

CHAPTER FOUR – CEREMONIES OF THE MASS

The venerable Cure d'Ars loved to repeat that if one knew what the Mass was he would die. Yes, we should die of love and gratitude. That which was the desire of the patriarchs, and was foreseen by the prophets; that of which the shepherds at Bethlehem, the apostles at the last supper, Mary and the holy women on Calvary and at the holy sepulchre, the disciples after the resurrection, were witnesses, we see ourselves every day. In the person of the priest, and under the eucharistic veils, Our Lord renews on the altar all the mysteries of His life. "The order of the Mass," says Pope Innocent III, in his admirable treatise on the sacrifice, "is arranged upon a plan so well conceived that everything done by Jesus Christ, or concerning Him, from His incarnation to His Ascension, is there largely contained, either in words or in actions, wonderfully presented."

We have divided the Mass into three parts, corresponding to the three epochs in the life of Our Saviour. The first, from the Introit to the Credo, comprises the thirty- three years of the life of Our Lord up to the institution of the Eucharist. The second, from the Credo to the Pater retraces the different scenes of His sufferings. The third, from the Pater to the end of the last gospel, embraces all His glorious life.

It is from this magnificent point of view that the greatest doctors of the Church have seen the august sacrifice. Thus considered, the holy mysteries cannot fail to inspire the Christian soul with respect and love. As we leave our houses to go to the church let us consider the pious haste of the shepherds and the Magi going to adore the Saviour in the stable; the sorrow which filled the holy women ascending Calvary, their loving ardor in going to the sepulchre. Their happiness is to be ours; let us have in our hearts something of their faith and of their piety.

FIRST PART

1. The Preparation at the Foot of the Altar.

In the earthly paradise the first man enjoyed familiar conversations with God. He fell, and was driven far from the face of the Lord, and sentenced to live in a vale of tears. He was not, however, left without hope; a Redeemer- was promised to him and to his children. And for four thousand years all the echoes of this poor earth carried up to heaven cries of anguish and of confidence, claiming the fulfilment of the divine promise. The Church places before our eyes at the beginning of the sacrifice the reminder of this fall. Between Eden and Calvary there are many connections; is not one the explanation of the other? The priest, as he descends the steps of the altar, represents man fallen, and driven from paradise. The preparatory prayers which he then recites recall those of the world of antiquity. Is there not in these prayers, as in those of the patriarchs and prophets, confidence and sorrow, joy and tears by turns?

"I will go unto the altar of God, to God Who rejoiceth my youth."

"Judge me, O God, and distinguish my cause from the nation that is not holy."

"To Thee, O God, my God, I will give praise upon the harp: why art thou sad, O my soul; and why dost thou disquiet me?"

These are surely the utterances of sinful man; fear and hope are always side by side; the heaven in his heart is never without a cloud. A redeemer has been promised to the guilty world; toward this divine victim all eyes are turned. The cross, foreseen by the prophets, will be the hope, at the same time that it is the support and consolation, of humanity. The priest indicates this thought to us as he traces the sacred sign several times upon his brow during the preparatory prayers.

2. The Introit or the Incarnation.

The Kiss on the Altar.—The prayers ended, the priest ascends the steps of the altar, and, resting his hands upon the sacred table, kisses it respectfully. This ceremony, so simple in appearance, is filled with mystery; it represents the infinite love of the Son of God in His Incarnation. (St. Bernard and St. Melito, *Spicil. de Solesmes*, t. iii. p. 29.) God pursued humanity, which, since the time of Adam, had tried to escape from the yoke of obedience and love. But there was a day, a day fixed from all eternity in the decrees of God, for which He waited: *apprehendit*, thus St. Paul expresses it. What would He do to this guilty, fleeing humanity? He embraced it in the clasp of an infinite charity; He clothed Himself with the mantle of its miseries: the Word was made flesh.

