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THE
EPIC
OF GOD

*Orabo spiritu orabo et mente :
psallam spiritu psallam et mente.*

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PART ONE:
RITES OF
ENTRY

Chapter i:

Vestments; Asperges; Sacraments.

THE ORGAN STOPS, THE BELL RINGS, and out come a posse of men strangely dressed, carrying glittering things, walking in very straight lines. They whirl in energetically from the **sacristy** (or dressing-room. In Italy sacristies are as grand as churches, but everywhere else they're bare and functional; don't imagine you're missing anything if you've never seen one). A dozen or so men swoop forward out of the little sacristy door, at what looks like violent speed, into the **sanctuary** (from *sanctus*, holy, and *sanctuarium*, the holy place): the area round the altar, which works a bit like a stage. The **nave**, meanwhile, is where the congregation stand and sit and kneel). Various black-and-white-clad figures turn sharply, bob toward the altar; then peel off to the right and left, precise as dancers. Hard on their heels come three figures in coloured silk smocks of various sorts (tree-green most Sundays, but sometimes hot scarlet, dingy purple, or gold). These colourful figures wheel in an elegant half-circle until they have their backs to us; at once they remove their hats – more about their hats much later on – drop to their knees, and reach for –.

But since a good many things are about to happen, we have enough to be going on with; and so we press the **PAUSE** button before the celebrant can get at what he's reaching for (which is, surprisingly enough, a bucket).

Let's set about explaining what we have here already.

Imagine that the **PAUSE** button really worked, so that all action is frozen at this instant: the moment the three sacred ministers kneel for the first time. We'll examine a single frame of the film – or if that sounds a bit cold, we'll examine a large, splendid painting of this instant of the rite, a painting rather in the manner of Cezanne: deep green, black and white of the vestments picked out almost luridly in oil-paint. Imagine a finger moving slowly over this bright canvas, touching thoughtfully on one thing after another.

Is rite wrong?

BUT WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE of the overall oil-painting?

We know it means that Mass is beginning: we're used to it. But we ought to try to see this scene as if for the first time – as if we were anthropologists suddenly coming across odd goings-on in the jungle. Who exactly are these people, what are they carrying, and what are they wearing?

Apart from such details, why on earth are they acting like that? Why *are* there so many elaborate details?

They are acting **ritually**, which means with extreme and resonant formality. They are moving and speaking in prescribed, significant patterns. They are acting in exactly the opposite fashion to how healthy people behave in everyday life. When a man walks across a room full of people, he swings his arms, he glances about, he nods to friends, he chats affably and lightly, he slumps in an armchair and casually crosses his legs because he feels like it and then looks about to see if anyone is going to bring him a drink. He moves easily, not worrying much about his movements (he'd look stiff and furtive if he did worry). His actions are careless; they have no particular significance.

This is an excellent way to behave – except here. Spontaneity won't do for Divine Service, not because there's anything wrong with it, but because in worship, more than at any other moment, the gravity of what is occurring demands some mode more intense than spontaneity and informality, which buckle under the weight. If you want to see this buckling, go to any church that remains under the spell of the 1960s, and affects easy informality in worship. I say 'affect' it, because acting 'naturally' (as if in a sitting room) is an unnatural way to behave when confronting God, Who made Nature and is beyond it. Informality when we are attempting to assemble as a people in front of God, and speak to Him, is irritating. It is weird. It is an intrusion. It impedes.

But when we put aside individual whim and conform to the patterns of a rite, we are moving – and thinking and feeling – at a higher

pitch than is possible in individual experience. We put off our individual littleness. We put on a formal grandeur.

Everything we are considering in this first freeze-frame of the Mass (indeed, everything that happens for the whole Mass) rests on this idea: rites – very formal actions – are necessary to worship. This idea is so fundamental to the Mass that we'll come back to it again and again. At the moment, our moving finger has come to rest on one aspect of elaborate form – the one that would first strike an anthropologist, seeing Mass for the first time – the people who have rapidly filed out of the sacristy are very oddly dressed.

(It is going to take some time to describe all this portentous clothing. Skip the next two sections if you are indifferent.)

Black and white

THE FIRST POINT ABOUT WEARING SPECIAL CLOTHES at Mass is that it blots out individuality. That might not sound like a good thing, but it is. The clergy and servers are not moving about the sanctuary in their own right, as holy individuals, but as representatives of the congregation – and of the universal Church through all time and place, and of humanity at large, and even of all creation. On behalf of the universe they are offering God an elaborate motion (rather like a dance, rather like a love-song, very like an opera). Their own individuality is not the point, and the uniform of sacred garments is meant to render them invisible as individuals.

