



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA

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

"Let each one deny himself some food, drink, sleep, needless talking and idle jesting, and look forward to holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing" (Holy Rule 49:7). "From Holy Easter until Pentecost, let alleluia be said without intermission" (HR 15:1). "We believe that the divine presence is everywhere and that in every place the eyes of the Lord are watching the good and the wicked. But beyond the least doubt we should believe this to be true when we celebrate the Divine Work" (HR 19:1-2).

Holy Rule, Chapter 72 - The Good Zeal of Monks.

Monastic Voices

Prayer becomes more authentic and meaningful when we stop seeing it as something which we do ourselves, and see it rather as something which God does in us and through us. This is especially true of eucharistic prayer. It is primarily the offering made by Christ to the Father, and only secondarily our offering. Jesus, crucified and risen, lives on in the heart of the Church, offering himself perpetually to the Father for the healing and sanctification of the world. We are allowed the inestimable privilege of sharing in that offering, of making it our own, of becoming instruments whereby it can continue to be made in our own days.

Certainly there are moments during the celebration of the Eucharist when it is right and appropriate for us to make our own personal and individual prayers, for people we are concerned about, or for our own private needs. The Bidding Prayers offer us some scope for this; and we may also profitably use the Preparation of the Gifts for the same purpose. But it would be a great mistake if we were to see the Eucharist as primarily concerned with this. It is not so much a time for us to express our own thoughts and feelings about God, or even to make known our needs to him; rather it is a time for effacing ourselves and forgetting ourselves in the face of a mystery incomparably greater than any of us individually, or indeed all of us put together. The mystery in question is vast and unfathomable. It is the mystery of the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ, which is enacted perpetually in eternity, was enacted historically in Palestine two thousand years ago, and is projected now into our own time so that we can be drawn into it, become part of it, and be nourished by it.

At this time, then, more than at any other, we should be letting go of all our normal concerns, our private hopes, fears, and plans for the future, and allowing ourselves to be carried by the Spirit of God into the heart of the mystery. Really, when approaching the Eucharist, we should think of nothing but God. This in itself will do much to overcome the sense of staleness and monotony, of "having heard it all before". The words of the Liturgy, the symbolic actions of the celebrant and his assistants, are only a vehicle, a means, through which this most awesome of mysteries is enacted. It is not necessary at every moment to concentrate on the words which are said, or to ponder deliberately on their meaning, though we can do so, of course, when the Spirit prompts us, as he will for some of the time. Very often, however, as we allow ourselves to be drawn into the Eucharist, we shall find that the words are like the repeated prayers of the Rosary, which merely create a kind of background while the mind and heart penetrate beyond to the mystery which is being represented and enacted.

If we surrender to the Eucharist, to the magnetic presence of God which is at the heart of it and is drawing us continually, we shall soon begin to sense its value and reap its fruits. No longer will we be oppressed by a sense of staleness or monotony. In the Eucharist we are returning to the primal origins of our religion - the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. We are returning to Christ himself, and through him to the Father, the origin and goal of all things. We are centring ourselves upon the supreme Centre, the hub of the cosmic wheel, the axis of the universe. Every Eucharist is thus a new beginning, fresh and young. It is, of course, preceded by a kind of death, as we let go for a while of our normal activities and preoccupations and allow ourselves to be caught up in the action of God, swallowed up in the fast-flowing torrent of the Spirit. But out of that death comes life, as we gain energy and light from union with God, and can return to our normal occupations renewed and refreshed.

When Christ died and rose again, an immense flood of spiritual light and power was released into the world. It is through the Eucharist that we are enabled to tap into that light and power, to draw upon it and be strengthened by it. The power and light of the Resurrection flows into us and carries us far beyond what our natural powers would be capable of. It carries us into the abyss of God, the everlasting silence and mystery at the heart of all things.

From **The Path of Life** by Dom Cyprian Smith, Monk of Ampleforth: Ampleforth Abbey Press 1995.

Dear oblates and friends,

Last year Ignatius Press republished a book about the liturgy I had long wanted to read: *The Wellspring of Worship*, by Jean Corbon O.P. The book was first published in French in 1980, with an English translation appearing in 1988; but it had long been out of print. I knew of Jean Corbon (1924 - 2001), since he was the one chosen to be principal author of Part IV of the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church: that is, its final section, on prayer. A Dominican friar, born in Paris, he spent most of his priestly life in the Lebanon, serving the Eastern Rite Maronite Church there. His work for the Catechism was largely carried out in an underground bunker in Beirut, at the height of Lebanon's civil war. I took his newly purchased book with me for the solitary retreat I had in November, and profited greatly from reading it. I mention it now because Corbon's theme, while relevant for anyone, seems particularly so for followers of St. Benedict: all the more as they prepare to celebrate Easter. I'll try, then, to convey something of its substance in this letter.

