

## Chapter xii: *An interlude about words*

*The pomp of clouds; the glory of the sea;  
Music of water; song-birds' melody;  
    The organ of Thy thunder in the air;  
    Breath of the rose; and beauty everywhere –  
Lord, take this stately service done to Thee,  
The grave enactment of Thy Calvary.  
    In jewelled pomp and splendour pictured there!*

*Lord, take the sounds and sights; the silk and gold;  
    The white and scarlet; take the reverent grace  
    Of ordered step; window and glowing wall –  
Prophet and Prelate, holy men of old;  
    And teach us children of the Holy Place  
    Who love Thy Courts, to love Thee best of all.*

**W**HY HASN'T ANYONE FILMED a costume drama about the astonishing Benson family? Dad was a mid-Victorian child prodigy and late Victorian thug who became, unhappily, Archbishop of Canterbury; Mum settled down with the widow of the previous Archbishop; the seven brilliant tormented children all lived and wrote and died unmarried. One son, E.F., became notorious at eighteen as a lush, frivolous novelist – you might have heard of his Lucia novels; and I'd recommend his reminiscence *The Way We Were* to anyone who wants to get inside the Victorian mind. Another son, Robert Hugh Benson, became a Roman Catholic priest and wrote propaganda novels,

which are unreadable, and poetry, which is, some of it, almost readable. This sonnet of his, 'At High Mass', is in the almost readable class: *pomp of clouds* is good, *grave enactment* isn't bad; but *sounds and sights* is just a *cliché* in disguise, while *breath of the rose, jewelled pomp* (again), *reverent grace* and (sigh) *beauty everywhere* are horribly flat. The last few lines are just preachy. Still – Benson is trying to say artistically what the artistry of the Mass is like, and that is a rare and brave attempt.

The Mass is like Wagnerian opera, a *total* art, and the only way of talking about it is to be artistic as well. One of the rare good poems about the Mass I know of is by a great Anglican parish priest, of aristocratic birth and startling humility, a great English poet who lived and worked almost four centuries ago: George Herbert. Here's his poem: Herbert dares to picture the rite as a dinner in a tavern, with the innkeeper asking *D'you lack anything, then?* which means *What'll you be having, sir?* – a staggering approach to what is on the menu.

*Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin.*

*But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,*

*Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
If I lack'd anything.*

*"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here";*

*Love said, "You shall be he."*

*"I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,*

*I cannot look on thee."*

*Love took my hand and smiling did reply,*

*"Who made the eyes but I?"*

*"Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them; let my shame*

*Go where it doth deserve."*

*"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"*

*"My dear, then I will serve."*

*"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my*

*meat.”*

*So I did sit and eat.*<sup>1</sup>

And again, for anyone who doesn't care for poetry, here is another artistic attempt to grapple with the wonder of Mass. In this anonymous sixteenth century woodcut (which you'll remember from last year's Corpus Christi bulletin) contemporary Venetians dressed up for Mass – the women in stiff collars and long mantillas of lace, the men in silk doublets; they do not look like fools – boggle and crane to see what the Chalice contains: and the artist has dared to be very specific, to show, not just Christ, but Christ dead, supported by amazed angels, striking awe into cherubim. The Chalice swells until it dwarfs them and the altar: it outstrips proportion, it seems to have broken out of space and of time, it fills the picture as it fills the mind:

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<sup>1</sup> 'Love', from Herbert's *The temple: Sacred poems and private ejaculations*, edited by Nicholas Ferrar (Cambridge: T. Buck and R. Daniel, 1633); *STC* 13183; facs. edn. Menston: Scolar Press, 1968. This text downloaded from: <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/rp/poems/herbert13.html>.

### *An entr'acte.*

THIS SERIES OF CHAPTERS is called *The Freeze-Frame Mass*, and the claim was that we'd press through our elaborate and alarming rites frame by frame, explaining and pondering each element of the action. Well, we're clearly not pressing forward with any action at the moment: it seems that we're dawdling, reciting poetry and pondering woodcuts.

True enough: this chapter we're enjoying an interlude, a pause to reflect more generally on our project. For Mass comes in three parts: a longish introductory passage, which we've just finished; the Ministry of the Word; the Ministry of the Sacrament. Last chapter we finally got the end of the first third of Mass. Act I is done, and before the curtain goes up on Act II next chapter, I'd like us to look about, and think what it is we're doing.