As a matter of fact, none of these sacred garments are religious at all, at least in origin. They're just old styles of clothing, which by ageing have become more rich, mellow, significant and delightful – as happens with good cheeses and wines and books.

The basic liturgical garment is the **cassock**. It's a long black sack with sleeves, and there's not much to be said about its appearance, which is the point. Its virtue is negative: it wipes out everyday shirts and trousers. It's about as austere, simple and unindividualised as clothing can get. The subdeacon may privately wear loud golfing trousers, and the second acolyte may have a taste for Hawaiian shirts; that doesn't matter.

You cannot be distracted by a man in a cassock. He is *abstractly* a man, a man without qualities.

If you look above the altar at Ascension and St Agnes you'll see, second from the left, a severe aristocratic blonde, very young, formidable, a teenaged lady of fashion from third century Rome, with a terrifyingly elaborate *coif*. Despite that icy stare and hard wee mouth – or because of that icy stare and hard wee mouth – she was indomitable about her Christian faith, and died for it; we remember her as St Agnes, our patron. You'll see that what she is wearing is a cassock. That's quite correct: all well-to-do Romans of her age, men and women, wore the *vestis talaris*, the ankle-length dress. Each third century cleric and server wore a fine but normal *vestis talaris* at Mass. It was like wearing a well-tailored three-piece suit.

In the sixth century, when barbarian fashions raised the hemline, and the coat turned into the mediæval tunic, the Church consciously bucked the trend and kept the cassock, a mark of ancient civility in a coarsening world.

The cassock became in due course uniformly black, except that bishops wear violet ones, and cardinals red – very vibrant the effect is, too. (Popes have taken to wearing unique white cassocks, but only since the nineteenth century, and I suspect – don't you? – a certain vulgar popular appeal in this innovation. They wish to appear innocent and candid; whereas the sovereign of the global Church is almost by definition not entirely innocent and not always candid. He ought to be in gorgeous scarlet or imperial crimson.)

All the people in the sanctuary, and the choir as well, wear cassocks. There's nothing to stop everyone in the congregation wearing one as well (in Morocco every man wears a *djellebah*, which has the same effect). They are secular affairs, and indeed every few years some *couturier* discovers the charm of the cassock, and starts dressing his rich women in what is really just the *vestis talaris*, the ancient ankle-coat.

A cassock is both an outdoor and indoor item. The Canons of 1604, which remain the basic law-code of the Anglican Communion, forbid beneficed clerics from going out in public “in their doublet and hose without . . . cassock”. I myself have never breached the letter of this

Canon, since my hips would not suit hose and my generous belly would not suit a doublet. However, like most lax Anglican clergy, I do not often go about in a cassock, wearing instead ‘[clericals](#)’: a dingy suit, black clerical shirt and a clerical collar, usually nicknamed a [dog-collar](#). – ‘Dog-collar’ is an ancient joke fossilised into a technical term. It describes, derisively, the starched-stiff white linen strip worn about the priestly neck. In the nineteenth century all gentlemen wore such things attached by studs to their collarless shirts, open at the front so the neck-tie could cascade over their starched shirts. Clergy wore their collars fixed with a stud at the back, so there was no gaudy tie for them, only a white circle sitting on top of their black shirts. The effect is a bit like the unbroken circle of a dog’s leash, and certainly the appearance is intensely ugly. If it comes to that, trousers themselves are ugly, and if we males were more civilised we would be returning to the loose long cassockish robes of the ancient world, or failing that, pre-Revolutionary breeches and stockings. As it is, alas, even priests with canonical injunctions to defy knock about with tubes of wool awkwardly covering their legs down to their shoes; while laics do not even attach fresh collars of Euclidean roundness and whiteness to their shirts, but buy ugly shirts with plastic-stiffened fold-over collars attached.

The state of humanity is more and more disheartening the more one thinks of it.

The priest who sings High Mass is almost certainly wearing ‘clericals’, but at least those unsightly items of street-wear (dog-collar and tubular trousers) are decently swaddled up by his liturgical clothing, as are the outlandish trousers of the other ministers and servers.

(James I’s Canons of 1604, which are still more-or-less binding on Anglican clergy, envisage clergy wearing outdoors, over the top of their cassocks, academic gowns and stiff flat academic caps – nicknamed ‘mortar-boards’ from the flat implements builders used to carry mortar on: another fossilised joke. Only once in my life have I seen this ensemble deployed. It was really rather elegant.)

