

Chapter iv: *The Introit*

MEA CULPA, mea maxima culpa : I confess to the company of Heaven and to you, my brethren, that I have sinned in what I have left undone, to wit, I didn't check all my references.

Last chapter, as we sighed over the loveliness of smoking incense, I told you that cardinals also used to smoke cigars as they celebrated High Mass in the central church of Christendom. Some of my readers found this too good to be true, so I reviewed my source, and alas... ! In the Library of Congress, itself beautiful enough to be a cathedral, I re-read *The Faber Book of Smoking*. I re-read Benedict XII's proclamation of 1725, allowing tobacco during Mass in St Peter's,

to provide for the needs of everybody's conscience, and especially for the good order of the basilica, which is seriously compromised by the frequent walking out of those who can't abstain from the use of tobacco which is so widespread today, partly due to the opinion of physicians who recommend it as a remedy against many infirmities, especially for people who are obliged to frequent cold and humid places in the early morning hours
.....¹

But of course His Holiness didn't mean cigars or pipes (which had gone out of fashion a generation before, and didn't come back for another

¹ Ed. James Walton, Faber & Faber, 2000; call-mark GT3020.F33, p.52.

century), nor cigarettes (invented in happy America much later), but *snuff*. I hadn't understood this when I first looked at this book, and – memory being a perverted faculty since the Fall – had stored away a disordered vision of baroque cardinals in heaped-up white wigs puffing cigars under Bernini's huge gilded *baldachino* as they swung jewelled thuribles, the carnal perfume of their tobacco entwining under those twisted pillars with spiritual fumes, until a glowing beneficent smog hovered over the central altar of Christendom, mingled of both This picture is my unconscious fantasy, I'm afraid – if a good deal pleasanter than the reality, of ministers and congregation snorting and coughing black gunge right through Mass.

However, it's true that Rome was keen on tobacco (as on capital punishment) as long it had power to enforce its will in such matters. When the Popes were absolute monarchs over central Italy, they ran a tobacco factory of their own and, sighs *The Faber Book of Smoking*, nostalgically, “in 1851 the dissemination of anti-tobacco literature became an imprisonable offence in the Papal States.” Exactly.

But now I fear that you won't believe a word I say.

TODAY OUR THEME IS TIME and timelessness.

Last chapter we watched the fumigation of the altar vigorously performed by sacred ministers and servers (who leave their clay pipes, chased-silver cigarette cases, leather cigar-boxes, and battered chewing-tobacco tins out in the sacristy, despite Benedict XII's kindly edict, and despite the District's cold and humid Novembers). Deacon revered celebrant with perfume of smoke, and thurible was borne away; celebrant faced east, toward the altar, directly in front of the big book on the altar, clearly about to speak. Deacon and sub-deacon spun like dancers, arraying themselves in an elegant diagonal (deacon one step below and one pace to the celebrant's right, subdeacon one step and one pace further). Relish this pattern, because it never occurs again in the choreography of the Mass. Let's freeze it in place.

But before we think about it, we have to think about the music. For while the altar was censed and the ministers aligned themselves in that

diagonal, the choir was aurally busy in the background – or rather not the background.

It's not that the choir sings while the altar is censed, but that the altar is censed while the Introit anthem is chanted; for the words of the Introit are the first words of the Mass itself. The opening words of the greatest of poems are sung, not said, since music befits their grandeur; and *while* these words are offered up, incense is offered up, too, hallowing the altar and rising toward God while the Introit rings out.

And what are these words? Well, that's the point: they change all the time.

Time and timelessness in the Mass.

WHAT IS TIME? We live in it and it kills us; if we try to define it, it puzzles us with paradoxes; we cannot imagine existence without it, but we still long to escape it; God made it and is outside it, but His Church is in it. The Church contemplates eternity, which is beyond time and encompasses it. Eternity is more than time as a three-dimensional living woman is more than her two-dimensional portrait. But the Church lives inside time and is propelled along by history, thrown about by cycles of decay and change and rebirth. We speak to God as men in a raft on whitewater shout out to a Man cross-legged on the bank.

