



**"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"**

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

"The liturgy is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In it full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members. From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of His Body, which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy. The liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows. From the liturgy, and especially from the Eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain. Here are achieved with maximum effectiveness our sanctification in Christ and the glorification of God: and it is to this that all other activities of the Church are directed, as towards their end. But in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that 'their minds be attuned to their voices' [quotation from HR 19:7], and that they cooperate with heavenly grace lest they receive it in vain (cf. 2 Cor 6:1). In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy the 'full and active participation by the people' is the aim to be considered before all else, for it is 'the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit' [quotations from St. Pius X].

*From Vatican II: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium, Dec 1963, nn. 7, 10, 11, 14.*

## Monastic Voices

"The liturgical sacrifice of Christ's Body and Blood presents to us mystically the death of the only-begotten Son. Though he is now risen from the dead and dies no more, and death has no more power over him (Rm 6:9), yet, living in himself immortal and incorruptible, he is again immolated for us in this mystery of holy offering. Here indeed his body is eaten; here his flesh is distributed among the people for their salvation; here his blood is poured out, no longer into the hands of unbelievers, but now into the hearts of the faithful. Let us then carefully consider how great is this sacrifice, which for the forgiveness of our sins ever imitates the passion of the only-begotten Son. For what Christian believer could have any doubt that at the moment of the immolation, at the sound of the priest's voice, the heavens are opened, and in this mystery of Jesus Christ the choirs of angels are present; what is lowest is united with what is highest; earthly and heavenly things are joined, and the invisible merges with the visible in one single unity. How necessary it is, then, that whenever we do this, we offer ourselves to God with heartfelt contrition. For we who celebrate the mysteries of the Lord's passion ought to imitate what we are enacting. That sacrifice that is so pleasing to God will be truly ours when we offer ourselves in union with Christ."

*St. Gregory the Great, Pope 590-604, Dialogues Book IV.*

"Of ourselves, we do not know how to pray as we ought; we must turn to Jesus Christ, who sends his Holy Spirit of grace and prayer, to come to the aid of our weakness, supplying for us and in us by sighs too deep for words (Rm 8:26). On the earth it is in the Church, the Bride of Jesus Christ, that this divine Spirit dwells. He is the principle of her movements; he prompts her requests, her desires, her canticles of praise. For eighteen centuries she has not kept silent by day or night; her voice is always tuneful, her words always go straight to the heart of the Bridegroom. The prayer of the Church is therefore the most pleasing to God, and therefore, the most

powerful. Happy, then, are those who pray her liturgy with the Church, who associate their particular desires with those of that Bride, so dear to the Bridegroom, whose wishes are always granted. But this liturgical prayer would soon become powerless were the faithful not to take a real share in it, or not to associate themselves with it in their hearts. It can heal and save the world on condition that it be understood. Open your hearts, then, children of the Catholic Church, and come and pray the prayer of your mother!"

*From The Liturgical Year by Dom Prosper Guéranger, 1805-75, founding Abbot of the restored Solesmes.*

"I believe that I have read every sentence of every Christian author extant from the period before Nicaea (325 A.D.), most of it eight or a dozen times. I think I can state as a fact that there is no pre-Nicene author, Eastern or Western, who does not regard the offering and consecration of the Eucharist as the present action of our Lord Himself, the Second Person of the Trinity: the earthly Eucharist offered by the heavenly Priest at the heavenly altar."

*From The Shape of the Liturgy by Dom Gregory Dix 1901-1952, liturgical scholar & Anglican Benedictine.*

Dear oblates and friends, One hundred years ago, in November 1903, Pope St. Pius X inaugurated his pontificate with a famous letter *motu proprio*, known by its first words in Italian, "Tra le sollecitudini". The subject of the letter was Church music. Pius spoke of the Church's need for liturgical music of high artistic quality, that can appeal to anyone of any nation or era, and above all that is truly sacred. All these characteristics, he wrote, are possessed in the highest degree by Gregorian Chant, the music "proper to the Roman Church, inherited from the ancient fathers, and jealously guarded for centuries". With this letter he launched a tremendous effort, extending throughout the Latin Church, to restore the Chant to its privileged place in the liturgy. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) quoted Pius X when it spoke of sacred music, adding that "other things being equal, Gregorian Chant should be given pride of place in liturgical actions" (cf. SC 116).