Another way of describing Mass is to say that it consists of the [Mass of the Catechumens](#) and then the [Mass of the Faithful](#), and that's how it is sometimes divided up in our bulletin. Catechumens were (and are) people on their way to membership in the Church: they are preparing by study and prayer for baptism and Confirmation. They, and indeed more casual enquirers, are always welcome for the first part of Mass, Acts I and II, introduction and Bible readings. But in the early centuries, at what we call the Offertory, the deacon cried 'Let the catechumens depart!'; in the Eastern Church the deacon still cries, more dramatically, 'The doors! the doors!', meaning the same thing. Act III, the actual sacrifice and offering, was originally for initiates only, for the baptised.

Such is the Church's self-confidence and generosity, West and East, that she now lets anyone who cares to turn up for the whole thing now. But there is still a distinct metamorphosis between Acts II and III: a surge of intensity, a temperature change. We can imagine huge doors slamming out the world, even if we're now self-assured enough to keep them open.

Liturgists sometimes use even more rebarbative language to this change. Acts I and II are the [Synaxis](#), a Greek word which means *meeting*. The Synaxis was, in the very early centuries of Christianity, effectively a different service, taken over from the psalm-chanting, prayer-reciting and lesson-readings of synagogue worship.

Just as we can still feel the change of gear, the modulation, the shifting of focus, at the Offertory, as Act II ends, Act II begins, so we can also, in the fully-developed rite of the Church, feel a distinct change of gear at *this* point, between Acts I and II. The Collect of the Day has been recited; Act I, the approach to the altar and initial praise, is distinctly over. The congregation sits down. Act II is going to be something different.

Before Act II begins, I want us to pause and loll. We need to reflect what we are about before we get lost in contemplating the details of the ‘Ministry of the Word’, the lectionary part of the Synaxis. What is it, overall, that we are about? We woke up, we drove to the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and 12th Street (Northwest), to assist at – well, what do we say? What is this whole thing called?

**The Inuit have no word for snow.**

**S***WARD, GRASS, LAWN, MEADOW, field, pasture, green, polder, turf, Paddock*, all designate more or less the same thing. The man who calls it *lawn* is thinking of its use for croquet or picnics, the man who says *polder* is thinking of a green expanse of grass in contradistinction to an expanse of still water, the man who exclaims *Paddock!* thinks of it as potential grazing (a word that itself just means *grass*), the man who says *ward* is contemplating it aesthetically and romantically – as a heraldic square of emerald, the man who names it *meadow* wants to run across it and pick its wildflowers. The different words are different because they about different aspects or different uses of something so common and universal we have no one word for it. It’s so central it isn’t simply called *x*; it doesn’t have a single name.

The central Christian act is like snow among the Inuit. To be a Christian is to assist at – this thing which we’re about this morning. This is what Christians *do*.

We throw all sorts of names at it, therefore. The first, Greek-speaking believers called it *Mysterion*, which means The Mystery, *Deipnon*, or The Banquet, *Teleion*, The Perfection or The Goal, *Agathon*, The Goodness, and so forth. Modern Greek Christians also have lots of

names for it, of which the easiest is *Liturgia*, which means People's Work – the Christian people's public business – and from this word we get *liturgy*, although we use *liturgy* to mean pretty much any formal prayer.

What do we call this act? Amongst English-speaking Christians, it has many names, and even in the Anglican Communion there is variety. We say **Holy Sacrifice**, to stress one aspect of what we do, the offering of Christ's Body and Blood to God.

We say **the Mysteries**, meaning the ultimately inexplicable rite of faith. **Mass** is a good, slangy Anglo-Saxon word which derives (almost certainly) from the last words of the Latin rite: *Ite, missa est: Go! this is the dismissal* – Latin has this brisk quality, which often sounds brusque and rude in translation. Our rite softens *Ite, missa est* to *Depart in peace!*

**Eucharist** is a Greek word meaning *rejoicing*, which is fine. The difficulty of it is that *Eucharist* sounds – or am I wrong about this? – awkwardly foreign, not an English word at all. However, it is fashionable.

Calling it **Holy Communion** fixes on one aspect, the eating and drinking of the Body and Blood by the celebrant and the people, and gives this name to the entire business.

Going further in the same direction, people name it **the Lord's Supper** to emphasise the connection with the Last Supper thousands of years back.

