

fied, nevertheless, if those in touch with him, by example or word or pen, even if only partly, but in some way because of him are living, and living more abundantly.

The Liturgy as Prayer¹—I

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

I want to begin by quoting a passage from St Paul which provides a good introduction to what I have to say. He is talking to the Colossians about rising with Christ and living in Christ's life. He goes on to say:

Put ye on as the elect of God, holy and beloved, the bowels of mercy, benignity, humility, modesty, patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving one another if any have a complaint against another; even as the Lord hath forgiven you so do you also. But above all these things have charity, which is the bond of perfection; and let the peace of Christ rejoice in your hearts, wherein also you are called in one body; and be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you abundantly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual canticles, singing in grace in your hearts to God. All whatsoever you do in word or in work, all things do ye in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God and the Father in him.

This concludes with the form of the liturgy, saying all *per Christum Dominum nostrum*, and begins with the social and moral virtues, leading up to the virtue of charity which is the bond of perfection. Now all this is really a sort of background to what is going on in the Church today, returning if you like to a more liturgical frame of mind—this enormous, unimaginable revolution in the liturgy that we have had in these last twelve years. Twelve years ago hardly one of us could have thought that so soon there would be changes in the mass, which has become so sacrosanct in every individual word and prayer that the idea of changing anything in it was hardly thinkable. A little further back

¹Though based on a paper given at a conference for Religious at Spode House, this article should interest all who are trying to live a life of prayer. It will be concluded in the next issue.

we witnessed tremendous changes in the Easter liturgy, and, a little later, changes in the divine office. All this is such a short period after centuries in which there had been absolutely no change at all—the epoch of changelessness. Now we are all looking forward to what the Ecumenical Council itself is going to do in liturgical matters and I imagine that there will be even more changes—perhaps even more radical changes. But first of all we want to see the reason for this.

It has often been pointed out that the reason for these recent changes is that the liturgy had become the property of the clergy, something which they 'did', something that they performed at the altar. A lot of it was just ritual which had gradually collected a lot of rather strange anomalies. When the sun used to shine down through the window every Holy Saturday morning—it was always in my memory anyway a most beautiful day and the sun was pouring through the windows—and at about ten o'clock in the morning we would start singing the most wonderful chant about this holy night in its profound darkness and so on towards mid-day—*lumen Christi*, the light of the great candle shining in the darkness—and all this in broad daylight. That was the sort of anomaly of time. There were other strange anomalies too in the divine office. At Blackfriars when we were instructing converts they used to come in the evening and a bell would ring at nine o'clock and you would say 'I'm sorry I have to finish now because I have got to go to matins'. Eyebrows would rise in wonder at these peculiar people singing morning prayers at nine o'clock at night. A very strange anomaly occurred during Lent, with vespers, the evening prayer, sung in the middle of the day because we were no longer able to fast until the nightfall and in order to have the mid-day meal at the usual time we advanced the evening prayer to late morning, because the law had it that the evening prayer must come before we broke our fast. These were various anomalies in time, and there were anomalies in action too. It always used to seem strange that while the subdeacon and the deacon were proclaiming the word of God to the whole church the celebrant was sitting down on the sedilia reading it away as hard as he could at the same time and not listening at all. The *flectamus genua* with hardly a moment to get down on one knee before you were told to get up again. These were anomalies which had gradually crept in because it had become a ritual which was the property of the priest and had a sort of sacred element about it, a mysterious sacred element which nobody really questioned or thought very much about. Since the priests also were just like every other individual in this respect,

members of the body of Christ, they made in their own lives a good deal of distinction between, for example, saying the office and their own private prayer. Saying the office was something you had to get through, and you muttered away at your breviary at odd moments when something else was going on. As such a variety of anomalies had grown up it was at length decided to return to the idea of the liturgy as the prayer of the Church. And this is where Pius XII and John XXIII in particular have given the lead.