The anthem at the *Introit*, by the chant, and not by the meaning of its words, is the expression of the ardent longing which made "the clouds rain the just" (Is. xlv. 8); so says Innocent III. "It is repeated to show the ardor of these sighs" {*De Sacro Alt, Myst.* 1. ii. c. 28); and in solemn Masses its chant, grave and slow, reminds us how long it was before heaven granted the Messias, only after forty centuries of tears and waiting. Why is it that this anthem is preceded by the sign of the cross? The deicidal cries have not yet been uttered; why show already the sign of the humiliations and agony of Calvary? Theology answers us. From the first instant of His incarnation Jesus Christ saw the rods, the thorns, the blows, the nails, the lance, the cross, and He suffered in His heart all the torments of His sorrowful passion. "Even in sleeping," says Bellarmin, "the heart of Jesus saw the coming cross." Christian art has transformed this teaching into an allegory as beautiful as it is touching. The child Jesus sleeps upon a cross, and His little hands press to His heart a crown of thorns.

From whom has the mystery of the Word made flesh received its first adoration? When God revealed it to the heavenly spirits, they chanted its praise before the throne of the Eternal; then one of their princes, the archangel Gabriel, in the humble house of Nazareth, had first the privilege of adoring with Mary the Word Incarnate. For this reason the *Gloria Patri* the chant of the angels, divides the *Introit*,

The Incensing of the Altar.—Before the *Introit* in solemn Masses the altar is incensed.

Ecclesiastical tradition has seen in incense the symbol of the sweet odor of Jesus Christ. To

the name of Jesus has been added another, that of Christ, meaning anointed or sacred for He has received from His Father a mysterious unction, of which the world has caught the blessed perfume. And, even in our day, in the atmosphere of corruption and error in which we live, what is the secret charm that draws souls to God? The odor of Thy sweetness, O Jesus, Thy miracles, Thy doctrine, and Thy goodness. It is the nature of our heart to render honor to all which recalls a beloved person. Jesus Christ is all in all to His Church; thus we see the spouse of Christ pouring out incense, the expression of her respect and love, upon all the objects which speak to her of her divine spouse— upon the altar, the symbolical figure of the cross. His glorious standard; upon the holy relics of the saints, His living temples; upon the priest, His visible representative; upon the faithful, the members of His mystical body. In union with the Church let us love to honor Jesus Christ wherever faith shows us traces of His presence; certainly in the Eucharist, but also in the priest, the poor, in little children, the sick, in those whom we employ.

3. The Kyrie or the Cry of Fallen Humanity.

"Why is it said before the Gloria? The prayer of mankind since its fall has become a profound sigh; indeed, in Latin both sorrow and prayer are expressed by the same word. The oldest and the widest-spread prayer—the prayer of the adult as of the child, of the sick, the poor, and the despairing—is short as a sigh: "Have pity on me."

Nature herself sympathizes with the misfortune of her fallen king. Everywhere arise voices which join with that of man in the note of melancholy and of pain, thus forming a universal harmony, of which St. Paul said : "For we know that every creature groaneth, and travaileth in pain even till now." (Rom. viii. 22.)

The Kyrie is, then, the cry of humanity at all the periods of its history, but above all at the coming of the Messias. Said before the Gloria, it expresses the profound misery of the old world, and the immense need that it had of redemption. In this place, too, the Kyrie has another signification: "The seventy weeks are shortened," said the angel to Daniel (Dan. ix. 24), and the doctors believe that the time of the Incarnation was hastened in the designs of God as a recompense to the prayer of the patriarchs, the prophets, and of Mary above all. During this chant let us not forget the power of prayer; it will abridge for us the bitter days of trial and God's abandonment; for the Church the time of persecution and tears.

The Kyrie is Repeated Nine Times.—Nine times the Church repeats this cry, in memory of the nine heavenly choirs. While the rebel angels tried to prevent the accomplishment of the divine plan, the good angels implored God for the incarnation with all their strength. They united their prayers to those of earth. God had chosen human nature, but this consideration of a mean jealousy could not affect them. They saw but one thing: the glory of God. God must be glorified; by whom, where, or how? What did it matter to true love! What a lesson and what memories for us in this ninefold repetition of the *Kyrie*!