Inside, in church, to brighten up the black cassock and make its appearance more formal, everyone wears a light outer robe. For servers and choristers, this is a simple cotton [surplice](#) – also called (if a bit shorter

and lacier) the **cotta**. The surplice or cotta is always white. The three ministers at High Mass, of whom more in a minute, wear outer whites as well, but for them the arrangements are more elaborate. They wear ankle-length white **albs** over their cassocks, which are thus virtually covered up. (*Alb* means white.) A white rope **girdle**, tied round the waist in elegant loops, holds the alb in place. Beneath the alb is an **amice**, a sort of truncated hood, which goes over the back of the neck; ribbons from the amice also get tied round the waist, and at the throat the amice is bunched into a rather dashing ascot affair. Gawky dog-collars are thus obliterated.

Colour.

CASSOCKS ARE FOR ANYONE; vestments are garments worn only at Mass and only by the **sacred ministers**, of whom there are three at a High Mass (we'll discuss the term 'High Mass' next week).

The Celebrant, who is going to consecrate the Wine and Bread and offer the Sacrifice to God, is the only necessary person at Mass. But, partly as a practical aid in these elaborate ceremonies, and partly because the threefoldness adds splendour, he has with him a **deacon**, and a **subdeacon**.

As you probably know, there are three '**orders**' of ministers in the Church: **deacons**, who can become **priests**, who in turn can become **bishops**. This system has often been tweaked, but the basic three-fold structure has been in place from the first century, and seems too fundamental to overthrow.¹ Yet this structure of three-fold order is only approximately reflected at Mass.

The celebrant has to be either a bishop or a priest. In practice, he is almost always *not* a bishop. The liturgical deacon – the man who does the deacon's work at Mass – can be a real deacon (as is appropriate), or a priest, since priests are deacons too, and priests are more numerous than real permanent deacons. Here, however, the deacon is usually Fr

¹ What dodgy nineteenth-century German-inspired historical criticism is this? Any apostolic succession worthy of the name goes right back to the apostles. It's exactly this kind of pseudo-scientific wickedness that led to the Hippolytan Heresy and Vatican II liturgy in the first place. RD

Dawson, a permanent deacon; today it is me. The subdeacon can be (and almost always is) a layman. The threeness of this arrangement may have something to do with the Most Holy Trinity, but it is more likely a matter of æsthetics and symmetry.

This elaborate hierarchy is made elaborately visible in the three sacred ministers' **vestments**. Vestments are spectacular outer garments, made to ennoble the action and strike the eye. They are not, like cassocks and surplices and albs, negative obliterations of the everyday, but neither are they decorative. They are in a serious sense *sacred*: solemnly blessed tools for the seemingly offering of Christ's Body and Blood.

At High Mass, vestments come in a matching '**set**' of embroidered silk, coloured, of course, according to the liturgical season (we'll come to the concept of colour in the Mass in a few chapters' time). The set matches, but it also varies: so we have a few more handsome words to master.

The sacred vestments.

ABOVE OUR HIGH ALTAR, on the far right, is St Vincent, a deacon in Roman Spain – of whom more later – and he is wearing a baggy gown which is clearly not a stylised piece of ecclesiastical costuming, but a formal item of everyday clothing, appropriate to his rank but not peculiar to it. It is in fact a **dalmatic**, a component of upper-class secular wear, like the cassock. As with the cassock, the dalmatic became identified with the Church, and specifically with the order of deacons; and it survived within the Church as the peculiar uniform of the deacon when the world's fashions claimed. The raiment Vincent wears is the distant ancestor of the dalmatic Fr Dawson is sporting at this very instant.

The subdeacon, meanwhile, wears a **tunicle**, which developed from an ancient Roman overcoat.

The tunicle and dalmatic have, by long development, become very alike, but note (and wonder at this subtlety) that the dalmatic has two **clavi**, or **orphreys** – broad decorated stripes – and the tunicle only one.

Meanwhile, of the same material but in a quite different shape, the **chasuble** is the distinctive dress of the celebrant. It began life as a huge,

tent-like coat, but over the centuries it tended to shrink. Now chasubles are either ‘Gothic’ (a floppy triangle of material), or ‘fiddle-backs’ (smaller, stiffer affairs, front and back each the shape of a violin).

Curiously enough, the really significant vestment, the **stole**, is almost invisible. It’s a long thin scarf of silk, coloured to match the other vestments, and it’s compulsory at all Masses. The chasuble can (in desperate circumstances) be dispensed with, the tunicle and dalmatic and even the ministers who wear them can be dispensed with, but the stole not. It is the definitive sign of the priest (who wears it *crossed* over his breast – no need to explain that – and tucked into his girdle).

In the Anglo-Saxon Church, that is to say in the Church of England before the Norman Conquest, stoles often had many little silver bells sewn on, so that the priest shook with a delicate noise whenever he moved.² This sounds delightful, and yet another reason to regret the Norman Conquest. Mightn’t we bring them back?