Pluscarden oblates scarcely need me to justify our community's preference for Gregorian Chant. We know from daily experience of its capacity to lift up hearts in prayer. Visitors to the Abbey often speak of its beauty, and its spiritual power. Those familiar with it through constant use or study find their appreciation ever deepening. I have written about the Chant elsewhere, so I won't dwell on it further here. I do however want to mark the centenary of Pius' historic letter by drawing attention to its deeper concern. Why did the Pope favour Gregorian Chant so much? Not, indeed, for its own sake. The Chant, for him, is a means, not an end. The great goal he had in view was the "active participation" of all the faithful in the liturgy. Good sacred music, he thought, effectively fosters this; bad or inappropriate music hinders it. But active participation in the liturgy, he wrote, is the "foremost and indispensable source of the true Christian spirit."

This principle, stated so simply a century ago by this holy Pope, goes to the heart of all Catholic theology and life and prayer. It was the guiding force behind the liturgical movement started at Solesmes by Dom Guéranger, to which so many Benedictines contributed, and which culminated at Vatican II. The Council's Constitution on the Liturgy uses the phrase "active participation" no fewer than sixteen times. How important it is, then, that we understand its meaning.

The first thing to realise is that the liturgy in which we are to participate is not first of all our work, or the work of Church ministers, but the work of Christ. He is the one who from all eternity praises the Father; who 2,000 years ago completed on the cross the work He had been given to do, to give glory to His Father on earth (Jn 17:4), and who now as our great High Priest (cf. e.g. Hb 4:14, 8:1 etc.) continues this work in, with and through His Church. For the Church is not just an association of Christians, organised like any other human society. We believe she is Christ's Body, and that His Spirit dwells in her. When she acts, it is not just that she acts in Christ's name, but that He truly acts through her. So at Mass the priest says not "This is His Body", but, in Christ's name and by His power, "This is MY Body".

All of us, who by our baptism are made members of Christ, are thereby made sharers, participants also in His own Priesthood. One of the central concerns of Vatican II was to draw out the implications of this doctrine. As our present Pope has written, really all that the Council wished to say about the Church, mankind and the world can be summed up in the idea of our share in Christ's Priesthood. And we exercise this Priesthood - we do what Christ did and does - through Him, with Him and in Him - above all when we participate in the liturgy.

The Church teaches that in the holy Eucharist, "the work of our redemption is accomplished" (SC 2). Here, by means of sacred signs that bring into effect what they signify, Jesus Christ, the risen and ascended Lord, offers to the Father His saving sacrifice made once for all on the cross. Here His Spirit most fully acts to make Him present for us and in us. Here through holy communion we are brought into union with, made one with Him. Entering into His mystery, we ourselves offer His own perfect prayer to the Father in the Holy Spirit. Then we make also the priestly offering of ourselves with Him, so that our own lives can become "a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" (Rm 12:1).

Celebrating the Eucharist with the Church, we also participate in her liturgical year. This is centred on Easter Day, and its weekly reflection each Sunday. But built around this structure, all the various aspects of Christ's one mystery are unfolded through the liturgy. Christmas, Epiphany, the Baptism in the Jordan, the Presentation in the Temple, the 40 day's fast; the Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension; the sending of the Holy Spirit, and birthday of the Church; the 3-years' ministry of preaching, teaching and healing; the glory also of Christ's Apostles, of His Mother, of the martyrs and the other Saints: each is annually and in turn re-presented for our instruction, our meditation, our participation. Again, it is necessary for us to think of these celebrations not just as times of common commemoration, but truly as a work of the Holy Spirit, making present to us now the mystery we are celebrating. So like the Mass itself, the liturgical year of the Church has the power endlessly to nourish and renew our Christian life.