4. The Gloria in Excelsis or the Chant of Bethlehem.

Intonation of the Gloria.—To represent the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem the priest

returns to the middle of the altar, while the last Kyrie carries to God the supplications of earth. Borrowing from the angels the words sung beside the cradle of the infant God, he announces to the world the supreme joy : "Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis."

In solemn Masses the choir continues the celestial chant, for the Gospel says that an angel proclaimed the good news to the shepherds: "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God" (Luke ii. 13.) The hands of the priest raised toward heaven at the word gloria seem to try to return to God all the glory. "Not to us, Lord, but to Thy name be the glory," sings the psalmist, (Ps. cxiii. 9.) To God be the glory of all our works; to us the humility, but also the peace which is their assured fruit. It is in order to receive this divine peace that the priest again joins his hands at the words: Pax in terra.

During this chant let us represent vividly to our faith Jesus Christ present in the tabernacle, the new stable of His eucharistic life. The ciborium is His manger; the species of bread and wine His swaddling-bands. He is cold, for it is winter about Him, the winter of forgetfulness and indifference. Let us fall at His feet, with the angels, to praise Him, with the shepherds to glorify Him, with the Magi to adore Him. Let us also offer Him gifts—the gold of a heart that loves Him, the incense of a heart that prays, the myrrh of a heart that is resigned.

The Sign of the Cross.—Persecution quickly attacked the child in the crib, but He escaped the fury of Herod by flight. The sign of the cross at the end of the joyous canticle of Bethlehem should recall to us the massacre of the innocents, the flight into Egypt, the anxieties of exile, and also the blood shed under the knife of the circumcision.

5. The Dominus Vobiscum of the Efusion of the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost.

The Kiss on the Altar.—The venerable Olier has so well explained this ceremony that we cannot resist the pleasure of quoting him. "It is necessary to remark," he says, " that the priest does not say, "*Dominus vobiscum*," or, "*Oremus*" without first kissing the altar, and even before the *Orate fratres* he kisses it again, to show that it is from the bosom of God that he draws the spirit of prayer which he wishes to give to the people. It is the same case in the benedictions which he gives the people, or to the host, or to himself; they are often preceded by a kiss upon the altar, to show that he gets from God the blessings for the people and himself, having of himself neither graces nor blessings, except in God, Who has, as St. Paul says, "blessed us with all benediction in His Son."

Meaning of the Dominus Vobiscum.—What touching reminders are in this salutation: The Lord be with you! One of the greatest joys of Christianity, the greatest surely, is to know that since His birth God has made Himself our Emmanuel, and remains always among us. When He died. He did not leave us; He stayed with His children in the sacrament of His love. The Lord be with you, says the priest before the prayer; let us not fear; let us pray with confidence; He has drawn near us to hear our prayers.

He is with us; may He be also in us, in our hearts. May He unite us all in a common bond of charity. The open and wide-spread arms of the priest give Him to us all; his arms closed tell us why He gives Himself: "that we may be made perfect in one." (St. John xvii. 23.) The goodness of God inspires Christians with a loving boldness. Lord, Thou art with us to listen to our prayers, but "we know not what we should pray for as we ought." (Rom. viii. 26.) Give us, then, Thy spirit, the spirit of prayer, which shall help our weakness, and make supplication for us with unutterable groaning."

"*And with Thy Spirit.*" This is the meaning of the response of the faithful. (Isidore Pelus., 1. i. epist. 122.)

The Seven Repetitions of Dominus Vobiscum.—Seven times the priest salutes the faithful by the *Dominus vobiscum*; seven times is the same response heard: "*Et Cum Spiritu tuo*" at the Collect, the Gospel, the Offertory, the Preface, the *Agnus Dei*, the Post communion, and the *Ite, Missa est*. Seven is the number of the Holy Spirit, called *septiform* in the chants of the Church; the faithful beg for His seven divine gifts at each salutation of the priest:

1st, after the *Gloria* for the gift of wisdom, which the incarnate Wisdom has merited for us, triumphing over pride in the humiliations of the stable.