Tat

He had a special passion . . . for ecclesiastical vestments, as indeed he had for everything connected with the service of the Church. In the long cedar chests that lined the west gallery of his house, he had stored away many rare and beautiful specimens of what is really the raiment of the Bride of Christ, who must wear purple and jewels and fine linen that she may hide the pallid macerated body that is worn by the suffering that she seeks for and wounded by self-inflicted pain. . . .

You’ll have gathered that this isn’t me speaking. It’s Oscar Wilde, from his decadent novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde was a debauched Puritan, titillated by the physical gorgeousness of the Church’s worship.

He possessed a gorgeous cope of crimson silk and gold-thread damask, figured with a repeating pattern of golden

² John O’Brien, *A History of the Mass* (1879), p. 47.

pomegranates set in six-petalled formal blossoms, beyond which on either side was the pine-apple device wrought in seed-pearls. The orphreys were divided into panels representing scenes from the life of the Virgin, and the coronation of the Virgin was figured in coloured silks upon the hood. This was Italian work of the fifteenth century.

Another cope was of green velvet, embroidered with heart-shaped groups of acanthus-leaves, from which spread long-stemmed white blossoms, the details of which were picked out with silver thread and coloured crystals. The morse bore a seraph's head in gold-thread raised work. The orphreys were woven in a diaper of red and gold silk, and were starred with medallions of many saints and martyrs, among whom was St. Sebastian.³

Ah yes! we'd been waiting for Sebastian. We could see him coming.

The slang word for ecclesial costuming and props is *tat*, a word which catches the fussy naughtiness of a certain attitude to Church ritual. Enemies indeed allege that ritualism is *merely* naughty, mere indulging of temperaments drawn to prostration, theatrics and lace.

As with all religious slurs, the sharp word became a thorn in the flesh and dwells among us still. Weak brethren materialised in the nineteenth century to fulfil the calumny. Oscar Wilde and many others have come into the holy city of Catholic religion through the low door of millinery. The human heart is terribly contorted, and God is unscrupulously sly in His methods. Even in the first generations of the Church it was remarked that *some ... preach Christ even of envy and strife ... of contention, not sincerely.... What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.*⁴ That's the spirit! – not to say, the Spirit. It doesn't do to be squeamish about salvation. Every way, whether through perversity of heart or crookedness of libido, through a desire to

³ from Chapter xi of Dorian Gray (<http://www.upword.com/wilde/dorgray11.html>)

⁴ Philippians i^{15-16, 18}.

vex one's bishop, or coddle one's "aesthetic self-consciousness",⁵ or to wear a velvet image of St Sebastian, or *épater les bourgeois*, the Catholic Faith is preached, and grows, at which we rejoice.

Nonetheless, we do not forget that all ritual is only a by-product of doctrine. It is the outward sign of the idea that God became physically present. If He is present, then He ought to be physically honoured, and gorgeousness is the sign of honour. Of course it is dangerous, because everything worthwhile is dangerous; but I take it anyone prepared to read such a logn book as this one is beyond the shallow thrill of acanthus-leaves, long-stemmed white blossoms, silver thread and coloured crystals.

But Mass hasn't begun yet

I SAY ALL THIS ABOUT THE CHASUBLE; yet, when we examine our freeze-frame we find that the celebrant is *not* wearing a chasuble. If we glance about anxiously (has he *lost* his chasuble?), we spy it waiting for him over on the craved row of wooden thrones off to the right, the **sedilla**. (a Latin word – *seats* – with Spanish-looking spelling; Washington is so close to the hispanophonosphere, it's usually pronounced *see-dee-YA*). We peer more closely, and see that it doesn't seem to have been left there as an oversight: for it is nicely deployed upside-down, with its bottom turned up, so it can be slid into. Hmm. Meanwhile, instead of a chasuble, the celebrant is in a **cope**: a heavy semi-circular cloak, with embroidered '**boss**' hanging down behind. The cope began life as a raincoat, and in Latin languages is still baldly called the *pluvium*. It is still bulky, and used to be so huge the priest needed help moving about in it. You'll notice that the other sacred ministers maintain the custom of holding it back from him, so his arms are free.

The fact that the celebrant is in cope and not chasuble is a signal that Mass is in fact *not* about to begin. It is delayed by what is really a quite separate service (you'll see that the bulletin lists on its menu of

⁵ Faber, p. 93.

services ASPERGES, HIGH MASS AND SERMON AT 10.00A.M.: three distinct items).