A word of warning, however, is necessary. No amount of change in exterior actions can achieve anything unless there is a change of heart. For example, it is no good expecting the Council to produce all sorts of marvellous things which will make it possible for us to march into church and pray the liturgy if we are not already acclimatised to such changes. I think some people regard the forthcoming Council as a group of professional picture cleaners, people who get hold of old masters and go over them very carefully removing the dirt and dust of the ages and revealing the marvellous colours and forms of the original. People think that the Council is going to clean up a lot of things in this way, so that we shall be able to see the beauty of the chant and the beauty of the liturgy and in fact the beauty of the whole life of the Church all renovated and shining. It is not like that at all, because this is a movement in the Church and we have to move with the Church. What I am trying to say is simply that if we retain the old mentality, though we dialogue mass, sing the mass and adopt new active ceremonies in the mass, these changes may be merely additional things which are done, or different things which are done, while the liturgy still remains the property of the priest and still something that is going on at the altar while we have continued our own private devotions and prayers—while we are dialoguing we still carry on our 'devotions'. In other words for ordinary people there is a limit. You cannot just put on different things and expect them suddenly to begin to pray the liturgy. Changes in action, changes in external modes, will not necessarily produce a change in liturgical prayer unless we prepare as St Paul says here. It all goes back to the idea of charity, to belonging to the body of Christ. From charity he goes on to 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you abundantly'. We have to be deepening our understanding of the scriptures and instructing one another, as he says, in 'psalms, hymns and spiritual canticles'. In other words deepening our understanding of what we are singing and what we are doing. 'Singing in grace in your hearts to God'—not necessarily getting mixed up with

the ictus or the quilisma or those points and other little bits and pieces in the plain song which can be very distracting. We have to be singing together in grace in our hearts. In order to have a proper liturgical revival and proper liturgical prayer, in fact in order to make the work of the Council a success we ourselves must be preparing in this way. So this is a word of warning—external changes will not necessarily achieve anything. What we are trying to see now is the internal change of heart, change of mind which makes liturgy a prayer. I am talking here in general about liturgical prayer and in the second article I shall deal with the theology of the eucharist to see how *the* liturgy is prayer. There is a distinction between individual prayer (silent prayer if you like) and community prayer. This is where we have to avoid making a dichotomy; but we must make a clear distinction. We cannot impose communal prayer on every occasion or think that everybody is bound to communal prayer, leaving no place at all for individual prayer or personal prayer. But, especially in our community life, our religious life, there must be communal prayer which is complementary to, working together with, personal prayer. Each individual person with his characteristics has his own personal attractions and devotions. There is no suggestion that these personal devotions and personal attractions should be stamped out or pushed under. Obviously they work together. personal attraction feeding communal prayer and community prayer feeding individual prayer. If you go back to the period of St Dominic, which is already late in liturgical history, you still find that there were no set times for meditation, no set retreats, or similar exercises. In the life of St Dominic, after matins, which was said in the middle of the night or early in the morning, he and his brethren continued, according to the individual attraction of each, in vigils until the morning mass. This was, of course, an unofficially specified time for what we now call meditation. Since that time this has all been incorporated into the various rules and constitutions so that religious must have set times for meditation just as there are set times for mass and so on. But in those days it was entirely a free expression. The soul had been fed during the singing of matins with the brethren and wanted to continue in the presence of God. Continuing in vigils meant that external communal prayer was complementary, leaving meditation as a free attraction of the heart to the individual drawing of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps when the first fervour of the brethren began to diminish and some of them felt they *ought* to spend the rest of the night or at least an hour or so in prayer, they began to look down their noses