At the end of the Book of the Apocalypse, St. John describes his vision of the glorious Church, the Bride of the Lamb, the City of God. Down through the middle of this City flows a crystal clear river, the river of life, rising from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Apoc 22:1). This river is the central image of Corbon's book. It represents the Holy Spirit, eternally poured out by God the Father as His gift to the Son, and eternally returned by the Son to the Father. Now, through the Paschal Mystery, this Gift overflows also for the Church, for us: as a limitless source of divine and eternal life. Corbon wants to cry out to us: if only we knew it, we have direct and immediate access to this source of life through the liturgy of the Church. To drink from this source is to participate in the divine life. Our only possible response to that is worship: and it is in the divinely instituted liturgy of the Church that we find the living wellspring of our worship.

Corbon traces out the theme of life giving water that runs through the whole Bible. Already at the beginning of Genesis, we find a river flowing through Eden, making it a garden, inhabitable by man. Driven out from Eden, the descendants of Adam would spend their life looking for this water again. That search is a sign of their search for lost friendship with God; of their thirst for God, that only God can quench. The Patriarchs were always digging wells (cf. e.g. Gn 26:22-25), and where they found water they would set up an altar to God. The gentiles did the same; but they turned their wells into centres of idol worship. They were like those of whom Jeremiah spoke (Jer 2:13): having abandoned the Lord, who is the fountain of living water, they dug instead leaky cisterns that actually hold no water. Looking to find life from lifeless things their own hands had made, they fell into ever deeper alienation and corruption.

The Jews never lost hope of finding this water again: of living at rights with God. As a recurring image for human life in God's friendship, they loved to picture a tree rooted beside a stream (cf. Ps 1:3; Jb 29:19; Jer 17:8; Ezk 19:10, 47:12). Such a tree is impervious to heat or drought, because its roots always draw up fresh water, so that its leaves remain always green, and its healthful fruit never fails. The Prophet Ezekiel took up this image and raised it to a higher level of symbolism. In his vision of a restored Temple, he saw pouring out from its right

side a river. The symbolic trees rooted in that holy stream have wonderful powers of nourishment and healing (Ezk 47:1-12; cf. Apoc 22:2).

Then one day a Samaritan woman came looking for water, and found Jesus sitting wearily by Jacob's well, asking her for water (Jn 4:7). He was thirsty. The thirst of Jesus, though, was not just natural. It expressed the thirst of God; of the Source that wants its life giving power to be accepted and received. She, representative of all of us, didn't understand what he was talking about, and remained locked at the level of earth. But if only she knew, he would give her living water, welling up from within to eternal life. This water which Jesus promised flows for us in the liturgy. It's the Holy Spirit, effectively present, acting in power. Through this Spirit, we are at last able to worship God in Spirit and in Truth.

The Samaritan woman asked Jesus about where to worship, on her own mountain or in Jerusalem. She little realised it, but she was putting her finger on a fundamental human question. How should we worship God? How can we live so as to be pleasing to Him? What is true liturgy? Jesus gives us a certain answer to these questions. Through him we know: where the divine Son and the divine Spirit are, there is true worship, there is true liturgy.

At the "Hour of Jesus" the Gift that is the living water of the Spirit was released. St. John bore witness how he saw water pouring out with the blood from the pierced side of Jesus (Jn 19:35). Here Ezekiel's vision was fulfilled. This was the true spiritual water flowing from the right side of the true Temple, Christ's Body (Jn 2:21). It is the never failing source of our super-abundant life (Jn 10:10), and its wellspring remains forever Christ's death on the Cross.

Now we understand how the "Hour of Jesus", when he passed from this world to the Father (Jn 13:1), must be the centre and reference point of all time, all history. Before that event, time had meaning only in so far as it was in the time of preparation. The fullness of time (Gal 4:4) occurred when God became a man in Jesus Christ. The Hour itself was the moment of accomplishment, of the consummation of all time. After it comes the time of the Church, the last times, that is, the brief waiting period before the completion, when all things will finally be subjected to Christ (1 Cor 15:28).

The river Jordan is a good symbol of human history without Christ. As it flows down pointlessly into the Dead Sea, it evokes the destructive waters of chaos (Gn 1:2) or of the Flood (Gn 6:13 ff). But when Jesus stepped into it to be baptised, the direction of history was changed forever. "Why, Jordan, have you turned back? .. It was at the presence of the Lord, who turns rock into pools of water, and the flint into living springs" (Ps 114:5,7,8). An early Christian apocryphal legend has it that the Jordan actually did turn back at the baptism of Jesus. That was a way of saying that then our human life started to flow back to its source. From being a flight from God towards death, it was now turned back to Him, towards Life. So the Jordan became a sign of the passage to eternal life, and of the baptism through which we share in Christ's Divine Sonship. The way back to a better garden, and to a better paradise, had been thrown open.

Why is all this particularly appropriate for followers of St. Benedict as they prepare to celebrate Easter?