Most of Mass is unalterable from day to day and from year to year (and indeed would be unalterable from century to century if committees of bishops would only stop fiddling with it). Why would we want alteration? The words of Mass are the ultimate words we have to say to God. There is nothing more that we could want to recite or hear apart from *Gloria in excelsis Deo, Glory to God in the Highest ; Hoc est, This is my Body ; the great Amen! ; Agnus Dei, O Lamb of God, dona nobis pacem, grant us Thy peace.* Most of all the cry *Sanctus! sanctus! sanctus!*, the endless hymn of *Holy!*, cannot change. For this is what is sung by the blessed company of Heaven, ceaselessly, eternally – not because they sing it innumerable times, but because they exist beyond change, outside the riot of timefulness, in the Face of God (before Which earth and heaven

evaporate). For the Blessed nothing *passes*; nothing is lost backward into yesterday; there are no possibilities unrealised; there is neither repetition nor ending. Time pours us along like a river; eternity is for them an immaculate ocean, shoreless, and they are at home in it. All moments are for them the one full moment when they shout in an agony of awful joy *Sanctus!*

Our stately repetition of that cry is an image of their endless crying of it. When we return Sunday by Sunday to these unchanging words we step out of the spin of time. We step into the infinite still centre, the deeper reality beyond time. Of course these words do not alter.

The Mass changeless and shifting

THESE INVARIABLE PARTS of Mass are known as the *Ordo Missæ*, the order of Mass, a term Englished, quaintly, as ‘the **Ordinary**’. The Ordinary comprises the preparatory prayers, the Kyrie, Gloria, Creed, Preface, Sanctus, Benedictus . . . : that is, all the bits – up to the beginning of the Canon (or Eucharistic Prayer), and also after the Canon – that are the same every week. These fixed portions are the rafters and beams of the Mass.

But within this framework are prayers, anthems and readings which do change with time. They change, essentially, with the turning of the year. They change not because we’d get bored without variation, but because God is with us within time. He moves with us, moving through the wandering paths of history, moving through the long arc of our lives as we mature and then fade, moving us with the loveable cycle of nature. The Church, in an act of incomparable brilliance and audacity, has turned the natural year into an icon of the eternal processes of salvation. She decks her Gospel tapestry round the 365-day solar cycle, pinning the events of the history of salvation to the seasonal orbit. She arranges for our Saviour to be born secretly every mid-winter, when all seems dark and dead, and for Him to rise again every beginning of spring, when His rising rhymes with the resurrection of life. Around those two poles, Christmas and Easter, she has constructed the colossal scheme of the Church **kalendar** (spelt like this; secular calendars are spelt like *that*).

We'll be discussing the kalendar in a few chapters, when we shift out of the green season and into the purple. Now we need to reflect that the kalendar makes each Sunday different, since each Sunday is at a slightly different point in moving toward Christmas, or past it, or toward Easter, or past Easter. Each Sunday, indeed almost every day of the year, has its own special quality and mood, as it fits to this colossal scheme of the kalendar – which is varied as the rainbow, and monumental as a symphony, encompassing every mood from frenzied despair to ecstasy as the year rolls round, touching each facet of the massiveness of Christian truth. By circling around and around we simulate the eternal stillness. Time is sanctified. The creating and destroying circle of seasons is made a pattern of timelessness.

Today our theme is time and timelessness. Time is a copy of eternity, and by turning time's flux into a stately cycle, we make that copying clear. The Mass stays still, and the Mass spins with the planet. The parts that stand still and the parts that spin both lift us to the eternal core of all things.

Proprium Temporale.

THE CHANGEFUL BITS OF THE MASS are called *Proprium Missæ*, the bits special or Proper to individual Masses; in English we say the **Proper** of the Mass. The *Proprium Temporale*, the Proper of Time, is the arrangement of all the sections of the Mass that rotate by Church 'season'. There's also a *Proprium Sanctorum*, a Proper for the special festivals that crop up on fixed dates, such as All Saints' on 1 November; we'll come to that sort of thing later in this series.

(I dread tiring you with technical terms. The only thing you absolutely need to remember is the distinction between the Ordinary, the immutable share of the Mass, and the variable Propers.)

Which bits of a Sunday Mass change? Which parts of the Mass are 'Proper', and governed by the Proper of Time?

Well, most obviously the lections, or readings, change: the **Gospel**; and the two passages that precede it, the Old Testament **Lesson** and the New Testament **Epistle**. Each Sunday has its own lections, its own Lesson

and Epistle and Gospel ‘of the Day’, readings ‘Proper’ or specific to (say) Trinity XII, or to Epiphany II, or the Second Sunday of Lent, or whichever point we’re at in time’s yearly circuit.

Chiming in with these readings is the **Collect** ‘Proper’ to the Sunday. This Collect ‘of the Day’ is the central Proper prayer of each Mass. Often it takes up ideas from the day’s Gospel.