The Divine Office, or liturgy of the Hours, is sadly little known in the typical parishes of our land. So often Church notice boards advertise Mass, Mass, Mass and Mass. But such an exclusive liturgical diet is not necessarily the best way of living and honouring the Eucharist. According to the Psalm, the royal Bride of the King wears a robe adorned with rich variety (Ps 44/5:14, Vg). So the Church adorns, surrounds, prolongs the action of the Mass through her rich and varied liturgy of praise. Through the Office, as through the Mass, she sings her song of love to Christ the Bridegroom. Here also as one body in Christ she praises the Father with one voice, using above all the words inspired by the Spirit in the holy scriptures. So the Divine Office, like the Mass, is much more than a set of prayers for private use. We participate in it not as isolated individuals, but joining our voice to a Choir which includes in principle all our fellow Christians on earth, and all the Saints and Angels in heaven (Ps 137/8:1; HR 19:5).

If we have understood the meaning of our baptismal priesthood, and the excellence of liturgical prayer, we will understand also why the Church urges us to participate in the liturgy as fully, consciously and actively as we can.

The first way to participate in the liturgy is to be there! This is generally much easier for a monk than for an oblate. Life in a Benedictine monastery is nothing if not liturgical. The whole monastic day, and every day, is dominated by the liturgy, which St. Benedict calls "the work of God". Nothing, he insists, in the monastery is to be preferred to it (HR 43:3). To adapt the words of the Council, it is the summit towards which all the activity of the monastery is directed, and the fount from which all its power flows. We see even visible evidence of grace flowing from it as from a fountain (SC 10). So St. Benedict directs the novice master to test the authenticity of any new vocation by asking himself: is this novice eager for the work of God? (HR 58:7). Does he truly want to participate fully in the liturgy?

The same question applies with no less relevance to prospective Benedictine oblates. If they desire to live according to the spirit of the holy Rule, in so far as their state in life permits, they also will be eager for the work of God. This means, in practice: they will try to get to Mass, even apart from Sundays, when they can. They will be aware of the various celebrations of the liturgical year, and do all they can to enter into them. According as circumstances permit, they will recite some part or even all of the Divine Office, ideally as a daily routine, mindful of St. Benedict's principle that when we sing the psalms "our mind should be in harmony with our voice" (HR 19:7; SC 11 & 90). Oblates will also be ever mindful of their union with the monastic community. It is the privilege and joy of the monks to have a liturgy that is sung, formal, public, regular; carried out with care and due solemnity; a communal act in which all alike can participate, irrespective of varying vocal abilities. When oblates come to stay, they step quite naturally into this ceaseless rhythm of praise. Directed to God, it is also there to strengthen, inspire and encourage all who attend. Even after their departure, oblates know that the monastic round continues on, and on, and that they are intimately linked to it in unity of faith and love. Normally lacking most of the supports enjoyed by the monks, they nevertheless persevere in their own commitment, ever more firmly convinced that it is worth all the effort required.

I have said so much in favour of liturgical prayer. Does this in any way detract from the value of personal, private prayer? Absolutely not! On the contrary! Unless we make time somehow to shut our door and pray to our Father in secret (cf. Mt 6:6), our liturgy could easily degenerate into empty formalism. How dreadful it would be to incur the Lord's rebuke: "This people honours me with its lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Mt 15:8)! So while private and liturgical prayer can rightly be distinguished, it is vital they be neither opposed to nor separated from each other.

