

## Chapter ii: *The Preparation.*

**L**AST WEEK THE ALTAR PARTY APPEARED and began vigorously swooping about; but we almost immediately froze their action, only a few seconds into the service, before a word had been spoken. The three sacred ministers were kept on PAUSE for many paragraphs, kneeling before the altar: the deacon was seized with stillness in the very act of handing the celebrant a gilded bucket of holy water. Our eyes dwelt thoughtfully on the various vestments worn by the motionless clergy and servers, and then on the very concept of ritual, before we released the PAUSE button and let them move: at which they briskly got up and advanced on us, flicking water from that bucket. This ceremony was the **Asperges** – a service distinct from Mass itself: a recollection of the fact of our baptism, a solemn and merry Preparation before we faulty but glorious creatures could dare to approach the sacrifice. And if we had time to step out of time again, we might also have paused the action as the drops of water fly off the aspergellium, through the sunny air, and onto us – reflecting for a while on holy water, what it is and why we have it and how old it is, and perhaps musing on how life evolved and how we are born and how we are reborn all through this one element; and we would have considered . . . .

However, we didn't, and if we are ever going to finish we have to keep the film moving through the projector. So:

at the end of the Asperges:

THE THREE SACRED MINISTERS return smartly to the foot of the altar. They kneel; the celebrant sings *The Lord be with you*; everyone responds *And with thy spirit*; and the he sings back *Let us pray*. Then comes a Collect.

Quite a few things must be said about this. *The Lord be with you* crops up as a sort of formalised greeting in the wonderful *Book of Ruth* (ii<sup>4</sup>); you might have noticed this if you read *Ruth* two weeks ago. A remark rather like *And with thy spirit* occurs in one of Paul's letters (II Timothy iv<sup>22</sup>). Early Christians put these two little sayings together, and thus created an excellent liturgical pattern: the **versicle** (sung by the priest; the word means *little verse*, and is often marked V.) and **response** (sung by choir or congregation; marked R.). There are number of other versicle-and-response pairs in the Christian liturgy, but this one is much the most common, as well as the oldest. The first account of what happens in the Christian Mass – the earliest version of this series of chapters, if you like – was written by a highbrow Roman named St. Hippolytus a little after A.D. 200, and according to Hippolytus, Christians were already enlivening their celebrations with the responsive cry *Dominus vobiscum, The Lord be with you: Et cum spiritum tuum, And with thy spirit*.

What exactly does this versicle-and-response mean? What it doesn't mean is this: that the Lord is only vaguely with the unholy laity, but eminently with the holy priest's *spirit*. Well, why would it mean anything as stupid as that? Indeed; but the poor 1960s innovators, those ham-fisted boobies and traducers of the Christian rite, really were worried that the traditional words might not sound egalitarian enough. So, in their usual way, when they didn't understand something, they wrecked it. They trivialised this classical versicle-and-response into: *The Lord be with you: And also with you* – than which it would be hard to think of a *riposte* more flat and tired, more rudely dull. Alas!

*The Lord be with you: And with thy spirit* is a **salutation**, a formal pattern of greeting: it's the liturgical version of V. *Hi, y'all!*, R. *How y'doin'?* But as with everything else in the Mass, it is more intense and significant than everyday speech. The priest ratchets up the tautness of

the rite, invoking the presence of the Uncreated amongst this congregation: **V.** *May the Lord be with you: as He is!* – And **R.** *He is!* respond the people, bouncing the thought back and opening it up: *and may He be with you as with us, not merely enveloping you, but present even to the intimacy of your innermost self.* And, mutually strengthened by this noble and elegant exchange, the priest and people plunge into prayer. *Let us pray*, sings out the celebrant, not meaning, “Let us begin to *pray*, having been, oh, I don’t know, thinking of lunch or gazing at the ceiling”; but “Let *us* pray: let us all, praying constantly as we have been throughout this great rite, for the moment *collect* our multitudinous prayers into one statement to God.”

Having exchanged courteous salutation with his people, and *collected* their wills and his into one, the priest chants a **collect** (emphasis on the first syllable; but you can see how it gets its name and what it means). A collect is a shortish prayer of this basic shape: first an invocation (usually in the form *O God, Who . . .*, and then some quality or action ascribed to Him: *O God, Who art the source of all order and beauty*); secondly, a petition (usually arguing on from that quality: *free, we beseech Thee, Thy Church from all disordered and ugly liturgical forms*); thirdly, a pleading of Christ’s *name* (*which we ask in the name of Thy Son Christ Jesus Our Lord*). Often, fourthly, this pleading of Christ’s name slides into one of a few standard Trinitarian endings (for instance: *who with Thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth, ever one God world without end*). And then comes **Amen**, a word which needs an essay to itself – and will get one, many weeks from now, when we reach the Great Amen.