when one of the weaker brethren marched off to bed immediately after matins. I suppose fairly soon a distinction came in about that too: obviously when there is really life in prayer one does not have to make special times or work according to the clock. In those days St Benedict's *Lectio Divina* was the main principle of religious life, that is to say reading the scriptures, reading theology, reading the Fathers in a spirit of prayer—in other words reading in the presence of God, deepening their understanding of God as they conversed with him. They were intent to become perfectly religious. In particular the whole of the liturgy was flowing from this constant communion with God, in the word of God, which means not only the Bible but also the Fathers and even the great theologians of their own day. I am talking about this period not only because it was the period when the Dominican order was founded but also because it was the period of great theological effervescence which soon deteriorated. Perhaps St Thomas was too great for the rest of the world and after St Thomas there was a great deal of arid philosophizing. But St Thomas himself was a professor of scripture and he was expounding the word of God. The *Summa* was really an introduction to help people to understand the word of God. After his time people began to comment on the *Summa* and to make what he had tried to make clear more clear, all the various distinctions. This must have been a disappointment to St Thomas in heaven. He wanted people to go back to the scriptures and try to understand them, and not become too befogged by commenting on the *Summa*. He was a *magister sacrae paginae*, dealing with the scriptures professionally in the university and the whole aim of his lectures was ultimately to perfect *lectio divina* so that people would be able to read the scriptures with greater understanding and greater prayer.

In the earlier times, then, there was no set time for retreats and meditation. The Church provided a forty day liturgical retreat with prayer and penance and alms-giving in Lent and that was quite enough for anybody. They did not need another ten day retreat—forty days was quite sufficient. All that was necessary was provided in the liturgical year and all that was necessary for religious life in the way of meditation and retreats was to be found simply by attending properly with real understanding to the Church's prayer. But all the time the tendency to formalize the external worship was having its effect. I was pleased to discover that benediction is now a liturgical service, because I had always felt that popular devotion in a sense is the first thing. This becomes liturgy, because it becomes the accepted way of praying in the

Church. We have already seen how in the early Church these formulae were not so definite. There were certain central formulae, such as repeating the words of the institution of the eucharist, but a good deal of it was left free to the individual feeling of the deacon or the celebrant or the people. The people loved to walk about in procession, singing litanies which they did I suppose partly spontaneously. Then by degrees it became accepted, ritualized, formalized, regularized, and we call that finally the formal liturgy of the Church.

So far so good. But the external, formalized liturgy begins to predominate and as more and more insistence is being put on ritual and how to perform the thing exactly, so by degrees the interior spirit of prayer begins to dwindle. With too much insistence on behaviour, on what we are doing in Church, trying to fulfil the formalities with great precision, the spirit of prayer has to look for other means of expression. This is especially noticeable in the fourteenth century with the upsurge of mysticism when the liturgy had become extremely formalized and remote from ordinary daily life. Though in reading the genuine mystics one must remember that their mysticism was fed on the mass and the divine office even though they seldom refer to it. Richard Rolle was rapped over the knuckles because he preferred singing in his heart to taking part in the prayer of the brethren of the choir. He was derided as a 'sitter' because of the fact that he always preferred sitting down and saying his own prayers and not standing up and reciting psalms with the brethren. But on the whole, especially in Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* one can sense that the daily office and the mass is taken for granted. But it becomes very remote and the emphasis lies on the personal approach to God through the various stages of mystical prayer. By the time of St John of the Cross the tension between the two becomes almost critical in such a way that the attack on the senses becomes a positive attempt to blot out the external world in such darkness as the night of the memory. This so shocked St John's editors that they rewrote one passage in order to insist that of course this didn't apply to our Lord and the Incarnation: but St John of the Cross did not say this. He was so insistent on the purity of the heart that crucifixes, for example, had to be very roughly wrought so that the attention was not held by anything material. All this is in his writings. If you read his life, however, you find that many of his statements must be modified in the light of what he *does*. He enjoys, for instance, saying his prayers looking out across the beautiful valley. He is a poet, and being a poet his imagination is alive and his imagination is fed origin-

