

Education and the Liturgical Year

Part II

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The living of the Liturgical Year

In a previous article it was pointed out that the Church educates through the sequence of the liturgical year, and that to profit from this education one must at the same time appreciate the reality of the historical events that make up this celebration, and meditate on their mystical signification, being applied and relived in our own human lives.

Advent

In effect, each of the Church's times and seasons has a special significance and a "treasure of sanctity for us to make our own" (Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, § 153). The year starts with Advent, a time of longing for God Our Lord to come into our souls, in union with the longing of the prophets of old, for the Messiah to come. The historical prophecies of the eight centuries before Christ pass before our eyes, giving us the sense of the Faith on the necessity for the Incarnation for the Redemption of mankind. However, at the same time we understand our own deficiencies, in which we resemble the blindness of those centuries before the Redeemer, become more aware of our sins, desirous of restraining our selfish desires and practicing voluntary mortification. Just as the prophet Isaias acknowledges that "a Virgin shall conceive and bear forth a son, and His name shall be called Emmanuel, God with us" (7:14), so likewise do we reflect on our need that the Saviour be born into our souls, and meditate on the "longing desire to return to God Who alone can free us by His grace from the stain of sin and from its evil consequences (Ib. § 154).

Advent is, in fact, one of the liturgical seasons that is in general little appreciated. The focus is altogether on Christmas. Yet, without this season of preparation, Christmas falls flat, and remains superficial in its appreciation. This happens in particular when Christmas parties are celebrated during Advent, or Christmas trees and Nativity scenes are erected during Advent, and when there is no effort to observe the Ember Days of Advent, and the Vigil of Christmas as a day of fast and abstinence. A good missal or explanation of the season of Advent, will give much food for thought. Likewise the prayers and readings, the Vespers' antiphons and the "O" antiphons recited every day from December 17 - 23, expressing as they do the eager expectation for Incarnate Wisdom. A common practice is to prepare a crib, adding a straw for each sacrifice through Advent, as a token of love for the divine Infant. Likewise is popular the use of the Jesse tree, a small tree indicating symbolically the genealogy of our Divine Saviour, and named after the father of King David, Jesse. The purpose is to attach to its branches a symbol, representation or text from the great figures of the Old Testament who prepared for Christ to come, such as Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David. One can be done every day during the Advent, with the reading of the corresponding story or text from the Old Testament, according to creativity, imagination and enthusiasm.

Incarnation

Whilst everybody observes Christmas, it is not well understood that this liturgical season continues until the feast of the Purification, on

the 40th day after Christmas. Consequently, the Incarnation is frequently not celebrated as the central event in human history. More regular visits to the Blessed Sacrament or more faithful recitation of the Angelus ought to characterize this time. Furthermore, since we celebrate God's gift of Himself to mankind, all our gifts ought to express this, and ought to be self-sacrificing, rather than with the intention of receiving another's gift in return. To achieve this, some gifts ought to be reserved for the poor or others who are unable to return the favour. Such generosity is the outward symbol of the complete rebirth

by grace that is the special fruit of the Incarnation, and entirely gratuitous gift that cannot be returned.

The meaning of the time of the Epiphany is also poorly appreciated. It is the manifestation of God made man to the world. The real visit of the three kings from the East, the miracle of the first sign by which water was changed into wine, and the baptism of Our Divine Saviour by St. John the Baptist, are the three events in which God

made man manifests himself and receives the adoration due to his divinity. The feast is a call to conversion, to publicly acknowledge Christ as the King of kings, and to shine forth that Faith by our confidence in Divine Providence. The custom of blessing and marking with blessed chalk the lintels of doorways with the year and the names of the three kings from the east (Caspar, Melchior & Balthazar) is an outward sign of our internal submission to this divine King.

The special beauty of Candlemas escapes no Catholic soul. The candles that are blessed, carried in procession, and held during the singing of the Gospel and during the Canon of the Mass, are powerful symbols of the Sacred Humanity of Christ, "light of revelation to the Gentiles and glory of Thy people Israel." (Lk 2:32). Just as they burn, are consumed and give forth light, so also Christ, who Himself declared: "I am the light of the world" (Jn 8:12), was consumed by the fire of his love to give us the light of everlasting life. The blessed candles that we take home to burn in times of temptation, trouble, family discord, tempest etc. are consequently the constant reminder of our Divine Saviour's offering of himself in the temple, with which we unite our own offering of ourselves at each Mass.

