

THE PRIESTHOOD AND CONTEMPLATION

By DOM BEDE GRIFFITHS

THE Mass, said St Vincent Ferrer, is the highest act of contemplation. This relation between the Mass and contemplation, and hence between the priesthood and the contemplative life, is something which has received very little attention; and yet it is something of supreme importance in the spiritual life of a priest, and in the whole conception of contemplation and the contemplative life. For too long, contemplation has been regarded as a matter of individual piety, the final phase in a system of meditation and mental prayer, to which few are expected to attain and which has no apparent relation to the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. Garrigou-Lagrange¹ has done much to correct this tendency, by showing that contemplation is not to be regarded as an extraordinary grace to which only a few can aspire, but as part of the normal perfection of a Christian life; the development of the grace which we all receive at baptism under the influence of the gifts of the Holy Ghost. Dom Anselm Stolz² has taken this doctrine a step further by showing that, in the tradition of the Church, contemplation is always centred upon Christ and is intimately related in all its stages to the sacramental life of the Church. This can be seen most clearly in the teaching of the Greek Fathers, especially St Gregory of Nyssa, whose mystical theology has been made the subject of a profound study by Père Daniélou³. According to this theory, the three stages of the spiritual life, the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive way, correspond with the three sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. Baptism is the sacrament which separates us from sin and gives us the light of faith, and corresponds therefore with the purgative way. Confirmation initiates us into the way of the spirit and raises the mind above the world of the senses, and corresponds with the illuminative way. Finally the Eucharist is the sacrament of union, the consummation of the spiritual life, which brings us into direct contact with God.

¹ Christian Perfection and Contemplation. ² Doctrine of Spiritual Perfection.

³ *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*.

In this way, contemplation is seen as a normal effect of the sacramental life, initiated in baptism, developed in confirmation and consummated in the Mass. The implications of this doctrine are obvious. It places contemplation at the very centre of the Christian life, relates it to the Mass and the other sacraments and sets it in the framework of the common life of the Church.

But it is not only the Mass and the sacraments that are thus related to the contemplative life. In the teaching of the Fathers, the Scriptures were also regarded as having a kind of sacramental character, and were seen as the God-given means for leading the soul to the goal of contemplation. Here again we have grown accustomed to systems of meditation, which, though no doubt ultimately based on the Scriptures, have grown very far from their mode of expression and of thought. But, in the early Church, the Scriptures, particularly the Psalms, were the one great source of meditation, and in the Rule of St Benedict, which codifies, as it were, the prayer life of the early Church, the *lectio divina*, or meditative reading of the Scriptures and the Fathers, is the only form of meditation that is found. Now it is precisely this treasury of readings from the Scriptures and the Fathers, in which the whole tradition of the Church is enshrined, that is placed in the hands of every priest in the Breviary. In the Mass and the Breviary therefore every priest has at his disposal a perfect method of prayer and contemplation. This is, moreover, not merely an individual method of prayer, but the prayer of the Church. In it and through it the priest is united with the whole Church, with all his fellow-members in the Body of Christ. He prays as a member of a body, as a part of a whole: and as his prayer goes to strengthen the life of the whole Church, so it also receives help and strength from the prayer of others. If the office is recited in common, this mutual strengthening of prayer can be more definitely felt, but even when he prays alone, he is no less really united to the whole Body and his prayer is no less truly a common prayer. It is a mistake to think of contemplation as being necessarily something solitary, which withdraws us from our fellow-men. There is certainly a kind of withdrawal in contemplation, but it is a withdrawal of the mind and the will into God, which actually unites us more intimately with others. It is in their superficial characteristics that men are most divided: the more we penetrate beneath the surface into the heart, the more we realise the ground

of our union with one another in Christ and the Church. It is therefore in the common prayer of the Church, which is the prayer of Christ himself, that we must seek the perfection of Christian life and the ideal of Christian contemplation.

But it will be said that there is a serious obstacle to this theory, in that contemplative prayer is always held to be beyond the sphere of words and images, whereas the liturgy of the church is entirely based upon them. This is a serious objection, and needs serious consideration. It is quite true that contemplation is generally held to begin when the mind passes beyond words and images and all clear concepts, and comes under the direct influence of divine grace. But this does not mean that the mind must necessarily abandon the use of words and images altogether. When the mind passes into a state of contemplation, it will not use words and images as the proper means of its prayer—this will be supplied by the action of grace—but it may nevertheless use them as ‘supports’ to its prayer. The purpose of all prayer is to raise the mind and will to God. All words and actions, all images and concepts, whether of the Mass or the divine office, are so many means—sacramental signs—by which the mind and will are raised to God. We must never stop short at the sign, but use it as a means to ascend to the thing signified—the infinite reality of God. It is in this way that we have to learn to use both the Mass and the divine office.

