

Splendor Of External Worship
by
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This sermon was given on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of St. Agnes Parish, New York City, 1873-1923. St Agnes Church is well known today as a location for the Tridentine Latin Mass and for it's traditionally minded clergy.

The use of liturgy in divine service was one of the most bitterly contested points of controversy between our Holy church and the misnamed reformers of the Sixteenth Century. These revolutionists denied the dogmas of the Real presence and of the Sacrifice of the Mass, of the devotion to the Blessed Virgin and the saints, and of the existence of Purgatory. Accordingly, they swept from their churches the altars and their adornments, the statuary and storied windows, the ceremonies of the sanctuary and the appealing and inspiring tones of the organ.

Their professed purpose in dealing this fatal stroke to the highest inspiration and noblest expressions of art, as it consecrated itself to God, was to bring back to Christian worship to the simplicity of the Apostolic days. Their profession might be received today with greater sympathy for their fanaticism, if research had not revealed that the confiscated precious plate and rich embroideries of the altar, glowing canvasses and breathing marbles, that adorned the sanctuaries and walls of the churches, and the stolen land, convents and monasteries, went to increase the wealth and to ornament the palaces of kings and nobles. They humiliated Christ to exalt themselves and robbed the house of God to embellish their own palaces. Greed for power and pelf (*money/ riches*) was the force that abetted, maintained and gave success to the movement of the so-called reformers.

God wills to be worshiped with all that is beautiful, rich, reverent and inspiring in nature as well as in humanity. In the book of Exodus, we read: "And Moses said to all the assembly of the Children of Israel: This is the word the Lord hath commanded, saying: Set aside with you the first fruits to the Lord. Let everyone of you that is willing and hath a ready heart offer them to the Lord, gold, silver and brass, violet and purple, and scarlet dyed twice and fine linen, goats' hair, and rams' skins dyed red, and violet colored skins, setim wood, and oil to maintain the lights, and make ointment, and sweet incense, onyx stones, and precious stones for the adorning of the ephod and the rational. Whosoever of you is wise, let him come and make that which the Lord commanded." Then follows descriptions of the tabernacle, the beauty with which it was to be adorned, and of the bejeweled vestments with which the priests were to be clothed.

The entire book of Leviticus is devoted to the careful and minute description of the elaborate ceremonies which were to be observed by priests and people in their approach to their Heavenly Father. Did not Solomon with divine approval search the known world of his day to obtain the most precious materials with which to erect the

temple he built to the worship of the true and living God? Did not God approve and commission him to build it? Did not fire come from heaven and consume the first offering on the altar as a mark of divine sanction upon what had been done to the honor and glory of Almighty God? Did not Aggeus charge the Jewish people suffering in captivity that God's punishment fell upon them for their failure to rebuild the temple?

And does God wish less of us in our open profession of belief in Him, in our expression of grateful and adoring love, in our visible exaltation of Him above all other creatures, than He was pleased to accept from the Jews? Have we received more and are we to return less? Have we been more honored and exalted and are we to honor and exalt Him less? Surely Christian Churches should speak of Him more loudly in praise, manifest to Him love deeper and greater, and give such evidence of stronger faith in Him, his divine attributes and his boundless mercies, that whole world might be attracted to know and love and serve Him.

What more impressive and splendid ritual is there than that which God has spread over the whole Empire of nature that she might speak to us of His beauty, his wisdom, His omnipotence, His immensity, His benevolence and His love? Who has not gazed with ever deepening and overwhelming worship upon the starlit firmament, as he contemplated the canopy of the heavens sinking back further and further into immeasurable spaces, and thought of the innumerable suns and planets, system upon system, revolving orderly in their giant courses? Who has not watched the glory of the golden sunset when the western heavens hold orb of day as a golden monstrosity over the earth, and has no thought of the marvelous and transporting raptures of the Blessed as they gaze upon the Throne of the Most High? Who has not looked from hill or mountain upon extending plains, carpeted with green, starred with flowers, strewn with silver streams and bejewelled with sparkling lakes and rimmed with lofty mountains and has not dwelt with loving hope upon our promised Home beyond the blue? Who had not thought of the fair gardens of God where love and beauty and sweetness are such as eye hath never seen, nor ear heard nor hath it ever entered into the heart of man to conceive? Do not the gentle airs of returning spring suggest to us the goodness of him from whom they come? Do we not see Him riding in Majesty upon the dark clouds of storm and tempest, hear His voice in the roaring waves and see His indignation in the flashing fires of the skies?