2nd, before the *Gospel* for the gift of understanding, to comprehend the word of God.

3rd, at the *Offertory* for the gift of counsel, which makes us prefer the joys of sacrifice to the pleasures of the world, after the example of the Saviour, immolating Himself for us at the last supper.

4th, at the *Preface* for the gift of fortitude, which sustained Our Lord in the anguish of His agony in the Garden of Olives.

5th, at the *Agnus Dei* for the gift of knowledge, the divine light which enlighteneth each soul admitted to the banquet of angels.

6th, at the *Post-communion* for the gift of piety, so necessary for him who has become the living tabernacle of Jesus Christ.

7th, at the *Ite Missa est* for the gift of the fear of the Lord, which should inspire us with a holy terror at the thought of the Last Judgment. Five times only does the priest turn toward the people in addressing them with the salutation of peace. The Church has so arranged it to figure in this sacrifice commemorative of the Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus Christ, the five apparitions of Our Saviour on Easter Day. The *Gospel* mentions Magdalen, the holy women, St. Peter, the disciples at Emmaus, and the apostles as having enjoyed this favor.

6. The Collect or the Prayers of the Hidden Life.

Return to the Epistle Side of the Altar.—Before the storm of persecution raised by Herod Our Lord fled into Egypt. The severe trials of exile in an idolatrous land were succeeded by hard tasks in the workshop until He was thirty years old. But during the days passed in Egypt and in Nazareth the divine Saviour silently wrought the work of our redemption by labor and prayer.

When the priest leaves the middle of the altar to go to the epistle side, let us think of Jesus

as a child, journeying into exile; let his hands raised to heaven remind us of the manual labors of Nazareth, and the Collect the prayers which sanctified it.

The Priest's Hands Raised and Joined,—The hands raised during the *Collect*, the *Secret*, and the *Post-communion* have another mysterious meaning. Tertullian tells us that in his time it was customary for Christians to pray with the arms extended in the form of a cross; later the hands only were raised; but the profound meaning of this ceremony remains the same. Jesus Christ alone has the right to be heard; if man, then, wishes to obtain grace from on high, he must identify himself with his Redeemer, become another self by sacrifice, resignation, and the cross. God looks lovingly upon those who suffer; at their prayer His heart overflows, pouring down torrents of mercy.— If the Lord does not listen to our prayers, we are to blame. Do we bear with Christian resignation the marks of the cross printed by sorrow on our hearts, or on our bodies by illness? The secret of the power with God which the saints possessed is in their spirit of generous sacrifice "For when I am weak, then am I powerful." (ii. Cor. xii. 10.) These words, addressed to the Corinthians by the Apostle, have been many times verified; each page of the lives of the saints bears witness to their truth. The priest himself has become a man of trials and sorrow because he has made himself our mediator in prayer; this is why God has constituted the priesthood a Calvary, and not a Thabor. But the priest does not pray alone. "Let us pray," he says, pray together; let us put ourselves in those good dispositions which obtain everything from God. His raised hands when he says these words remind us what these dispositions are: to accept the cross without murmuring, to carry it resignedly.

Often the priest joins his hands. This position has its meaning; we shall find it in the answer of Nicholas I to the Bulgarians : "It is very suitable during prayer," says the Pope, "to bind one's hands, so to speak, before God, and to conduct ourselves in His presence like criminals prepared for punishment, in order to escape condemnation, such as the wicked receive in the parable of the Gospel."