For this purpose the careful recitation of the words of the divine office, whether said in public or in private, and the deliberate performance of the gestures of the Mass, the sign of the cross, bowing and genuflecting and moving across the altar, are all of primary importance. Each word and gesture must be given a sacramental character: it must become a means of recollection. The regular rhythm of the recitation of words or the performance of a rite is a universally valid means of recollection. If it is done with haste or with a distracted mind, its whole value is lost: but if it is done, not necessarily slowly, but with recollection and attention, it can become one of the most perfect means of preparing the soul for contemplation. The same may be said, incidentally, of the Rosary, which can also be used as a method of contemplative prayer. Any ordered, rhythmical action by which the body is set at rest, and the mind made attentive, has this sacramental character. If to this the chant and ceremonies of High

Mass are added and are rendered with proper care, a vast, rhythmical structure of prayer is built up, which forms the perfect theatre for contemplative prayer. As with words and actions, so with thoughts and images: these also must be used as a means to raise the mind and will to God. The aim here must be not to indulge in discursive thought and fancy, but to concentrate the mind in a more and more simple act of attention to God. This act of 'attention' has been well described, in general terms, by Simone Weil.⁴ 'Attention consists in suspending the activity of the mind, in leaving it open, empty, and able to be penetrated by the object of thought. . . . above all the mind must be empty, attentive, seeking nothing but being ready to receive, in its naked truth, the object which is going to penetrate it.' When it is a question of contemplative prayer, the mind must be simply seeking God, not any particular image or concept of God, but God himself in his 'naked truth'. So when we approach the Mass or the divine office, we should not try to force our attention, but to leave the mind open, so that the thoughts and images penetrate the mind, while it remains continually quiet and attentive to God. In this way, the supernatural meaning of the psalms and the scriptures, that 'mystical sense' which was the delight of the Fathers of the Church, will gradually be unfolded, and we shall enter into the inner meaning of the mystery of Christ and the Church.

Thus the recitation of the divine office may become a regular method of contemplation and establish the soul in the 'illuminative way'. There may even be moments when, as we read in Cassian's account of the prayer of the Egyptian monks, in the course of the psalmody the mind may be carried beyond itself and pass into ecstasy—that is into that 'pure prayer' where all thoughts and images are totally transcended, and the soul is absorbed in God. But normally the succession of words and images passing through the mind will create a kind of rhythmical pattern, by which the mind will become gradually unified and concentrated on God, so that while the recitation continues as it were on one level, on another level the mind is wholly attentive to God and recollected in his presence. Thus the recitation of the divine office may lead by gradual stages to a state of contemplation, which, though it is, of course, rare in ordinary experience

⁴ *Attente de Dieu*.

and is a wholly gratuitous grace, is yet in no way outside the ordinary way of liturgical prayer.

But if the divine office can lead us to the threshold of the unitive way, it is in the Mass, as has been said, that we must seek for the 'highest act' of contemplation and the most perfect means of union with God. Now, the basis of this union is to be found, as we have seen, in baptism. In baptism, a seed of divine life is implanted in the soul, which is capable of developing, through the influence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the grace of confirmation, until it leads us to the beatific vision of God. But this divine life encounters an obstacle in our nature in the form of sin, and before it can wholly penetrate our nature, a profound transformation has to take place of our whole being; and this transformation of our being involves a kind of death to the soul. 'You who are baptised', says St Paul, 'were baptised into the death of Christ.' We have to die that we may live; to die to sin, to the world, to ourselves in order that we may live in Christ to God. Baptism is the beginning of this process; it is a real, though mystical, death to sin which unites us really, though mystically, to Christ in his death and resurrection. It is the root of a union which has only to grow in order to attain to the full flower of Christian perfection. But this process of growth involves a continual death and resurrection. The more we advance, the deeper the death we have to die in order that we may be totally transformed and conformed to Christ: and the sacrament which enables us thus to die daily, to be transformed daily into the image of Christ, is the Eucharist. This is the true meaning and purpose of the sacrifice of the Mass: that we should be enabled to participate in the sacrifice of Christ, to share his death in order that we may share his resurrection and so offer supreme glory to the Father.

The sacrifice of the Mass is then, for the priest, the supreme means of his sanctification, because in it and through it he becomes more and more closely identified with Christ. Just as in the divine office we make use of words and gestures, of images and thoughts, in order to raise the mind and will to union with God, so also it is with the Mass. Every word and gesture, every image and thought suggested by the sacred words has its own value and forms part of a rhythmical pattern, which creates the perfect setting for the union of the soul with God. But at the centre of the Mass there is something more: there is the divine action, the redemptive act of

Christ, made present to us sacramentally through the action of the Mass. Our action of self-oblation is met by the corresponding act of self-oblation on the part of God, and our sacrifice is identified with his, just as the bread and wine we offer are transformed into the substance of his flesh and blood. Here there takes place that marriage of the soul with God, of Christ with the Church, which is the consummation of Christian prayer. For each of us, of course, the degree in which this union is realised depends upon his disposition and the special grace he may receive; but the way is there open for all, and it is the way to the closest conceivable union with God. At the heart of the Mass, in the silence of the consecration and communion, we enter into the holy of holies, where no created thing stands between the soul and God.