Each Mass has one unifying **Collect** – note the capital – the Collect of the Day, which we’ll come to in chapter [xi](#). But it also has a number of other collects, small c, which we’ll note as we go. Meanwhile, observe the dignity and grace of the collect form. Most of our collects were composed in that majestic language, Latin, but they have passed over into English very beautifully. A good collect obeys the form, but is surprising and original enough to sound fresh, and courtly enough to sound stately without being mannered or slick. A collect is like a *haiku*.

**A costume change; an important redundancy, and a harangue.**

**H**AVING THUS PRAYED TOGETHER, we've completed the rite of Asperges. At once two things happen, one predictable, one very unpredictable.

The priest has to get into the correct garb for offering the sacrifice of the Mass: his chasuble. Rather than abandon his people and creep off to the sanctuary to change (which would be an unfriendly and secretive way of going about things), the three sacred ministers swirl about to their heavy, carved, wooden seats, the **sedilla**; and in the sight of all the celebrant unbuckles and sheds his cope, which a server holds; the celebrant kneels to accept this yoke; the deacon lowers it onto his shoulders. The cope gets dropped onto a chair and forgotten.

Meanwhile, all three ministers each reverence with a kiss, and then don, another, a mysterious vestment, a vestment also for use only at the Sacrifice, and therefore left waiting for them on the *sedilla* until now. This finery evolved from a thoroughly lowly species of cloth: the *mappa*, a folded linen napkin fashionably carried in the left hand in ancient Rome. In other words, it was a handkerchief. But in the palmy days of the Empire the consuls would signal the start of the games in the Coliseum by waving their *mappæ*, which thus mutated into a symbol of rank. The clergy of the new religion of Christ in turn adopted this mark of honour: deacons and sub-deacons cleaned the vessels at Mass with their – well, what? The thing got called, with dizzy variety, a *mappula*, or teensy *mappa*; a *mantile*, a *manuale*, a *fano*, a *sudarium*, a *sestace*; finally a *manipulus*, a thing for manipulating, for poking into the chalice and rubbing about; hence our English word [maniple](#). The next stage was the maniple ceasing to be carried; it instead attached itself to the left wrist. In a final spasm of evolution, it stopped wiping anything at all, but took on embroidery, and stiffness, and colour, becoming useless and honorable – like human hair or human eye-colour.

Thus the maniple's now simply a decorative vestment: a strip of silk a yard long, looped over the left wrist, matching in colour those other noble vestments, stole, chasuble, dalmatic, tunicle. It's a grace note, adding a pleasing touch of whimsy and an æsthetic asymmetry to the

ministers' robes. Only a joyless and humourless heart could be unmoved by the pluck and *panache* of the maniple. Woe! joylessness and humourlessness, like earnest thuggery, were exactly the mood of the 1960s and the so-called Liturgical Movement. (How fond they were of the word *Movement* in those days! And how unfairly they used it: for the real Liturgical Movement, beginning in the late nineteenth century, was precisely about recovering, and reviving, and scrupulously following, the classic Christian forms, which is to say, fully developed late mediæval patterns; whereas in the Sixties the object was to scrap them.)

You can guess what happened to the maniple in churches that consented to be hippified.

Hence the maniple is utilitarian in this sense: if you ever go to a church other than Ascension and St Agnes (but why would you?), and see maniples worn, you know you have escaped out of the glum suburbs of the Heavenly Jerusalem, into its suave and courtly heart. The vandals of the 'Sixties objected to the harmless wee maniple more, perhaps, than to any other item of their twenty centuries' inheritance. It was so *objectionably* civilised: it was the first thing to go. Thus the survival of the maniple in a given church almost certainly implies the survival of everything else lost in the deluge: the rational Eastward position, real music, actual beauty, exquisite gesture, cultivated devotion, humility towards the Tradition, well-bred preaching, liturgical high-spirits, and so on – the full chromatic scale of merry Catholicism. If you sight the discreet swish of a maniple, you know you're in a church where the old customs are maintained, customs living and not synthetic, and therefore not (already) tired, but perpetually young.