Let those who would rob God's service of rites and ceremonies, who would destroy liturgy by which man is brought to his Creator and which should mark the reverent and proper approach of man to God, blot out the stars from the heavens, pluck up the flowers from the fields, darken the sunset, silence the woodland choruses, chill

the balmy warmth of returning Spring and hush and conceal every manifestation of God's attributes around us. For have not these, as have rites and ceremonies, been perverted in their purposes? Have they not been worshiped as God? But Holy scriptures teach that the heavens are to declare God's magnificence and power and the earth is to give Him praise.

Religion must follow in the footsteps of the works of God and by appealing to man's senses as well as to the faculties of his soul, lift him up to his Maker in body and soul. The whole man, body and soul as God has made him, must be raised in worship to praise God with all the powers with which God endowed him.

If it were granted that the house of God is only a house of prayer, of all places it should be the most beautiful, inspiring and expressive. It is the place where man believes that he holds communion with God. It is the place of his soul. It is the sacred place where he pours out his sorrows and sins, where he appeals for his highest aid and where his noblest emotions are awakened, where his Greatest Friend stoops to speak with him, to counsel, help and uplift him. It is the place where he and God are alone and in each other's embrace. What other place should be as expressive of gratitude and love? What other place should speak of dignity as high, of glory as splendid, of love more self-sacrificing? Shall places of commerce and trade be places of marble and gold and raise their heads proudly to the skies to proclaim the honor and dignity of business, while the churches of the living God grovel to the earth in meanness and poverty? Shall the material creatures of God be exalted above Himself? Shall the houses for the comfort of our bodies speak of greater distinction than those which uplift and sanctify our souls?

Rather it should be the ambition of every people, as far as they can accomplish it, to make every man feel--though he be a king--that when he enters into the House of God, he enters into the house of One who is greater than he, for the house is the house of the Lord, the King of kings. In this manner all peoples built their houses of worship until arose the destroyers of the sixteenth century. So built the Egyptians and the Assyrians, and in this spirit arose the Parthenon at Athens and the Pantheon at Rome.

Catholic churches are not merely places of prayer and silent worship and communion but are also the dwelling places of the Incarnate God. Jesus Christ really resides upon our altars. We see Him with the eyes of faith beneath the species under which He has chosen to remain among us, as truly as they beheld Him who heard His voice and touched His beloved Person when He walked the ways of earth with Men. Genius had come well to offer and consecrate itself to our holy faith that our churches may be the environs of heaven. Our altars are Christ's thrones, our sanctuaries His court, our

churches His audience chamber, where face to face He meets his people and communicates with them not only in spirit but also by nourishing them with his adorable Body and Blood. Daily on his altar-throne He perpetuates the Holy sacrifice by which man has been redeemed and his eternal inheritance restored.

Inspired by our faith, genius has soared to the very threshold of heaven and catching glimpses of its ravishing beauty and glory. Had expressed its marvelous flights in noblest art to quicken the spirit of God's adorers and enable them to know, love and serve better the Lord Who created, redeemed and sanctifies them. In this manner outflowing and sanctified genius had given us from the ages of faith the majestic piles of marble and granite and the breathing and ethereal productions of brush and chisel which are the despair of our day to imitate.