The implications of this conception of the Mass as the 'highest act of contemplation' and the perfect means of union with God are very great. In the first place, it sets contemplation, as we have said, at the very centre of the Christian life. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that on this ground the Christian life is essentially a contemplative life, in that it is wholly ordered towards contemplation and union with God in the central act of its religion. But, in the second place, it reveals the profoundly social character of Christian contemplation. The priest does not offer Mass alone: he offers it in the name and on behalf of the whole Church. Whether Mass is offered in public or in private, with one server or with a multitude of people present, it is always the offering of the whole Church, of the mystical body united with its head. But more than this, we know that the '*res*', the reality signified and effected by the sacrament of the Eucharist, is precisely the 'unity of the mystical body of Christ': so that in this sacrifice the priest is united with the whole people, who offer the sacrifice with him, in the most profound sacramental union. It is by this means above all that the unity of the Church, and eventually the unity of all mankind in Christ, which is the object of the Mass and the redemption, are achieved. Thus Christian contemplation, so far from isolating the contemplative, brings him into the most intimate contact with others' souls; he becomes identified with Christ in his redeeming work for all mankind. There is no human need which is not represented in the offering of the bread and wine on the altar, no human soul whose self-oblation is not included in the sacrifice. The more the priest has identified himself with

Christ in his sacrifice, the wider will be his sympathy, the more he will penetrate into the deepest needs of mankind. It is in this respect that a priest who is vowed to the contemplative life exercises his apostolate. However limited his contact with others may be extensively, intensively he can identify himself with the needs of all. Sharing in the sacrifice of Christ, he shares also in the prayer of Christ, which is the prayer of the Church, and in the whole redeeming work of Christ, which is the work of the Church. It is his privilege, precisely in proportion as he renounces his own personal activity, to act in the person of Christ and in the name of the Church.

But for the priest who is engaged in the active apostolate of the Church, the consequences are no less important. It means that he has in the Mass the one supreme source of all apostolic work. His activity will be of value just in proportion as it is fed from this source. It is in the contemplation of the mystery of Christ and the Church, in union with Christ in the sacrifice of the Mass, that he will gain the light and strength he needs, if his work is to be of a supernatural character. '*Contemplata aliis tradere*' must be the motto of every genuine apostle, and this contemplation, as we have seen, is the fruit of the right use of the Mass and the breviary. The means are there for all to use; they are the most simple and fundamental of all. A priest fulfils his function as a priest just in so far as he identifies himself with Christ in the sacrifice of the Mass and in the prayer of the liturgy. It is through this that the redemptive work of Christ is perpetuated in the world. Through this the only adequate praise and worship and adoration are offered to God; through this the only adequate offering is made for sin, and mankind is restored to its lost unity, and souls are saved; through this, finally, the Church is built up and perfected as the Bride of Christ. It is the ladder set between heaven and earth, on which the angels ascend and descend, bearing the offerings of man to God and bestowing the graces of God on mankind; and it is the priest who is the mediator of this intercourse. It may be asked, in conclusion, what is the relation of private prayer to this public prayer of the Mass and the liturgy? It is sometimes suggested that vocal prayer, the prayer of the Mass and the breviary, is a kind of elementary basis from which each individual has to advance along his own path of private, mental prayer towards union with God. But this seems to us to

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be the opposite of the truth. In reality it is our private prayer which is, as it were, an elementary exercise preparing us for the great work of the Mass and liturgy. Our private prayer ought, as far as possible, to be wholly subordinate to the public prayer of the Church. It may take the form of a preparation for Mass, or a thanksgiving after Mass, or of half an hour or an hour at some other time of the day. But always it should be subordinate, and as far as possible related to the prayer of the liturgy. We should try to school our minds in the language and habit of thought of the psalms and the scriptures generally, so that when we come to take part in the Mass or the divine office we find that it is the expression of our own most personal prayer. Our individual prayer will become more and not less personal as it begins to find its expression in the liturgy and the Mass, because ultimately our own personality can be fulfilled only when it has been conformed to the person of Christ. Thus, ideally, the prayer of the liturgy should be the fulfilment of personal prayer.

This does not mean, however, that our prayer must always be tied to the words and forms of the liturgy. We must insist that the whole of the divine office, like the action of the Mass, opens out upon the entire mystery of Christ and the Church. The words and actions, the images and ideas of the liturgy are nothing but means by which we are enabled to reach out beyond finite concepts into the inner mystery of the divine life. We need these means, these concepts and actions, to enable us to mount towards God, but God can use them in many secret ways to achieve his work of pure contemplation. This contemplation will be, of course, a profoundly personal prayer, but it will be a prayer which extends far beyond the limits of our own personality into the mystery of the personal life of God. Such contemplation will overflow into our daily life and awaken prayer, it may be, at all times of the day, but it will be a prayer that stems from the source of the Mass and the liturgy, and is constantly returning to its source. In this way we should eventually by grace be able to make our whole life an offering of Mass, a continuous self-oblation in union with Christ, and a continuous offering of praise to God and of prayer for our fellow men. Then we should really be living the life of Christ in his Church, and this is the ideal of Christian contemplation.