

The Church at Worship

Our Catholic Heritage

Liturgical Life as Part of Our Faith

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"On an appointed day they (the Christians) are accustomed to meet before daybreak, and to recite a hymn . . . to Christ as to God . . . They reassemble later to take food of an innocent and ordinary kind." (Pliny the Younger, 112 A.D.)

From the beginning the most visible and potentially the most edifying part of our Catholic faith has been our liturgical life. Worship is not part of the Christian life; it is the Christian life. Even the pagans noticed it.

The earliest data we have on the Eucharistic Liturgy is found in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapters 10 and 11. The news was not good. Abuses had crept into the celebration of the AGAPE (the meal of brotherhood). In the course of his rebuke Paul gives us the most primitive statement of our belief in the Real Presence of Christ.

Until the fourth century, the Mass was celebrated very simply in private

homes. The basic elements of the liturgy as we know it were already present: prayer, readings, homily, kiss of peace, consecration, communion, and collection for the poor. It is interesting to note that many terms used to describe the Eucharist were also used to describe the Church, e.g. AGAPE (Love), IRENE (Peace) KOINONIA (Brotherhood).

The day of celebration was the Lord's Day (Sunday), the weekly commemoration of Easter.

"Come together on the Lord's Day. Break bread and give thanks (EUCARISTIA in Greek), having first confessed your sins that your sacrifice may be pure." (Didache, c. 100 A.D.)

By the fourth century the Christians were able to construct buildings for worship. They called them basilicas (king's houses). The bishops presided in special churches called cathedrals where they set up their chairs of authority (CATHEDRA in

Greek). The Arian controversy brought about the introduction of the Nicene Creed into the Mass. The ceremonies became more splendid and solemn.

"I wept at the beauty of your hymns and canticles, and was powerfully moved at the sweetness of your Church's singing. The melody flowed into my ears, and the truth entered into my heart. My feeling of devotion overflowed. I wept, and I was happy in those tears." (St. Augustine, The Confessions)

The Dark Ages brought with them some confusion in liturgical practices. Pope St. Gregory the Great (d.605) is credited with restoring order and stability. Church music was standardized throughout the West, and eventually was named Gregorian Chant. The Roman Mass became normative. Latin was enshrined as the liturgical language. Vestments were introduced (actually the costume of a first-centu-

ry gentleman). Ceremonies such as processions, genuflections and incense became common.

In the Middle Ages, not much was written about the Mass, but a great deal was written, and built, for it. The Gothic cathedrals, those great "Alleluias" in stone, rang with the strains of innumerable sequences, hymns and motets. In these, the heart of Christendom swelled in triumph, and men poured out their wonder at the majesty of God. We praise the Eucharist today in the medieval hymns of St. Thomas Aquinas; "Tantum Ergo," "O Salutaris," "Pange Lingua," and "Adoro Te."

Empires rise and fall. The princes of this world know their short space of pride and power. The Poor of God alone survive for they eat the Bread of Life.

"The worthiest thing, most of goodness, in all this world, it is the Mass." (Layfolk's Mass Book, 13th Century)

The Church and Celebration of the Nativity

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"Let us gather hand in hand And sing of bliss without an end. The devil has fled from earthly land, And Son of God is made our friend." (Nativity Carol, 1350)

The feast of the Nativity is first mentioned in the Roman Calendar of 354 A.D. The date Dec. 25 marks the winter solstice when the sun begins its return to the northern skies. From 274 A.D. the pagans honored the day as the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun. The Church instituted the celebration of the Nativity on that day to lead mankind out of darkness and images into the truth:

"Our Lord was born in the month of December . . . The pagans say it is the birthday of the Unconquered One . . . Who is as unconquered as Our Lord is? . . . They say it is the birthday of the sun; Jesus is the Sun of Justice." (St. John Chrysostom)

The name "Christmas" first appears in Anglo-Saxon record in the year 1038 A.D.

From the beginning it was a feast of joy. Christians appropriated the pagan custom of giving gifts at the New Year. The Council of Braga in 563 forbade fasting on Christmas Day. The Council of Tours in 566 extended the feast for 12 days, culminating on Jan. 6 with the celebration of the Epiphany. Christmas was a favorite time for court festivities. Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day in 800 A.D. and Wil-

liam the Conqueror had himself crowned King of England on the same day in 1066.

The medieval sacramentaries assigned three Masses to Christmas Day, a custom we still follow. In Rome, the first Mass was celebrated at midnight in the Basilica of St. Mary Major, where the relics of the crib at Bethlehem are kept. At dawn, Mass was said at the church of St. Anastasia near the Circus Maximus as a gesture of courtesy to the Byzantine Catholic community who lived nearby.



(Art by Robert F. McGovern)

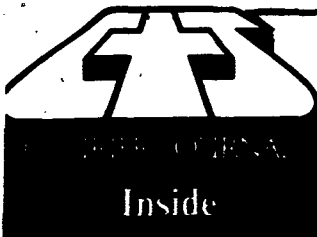
The last Mass was said at the Vatican Basilica.

Greenery as a decoration for Christmas goes back to the medieval legend that the staff of Joseph of Arimethea, kept at Glastonbury in England, flowered on Christmas Day. In some areas, on Dec. 24, the people observed the custom of the Paradise Tree. A tree would be decorated with apples in memory of Adam and Eve. The Christmas tree proper first appeared in Strasbourg in 1605. Farmers would expose grain on Christmas night to gain fertility from the dew which fell at the singing of the words of Isaiah:

"Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above. Let the clouds rain down the Just One."

It took St. Francis of Assisi to crown the ceremonies of Christmas by inviting the Holy Family. At the town of Greccio in 1223, Francis invented the Christmas Crib.

"The people of the neighborhood prepared with glad hearts . . . candles and torches to light up that night which has lighted up that night which has lighted up all the days and years with its shining star. At length the saint of God came . . . The manger was prepared, the hay had been brought, the ox and the ass were led in . . . The night was lighted up like the day, and it delighted man and beast. The people came and were filled with new joy over the new mystery. The woods ran with the voices of the crowd and the rocks made answer to their joy." (Life of St. Francis, Thomas of Celano, 1260)



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