Many weeks from now, when we reach the Last Gospel, we'll be contemplating an epilogue, tacked onto the last extremity of Mass itself because we have an impulse to linger, even after the final blessing, and contemplate the central truth of the Faith, that God became Man. At this first extremity of the rite there is an opposite impulse: a seemly dread about approaching the ultimate rite, a wise reluctance. As the magnificently-clad representatives of mankind sweep into view, they, and we, quail. We are struck by the farcical gap between who we are, and what we are about to do.

What closes that gap is baptism. We have been baptised 'into' Christ, into His death and infinite life. Therefore (there is no other reason) it's reasonable for us to celebrate and offer and receive the Sacrifice. We have, no doubt, betrayed our baptismal vows to follow Christ again and again since we were last at Mass. But that is reason to refresh the baptismal fact, not to shy away from it. Our minds turn to the water of baptism – at once, perfectly on cue, the deacon hands the celebrant what we most want to have to hand: a pail of holy water.

Here, then, is our first freeze-frame fully explained. The three sacred minister are kneeling before the altar; the servers are standing in their appointed places; the celebrant is turning to take the bucket from the deacon. We release the PAUSE button, and action resumes. We begin, not Mass, but the rite of –

The Asperges.

THIS IS CANDIDLY TITLED in Ascension and St Agnes' weekly bulletin **AD ASPERSIONEM AQUÆ BENEDICTÆ, WASHING WITH BLESSED WATER,**, so as not to be confused with the rite **AD MISSAM,** the Mass proper, which begins on the next page.

Of course it's not so much a washing as a sprinkling. The celebrant, and then the whole choir, sing one of the Church's greatest songs, adapted from the penitential fifty-first Psalm: *asparges me hysopo et mundabor lavabis me et super nivem dealbabor, Thou shalt purge me*

*with hyssop, and I shall be clean; thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*⁶ In the joyous weeks after Easter a more cheerful text replaces this, but for the moment the priest and choir chant to God for release from the vileness of what we are and what we do: *Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo: Thou shalt wash me, O Lord, with hyssop.*

As is usually the way, the first word of the Latin rite becomes the name of the ceremony: **Asperges**.

Hyssop is a plant, bitter in taste, a herb that conjures up the sourness of remorse and the astringent cleanliness of repentance and forgiveness. As a matter of fact, since one can't have hyssop to hand all the time, the sprinkling is done with a sort of hollow rattle, attractively named an **aspergillum**. The celebrant uses this to fling holy water at the altar; he touches his own forehead; sprinkles the deacon, on his right, the sub-deacon, on his left, then everyone else in the sanctuary. He turns (the deacon and subdeacon deftly swap sides, so that hierarchy is preserved, the deacon, the celebrant's right-hand man, remaining on the more honourable right. These small touches have a delicate beauty to them). The three of them stride down the nave. The congregation are recalled to the moment of their baptism – utter forgiveness, endless rebirth, union with Christ, death cured – in the most direct fashion, by having the same water brought from the altar and flung at them. The moment of wincing away from God, renewed each Sunday as we confront the Mass, is by this weekly action splashed away.

No one could call it subtle, and it is not meant to be. We are called to attention by having cold water flicked in our faces. With that flamboyant and good-humoured gesture of assurance, the Church shows her children that they are going to be forgiven, once more, of all we have done ill, once more. *See, think: you have been baptised! Therefore throw remorse over your shoulders, and rouse your minds. Nothing stands between you and utter happiness; the doors of Paradise, like city gates, are swinging open on you; you can almost smell the air from the deathless lands. . . .*

⁶ Psalm 17 (according to the Vulgate count), or li⁷ (according to the Prayer Book).

What is holy water?

UT WAIT ON – hold all this mysticism: what exactly is this **holy water** being sprinkled over us with an aspergillum? Is it just water, and is it just meant as a reminder of the fact of our own baptisms?

No, it is more than a reminder, and it is not merely water.

The two central Christian sacraments are baptism and Eucharist. As soon as baptism ceased to be celebrated in rivers (where nothing much could be done about the water) – as soon as baptism was generally administered in a specially-built **font** inside the church – Christians began to pay attention to the water itself. The rite of baptism was elaborated to include an initial blessing of the water by which the candidate was to be ‘reborn’, and this blessing itself became very elaborate (everything within Christianity tends to get elaborated, because the energy of the Faith is exhausted and bubbles over). Believers liked to take away this elaborately blessed baptismal water, and the custom grew up of blessing or hallowing water apart from baptismal needs. We read about a wonderfully named functionary called a *hydrokometes*, an *introducer by water*, who stood at the church door and splashed folk as they came in. The *hydrokometes* vanished, but there remains at the entrance to most churches a **stoup** or basin of holy water – or **lustral water**, which is a grander, and vaguely pagan, name for the same thing. As worshippers arrive in church, the custom is for them to dip in their fingers (traditionally the first two fingers), and sketch the **sign of the Cross** (forehead, sternum, left breast, right breast). In this church of Ascension and St Agnes the stoup looks like, because it is, a former font. It’s the small wooden font of St Agnes’ Church, and arrived when the congregation of St Agnes arrived back in the 1940s. So here the connection between baptism and holy water is visually obvious.

