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THE LITURGY AND THE MONTESSORI METHOD

Two Movements Start in Rome

At the beginning of this century two important movements originated in the Eternal City of which still remains the centre of European culture and civilization. One was the Liturgical Movement inaugurated by His Holiness Pope Pius X, and the other was the Montessori Movement started by another great Italian genius about the same time.

Almost from the beginning there were discerning people who realised that there existed, in their very nature, a certain affinity between these two movements. This became more clear as the years passed. Now--after half a century--this similarity has been commented on in the highest Catholic circles. Thus, in December, 1962, an article was published in the Osservators Roman, the Vatican Daily Newspaper, entitled IL LITURGISMO DEL METODO MONTESSORI, which might be translated "The Liturgical Nature of the Montessori Method." In this article the writer, after comparing the psychology behind the Liturgy and with that of the Montessori Method, says, "These brief observations should, I believe, be sufficient to justify the expression of the Liturgist who spoke of the 'liturgical nature' of the Montessori method, and to explain why such a method is coming to be considered with a particular interest at a time in which a

catechitical renewal finds its place in the vast picture of the liturgical renaissance."

The remainder of this chapter forms a comment on this opening theme.

WHAT IS THE LITURGY?

If we ask ourselves: "What exactly do we mean by the Liturgy?", it is not easy to give a brief and comprehensive reply. By historical derivation the word Liturgy meant "the public office voluntarily performed by a wealthy citizen of Greece." Now-a-days when people speak of the liturgy they generally refer to the various kinds of rites, forms, and ceremonies carried out in connection with communal worship. Practically all the great religions of the world, both ancient and modern, have some form of liturgy.

A Quaker Meeting

At this point perhaps the writer might be permitted to relate some personal experiences which may help to throw light on the matter. He was brought up in what is perhaps the most unliturgical form of Christian worship that exists-- that of the Quakers. Perhaps the reader is not acquainted with their form of worship. If we went to a Quaker meeting we should see anything from half-a-dozen up to a hundred people all sitting absolutely still, on hard wooden benches,

in a bare room without any ornaments whatever. We should see no colored windows, no pictures on the wall, no statues, no altar, no pulpit, no organ or hymn-books, no decorations of any sort, no set form of service, no ordained minister--not even a collection! Complete silence reigns, - the silence of immobility.

What are all these people doing? They are waiting in what the Quakers call a "Living Silence" for the Spirit to move them, or some of them at least, to speak or pray extempore.

And what is the underlying principle of this form of worship? It is this, that the Spirit of God works directly on the human spirit--Spirit to spirit--without any preparation or any material mediation whatsoever. "Those that worship God must worship Him in Spirit and in Truth" is a favorite Quaker quotation. Therefore, all external form, rites, ceremonies, prescribed actions, such as genuflection ("Bowings and scrapings" as George Fox called them) all material aids of any kind were Anathema to the early Quakers, and still are to their descendants.

Their reasons for this attitude is that they believe that all prescribed ceremonies, anything in fact which is mixed up with matter and rigidity of habitual actions, act as breaks on the free working of the Holy Spirit. "The wind bloweth where it listeth and you hear the sound thereof, but no one knows whence it cometh or whither it goeth." So is it,

according to the Quakers, with everyone that is "moved by the Spirit" to take vocal part in their communal worship. The spirit always works impromptu and all external forms and ceremonies make religion hide-bound by tradition, till, "Custom lies upon us with a weight heavy as frost deep almost as life itself." (Wordsworth)

SPIRIT VERSES MATTER: IS THERE AN ANTITHESIS?

The Quakers say, "Where in the New Testament can you find any support for such customs as the use of Holy Water, or Rosary beads, making the sign of the Cross, the wearing of gorgeous vestments, the elaborate ritual of Mass, especially High Mass and other religious functions?" These things, they say, belong to the old Dispensation (see Leviticus and Deuteronomy, etc.) but they were all swept away by the simplicity of the Gospel message. They have come back again-- alas!--as pagan accretions to original Christianity, because its original fervor, its immediate inspiration, has been lost, the high tide of its original spiritual life has ebbed away leaving religion "in shallows and in miseries."

PAGAN ACCRETIONS?

Many years ago I lived in India for a while as tutor in an Indian family. I was still a Quaker, nominally, but was already feeling the pull of Catholicism in many respects. My spiritual state at that time could be compared to a pendulum

which was swinging now sometimes towards, and now sometimes against Catholicism. The main point at issue was still that mentioned just above, the "pagan accretions" which had been incorporated into the Church.