And sometimes, on great occasions, the Canon itself is varied by the insertion of a special **Proper Preface**.

Thus there are four or five big changeable elements of the Mass (Collect, Lesson, Epistle, Gospel, occasionally Preface): four or five major Propers.

These are supplemented by seven smaller changeable elements, minor Propers, which are integral to the text of the Mass, although some are sung by the choir rather than said or chanted by the priest.

The minor Propers are: the **Gradual**, which leads into the Epistle; the **Alleluia**, which leads into the Gospel; the **Offertory**, an anthem sung or said (naturally) during the offertory, the offering to God of bread, wine and money; the **Secret**, recited or sung just before the Canon; the **Communion anthem**, said or sung immediately after we have received; and the **Post-communion**, said toward the end of the whole affair; and, first of all, most importantly of all, the **Introit Proper**, which is what we are listening to all this long frozen instant.

The three sacred ministers remain fixed in their diagonal, stretching downward line from the altar.

The choir offer God their dramatic song.

We continue ponder the genius of varied words within an unchanging liturgy.

The Proper as art.

I DO MEAN *GENIUS*. The eleven or twelve variable lections, collects and other Propers are not chosen at random. The dozen Propers form one art-work, sometimes simply called **The Proper**. Their arrangement is wise and ancient, developed slowly through the centuries, forming complex harmonies. Pope Gregory the Great, who framed the traditional

Proprium Temporale, is one of the greatest artists of the Mass. His Propers form a harmony that can be exceedingly subtle.

The dozen elements of a traditional Proper do not all say the same thing, and sometimes they respond to each other startlingly, in debate, in contradiction, creatively. The effect of a well-made Proper is to turn the Mass, that incomparable poem, into an uncountable *number* of poems, each exactly appropriate for the day. The splendid framework is modified by eleven or twelve ‘touches’; the Proper encases the unchanging reality. The eternal Sacrifice, offered for all time, is painted slightly differently each Sunday.

The 1960s jumbled the Proper of Time as it jumbled everything else. For the last four decades, Propers and **lectionaries** (systems of lections) have been ploddingly obvious. “Today’s theme is Patience in Suffering,” they inform the poor priest; “here are three Biblical passages we’ve found dealing with Patience in Suffering; we have also composed (in English appropriate for supermarket loudspeaker announcements) a Collect about Patience in Suffering; your sermon ought to be about Suffering, and being Patient. We hope you enjoy this Eucharist.” Such heavy-handedness is a failure of nerve. The Propers are not meant to be preachy, or to set a ‘theme’ as at a Las Vegas wedding. They are, traditionally, daring. The Proper of Time raises the Mass’ dramatic pitch.

The Introit Proper as dramatic ode.

THE THREE MINISTERS WAIT in their diagonal, rigid for pages more; the drama being is announced.

If you’ve even seen or read a Greek play, you’ll know that behind the three or four main characters stand a Chorus. The Chorus are a group of performers who are not exactly characters themselves, and do not move or enter the action, but speak with the characters and the audience, lamenting or rejoicing or worrying over what is happening. They speak as one, chanting in verse, and they speak for all mankind, offering common sense and common decency in response to what happens in the drama. Greek drama is about extremes of human experience. What the Chorus beholds is usually both much lower and

much higher than everyday common sense and everyday decency. Their typical mood is therefore wonder and dismay, for what they see is beyond them and they know it.

Part of our mind should experience Mass in this way. It really is a drama, with celebrant acting as hero (what's called in light opera the *juvenile lead*), deacon and subdeacon and lector taking lesser rôles, the servers serving as *corps de ballet*. The choir is, in the Greek theatrical sense, the Chorus. And we are with the choir, for although they utter things more vividly than we could, they are speaking for us, saying in human terms what can be said about the super-human mysteries acted and realised on stage before us. This rôle as Chorus begins with the proclamation of the Introit.

The Introit as title of the Mass.

THE FIRST LINE OFTEN announces the poem's mood and topic. There are songs and poems to which we give the name of their first lines: *O say can you see?, I vow to thee, my country, 'Twas the night before Christmas*. Their first lines set the tone and suggest a title. So with the Mass. The first thing we hear of the particular nature or mood or trend of a particular Mass is the Proper called the Introit Anthem, which is different each Sunday. Indeed, at least where the chaos of the Sixties has not scrambled such things, Masses are named for the Introit. We can refer to *this* Mass – that is, to the Propers special to today's celebration – as 'the Mass *Ingrediatur ante te*.' One of the first things our minds need to do at each Mass is to seize onto the first element of the Proper – the Introit Proper or Anthem.