7. The Epistle, or the Mission of the Precursor.

Before the *Gospel* and under the name of *Epistle* the Church reads certain extracts from the Old or New Testament. This reading recalls to us the mission confided to the prophets and disciples of preparing the world for Our Lord's preaching the *Gospel*. It was for this end that the divine Master sent before Him some of His chosen ones before He came to preach. Among those thus sent there is one greater than all the others; he came like the dawn, proclaiming the rising of the Sun of justice, and it is he whom the Church has especially in view in the ceremonies which accompany the reading of the *Epistle*. Thus, contrary to the manner of reading the *Gospel* the *Epistle* is read, or sung, with the face turned toward the east, because St. John the Baptist always had his eyes fixed upon the Messiah, Whom the Scriptures and the Church style "the true Orient." In solemn Masses, the chant of the *Epistle* is an echo of the voice of the precursor "crying in the wilderness," and the absence of lights around the subdeacon is an illustration of those words applied to John : "He was not the light." (St. John i. 8.) The faithful remain seated during the chanting of the *Epistle* to figure the sad state of the old world—"them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death

" (St. Luke i. 79) before. Jesus Christ came to bring them truth and life. St. Alphonsus Liguori recommends us to listen to the *Epistle* as if God spoke to us by the means of His prophets and apostles; let us lend a willing ear to the words which are "the spirit and life." (St. John vi. 64.) Was it not in reading an epistle of St. Paul that St. Augustine found the truth, and the grace of conversion? Who can say what rich treasures God has hidden there for us?

8. The Gradual and Tract or the Sighs of Penitence.

The *Gradual and the Tracts* always analogous to the truths contained in the *Epistle* are the response of the faithful, the protestation of their good will and their disposition to conform to the precepts which they have just heard. The crowd assembled by the preaching of St. John the Baptist returned to their homes converted and penitent; it is of this page in the Gospel story that we should think during this part of the Mass.

The commentators on the liturgy have observed that the chant of the *Gradual* presents greater difficulties in its execution than the other liturgical chants. Why has the Church thus arranged it if not to show her children that the observance of the Lord's law is hard to fallen nature, and that one cannot "love the good God even a little," as St. Vincent de Paul has so well said, "except by the sweat of his brow." Let us respond to the call with which God has for so long summoned us to perfection and penitence. Let us say with David: "My heart is ready. Lord, my heart is ready." Not to-morrow, not to-night, not soon, but this moment, now, let us begin the work. If there are difficulties and pains, there are also consolations and joys, in the service of God, and the flowers grow thicker than the thorns.

9. The Alleluia or the Canticle of the Celestial Country.

If the labors of the service of God affright our soul, at least the sight of the reward arouses our courage. "They who sow in tears shall reap in joy." (Ps. cxxv. 6.) The *Alleluia* the joyous chant of heaven, following the *Gradual and Tract*, arouses in our poor hearts, so easily discouraged, this consoling thought. "We shall rejoice more than we can express," says St. Gregory the Great. "We prolong indefinitely the heavenly song, that the ecstatic soul may fly toward those blessed regions where life shall have no end, the light no cloud, and happiness be unmixed with sorrow." This unending bliss is a happiness which even the tongue of St. Paul himself could not describe, and the Church, by this long series of inarticulate tones which accompany the Alleluia, has but one thought—to show to her children that words fail her when she thinks of the splendors prepared for the elect of God. This is the interpretation of St. Bonaventure. "When we pause so long on the last letter of the word alleluia," says this holy doctor, "we seem to say: The happiness of the saints in heaven shall have no end, and we are powerless to speak suitably of its bliss." In the Christian solemnities, figures as they are of the eternal joys, we delight to prolong the Alleluia, adding to it a certain number of notes. The words thus added were called sequences, that is to say, the prolongation of the Alleluia; they are also called the Prose.

10. The Gospel or the Preaching of Jesus Christ.

Preparation,—The time to begin His mission had come; Our Lord left Judea to go into

Galilee. His choice was Capharnaum, a city wherein lived many gentiles. But previously to beginning His public life He prepared Himself for preaching the *Gospel* by forty days of penance and prayer in the desert.

How does the Church recall to us these divers circumstances? The priest withdraws from the epistle side of the altar, as Our Lord left ungrateful Judea; then, pausing in the middle of the altar, still like his divine Master, he recollects himself, and prays. Let him not pray alone. Let us beg God for a good and docile heart to receive the divine seed. If those lips which proclaim the Gospel needed purifying, ought not the heart which is to receive it be prepared ?