DOWN WITH THE 'LITURGICAL MOVEMENT'!

DOWN WITH IT, THE DIRTY, STUPID, DINGY THING!

And now we halt the advancing film again, for:

### **The rite of Preparation.**

**H**AVING VESTED THEMSELVES FOR MASS, the sacred ministers prepare their heads and bowels to approach the altar of God. Once more the

three of them swivel until they are facing it, and

*V. Introibo ad altare Dei, I will go unto the altar of God,*  
murmurs the celebrant;

*R. Even the God of my joy and gladness,*  
respond the deacon, the subdeacon and the servers.

*V. Our help is in the name of the Lord,* confesses the priest;

*R. Who hath made heaven and earth,* exult the rest of the party.

Then immediately the priest recalls what he is about to do, being who he is and having done what he has done; and bowing himself, sighs:

*Confiteor, that is, I confess – to God Almighty; to blessed Mary Ever-Virgin, to blessed John the Baptist . . . that I have sinned in thought, word and deed . . . ;*

he thrice makes the gesture of thumping his own breast in remorse.

This is the rite of **Preparation**, undertaken by those about to step up to Christ's table, and act as waiters and agents as He lays Himself on it.

The Preparation used to occur out of sight, as a private devotion in the sacristy before the altar party appeared. It still has a curiously intimate feel. The priest tacitly confesses his secret failures to God; also to the Mother of God, who is a woman, a cousin; to all the company of heaven; and then – *and to you, my brethren*; and he bows sideways, right and left, deaconward and subdeaconward. (For the Preparation we need to study not so much a single frame of the film as a few seconds of it – enough to catch this exotic motion, back and forth.)

This gesture can be seen from the nave as an almost-awkward waggling. But there's the essence of the Catholic Faith in that waggle: God chooses to share the business of confession, forgiveness, redemption and mercy *downward*, with His creatures. There is a communion of saints, living and dead, an organic coöperative of all the faithful. And therefore from bowing forward, toward his Creator, the priest dares bow sideways, asking the aid of his relations, the saints, and his brothers, the other ministers and servers, to whom God has delegated the right to hear and receive such words. It's ungainly, but it's moving. Thus, when the priest has finished his damning self-account, all the rest of the coloured or black-and-white functionaries murmur to God on his behalf: *May the Lord Almighty forgive thee thy sins . . .* And then they bow, and mutter

precisely the same confession, with the same odd and beautiful sideways bendings; and the priest in turn prays to them for God.

Finally, and phrases of thunder: **V:** *Wilt Thou not turn and quicken us, O Lord?* **R:** *That Thy people may rejoice in Thee! . . . .*

Then a motionless pause – motionless in reality, not just because we are pausing the action – while the congregation finishes that extraordinary thing, the hymn.

### **The Introit hymn – with a digression on hymns in general.**

**W**HILE ALL THIS PREPARING IS GOING ON, inaudible to the congregation, a really unpredictable thing has been occurring. The faithful, who are to witness the Sacrifice offered and to consume it, are preparing themselves for their *rôle* by singing a song.

Let's mull over this marvel. – Christian worship is full of **music** because the harmony, complexity, swiftness, poignancy and drama of music strikes us as an innuendo of God the way spoken sounds don't. There's an ecstasy in music, and also a craving, which hints at what we most want, and most fear, and know to be true. For these reasons – and also, practically, because it is easier to hear and to memorise chanted phrases than spoken phrases – liturgical texts have always been sung, in Judaism as in Christianity. Something was sung at the Last Supper, the first Mass, almost certainly one of the Psalms (Mark xiv<sup>26</sup>). Such texts as the Lord's Prayer were sung or chanted at Christian celebrations of Mass almost at once. And from the ninth century pipe-organs became universal, providing backing for choral parts of the Mass, and also instrumental mood music. Our organ **prelude** this morning was the effective beginning of worship: the lifting up of the imagination and emotions, by sublime music, to a pitch fit for the contemplation of God.

What is more surprising is that the Church has accepted into the Mass, not just the singing of liturgical and scriptural texts integral to the rite, and not just organ background music, but also poems, entirely distinct from any liturgical words, set to tunes: lyric compositions interpolated into the rite to express popular devotion.

These **hymns**, or poetic outpourings, appeared at once in Christian history, so that the New Testament documents are peppered with quotations from hymns already (presumably) well-known to their first readers. But, as I say, although early, they're a *surprising* inclusion, because hymns are unlike anything we've yet come across in these notes. The hymn is not formal, nor fixed, and it is not necessarily complex and profound. It is an effusions, often private in tone, or emotionally vehement, or meditative to the point of being dreamy, or positively bouncy. The hymn is a sudden shift into subjective devotion.