(By the way, it's called 'the Introit', the 'entrance anthem,' because it used to be sung as the anthem of entry. As the priest and his servers marched up to the altar, the choir cried aloud to invoke God and beg His aid. As we noted in earlier instalments of these notes, marching to the altar is more difficult than it sounds; Christian conscience and imagination gradually introduced preliminaries – Asperges, Preparation, congregational hymn – which shunted this entry song deeper into the ritual structure. So now the Introit Proper is sung, not as a processional,

hailing the arrival of the priests, but at the *end* of the ceremonies of entrance.)

Nonetheless, we should still try to hear it as the title song, the dramatic and initial announcement of what this Mass is about. The needful washing and recollection over, the Church, in the person of her representative, the celebrant, has reached the altar; he stands, and we stand with him, in front of the book of the Mass, the **Missal**. What is the name of the Mass? What is it that the Church and God particularly have to say to each other today?

The Introit as poetry.

THE INTROIT, ANNOUNCING the purpose and aim of each Mass, is an artistic and dramatic reworking of a **psalm**. That is, it uses as its raw material one of the 150 poems in the Old Testament's Psalter, or Book of Psalms, composed, according to pious (unhistorical) tradition, by King David. But the Introit is not just a quotation from the Psalter, for the psalm is sung encased within an **antiphon**.

The antiphon is one of those simple and subtle forms invented by the Church (like the versicle-and-response form, and like the collect form). It's a verse sung one before and once after a psalm. The 150 psalms are timeless, grand compositions, but they are adapted to the moment by an antiphon 'Proper' to the Mass. The antiphon colours the whole poem it surrounds, fitting it for this particular instant in time. The Introit Anthem's thus in the form:

antiphon;
very small fragment of psalm, usually only a few lines;
Gloria Patri (the traditional ending to all psalms);
the antiphon repeated.

(Why, you ask, is the fragment of the Psalter so tiny? – because early in Church history it was found that the priest would inevitably be at the altar, rearing to go, long before the choir had finished their Introit psalm. He'd therefore signal the choirmaster *Stop now, please*; the choirmaster, snapping his pencil, would signal to his singers to stop just

before they got to a good bit, lovingly rehearsed. Since no one wants to upset choirmasters, the psalm got trimmed down drastically to fit the action. In some ways this is no doubt a pity, especially for worshippers who don't get to hear whole psalms sung at Evensong.)

Autumnal colouring.

LET'S NOW MEDITATE ON TODAY'S Introit anthem, straining to hear it both as drama and as lyric poetry, attending with mind and imagination as if we were watching a classic plays, trying to follow its subtleties into the heart of today's Mass. – I hope this won't seem like sterile literary analysis. What I'm trying to describe here, with pedestrian, scientific exactness, is what happens within us every Sunday, with the speed of wings, once we are open to the Mass' spirituality and artistry.

Today, 11 November, is for the Church the twenty-third Sunday after the Feast of Pentecost – Pentecost XXIII, for short; according to another way of counting, it is Trinity XXII (since Trinity Sunday comes one week after Pentecost Sunday or Whitsun). In any case, it is within the 'season' of Trinity or Pentecost, the long uneventful time, between 22 and 27 Sundays long, which stretches from the end of Eastertide to the start of Advent – in other words from early May, give or take a month, to about the end of November. This season is tree-green, the green of quietly growing things, and this is how we are to think of the Church between the tumultuous season around Easter and Christmas.

Still, today the liturgy knows it is autumn outside. This isn't just any old Sunday in Trinity or Pentecost season, it's number XXII and XXIII, a Sunday *late* in Trinity or Pentecost, with the leaves coming off the trees and December coming on. December, when Nature fades and dies, is also Advent, the Church's preparation for the second coming of Christ and the end of Time.

Today's Propers reflect that. November is the month of death and remembrance, and on the whole the Propers of Trinity-Pentecost darken toward the end of that season. We are sliding now out of the green season

into darker, deeper, more terrible and more magnificent times. The Propers indicate this delicate movement.

If the Mass itself is a great poem; and *each* Mass, modified and coloured by its Proper, is a great variant poem; then the kalendar, the cycle of Masses throughout the year, is yet another, over-arching work of art, building all these repeated and varying Masses into a structure so huge, so manifold, so bold and chromatically diverse, it defies praise.