Changing the place of the book before the Gospel shows us, says St. Bonaventure, that the nations, figured by the left side of the altar, have received the doctrine of Jesus Christ from the Jews. For the Jews, with the exception of a small number, have rejected the teaching of the Saviour, and driven out the apostles. And they have deserved to hear the words:

"Because you have refused the word of God, we will carry it to the gentiles." (*Expositio Missae.*)

The same book brought back to the right side toward the end of Mass prophesies the return and pardon of the children of Israel. (Rational 1. iv. c. 27.) There shall come a day when Our Lord will reunite the dispersed tribes, to receive them into the fold of the Church; then they will accept the truth rejected by their fathers. As to us, let us feel a salutary fear. When a people closes its eyes obstinately to the light of faith, God sends the blessed torch to nations more grateful, and when a soul resists grace the despised grace is offered to souls who will accept it. Lord, we implore Thee, stay with us always.

Turning toward the North,—The preaching of the Gospel is the invincible weapon which God has always used to conquer the demon; it is this which the Church desires to teach in ordering that the priest shall turn toward the north in reading the Gospel. Why the north? On that side the rebel angel has established his throne, says Isaias. (xiv. 13.) And Jeremias adds: "From the north shall an evil break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land." (i. 14.) The only thing that can stem the venom which Satan pours forth upon the world is the word of God.

The Faithful Standing.—Having been seated during the *Epistle* the faithful rise at the *Gospel*, to show that the old world, shaking off the dust of the tomb, was raised to life by the word of Jesus Christ. This is also to recall the other miracles wrought by the voice of Our Saviour : the sick healed and rising up and walking ; the dead brought back to life and falling at His feet ; the crowd leaving all to follow Him. On reflection we shall find in this ceremony teaching proper to ourselves. If we are sitting in discouragement and torpor, let us rise; the voice of the Master calls: "Arise." Perhaps, like another prodigal, we live far from God, far from the sacred banquet, far from the joys of the Christian family, plunged in the mire of vice. May this ceremony not be to us a lie; let us rise, and go to God, our Father, Who calls us.

Signs of the Cross.—The sign of the cross made by the priest on the sacred text reminds us that Jesus Christ has confirmed the truth of His teaching by His death; the cross has been the seal of the Gospel. The priest then makes the sign of the cross upon his brow, his lips, and his heart. "This triple sign of the cross," says Father Lebrun, "prints the memory of Jesus Christ and His holy words in our mind, that we may be filled with the holy lessons which Jesus Christ came upon earth to teach; and in our hearts, that we may give all our love to carrying them out; and on our lips, that we may love to speak of them, and make them known."

Kissing the Book.—Let us kiss the gospel with the priest. We cover the letter of a father who is gone with kisses and tears, and the gospel remains with us as the legacy of God to His children. By this respectful and filial kiss we ask Him to pardon all offences and irreverences committed against His divine Word.

In solemn Masses the chanting of the *Gospel* is accompanied with other ceremonies. The deacon, before fulfilling his duty, asks the celebrant's blessing; no one can preach who is not sent by God, or those who hold his place. The subdeacon goes with him, to show the harmony between the two Testaments, the prophets and the apostles.

The Church gives to the gospel the same honors as to the Eucharist. She fills its way with the perfume of incense ; she accompanies it with the light of tapers; she incenses it three times, and the deacon who carries the *Gospel*, as well as the priest who bears the Eucharist, receives this testimony of respect. When we read or hear the sacred word, we are like children of the household seated around the Lord's table, where we eat the heavenly bread. "Let us not lose a word of it," Origen warns us. " For, as in receiving the Eucharist we are careful, and rightly so, not to let the smallest crumb fall, why should we not believe it a crime to neglect even a single word of Jesus Christ, as it is to be careless of His body?" (Hom. xiii. in exod.)

The priest is also a gospel, but a living gospel; by his conduct he should preach to the people. That he may not forget this duty so important, the Church bestows upon him the honor of incense, as to the sacred book itself.