In principle, any of these names would do. But in practice they are all party labels, trailing theological connotations. There's no point pretending to be innocent about this. An Anglican or Episcopalian who says "Lord's Supper" is, provocatively or not, using a definitely Protestant term: he is implying that the rite is a memorial reconstruction of the Upper Room, in which we contemplate a mere symbol of Christ's giving of Himself on the Cross. "Holy Communion" is more middle of the road, "Eucharist" a little 'Higher' or more Catholic. To say "Mass" is to assert that the rite as celebrated by us is the same rite as the rite celebrated in the Church of England before the Reformation, and by Roman Catholics the world over.

This last attitude is, of course, precisely the view of these notes, and I am consistently saying 'Mass' because that is precisely what our Mass is. Moreover, 'Mass' is a good old English word (cognate with the good old

French word *Messe*, and the Latin and Italian *Missa*, and so forth). But it's worth remembering that the word *Eucharist* is nowadays in vogue, with Roman Catholics and with other folk, because, being an awkward technical term, it isn't as clearly flavoured as 'Lord's Supper' or 'Mass'. Such vagueness is useful in œcumenical discussion. In the same way, œcumenical negotiators sometimes use the freakish Greek word *presbyter* to mean priest, because *presbyter* is what Greek Christians said nineteen centuries ago, and it doesn't startle those Protestants who do not know what it signifies (which is *priest*). If it comes to that, people use the odd word *execution* (which really means *action*) as a vague, neutral term, because *death penalty* sounds too harsh and hostile and *capital punishment* sounds too pleasant and desirable.

So in polite situations of negotiation and compromise, let us by all means utter the weird Greekism *Eucharist*. But when speaking among ourselves, and when speaking candidly, we say what we mean, which is *exactly* 'the Most Holy Mass': Mass as Christians have always meant the word, in all its richness, with all its implications, with its entire baggage of dogma, formulated before the Reformation, when Protestants – quite honestly – shied away from the term because they shied away from the dogma.

### **What the word 'Mass' implies.**

**W**HAT ARE WE SAYING when we call our Sunday morning service by that noble, ancient and mediæval word, *Mass*? Let me jot down some of the doctrines that are involved in that monosyllable.

☞ Here is the consecration of bread and wine so that they miraculously become (by specific action of the Holy Ghost) the actual Body and Blood of Christ, really (which is to say physically, and effectively) present under the 'species' of Bread and Wine.

☞ Here also, subsequently, is the offering to the Father of this ultimate Sacrifice, the Sacrifice of Calvary, offered by the priest once more, for the salvation of himself and of all the living, whether in church or not, and also for the benefit the dead in purgatory.

☞ This Sacrifice of the Mass is offered in unity with the dead who have reached perfection, the blessed company of heaven, especially of the Virgin Mother of God; and it is offered in their honour, particularly on feast-days when we commemorate and celebrate particular saints: today, St Agnes. We honour them with such an incomparable Sacrifice because they are our friends and intercede for us, through the solidarity of love known as the [‘communion of the saints.’](#)

☞ The reception of the Sacrifice by [the Faithful](#) – in other words, the people’s taking communion – is a natural part of the rite, but it is not necessary. To ‘hear’ or in other words prayerfully to attend and witness Mass is an excellent and satisfying action for all believers (and indeed it is an absolute duty for all believers on every Sunday and other ‘day of obligation’).

☞ In any case, the worshippers are there to adore the Body of Christ, offered once more for them and elevated so they can gaze upon It. It is always valuable for the faithful [to hear Mass](#), as the venerable term runs, or to assist

☞ If we do [‘receive’](#), as the saying goes (that is, [‘communicate’](#), [‘make their communion’](#), or – to put it more clumsily – [‘take communion’](#)) we the Faithful properly keep some sort of [fast](#) before reception, classically eating and drinking nothing but water for three hours before reception. And we strive to receive [fitly](#), which is to say in a decent and thoughtful frame of mind: in charity with our neighbours and intending to lead a new life, as the General Confession puts it. Those in furious bad-temper with a neighbour, at least someone else present in church, should probably not be receiving.

☞ It is also natural to have a virtuous and right-thinking priest to [celebrate Mass](#): to [‘say Mass’](#), if it be a Low Mass, or [‘sing Mass’](#). if it be a High Mass (more fine old turn of phrase). But virtue and right-thinking are not necessary. If we have the ill-fortune to assist at a Mass said by a priest of dissolute habits or heretical views, it is still perfectly valid, so long as he has been properly ordained to offer the Sacrifice by a proper bishop.



