

Insights in Liturgy

By Msgr. William H. Shannon Part II

The Mass: Eucharist, Epiphany

We have seen, in last week's article, that for nearly a thousand years the Mass was looked upon as the action of God's people offering Eucharist (praise and thanks) with Christ to the Father. In the ninth and tenth centuries a radical change occurred in the way in which people understood the central act of Christian worship. The history is very complicated; obviously only a simplified summary can be given in a short article.

In the ninth century liturgical initiative in the Church moved from Rome to Gaul or more specifically to the Empire of Charlemagne, who in order to unify the diverse people in his empire, forced them to be baptized Catholic and then imposed the Latin Roman liturgy on them. These "converts" had little idea of what it meant to be a Christian. They went to a liturgy which, instead of helping them to understand the significance of their "conversion", had little meaning for them. It was in Latin, a language they did not understand. It was a liturgy that came to be, more and more, dominated by the clergy, with the laity as silent spectators.

The Church in Gaul had reacted strongly against the Arian heresy that denied the divinity of Christ. In fact so strong was their emphasis on the divinity of Christ that

been the joyful, happy spirit of the Christian community became an atmosphere of awe and fear. People now knelt for Communion and received the Host on their tongues—that is those who received. Many did not, because of an exaggerated fear of the awful majesty of God and their own unworthiness. In the 12th century the custom was introduced of elevating the Host and the Chalice at the time of the consecration, so that people could see and adore what they were no longer receiving.

In the Middle Ages the Mass had become what it was to remain until the 20th century: an action dominated by the clergy who said the words that brought about the Epiphany of the Lord, with the laity kneeling in their places watching the action and adoring Christ when He came. The Mass became Epiphania rather than Eucharistia.

The whole thrust of the Liturgical Movement in the 20th century, which was embraced by Vatican II and

made the Movement of the whole Church, has been to restore to the Mass the meaning it had in the beginning. Vatican II called for a reform of the words and actions of the Mass so that people would be able "to understand them with ease and take part in them fully actively and as befits a community." What the Council called for and what has been happening in our worship in the last fifteen years is a restoration of the earliest understanding of the Mass. We have moved from an understanding of the Mass as Epiphania and returned to a realization that it is Eucharistia.

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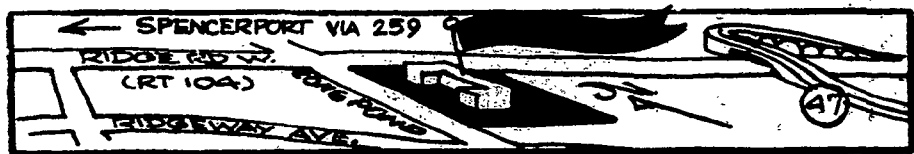
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