ally by the word of God in the liturgy. Although he may not acknowledge this very clearly, it is there. For people who lack imagination, people who are not poets, to read the mystics without basing it on liturgical prayer is very dangerous. In such cases the spirit of prayer goes off into individual forms of prayer and these in their turn become formalized and ritualized so that the true liturgy of the Church declines and devotions like the rosary and stations of the cross and even methods of mental prayer become in a sense a liturgy in themselves, a rather individualistic type of liturgy. The rosary was only one way of making meditation, but now it is said formally by everybody aloud in chorus in a way which was not originally intended. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is not the original devotion of the rosary. The rosary has now become almost a form of liturgical prayer; it has its own rubrics. The same fate has befallen the stations of the cross and our own monastic prayers. It is only since this recent revolution in liturgy that we have begun to discard a lot of extra-liturgical things which had been added on. When we had finished saying None before lunch we used to kneel down and go through a whole series of different prayers for different intentions. One intention, for example, was an apology; instead of keeping a perpetual fast and abstinence which we could no longer support we said the *O Spem Miram* in honour of St Dominic—really I suppose a sort of apology to St Dominic for breaking the rule. As time went on we added a little prayer here and a little prayer there so that having finished the office we recited the breviary prayers after office and then a whole lot of other prayers peculiar to the house or province, producing a strange effect on the uninitiated who could only pick up a lot of mumbling. All this was in fact a sort of incipient liturgy: it was becoming ritualized and formalized. What was originally the inspiration of the moment, a spontaneous idea to pray for this or that, then became a set form. This process is going on all the time and it will continue to do so. It follows from the fact that the Church is alive in her prayers; but when fully alive the encrustations will fall off partly by a natural process. We have also to cut our corns now and again especially as we grow older. After all the Church is two thousand years old and inevitably some of her prayers grow a bit corny here and there. In this respect we hope the Council will perform some chiropody.

There are some principles to be remembered in this business of the liturgy being our fundamental prayer, feeding our personal prayer. I would select three principles; they are not the only ones but they are important. The first is that grace is the shared life of God. Grace is not

a merely individual affair. In so far as we receive grace we receive the life of God, and we all receive the life of God. We are always talking about individual graces for this and that, and this is true up to a point. But in so far as we receive grace—'singing with grace in our hearts'—we are sharing in our Lord's life. It is our Lord's life which we all share, and we cannot keep it to ourselves. It is not just that we are now living the life of our Lord through his grace independently and excluding everybody else. Once an individual has been drawn into the life of Christ he has been drawn into the same life with everybody else in the mystical body of Christ, in the one body. There is no possibility of being exclusive in grace. There must be a sharing in the prayer of our Lord once one has entered into the life of grace. This is important because many of the phrases about grace make it very individual, whereas on the contrary it is fundamentally a communal life that we are living in the mystical body. Therefore our prayer, even our individual personal prayer, in so far as it is springing from grace or charity, is in fact a prayer with Christ in the mystical body, not only for ourselves, but for the whole world too. We are praying with our Lord. All our prayer in that sense is the prayer of our Lord, and none of it is entirely and exclusively our own.

The second principle is that action leads to contemplation. Once we have received the life of grace we then proceed to pray in a liturgical manner with the external rubrics. But we have to take care that it does not become a purely external way of behaviour. If we are performing the actions in the right way then the more we enter into the action of the mass and the divine office the more we are deepening our contemplation. By the sort of action that we do, reading the scriptures in the mass and the divine office, we are reading the psalms all the time and this, according to the theologians, is active prayer. But if we are doing it in such a way that all our actions are becoming centred on one point, namely on our Lord, then obviously instead of being carried in all sorts of different ways everything becomes gradually unified. The whole principle of praying the liturgy is that gradually things become more unified. We begin by a whole series of prayers and actions. In the case of my own mother, who began as a good Quaker and then became a very good Catholic, the transition as you can imagine from Quakerism to Catholicism was somewhat difficult. When she first went to mass she could not make it out at all. There was nothing but markers in the missal and she had to spend all her time moving the markers this way and that. How, she demanded, could you possibly pray when you

were all the time wondering where the priest had got to and how far you were left behind? There is a vast variety of actions and words in the divine office and in the mass, but if all this is being prayed with understanding, it gradually draws into a unity. Like everything else in life it begins by being difficult, going from one thing to another, a whole series of things to be done, but as you go on, if you are doing it in the right spirit, it becomes one action and one prayer and in this way you are becoming a contemplative. So that far from being a distraction and keeping you away from your mystical prayer or your life of contemplation this is the way the Church has provided for entering into the real prayer of Christ. Action leading to contemplation.