Catholic Christianity typically prefers explicit and public ceremonies to causal private acts; so as well as the splash of water on your individual forehead as you enter, the Church provides the imposing rite of Asperges. The Asperges was ordered for the whole West just over a thousand year ago by Pope Leo IV, who decreed: *Omni die Dominico, ante missam, aquam benedictam facite, unde populus et loca fidelium*

aspergantur, which is to say that every Sunday, before Mass, the parish priest is to ‘make’ holy water in his church and cleanse his faithful people with it. The contemporary Bishop of Rheims, who bore the barbaric name Hincmar, made these regulations:

Every Sunday, before the celebration of Mass, the priest shall bless water in his church, and, for this holy purpose, he shall use a clean and suitable vessel. The people, when entering the church, are to be sprinkled with this water, and those who so desire may carry some away in clean vessels so as to sprinkle their houses, fields, vineyards, and cattle, and the provender with which these last are fed, as also to throw over their own food.⁷

And even though space-time stands between you and me, gentle reader, I can almost hear your snickers at the idea of taking holy water home to the barn and scattering it on the straw.

And yet, why exactly is this childish?

It will take some pages to explain why it is not.

Prayer using things.

CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY HAS NOTHING TO DO with magic. No object has any supernatural power in itself; the world is as it looks; reason and normal experience are our only ways of understanding the world. There are no ghosts. Water is, physically speaking, only ever water, and nothing uncanny can be done with it.

But if we believe that there is a Power beyond the world, then it is reasonable for us to speak to God, and ask Him to do things for us: to illuminate our minds, to reform our conscience, to alleviate evils. Why not? Why would He make us capable of thinking about Him if He didn’t

⁷ H. Leclercq’s article on ‘HOLY WATER’ in the Catholic Encyclopædia (www.newadvent.org); Leo IV P.L., CXV, col. 679; Hincmar “Capitula synodalia”, cap. v, in P.L., CXXV, col, 774

want us to speak to Him? Why would He make us desire Him so avidly if He didn't mean to reach out to us?

Very well: how do we speak to Him? How do we ask Him things? We can simply ask, forming the request in our minds, and He will hear; but there are better ways. After all, we are not all mind. We are bodies as well, and even something as intensely spiritual and subjective as sexual love is for us unsatisfactory without physical expression. Likewise our prayers are unsatisfactory if they are merely mental: it is almost always better, even when praying alone, to kneel. And it is best to pray using more than mere words. It is best, it has always been best, to use things as well. In all the ancient religions everyone (except for a few highly-strung solitaries like Socrates) knew better than to praise and petition the gods only with words. It was best to multiply the means, to

Laudate eum in tympano et choro :
laudate eum in cordis et organo
Laudate eum in cymbalis bene sonantibus :
laudate eum in cymbalis iubilationis

Praise Him in the timbrels and dances :
praise Him upon the strings and pipe.
Praise Him upon the well-tuned cymbals :
*praise Him upon the loud cymbals.*⁸

This materiality in worship, this praying to God with dances and cymbals and not just words, is particularly obvious for Christians. For (declares the Christian Gospel) *Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis, The Word is become flesh, and dwelt among us.*⁹ God has united Himself with matter, by taking a body; He has united Himself with humanity, by becoming a Man. He has chosen to come to us in material form, and we are naturally inclined to come to Him the same way.

⁸ Psalm c1⁴⁻⁵.

⁹ John i¹⁴.

The Catholic Faith is thus opposed to specious **dualism** – the idea that matter and spirit are entirely separate, that no material act can have religious effect or significance. Yes, we insist, it can: the birth of a certain Child in a barn, the Death of that same Individual on a scaffold, are the basis of all our hope. *Verbum caro factum est.*

Moreover, the physical offering and consumption of the Body and Blood of that same Man is our weekly hope. Our closest approach to God is not in vehement subjective verbal prayer, nor even in ardent mystical ecstasy, but – staggering idea! – in the physicality of eating and drinking Christ.

The sacramental principle.