This particular hymn, today's background music to the priest's frozen kiss, sets to a sweet, emotive, eighteenth-century German tune a short contemplative poem by John Keble, the saintly country priest and spiritual founder of Anglo-Catholicism. Keble takes one of Our Lord's Beatitudes –

*Blest are the pure in heart,  
For they shall see our God*

– and gently turns it over in easily-flowing verse: six syllables, six syllables, a swelling line of eight, quietly ardent; then a dying fall to another six-beat line. . . . It's a wholly different mode from the brisk Latinate rhetoric of the Asperges psalm, the versicle-and- response, the collect. It pulls us back for a moment, out of the corporate and formal act, back into our own muffled thoughts.

Of course hymns are not irrelevant to the Mass, not mere interruptions. Keble's tender musings on inner holiness (*The secret of the Lord is theirs*) are being sung because today we rejoice over Simon and Jude, who were pure in heart and therefore shed their blood (hence the crimson vestments) and now literally stand in the height of Paradise, eminent amongst the company of Heaven, where they *see our God* forever. Today's Sacrifice is being offered in their honour; we ask them to pray for us; we stand, at the climax of the Mass, shoulder-to-shoulder with them in front of Infinity. It is fitting, therefore, that we ponder the inner humility that prepared them for such public glory. It is fitting; but if we were seeing Mass for the first time (and that is how we are trying to see it) we could not have predicted the hymn. It is, like the sermon, an



audacious addition to the rites. I suppose that the Holy Sacrifice is offered with such glad and massive pomp it can afford these unceremonious touches. A hymn's a small *bouquet* of wildflowers laid on the huge glowing marble steps of a marble temple, which is the Mass.

By the way, the old 'rituals', which laid down the laws for celebrating Mass, did not mention hymns (they just happened, almost spontaneously), and neither did the English Book of Common Prayer. In the nineteenth century, English law-courts had solemnly to decide whether hymns were illegal or not in Anglican worship. Well, they were allowed, and here we are, singing the first of the four we'll sing at this Mass..

And then the hymn is over; and the three ministers, who have been waiting for this moment, are prepared for vigorous activity. Here at last is

#### **the arrival at the altar.**

**A**S THE HYMN CEASES, the priest and his colleagues start advancing up to God's altar. The choir begins at once on the Introit (of which more next week), while the climbing celebrant murmurs a prayer that ministers and servers might be able to enter with pure minds *ad Sancta sanctorum, into the Holy of Holies*. The priest strides up the steps to the altar itself, whispering another prayer; and **kisses** it. – We freeze his movement at this moment, as he bows, pressing his lips to the centre of the altar itself. (In origin this kiss was a salute, not just to the altar itself, but to the Christian heroes whose relics were preserved in honour within or beneath it.)

Indeed, what's essentially been happening so far, over these first three chapters, up until the moment of this kiss (I hope we haven't lost the wood for the trees!), is a pilgrimage: a long, stately approach to the great stone table where God reveals Himself. The ministers came into the sanctuary, and instead of striding up to the altar, fell to their knees below it. They steadied themselves and us for our convergence on God's board by the rite of Asperges; then paused again to recite the Preparation:

*V. Introibo ad altare Dei, I will go unto the altar of God,*

R: *Even the God of my joy and gladness!*

### What has happened so far

**T**HE PATTERN OF EVERYTHING up to this moment has been **Introit**, which is to say entry: a going up to God: a closing in on His innermost presence, the inner *sanctum*, the Holy of Holies. The Introit has been a rightly elaborate motion, mingling eagerness to approach with dread. Now, at last, the everyday world is left well behind, and it is fitting for the celebrant to climb up the last steps and, on behalf of all the faithful, to kiss it. *Introibo ad altare Dei!* The journey (of about ten yards; and from this planet into eternity) is accomplished.

The ministers as they climb the steps unconsciously flutter their maniples, those ceremonial handkerchiefs, as the consuls used to flutter them in Rome: for the great Game is beginning.

We've kept the celebrant bent over for a few paragraphs. Now we release him, and he breaks at once into action. A server or two stride over to him, armed with a metal machine, the deacon and subdeacon form a businesslike huddle around him, and abruptly the air is full – of perfumed smoke!