Let me look at Easter first. Because of Christ's Resurrection from the Dead, the event of his death on the cross could not possibly remain, like all other events, shut up in the past. Christ, once slain, is now eternally alive, and as his passage from death to life remains effective for all time, so it remains also always present. We are always in this Hour of Jesus; and we celebrate it above all, enter most fully into it, through our Easter liturgy. Inseparably linked to the Easter mystery are the mysteries of the Ascension and Pentecost. At the Ascension Christ our High Priest inaugurated the eternal liturgy of heaven, which the book of the Apocalypse portrays in a series of striking pictures and images. The liturgy of the Church on earth is always united with this heavenly liturgy. It has the same source, the same Priest, the same goal, and it is carried out in the unity of the same mystical Body. "Lift up your hearts" we are commanded at the beginning of every Preface. We need to do so, because in the prayer of the Eucharist, the dividing line separating the worship of heaven from the worship of earth is abolished.

The Spirit poured out at Pentecost is the guarantee of this unity of worship. For Corbon, as for the Eastern Christian tradition in general, the prime role of the ordained priest is precisely the efficacious invocation of the Holy Spirit. At his word the Spirit comes in power, transforming what is earthly into what is divine, making Christ's Body present. Through the activity of the Holy Spirit, our activity, the activity of the Church, is taken up by God. The two activities work together as one, just as the divine and human acted together as one in the

man Jesus Christ during his life on earth. This co-working, what Eastern Christians call by the Greek word *Synergy*, is the principle of all sacramental worship. Because of it, in our liturgy there is able to take place, in us, through us, what takes place in the heart of the Trinity. That is, the Gift of Life is limitlessly poured out; it is freely and willingly received; and it is returned with love and joy to its Source.

These reflections seem appropriate for Benedictines in a particular way, because our spirituality is essentially rooted in the liturgy of the Church. Part of the blessing St. Benedict left his followers was his insistence that we live the Church's liturgy. If only we do so, then we will indeed be like trees planted beside living streams, our roots sunk into never failing and ever life giving waters.

But how do we live the liturgy? Jean Corbon wrote his book, and St. Benedict founded his monastery, to help us do so. Surely all of us are uncomfortably aware of a regrettable gap that exists between what we celebrate in Church and what we live out in our daily life. Yet by its nature, the liturgy should be ceaseless: either being celebrated, or being lived out through lives filled with Christ. How terrible, then, if we allow our liturgy to become a mere thing of routine; or if, as soon it is over we forget all about it and turn, as if it had never been, to the pressing concerns of the moment. So it's good to stand back, as we do at Easter, and reflect on what it all means; or through study strive to deepen our understanding of what we believe. Corbon helps us do this by offering his profound theological vision, rooted in the liturgical tradition of the East, and of the first Christian Millennium. St. Benedict, for his part, offers us two very practical ways of extending the liturgy in our life. Both ways are as much open to oblates as to monks. In the monastery they are set up publicly as essential reference points, and everything is structured to make sure they are not neglected.

The first way is through the practice of the presence of God, the continuous prayer of the heart, and the life of fraternal charity. Our baptism impels all of us, and not just monks, at least to strive towards these goals. The second way is through the Divine Office. Through the Hours of the Office, what is celebrated at Mass is made to permeate and transfigure the time of daily life. But whereas at Mass everything is given to us, everything is grace, in the Office we give everything back; everything becomes a praise of the glory of his grace (Eph 1: 6,14). Since the prayer of the Office belongs to the Church, it expresses the love of the Bride for her divine husband. So whether we sing it in a monastic Choir or snatch a few moments to say a part of it in our room at home, it's a special way for all of us to live out the liturgy: to participate in the priestly prayer of Jesus; freely to offer glory to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.

Throughout history, Christians have been tempted to stop up the river of life, so that for all their professions of faith, they fail to be carried along by it as they should. Failing to live the liturgy, their interpretation of the Gospel becomes narrow and distorted. Take, for example, the merely moralistic Christian. For him, the Gospel is simply a challenge to lead a good life. Or there's the secularist Christian. He wants to reduce the Gospel to social activity, making it in effect just one more political programme among so many others. The pietistic Christian has the opposite temptation. He believes in the Kingdom, and wants to live with God: but only as an individual. By contrast the liturgy shows that moral goodness is not enough. We are offered a share in the divine life, and required to manifest divine holiness! It shows us too that the Kingdom is not a remote ideal but a fact, given and communicated. And in the very act of nourishing us as individuals, the liturgy binds us also into a community, made one just as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are One.

To live that is to be impelled inevitably to Christ-like action in our daily life. This is expressed in two main ways as Corbon sees it: through mission and through compassion. Mission: because those who have drunk from the life giving stream must be filled with insatiable desire for others to come to the same waters. And compassion: because one who has encountered the love of Christ will be driven to reach out in whatever way possible to anyone at all who is poor or afflicted. In this way trees planted by the living waters will indeed bear fruit that gives healing and health to the nations.