Ingrediatur ante te

TODAY'S MASS PROPER begins with the choir announcing a certain shade of religious feeling. It cried dramatically, longingly, uncertainly:

Ingrediatur ante te oratio mea:

inclina aurem tuam ad laudationem meam.

Our bulletin quite rightly gives the Introit anthem its Latin title, because Latin is the 'normative' or fundamental tongue of the Western church. But at Ascension and Saint Agnes the Introit's generally sing in English.

O let my prayer enter into Thy presence:

incline Thine ear to my calling.

So that's our antiphon: a yearning cry to God, craving His reception of our prayer. This is to be 'the Mass *Ingrediatur ante te*', the Mass Of Begging Admission for Our Prayer.

Imagine theatrical darkness, a white-robed Chorus standing on a remote platform, the curtain just risen on silence and a blank back-lit stage; then this sudden heart-breaking wail from the Chorus, raising their arms together in stylised fervour: *Ingrediatur, Let it in! Admit our words!*

Whether you know any Latin or not, say the antiphon over to yourself in that noble language:

inclina aurem incline ear
laudationem praising

tuam Thine,
meam Mine.

ad to

Note how the anthem leans on its empathic pronouns: *te, mea, tuam, meam: mine, Yours, You, me*. The Latin poetry of the antiphon insists on this intense and insecure longing to connect *I* and *Thou*, our tiny

personality with the infinite personality of God. If (for some perverse reason) we wanted to render the antiphon as ugly English doggerel, the doggerel would run:

*Admit it unto Thee:
This prayer that comes from me.
Incline that Ear of Thine
Unto this crying: mine!*

So much for the antiphon.

Unusually, today's Psalm fragment (lxxxviii^{1a}) comes from exactly the same place as the antiphon which 'encases' it (lxxxviii^{1b}; but lxxxvii³ in the Vulgate). Here's the psalm fragment:

*Domine Deus salutis meæ:
per diem clamavi in nocte corma te.
O God of my salvation:
I have cried day and night before Thee.*

We are to 'hear' this slither of a psalm 'coloured' by its antiphon. The motif of the Mass, announced in the antiphon, is the passionate desire to be heard above the circles of Time, where perhaps the timeless God does hear our intermittent outcry. So these lines from the psalm must be a picture of that anxious calling. God is our only health, *salutis meæ*: again, the Latin brings the crash of the line down on that pronoun: *O Lord, O God, the only wellness* of me, of me. We do not feel certain we are heard, and therefore we are sick with desire for God, racked by urgency need, crying at Him in the endless wastes of time, all day and at night, *clamavi in nocte* (savour those fine Latin noises: nocturnal clamour!); and He, beyond the circles of living and dying, summer inevitably dropping into autumn – does He hear?

The psalm, in its drastically shortened form, is over, and we end it as we always end psalms, with the inevitable, always-wonderful versicle-and-respond *Gloria Patri*:

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost:
as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end.*

There: we are steadied and consoled by that amazingly calm statement of eternity. There is changelessness, there is utter certainty. What always

was always will be, and is now. Nothing alters. The Trinity is perpetually One, and perpetually There, and perpetually glorious.

Good – but then we fall back on the antiphon, that dramatic cry again: a longing which, for the moment, isn't sure it's going to be satisfied:

*O let my prayer enter into Thy presence:
incline Thine ear to my calling.*

The Introit complete.

THERE, IT'S DONE: THE CHOIR has sung the Introit. The art of today's Proper Mass is set on its course. The perpetual liturgy is precisely coloured for the day. *Ingrediatur ante te oratio mea*: now we'll hear that awful question bounced about and turned on every side throughout the rest of the Mass, as the prose of the lections and the poetry of the other Propers spins it about.

Talking of spinning: we've kept the ministers frozen all these pages doing nothing at all. Now, with the Introit complete, deacon and subdeacon swirl from their diagonal figure back into a more common position – a perfect line behind the priest. We'll see them in those pose often again. The celebrant, at the head of this file, opens his mouth to speak –.

At that point we stall him again, before he can say a word, and are going to leave him there, facing the altar, gazing at the book, with his hands spread apart, until next chapter: when we'll ask – what is the book on the altar? what is he doing with his hands? why does he have his back to us if he is about to speak to us? why are the deacon and subdeacon getting in the way? and what, exactly, *is* this altar?

We're going to keep him with his mouth open to speak for some pages next chapter, for what he's about to say will come as a jab: he'll ask, do we actually *mean* all this?