And so on. This list of ideas and practices – they’re certainly not meant to amount to a definition of Mass – covers everything I can think to note down that scandalised and scandalises Protestants. If it comes to that, some of these doctrines scandalise modernised Roman Catholics. (Alas for the Church in this inane age!) But all these attributes are implicit in the word *Mass*, at least in the way the word has been understood for many centuries. It is therefore worth clinging to the term *Mass*, however slangy in origin, just as it is worth clinging to every traditional ceremony – not to be needlessly provocative, but to make sure we are not misunderstood by anyone else or by ourselves.

When we celebrate Mass as we do here, and when we call it ‘Mass’, we cannot be mistaken. We mean all those things the Church has always asserted about the Mass, not a selection of them: we assert everything in the last paragraph. We are not footling.

### On with Act II!

TALKING LIKE THIS stirs my blood, and frankly I’ve had enough of this *entr’acte* this lounging about on the lawn, meadow, sward – I think we should be back on the road. Lectons, the Ministry of the Word, lie ahead, and next chapter we’ll tackle them as we march on toward the climax of High Mass –.

But meanwhile, it strikes me that although we’ve discussed the term *Mass*, we haven’t yet thought explicitly about the term *High Mass*, and we may as well do that now, while we are casting restful eyes over the entire business, before we leap and press on.

[High Mass](#) is the normal way of offering the sacrifice of Christ’s Body. It means the celebrant is aided by two sacred ministers, deacon and subdeacon, and it implies a choir, a thurifer wielding incense, a *corps de ballet* of acolytes or servers, and all the other good and grand items we’ve been discussing. –The Latin term for High Mass is [Missa solemnis](#): as we’ve noted, *solemn* in liturgy literally means *smoky*. Incense, three ministers, choral music and lush ceremonial are all intrinsic to this abundant manner of celebrating Mass, so *High* and *Solemn Mass* amount to the same thing.

High Mass is the normal way, the most decent and fitting way, of celebrating. But because the discipline of the Church throughout the Middle Ages was that every priest should offer the Sacrifice every day (which could hardly be done if every Mass were supplied with servers and choir); and because not every parish could manage three sacred ministers; and because, frankly, Western Christians wanted a shorter and simpler service for weekdays, in mediæval times something quite different evolved out of High Mass in the West: [Low Mass](#). At Low Mass there is only one priest, the celebrant, who does almost everything normally and properly done by other people; and there is generally no song. – There's something a bit sad about this development, although it was no doubt necessary. The Eastern or Greek Church has never gone in for such a thing, always celebrating with incense and deacons and song, and Easterners (although too polite to say so) are a bit shocked at our cut-price efficiency. Still, the institution of Low Mass does mean that a parish church can – and of course *ought* – to celebrate Mass every day. It's definitely worth coming along to this church (any Wednesday at 6:45, or on Saturday at 9:30, or any other day except Sunday at 12:10) to 'assist' at a Low Mass, and see how it's done. I'm not going to describe it here: for the full-tide splendour of High Mass is the normal and proper mode of Mass, even if has never been the most common mode. It's High Mass that should command our attention. Low Mass is to be thought of as a useful variation and abridgement of the real thing.

As you'd expect, simply because this all of sounds so glorious, joyous and rich, High Mass, and indeed Low Mass too, have been suppressed in the general darkening of the Church, submersion of solemn fun and loosing of claptrap that came in with the Second Vatican Council. Now Roman Catholics and most Anglicans subsist on a sort of hybrid: a Mass without the quiet dignity of being Low and without the brilliant might of being High. The modernised Mass is neither High nor Low but Flat. Far more than at any Low Mass, there's exaggerated onemanshowmanship by the priest (his voice booming down into your head through an amplifier, his face flaunted at you across his trestle 'altar', his personality ground into you through informal self-display). The music of High Mass is forbidden; instead there are a lot of

deliberately bad songs performed on the stage (no more sanctuaries), by a 'music group', to a silent congregation. This is known as [participatory liturgy](#), because at last the wicked millenium of Low and High Masses is overthrown, and the laity are the centre of attention (Church attendance figures show how much the laity enjoy *that*).

But what does it matter, what does it matter? The Church's frenzy must pass, the music of heaven will resume on earth in due course. So enough of terms and technicalities and desolations: on with the many-named thing itself!