I think that this is why the Vatican II Constitution on the Liturgy, in speaking of "active participation", always used the Latin phrase "actuosa participatio". A more obvious word to use for "active" would have been "activa". But this can mean "the opposite of contemplative" - which is certainly not what was intended. "Actuosa" has the sense, rather, of "fully engaged"; "present with mind and heart"; "alert and committed". So "active participation" will involve also careful listening; attentive openness; exterior and interior silence. Another Benedictine principle is relevant here: very often it will be more appropriate for the good disciple to be silent and to listen (HR 6:6). Unfortunately some people do seem to think that activity, in the sense of doing things, is what constitutes good participation in the liturgy. I once attended a Mass for children, when everyone at the start was handed a percussion instrument. I have unhappy memories of a more or less continuous din, together with much running about, and a harassed-looking priest whose voice was almost never audible. The children were certainly active at that Mass, but their activity was scarcely true participation in the liturgy. I would argue that it prevented them and others from participating in any meaningful way at all.

The Blessed Abbot Columba Marmion (1858-1923) is an example of a great lover of the liturgy who was also a master of interior prayer. For him, the two forms of prayer were perfectly harmonised. So he once remarked in a conference: "At the beginning of my monastic life, the Abbot, Dom Placid, said that when one goes to Choir detached from everything and absorbed in the presence of God, one arrives, almost without suspecting it, at contemplation. At that time I could hardly believe it. Now I know it is true."

I want to end this letter, as I began it, with Pope Pius X. A true image of Jesus Christ, he was not only an outstanding Pope, he is also a canonised Saint. Our community has a particular devotion to him, since it owes the continuation of its existence after the crisis of 1913 in large part to him. Born in poverty, he insisted on living and dying in personal poverty, even amid the splendours of the papal palace. He was a valiant defender of the Faith against the errors of the modernists. A hater of war, he refused to bless the armies marching off to Armageddon in 1914, and died soon after the conflict broke out, his heart broken with grief. He is remembered perhaps above all as the Pope of the Eucharist. He it was who strongly encouraged frequent holy communion, and urged that little children also be allowed to come to Jesus in this sacrament. In him we see exemplified the goal of the liturgy he took such care to purify and promote: that God be glorified, and that, with maximum effectiveness, men and women be made holy in Christ (SC 10).

Shortly after the Caldey conversion, Blessed Abbot Columba Marmion took our community's founder Aelred Carlyle with him to Rome to meet the Pope, St. Pius X. I give below an extract from a letter of Abbot Aelred to the community, dated May 16th, 1913.

"After a while, a door opened and shut: a Bishop passed out, and a Monsignore hurried along to tell us our turn had come. We went in, and found ourselves in a long large room, furnished as a library and study, and with apparently no one in it. As we advanced, however, we saw a corner almost behind the door we had entered, with shelves of books and many papers: and lying upon the desk was the little book of Caldey photographs I had asked Cardinal Merry del Val to give to the Pope. At the desk, and just rising to meet us, was Pio Decimo. The distance from the door to where he stood was so short that we found ourselves almost at once at his feet. He was dressed in his white cassock, but without cross or ring or cincture. I thought he did not show much sign of recent illness, or of his seventy-nine years. He refused to allow us to continue kneeling. He spoke quietly and slowly in Latin, looking very keenly at us, and slightly moving his hands in emphasis. He began to talk to us of the great favour and grace received by the Abbot and monks of Caldey in what he called our miraculous conversion. Abbot Columba told him I hoped to spend a year at Maredsous for my Novitiate, and that after my profession it was proposed I should be ordained as soon as I was ready. The Holy Father then said, repeating the same words several times with emphasis and great kindness:

'We accord the most ample faculties and all, all dispensations, in order that he may be ordained immediately after his Novitiate: and not only for him, but also for those at Caldey, for they have not need to be very learned in order to praise God.'

Then we took our leave, and as Abbot Columba left the room, the Holy Father, blessing me, pressed both his hands upon my head, and I came away with a feeling of great peace and happiness. I had experienced no strong emotion, and had only felt that I was in the presence of a holy and venerable Father whose heart overflowed with love for his children . I had no need to speak much or ask anything. The Pope had said that all should be done to help us to continue our work; he had blessed me and my Community, and had promised to pray for us. All this he did with the greatest kindness and spontaneity. The audience lasted for twenty minutes."