THOSE LAST FEW PARAGRAPHS were an attempt to say what is finally going on in Mass – a first attempt. Throughout this book we'll keep returning to the enormous question: What, theologically speaking, *happens* during Mass?

And this question is obviously tied up with the question I announced in the preface: How should Mass be celebrated? If Mass is essentially a subjective business, aimed at increasing Christians' sense of devotion to God and 'fellowship' or communality with each other, then there's a good case for keeping it casual and folksy. But if, as the Church always maintained until her frenzy in the 'Sixties, if Mass is Christ's physical giving of Himself to humanity over again, then our subjective response becomes secondary. It's a good thing if we feel elated, contrite, tender, loving, and so forth, at the presence of Christ. But if He is indeed literally present, then what is vital for us is our presence at Mass every Sunday, and for us to welcome Him fittingly. We are dealing with realities. Our feelings can look after themselves.

This book therefore not only describes but defends the traditional shape and spirit of Mass (ornate, formal, magnificent, solemn). It defends the solemnity of Mass because I believe, and want to defend, the basic Catholic doctrine of **Real Presence**, which means Christ's *physical* presence in the bread and wine; and the equally basic Catholic doctrine of the **sacrifice of the Mass**, which is to say the priest's actual, useful

giving to God of the best thing we could conceivably give Him, His own Son.

These two ideas, stated so bluntly and rapidly, seem fantastic. They are fantastic: but no more fantastic than the doctrine of the Incarnation, of which they are the necessary consequence.

The idea that we approach God through material things, and also that He approaches us through material things, is what theologians call the principle of **sacraments**. Sacraments are (to use an old tag) the material means of God's goodness to us, goodness unobtainable any other way. They are the material means He has chosen to use, and He actually uses their materials. These materials aren't merely the symbol of what is going on spiritually. In baptism God uses water to make us immortal and fuse us with Christ. Without water the new birth of the individual cannot happen. What God manages to do with the unbaptised is not something we don't know about; but whatever happens with them, it is not the same as what happens to those drastically and irreversibly incorporated into JESUS Christ at the font. Again, in the Mass we are in communion with God in an incomparable mode. There is such a thing as 'spiritual communion', or a subjective act burning desire to be one with God; but it is not the same and it is not as good as the physical communion that occurs at the altar rail.

Sacraments, to use another old theological term, are efficacious. They work in themselves, and they work through physical things.

Sacramentals.

THE SACRAMENTAL PRINCIPLE is that in baptism and Mass God and man come together through the medium of certain ordained material devices (water is blessed and applied, and a baby is absorbed into the Body of Christ forever; bread and wine are offered, and Christ becomes present on the altar). Granted this startling principle, it follows that God and man might also be able to come together through other material means too. The whole material universe is potentially a medium between Him and us. It does not (as most religions teach) stand in the way. It does

not (as most religions teach) need to be transcended and escaped. It is our means to Him and His to us.

Specifically, apart from the big two sacraments, the Church recognises five other sacraments, thus bringing the total up to the satisfying number seven. The **seven sacraments** are baptism and Eucharist; marriage; ordination; what is called (curiously) confirmation; what is called (inaccurately) confession; and what is called (very inaccurately) the last rites. In each of these events, the ‘matter’ of the sacrament – as the theologians say – is used by God, at the solemn petition of the Church, to work some extreme good impossible otherwise. When the dying man receives the last rites (or more properly ‘extreme unction’), he is touched with a little fragrant oil (‘anointed with chrism’) and thereby utterly reconciled with God. There is nothing magic in the oil; but the Church has earnestly begged God to grant forgiveness *through* the application of chrism, and we believe He grants the prayer. Of course someone could just pray over the dying man that he be entirely forgiven; but the prayer of things is better than the prayer only of words, and by using this thing, this specified oil, we apply the concerted prayer of all the Church in all centuries to this particular deathbed. That is better.

Apart from the seven sacraments, there are also lesser customs and objects through which, by the long prayerful custom of the Church, are regarded as standard bridges between divinity and humanity. These things are termed, confusingly, **sacramentals**. Sacramentals are not sacraments; but they work in a roughly similar way. That is, the Church, having authority in such affairs, chooses some innocuous stuff – silk, say – and decrees that silk damask scarves, to be called stoles, shall be the necessary mark of a priest saying Mass. Here, she says, is the material object through which I ask Christ, my Husband, to be present in the Sacrifice. When, in the sacristy before Mass, the celebrant kisses his stole and puts it on (murmuring the set prayer *Though I approach unworthily to celebrate the sacred Mystery, may I merit nonetheless eternal joy*), he is putting on the prayers of all the Church that the Sacrifice of Christ’s Body might be made, validly and fittingly. And we believe that God answers the concerted prayers of the whole Church. He accepts her

forms, and comes to her through the means she asks. Even something as trifling as a stole is a medium for Him to shape our life into His perfection; and therefore there is a proper awe attaching to vestments, because they are sacramentals, and part of the machinery that carries us on to eternal joy.