The third principle to which I would draw your attention is that which I have already mentioned concerning the manner of reading, the *lectio divina* of St Benedict. Prayer is not just a question of the will, or of the imagination. It springs from the mind, springs from the living word of God. As St Paul says: 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you abundantly in all wisdom'. It is always our own fault when the liturgy becomes just formalism because the whole time the Church has been presenting us with the word of God in the mass and the divine office. The scriptures, the psalms particularly and the readings from the New and Old Testaments, should have been growing deeper into our hearts if we understand it. If we have not this sort of scriptural wisdom, this basis of the word of God in our lives—we should take a lesson from Mgr Knox's book on *Enthusiasm*—uninstructed prayer and devotions, uninstructed mystical prayer and the like, all lead to a false mysticism. *Enthusiasm* reveals the lengths to which this 'mysticism' can go. Mystical prayer, prayer and contemplation, are all the time growing out of the relishing of the word of God. This is given in the liturgy, not only in what is actually read but in the singing, too; this is the whole point of the chant. The rhythm of the music releases the imagination for one thing; a person's poetic abilities are heightened and he enters into a better total frame of mind and body, a more relaxed frame of mind and body in order to relish the world of God. Then the word of God is laid out for him very slowly as the chant unfolds. This is the idea, for example, of the Gradual and the Tract—something 'drawn out'. The verses of the psalms are drawn out and sung at length in such a way that we should be deepening our appreciation of that particular text. All this is in direct contrast with much of our practice in the way we treat singing in church. Too often it is a distraction.

Either what we are singing is so ghastly that we have to put an iron curtain down and carry on with our prayers, trying to distract ourselves from the noise, or we become so interested in the ins and outs of it—the way the psalms go or the litany, that we get tied down to the externals. One advantage of singing in unison, in chant, is that it is so easy, so uncomplicated and leads—or it should do—to a simple relaxed form of communal prayer. In a complicated age such as our own I suppose the chant can be inadequate for most people, who are not acclimatised to it. But we in the cloister ought by now to be well acclimatised to chant so that it is second nature to us. We should be able to sing fairly well without getting too bothered about the way people are singing out of tune. Not that it really matters very much about being in tune but it matters if you are going to get 'het up' about it, particularly if the person next to you is constantly flat. I remember one large abbey some years ago where the monks, obviously contemplatives, building their contemplation on and through the liturgy, supported the chant by playing the organ—holding on to the one single reciting note while the organ played a series of chords and harmonies in order to keep the note up. All was well for one side, but the other was constantly quarter or half a tone below the organ. This went on right through the office, one side on the note, the other led by someone who was flat and obviously had no idea of tone. For a visitor, of course, it was agony, but I am sure that after three or four weeks, or three or four months, or perhaps three or four years of carrying on in this way the monks were able to relax even while they were singing flat.

The whole manner of prayer in and through the liturgy is based on this idea of relishing the word of God. We have to be careful not to allow scholasticism and that sort of theological excitement which has come since St Benedict's day to quench the *lectio divina*, or make the Bible into an interesting document and something where we advert to our distinctions and syllogisms and work out our Catholic doctrine. It is part of our life and we are living it as we are reciting it, and thus it enters into our hearts. So the third principle is the *lectio divina*.

Finally, I would say a word about religious in particular in this matter because as I said there should never be a dichotomy between the life of prayer and the liturgy, there should never be a dichotomy between our life in the Church, I mean physically in church for the divine office and the mass, and the rest of the day. This we are always preaching to people outside but certainly for us it is absolutely clear.