One week, when this matter was specially uppermost in my mind, a number of incidents happened, one after the other, which seemed to bear directly on the problem. One day one of my pupils, little Leena, aged five, came up to me and said, "Mr. Standing, would you like some of my rice; it is very special rice." Upon my asking why it was so special, she replied, "My God has blessed it." Then, in a burst of confidence, she went on--"Would you like to see my god?" Upon my replying in the affirmative she took me upstairs to her room and showed me a wonderful cabinet in which was a large golden image of Krishna. He was not the only deity in the cabinet; which was a veritable Pantheon; there were many other images in it including one of Our Lady and one of Peter Pan! Thereupon Leena described the ritualistic custom which had preceded her original offer to me. "We put rice grains down in front of our god; and we ask him to bless it and then we give it to our friends." How similar, externally, I thought to myself to the blessing and distribution of the Holy Bread. To those who like to know the end of a story I might add that I took the grain of rice and consumed in the spirit in which it was offered.

The day after I met Leena's elder sister, Mrudula, carrying a shining golden object which looked like a miniature model of the seven bronzed candlesticks which was kept by the Jews in the Tabernacle. I stopped her and asked her what it was, and she replied, "We put 'ghi' (melted butter) in the little pits or cups at the top of each stick; then we light it and put it before our god." Ah, I thought, that is where the Catholics got the idea of lighting candles and putting them before the statues of the saints.

Usually I had my meals by myself, but occasionally I had it with the family in Indian fashion. I noticed that the waiters who carried round the food had a long circlet of beads slung round their torso over one shoulder. On my asking Leena, who sat next to me, what they were for she replied, "He says his prayers on those." And that, said I to myself, is where the Catholics got their idea of the rosary.

The next day I visited an Indian temple with two Indian ladies and I noticed that there was a sort of stoup with water in it into which the ladies dipped their fingers and after touched themselves devoutly. Obviously it was a kind of Holy Water.

A few days afterwards I had the opportunity of watching a Hindu priest at his morning devotions. He went through a definite series of prescribed actions which included certain movements of the body, arm, hands; the ringing of a

little bell at intervals. Certain material elements were used also in this ritual, such as water, milk, and grains of rice; and everything is done in a circumscribed and precise manner. It at once reminded me of a Catholic Priest celebrating Mass.

The cumulative effect of all these incidents seemed to prove in my mind that it is quite true that Catholicism has been degraded by a collection of pagan rites which have been superimposed upon the pure simplicity of the Gospel.

THE REAL ANSWER

And so the pendulum swang away very definitely from Catholicism; and it was only months afterwards that I found the true answer to this problem in Newman's Development of Doctrine. In that he says, "Every great movement which stirs the minds of men has--in proportion to its original vitality--the power of assimilation. As it goes forth into the world of men and of ideas it has the power to assimilate, or absorb into itself everything that will be useful to it: just because it has such vitality it will be able to 'digest' these foreign elements into itself, thereby making them its own, and it becomes the stronger and the more effective by this process."

THE LITURGY IS ESSENTIAL TO OUR HUMAN NATURE

By his very nature, being a compound of spirit and matter, soul and body, man needs something material as well as the

purely spiritual. Spirit and matter are not really and essentially, in opposition to one another; they are not contrasting elements that make war upon each other.

The fundamental fact behind Christianity--the Incarnation--means nothing less than this--that God, the Infinite Spirit, "became Flesh and dwelt amongst us" in an indissoluble welding together of Spirit and Matter.* In us, as completed human beings, these two elements are equally essential to our full nature; and will be to all eternity. Our Lord Himself, as a man, rose from the grave in His material Body (which He still has), as Our Lady was assumed into Heaven in hers. For us too a body is necessary for our completion, as necessary as the soul. This is the significance of that article in the Creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the Body."

ALL GREAT RELIGIONS HAVE A LITURGY

One often hears it said that "all the great Religions teach more or less the same truths but differ in their outward form and expressions." As a matter of fact it would be more true to say that all Religions have very much the same outward forms--e.g., treating men, who are composed of soul and body, as if they were just like angels composed only of spirit. This is the reason why a religion like Quakerism can never appeal to a great number and variety of persons. It is too austere or abstract just because it is lacking in any external forms. En passant it would be interesting from this point of

view to speculate what form of worship could be carried on by pure Spirits. It is impossible for us to imagine it; and even the author of the Apoculyse has recourse to a material metaphor when he describes the elders "casting down their golden crowns before the Lamb." The prophet Ezekial describes the coming and going of the angels as "living flashes of light,"--light the most immaterial element in the universe around us.