Back to holy water.

ALL THIS TURGID THEOLOGY brings us back to those cows in barns outside Rheims, and Bishop Hincmar's friendly suggestion that his flock might like to sprinkle holy water on their provender.

Holy water is, as you'll have guessed by now, a sacramental. The Church has come to specify it as a formal way of asking God's blessing on things. When Hincmar's rude Franks took holy water home in clean pots and flicked it on the straw, they were beseeching God to care for their cattle, on which their own happiness depended. There's no reason for us to despise such a petition; and there's no reason to doubt that their prayer of sprinkled water was more eloquent than any words they might have been able to form asking God for such aid.

Neither are we so very eloquent. Our desire to have God look after us is just as childish and vague as that of the peasantry of Rheims in the ninth century. It behoves us to use gratefully the sacraments and even the sacramentals provided for us by the Church (who is called our wise Mother for a wise reason). We do not pray for forgiveness well, our own words are trite. Then let us be assiduous about attending to the Asperges, for that action is copious and fluent. The celebrant marches down the nave, throwing about water the Church has asked God to use to free you from your worst deeds this week. The drops go fly through the air, catching the sun, and smacking coldly on your face. There: your baptism is renewed. Of course there's no magic in the water; but this vivid act is the way the Church has chosen to pray for your renewed forgiveness, and this vivid act is the way God has consented to use to forgive you.

We'll come back often to this idea, for it lies at the heart of all ritual. *Form* is good, because by it the individual escapes his own limiting individuality. *Material* rather than merely verbal prayer is good, both

because we are not merely verbal; and because (far more importantly) God has given Himself to us a man, a man with a Body; we share in that man's divine manhood because He allows us to share in His Body at Mass. The best prayer is this both formal and material, not casual and interior; the best prayer rests not on private words, but on the visible, reverent use of vestments, devices water, candles, chalices, statues of the Virgin, relics, and most of all the sacraments themselves. Such ritual things are not low, puerile and crude; they are the height of sophistication (not that that matters very much), and they are the height of effective prayer (which matters a good deal).

Enough theory. Back to pleasant practical details.

Holy water is 'made' every so often by a priest, who 'exorcises' and blesses water with a painstaking formula of prayer, then 'exorcises' and blesses salt with another painstaking formula of prayer, then mingles the two together while reciting yet another prayer. You may say that this sounds a bit like a magic spell; I suppose it does; but then most clinical medicine sounds like a spell to, and is not. By 'making' holy water we are asking God to be good to anyone who cares to use the stuff: that is perfectly rational. In this church holy water is kept in the sacristy in a large metal tank, of deplorable Art Deco design, and drawn off through a tap.

A few cupfuls of holy water was poured into the bucket by the sacristan before Mass, and now it has been lavishly scattered about the altar and people by shakes of the aspergillum.

The Asperges are drawing to an end. It has taken a long time to discuss this custom, partly because we first paused over costuming (which had to be accounted for now, before more action begins), and partly because Mass is like that. It opens up to the gaze at every point. Its actions are amazingly rich, and amazingly connected with one another. Just as one infinitesimal cell of your body contains all your D.N.A., so that a speck of your finger-nail describes your hair-colour and liver-dimensions and even much of your temperament, so any instant of the Mass almost contains the whole. If we could thoroughly understand that single drop of holy water flying through the air, we would have pierced the attributes of sacramentals, the mystery of the sacraments, the secret

of the Incarnation itself, and thus the nature of God. Since I don't think we've exhausted the secret of the Incarnation over the last dozen pages (the seraphim ceaselessly sigh as they understand ceaselessly more of it), which makes me suspect I haven't adequately cleared up even the mystery of holy water. Ah well – what we've done will have to do.

On, on.

THE ASPERGES ARE DONE. Our gorgeously apparelled sacred ministers swing about and march back up to the altar, back up to the severely apparelled servers who stand waiting for them. The rite of Asperges is concluded, and the ultimate rite is upon us, that rite fathomless to the human mind, inexhaustible, endlessly fresh. This rite is the best thing in life. It is so good and valuable that, amidst all the sacraments and sacramentals, we slangily call it *the* Sacrament, **the Blessèd Sacrament.** Now it is time to begin to look up to the Most Holy Mass, in which everything savours of mystery, in which there are no secrets – of which nothing can be entirely grasped by the mind, of which there is nothing not waiting to be explained.