We are vowed to the perfect life, charity, we are bound to perfection. This is what we have promised formally; we are to strive to be in every way perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, and to live the life of charity to the end of our lives without any distinctions. It is part of the life of grace that we are sharing with our Lord the whole time, the life of charity, the expression of the life of grace, the life of the mystical body, and this is going on all the time. It is to this that we have dedicated ourselves by means of the three vows. The three vows are in one sense liturgical vows making it possible to live the life of constant prayer, of constant charity, of perfection. I think it is the rule of St Benedict again which says, for example, that the vow of poverty turns all material things into liturgical instruments by making all material things into sacred vessels; all vessels become sacred vessels because they are no longer our own personal property for our own material advantage but are all for the worship of God. Therefore there is no dichotomy between the sacred vessels which we use and which we care for so diligently in the sacristy and the sacred vessels which we care for with perhaps less diligence in the refectory or in our own cells. All these things are now dedicated by the vow of poverty to the worship of God. In this sense our habits are of the same sort of quality as the vestments of the priest. They don't belong to us, they are dedicated to the life of the Church which is the life of prayer, the life of liturgical prayer. In other words poverty turns all material things into liturgical things; they are formally worshipful things, things we use in worship. Secondly the vow of chastity consecrates our bodies in the same sort of way. St Thomas says somewhere that all physical penances are for the perfection of chastity and in this way all the hard things we do, all the self-denial imposed by our rules are perfecting us as vessels, as sacred vessels St Paul says. We have become vessels ourselves, vessels dedicated to the prayer of God and the worship of God through Christ. Having consecrated ourselves in this way, our every action is in some way a liturgical action, an act of prayer. 'All whatsoever you do in word or in work do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Giving thanks (eucharist) to God and the Father *per Christum Dominum nostrum*'. This is what St Paul says and this is what we are vowed to do. We have dedicated ourselves to this in religious life and so the refectory table and the altar come within the same categories. Our actions in the refectory consecrated by the vow of chastity have the same sort of character as the actions that we perform in church. Finally the vow of obedience lies at the very heart of worship. Obedience to the sacrifice

by which we hand ourselves over as victims with Christ, uniting ourselves above all to our Lord in the mass: everything we do is done in the same spirit which is the very centre of the whole liturgical cycle and is also the centre of our lives of obedience.

Religious life is essentially a community life, that is a life of the Church at least by profession, and therefore it should be through and through a liturgical life. Whatever we do is liturgical in this way and there should be no sort of tension between what we do in church and what we do all the rest of the day—all is *per Christum Dominum nostrum*, as it is expressed in the mass *per ipsum et cum ipso et in ipso est omnis honor et gloria*. The only way we can give honour and glory, eucharist, thanksgiving to the Father and the Trinity is *per Christum*. The whole of our life is organised in this way. It is centred in him and therefore as I have said we become contemplatives.

I would add that in this way any of the things that are not obviously liturgical in our lives can be made liturgical in spirit. This attitude will keep us from becoming formalized in our liturgy and give us the right sort of mind so that when changes come about we are ready to accept them and they will be therefore able to help us. If you are saying the rosary, say the rosary as *lectio divina* and do not just make it into a mere formula or have little pictures of each mystery of the rosary, turning them over in the imagination like pictures in a book. If at each mystery you turn over the next page to the same picture you have always had, you will have made the rosary into a dead formality. But if it is about the Annunciation, a little reading of the account of the Annunciation now and again in the scriptures will perhaps give you a new slant in your saying this mystery. It is the same with the stations of the cross and the same with all the prayers which are said in the convent. The only way these things which have become formalized can regain their life is by introducing this spirit, from which the liturgy and indeed our whole religious life should spring.

I will end by giving some possible points for discussion. What opportunities are open to you in your order or congregation for developing this liturgical spirit and for making the reading of the scriptures into *lectio divina*? Are there any possibilities of introducing certain para-liturgical ceremonies which might help the Sisters to understand the spirit of the liturgy? How much active participation in the liturgy is possible in your convent—dialogue mass, sung mass, processions? Is reading in the refectory and spiritual reading directed in any way towards a deepening sense of the liturgical cycle?