People are often very illogical in these matters; and you may find the very same person who is shocked by the lighting of the candle to place before the image of a saint, thinks nothing of lighting twenty candles on a birthday in honor of a very ordinary person.

Liturgy Outside the Church

Liturgy is something so essential to human beings, when they act together at any solemn function, that it is found outside the Church, or at least something which corresponds to it. One takes for example of the precise and complicated ritual which accompanies the Coronation of a King. We get the same sort of thing on a smaller scale in the ordinary etiquette of a court, or such ceremonies as the trooping of the colors, masonic initiations and so on. Such definite and prescribed ways of doing things seem to spring up spontaneously when people in unison repeatedly perform the same act together.

SOME POINTS ABOUT THE LITURGY

Let us sum up some of the main characteristics of the Liturgy:

- (1) It is something which arises as a consequence of our twofold nature--e.g., being composed of soul and body.
- (2) It unites, and holds together a group of people engaged in a communal act of worship--even if they are not of the same nation or language. This is especially true of the great central act of worship--the offering of the sacrifice of the Mass.
- (3) It is a means for carrying on the continuity of worship from the vagaries and eccentricities of individuals. In times of spiritual slackness--i.e., when religious fervour is at a low ebb, it acts in the Church as a sort of driving wheel which carries on the momentum of the past into and through the present. It also preserves and keeps ever ready the forms by which the deepest religious experiences can be expressed.
- (4) Actions speak louder than words as the saying is. In religious, as in social life, our deepest emotions can often be better expressed by means of actions rather than words. Thus a kiss or a hand-shake, or even a glance can "speak volumes." And so it is in the religious service. How many such significant

actions are incorporated into the liturgy--e.g., kissing the altar, raising the hands, genuflections, raising the eyes to heaven, standing up at the Gospel, the sign of the cross, the lighting of candles, the wonderful service of Tenebrae and, in fact, the whole of the Easter Services.

- (5) The Liturgy is charged with symbolism: Symbols are an unrivalled means for bringing certain truths most swiftly and effectively into our minds and hearts. For example, the Crown of Thorns, the mixing of the water and wine, the image of the Sacred Heart.
- (6) Another important function which is carried out by the liturgy is what one might call the preserving a minimum of decency and dignity in the religious functions. In this way even a rather careless and indifferent celebrant is kept--during the fulfillment of his office--within certain bounds of dignity and decorum.

This applies also to the congregation; for in a similar way making the Sign of the Cross on entering the Church with Holy Water, genuflecting before entering the pew, standing up when the priest enters--all these, and similar actions, make for the prevention of slovenliness and careless behavior in the house of God, and give it solemnity and dignity and reverence.

- (7) Speaking historically the Liturgy has been the means of incorporating into regular public worship the inspirations of holy men in the past. Thus somebody must have been the first who, in the depths of his emotion, stooped down and kissed the altar on which Our Lord had so recently descended, or where the bones of the Saints were placed, just as an ardent lover would say of his mistress that he would kiss the very ground she trod upon. In the same way, someone must have been the first to kiss the book of the Gospel after he had finished reading from it, just as it was probably some far off Presbyter or Deacon who made the people stand up at the reading of the Gospel. These actions were felt to be so right and apposite that they were incorporated--bit by bit--into the regular performance of the rite. And thus, century after century, the Liturgy grew and developed, like a great work of art under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- (8) We must not of course forget that some of the actions of the liturgy are more than symbolic. The sacraments are in fact the actual channels of invisible Grace, working ex opere operante. There, too, in the most striking form, we realize how wonderfully Our Lord, in His dwellings with us, adopted means most

suitable to our twofold nature of spirit and matter.
"He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are
dust."

- (9) The Liturgy is something which makes its appeal to the learned and unlearned alike--to those who cannot read, as well as to the scholar; and further is an appeal which is independent of language, and so can be understood and appreciated by foreigners as well.

CHILDREN AND THE LITURGY

The fact that the liturgy appeals to the learned and the unlearned alike brings us to the next point in our discussion, viz., that even children can take a real interest in, and feel a real appreciation for the liturgy. Indeed children are inveterate liturgists by their very nature. At the early age of two and a half to four they are most insistent on having things done in the correct, that is the accustomed way. In fact I have heard Montessori compare the small child at this Sensitive Period Order to a Master of Ceremonies at a religious function. And as we have pointed out in other parts of this book it is possible for the small children to appreciate much of the liturgy at a sensorial level before the age of reason sets in.

It was the Holy Pontiff Benedict XV who initiated the great movement in the Church towards a fuller appreciation of