offering of life to God, the receiving of life from God. We offer him our selves and our world in union with his Son, in order that thereby his life may come down upon us and into us: that he may take possession of us. The Passion of Christ is completed in the descent of the holy Spirit to whom we pray: Come, take possession of our souls.

'Through the bread and the wine we become rooted again in nature; through the bread and the wine we begin to live a divine

life because we begin to be possessed by God. There is a third thing. The breaking of bread is the symbol of hospitality, of all that we mean by hearth and home; this sacrament is meant also to restore us to our roots in the human family, to cure our individualism and the loneliness and frustration that come of it. The Church remains almost the only defender of the home, the family, in a world in which home life is breaking up and society is becoming atomistic and therefore neurotic. It is, alas, a common reproach against catholics that in spite of their common faith and common worship and above all their sacrament of unity, they remain, once outside the church doors, as bitterly rent by faction and class-consciousness, by envies and resentments, by gossip and calumny, as any of their pagan neighbours. If it is true is it perhaps because too much of our modern church-going is again too large-scale, too complicated, too overlaid by extraneous and perhaps harmful elements, and misses the sharp realism, the blazing out of the essentials, which we are given here in the squalors of this little attic?

'But again there is something more. The sacrament of unity is also the sacrament of peace. Have you noticed how it is the rootless people who are always scheming and struggling for power, for influence, for money, always restless? The Eucharist gives us peace precisely because it gives us roots, in this world and the next, in the human family and the divine.

'You cannot hope to understand grace unless first of all you understand nature: you cannot understand what it means to be divinely alive unless you first of all know what it means to be humanly alive. If your pagan friends are ever interested enough to ask you what you mean by grace, the sacraments, the Mass, don't embark forthwith on the theology of sin, redemption, eternal life; start with this world, this life; try to show them that these things, even naturally speaking, can open a door on to a world they have lost and without which they are bound to be miserable, frustrated, restless.

'You can never hope to be masculine without damage to yourself and to other people unless first of all you learn to be feminine towards reality. Every man wants to have a rich personality, a full life; wants to be able to exercise power and responsibility of one kind or another; wants to be happy; but the restless rootless man tries to seize upon these things or to be domineering with

them; and then beauty, charm, all the personal gifts are used recklessly, irresponsibly, cruelly, to dominate over others, and power degenerates into tyranny, and the search for happiness becomes a ruthless egoism. The Gospel, which presents us with the paradox of the Christ who is both the Judge coming in clouds of majesty and the meek and humble Lamb, presents us also with the paradox of losing life in order to find it. We may have great personal riches, but we are told, Blessed are the poor; we may have great power and have to exercise authority, but we are told, Blessed are the meek; we cannot help longing for happiness, but we are told, Blessed are they that mourn. It is because all these things must lead to evil and destruction unless we are learning to be possessed by God, as the Church teaches us to be.

If we are given great personal gifts we have first of all to remember that they are indeed given; they are not ours; we are only stewards, to use them according to God's will and for God's purposes in poverty of spirit. If we have power and authority we have to remember that they can be exercised only in obedience to a greater power and a higher authority, in meekness of heart. If we are given happiness we have to try to accept it humbly from God's hands and make it part of that divine love, that *caritas*, in which we are meant to live, which is meant to be our "atmosphere". And all this the Church teaches us, again, through the water, the wood, the cup, through the symbolism of sacrifice, which shows us that things are only made perfect when they are raised to a higher plane, as the sensuous is made perfect when it becomes the vehicle of spirit, and that they are raised only when they are offered, as the bread and the wine are offered.

'Do you remember a striking and, at first sight perhaps, strange phrase of St Peter's: He that will love life, and see good days? Does it at first sight seem a rather pagan sort of thing to say? Are we not taught to fix our gaze upon eternity, and to treat this life, this world, with scant ceremony? No, we are forbidden indeed to be hedonists, but we are taught to love, to love all life, to love the earth and its fullness, to love and reverence water and wood and wine.

'But notice what St Peter is saying: He that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile. It is no good trying to be rooted again in nature if at the same time we continue to be individualists, to be

isolated and lonely as modern man tends to be isolated and lonely. In earlier and healthier ages man did not have to try consciously to establish his unity with the human family: the social distinctions were there, far more clearly marked than in our day, but they did not prevent the family atmosphere which you find in Chaucer, which you find in Fielding, but which is gone when you come to Jane Austen, and is replaced by the conscious hatred and antagonism of the Two Nations in Disraeli. Nowadays it must be a question of a conscious effort: we have to train ourselves to realise that there is a unity far deeper and far more important than all our differences: the Church tells us so when it brings us all together to the Table, to the sacrament of unity; but we shall spoil the lesson and make it nugatory unless our lips express it, speaking no guile.

‘The sacrament of unity is also the sacrament of peace, of that inner tranquillity for which all human beings long and which so few can find. Try first to explain all this to your friends: try to show them how the Church’s liturgy, which may so easily seem a mere pointless mumbo-jumbo, is in fact a door through which they can pass into a world they have dreamed of but never attained, a world where they will find the great realities, and sanities, of nature, the unity of the human family, the secret of tranquillity and peace.

‘Then, and only then, when you have shown them how to be human, try to show them how to be divine, and tell them of the greater purposes of redemption; tell them of that other world of which one of the loveliest of the Sunday collects speaks:

‘O God, who hast prepared for those that love thee such good things as the eye of man cannot see: pour into our hearts such a sense of thy love that we, loving thee in all and above all, may obtain thy promises which exceed all that we can desire.’