"A cathedral," says Ruskin, "with every stone that is laid on its solemn walls, raises some human heart to God." Whose heart does not beat fast with emotion and is not lifted up high to God in loving adoration as he gazes upon the lofty dome of St. Peter's at Rome, and beholds of St. Mark's at Venice, and Notre Dame at Paris; as he adzes upon the music voiced in stone that shimmers as the sunlight upon the purest snow high in air at Milan, and admires the marvelous sermon of stateliness in granite or marble which, as epic poems of prayer, dignify and glorify nearly every large city in Italy, Spain, France, Germany and England? Some of them have been stolen from Holy Church and lacking the Sacred Presence that was the inspiration of their erection, their deathlike coldness, dampness and empty glory, make them now the ruins of their former greatness.

Adorned with Catholic ceremony, with solemn and imposing procession of mitred bishops, surpliced priests and kneeling multitude, while angelic choirs sing the praises of the Almighty, and altar is ablaze with symbolic lights about the tabernacle of the Most high and incense ascends with prayer,--whose heart does not feel in a Catholic cathedral the profound adoration and the thrilling exaltation of the wonderful and inspiring scene as if he were in touch with beauty and power Divine? Cathedrals are the expressions of the fullness of the Catholic soul and it is only the exulting joy or the profound sorrow of such a soul, manifested in the inspired rites and ceremonies of holy Mother Church, that can complete them and give them their proper religious significance.

The liturgy of holy church is not only monumental and inspirational, it is not only the outflowing and outpouring of her living soul, but it is also the fitting expression of her belief. Every ceremony or rite is the vesture proper to the truth it expresses. It is not a part of a drama seeking to impress by its beauty, its suggestiveness or its austerity. It is the language of the Church. By it she speaks to all the saving truths

which have been entrusted to her keeping. By it the lettered and the unlettered, the child as well as the parent, the sinner as well as the just. The rude barbarian and the untutored savage are instructed, impressed and lifted up to God,—and by it they all, in unison of voice and action, profess the same faith with which they have been blessed.

The altar expresses the perpetual and all-saving sacrifice which is offered daily according to the command of Christ: "Do ye this in memory of me." The lighted candles, the flowers and the incense speak of His presence in the tabernacle Whom we adore. The storied windows and the statuary tell us of the life beyond the grave and bring close to us the saintly company about the throne in Heaven who are our friends, our companions and our intercessors during our journey on earth. The church itself fills us with the beauty, the grandeur the majesty , the power, the immensity of Him to Whom it is dedicated. The surmounting cross raises our thoughts to the one and only Mediator through whom all blessings flow from our Heavenly Father.

When we raise our eyes to clasp our hands, bow the head or bend the knee, sign ourselves with holy Water, the action brings to our minds and hearts dogmas of faith that profess our faith and love. For this reason the revealed truth, which cannot change, causes our liturgy to move with uniformity and harmony, everywhere essentially the same in all countries and all ages. Wherever he may be, a child of holy Church is at home at the Catholic services of the land. He maybe in distant Asia or Africa, among people whose habits of thought, customs of life are strange and unintelligible to him, but in their churches, if they be of the household of faith, he is in a familiar House of God and can worship in the same manner as he sees at home.

It is because they lack revealed and unchanging truth, that this privilege cannot be enjoyed by those outside the fold. "Lex colendi est lex credendi" is the old and true axiom. *The law of worship is the law of belief.* Where there is no true creed of belief there can be no true and fixed form of worship.

We thank God, however, that many of the leaders of religious thought outside our Church are endeavoring to bring back liturgical forms to their services. They are raising crosses to Heaven; they are installing stained glass windows and images; they are restoring music and adornments; and may we hope that some day they will put back the truth which will give their liturgy significance and lead them into the one fold with the One Shepherd.

The full meaning of the Catholic liturgy was expressed beautifully by the illustrious Cardinal Bona when he wrote: "Although these ceremonies have no perfection and contain no holiness in themselves, they are nevertheless the acts of external religion,

by which the soul is lifted up to the veneration of holy things, the mind is sublimated to heavenly thoughts, piety is nourished, charity is inflamed, faith is increased, devotion is strengthened, the more humble are instructed, the worship of God is adorned, religion is conserved and the faithful are distinguished from pseudo-Christians and the heterodox."