The time of Septuagesima has its particular focus also: the weakness of man's nature after the Fall, at which he lost not only sanctifying grace, but also the preternatural gifts. This weakness, most particularly manifest by the four wounds of ignorance, malice, weakness and concupiscence, is the reason why our daily spiritual lives must necessarily be a constant struggle to resist temptation and to overcome the spirit of the world. The absence of the Alleluia at Mass is a reminder to get back to the serious things of life, and to "work out your salvation in fear and trembling" (Phil 2:13). It is a time to take special care about making one's daily sacrifices.

The different Masses in the missal for every day in Lent are one of the great treasures of the liturgical year. In so many different ways, with different stories of God's mercy from the Old and New Testament, they urge us to amend our lives, detest our sins and expiate them by prayer and penance. During Passiontide the sufferings of the innocent, persecuted prophet Jeremias are the figure that leads us to understand the depth of the betrayal and anguish that Our Divine Saviour suffered in His Passion, culminating on Holy Wednesday in Isaia's prophecy of the suffering servant of God, meek as a lamb led to the slaughter, upon whom the Lord has laid the iniquity of us all. (Is 53:6). During the unspeakably poignant symbolism of the Holy Triduum, of the Tenebrae as well as of the Masses and Solemn Liturgy, we relive the mysteries of the Passion, for which all our sins are responsible, begging the help and grace of making them our own.



The educational power of the liturgical year is not yet fully accomplished. Man's nature is to be happy, and he will only learn when he sees that this learning is the key to the greatest happiness possible. And so the Liturgy lifts a man up to the things of heaven, that he may no longer be preoccupied with the things of this earthly existence. This is the fruit of the Paschal season, for "we must rise, in union with the Redeemer, from our cold and slothful life to one of greater fervour and holiness by giving ourselves completely and generously to God" (Ib. § 159). Yet this is still not enough, for the Church would have us learn our entire dependence upon the Sacred Humanity of Our Divine Saviour, gone before us to prepare us a place, now always living on the right hand of the Father to intercede on our behalf. This is the purpose of the time of the Ascension.

During the Octave of Pentecost, during which the external mission of the Holy Ghost onto the Church is celebrated, we are set on fire with divine love, so as to strive daily to advance in virtue, to correspond with the gifts of the Holy Ghost, and to become holy, "for this is the will of God, your sanctification" (I Th 4:3). The temporal cycle is then completed by the solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, of Corpus Christi, and of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, bringing to our minds the principal mysteries of our Faith, upon which our eternal salvation depends, and finally by the time after the Pentecost, during which time the soul puts into practice all these virtues and graces, inspired by the teachings of the Apostle of the Gentiles in selections from his many epistles, and the examples from the life of Our Lord taken from the Gospels. On the Last Sunday of October we have the opportunity to profess our Faith in Christ's Social Kingship, praying that His absolute dominion may be recognized by society as a whole. Then on the Last Sunday after Pentecost, we prepare for the end of the world and the second coming by meditating on the Last Judgment.

Sanctoral Cycle

The temporal cycle is not, however, complete in itself. Constantly interwoven with it, overlapping with it, and enriching it, is the sanctoral cycle. As a true pedagogue, the Church knows that man learns more effectively by example than by any other means. The saints' feast days, remind-

ing us constantly of examples of heroic virtue, inspire us to cultivate the divine life of Christ in our souls. This is how Pope Pius XII puts it: "The Sacred Liturgy puts all these gems of sanctity before us so that we may consider them for our salvation, and 'rejoicing at their merits, we may be inflamed by their example'....These are the footprints left by the Saints in their journey homeward, that guided by them we might follow them into glory" (Ib. § 167).

If the Church presents a brief life of each day's saint in the office of Matins and instructs that a summary be read during the office of Prime of the preceding day, it is certainly the mind of the Church that every Catholic be desirous of reading a little of the life of the saints of every day. What an encouraging practice! If we cannot do so every day, at least let us remember the most important feast days of saints, namely those of first or second class. Mark them off on the calendar, become familiar with them, celebrate the feast with some special solemnity, and you will become educated in the life of grace that was theirs. In particular, let us welcome the feast of the Apostles, columns of the Church, that come around nearly every month, and the feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our mother and highest educator, who will protect and help us in proportion as we honour each one of the privileges that each feast celebrates: - from her Immaculate Conception to her Assumption into heaven: from her Annunciation to her Transfixion at the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows: from being the Mother of God to becoming the Mediatrix of all graces.

Let, then, no truly Catholic home be without the resources to learn to adore, pray and love in the school of the Liturgy. It will have a daily Missal with commentary. It will have a liturgical calendar for every day of the year. It will have a commentary on the liturgical year. It will have a complete Bible. It will have a collection of lives of saints. But most of all it will have a love for what the monks call the "opus Dei", "the work of God" - the Church's public praise, adoration, petition and thanksgiving in the sacred Liturgy.