

AT MASS WITH MARY

John Sexton Kennedy

*A glory of new stars, downward flung
And forged into seven swords, has stung
The heart of the Woman whom I pass
On my way to the altar for morning Mass.
There is no shrill crowd, there are no hoarse cries,
But I meet One bearing a cross in her eyes.*

JOHN SEXTON KENNEDY

Foreword

Those people who twenty centuries ago were present on Calvary because they hated Jesus Christ paid more attention to the sacrifice of the cross than do most of us who are Sunday after Sunday present at Mass because we love Jesus Christ. This is a fact at once startling and sobering. At the beginning of each week we and many, many like us take our places before a thousand altars, and, as the great Action wherein Christ intended that we should, each of us, intensively participate, proceeds, we stand, kneel, sit absently. For us the Mass remains the measured movements, the mystifying mumblings of a remote, brightly clad figure. And so we are paupers in the midst of plenty, drought-ruined in a land of living waters; we miss the full worth of this unique means of best paying our debts to God, this unique means too of best building up and improving our poor, uncertain lives.

What are we to do? Methods of hearing Mass well are numerous. Some have been explained to us. We have found them involved, almost baffling. What is most difficult is to keep well focused the basic truth that the Sacrifice of the Mass is really the same sacrifice as that of Calvary. In the absence of glittering spears, strained and distorted faces, hideous cries, a grim cross we utterly forget that we attend the crucifixion of Christ. Could we but sufficiently appreciate the fact, our problem of keeping attentive, devout at Mass would be solved. As a means to this end, a means not indeed perfect but if earnestly tried quite effective, we are suggesting the effort to hear Mass with Mary. The lessons which we can learn from Our Blessed Lady are quite beyond numbering; none of them is simpler or of greater value than that of worthy assistance at holy Mass. Herein we shall consider first the thorough excellence of Mary's following of the first Mass, and then the value to us of her exceptional example.

Union of Intentions

No one of us countless Christians who have come after her has ever heard Mass as well as Mary did on Calvary. No one of us has ever heard Mass under precisely the same circumstances as she. True the sacrifice of our altars is the same as that of the great, gaunt cross; but the rending of the body she had borne, delivered, nursed at her breast, the spilling of the Precious Blood which had had its fountain source in the quiet places of her heart were not screened from Mary's eyes, as they are from ours, by the appearances of bread and wine. They were present to her in brutal, unescapable reality. However this fact contributed least to the perfection of Our Blessed Lady's participation in the holy sacrifice. Contributing infinitely more were acts of her mind and of her will.

She realized that the exquisite fruit of her womb, utterly crushed by slow suffering, was God, only Son of the unsired Father. She realized that He was dying to undo the sins of the ages. She recognized here the culmination of the conflict between divine love and sin. Sin had been man's answer to God's love; love, abandoned to sacrifice, was now God's answer to man's sin. Penetrating the meaning, the worth of this sacrifice,

Mary bowed her will to that of God the Father, united her breaking heart with that of the dying Christ, and heroically prayed that the unimaginable agony of the cross might not be in vain.

These acts of Our Blessed Lady we can profitably and without difficulty imitate in our assistance at holy Mass. We know that what takes place at the hands of the priests at our altars is what took place at the hands of the soldiers on the desolate hill outside Jerusalem twenty centuries ago. We know that He who suffers so is God of very God. We know that He goes down silent to an appalling death to save us from sin. And so as we kneel in the presence of this great oblation of God to God, we shall be with Mary. Wherever, whenever the cross is set up, she stands beneath it. She will help us to attend well and profit by its surpassing mystery.

Confiteor

Mass begins with a solemn confession of guilt. In the Confiteor, said twice before the priest goes up to the spotless altar (once by him, once by the boy in the name of all of us present), the reason for the Mass is set forth; the tone, the chief quality of our participation is suggested. The great sin of our day is the casual assumption that there is no sin.

But Mary, without sin though she was, appreciates its stinging reality. Sin it was which had torn the singing stars down from the Bethlehem night sky to beat them into seven swords and here to plunge the last of them into her wrung soul. Sin it was, our sin, which alone separated sinless Son and Immaculate Mother, flinging Him on a cross to die, leaving her in tears at its foot. And as we kneel at the renewal of His staggering sacrifice, we know in our hearts that there is such a thing as sin. We know because we have been guilty of it. We have turned away from God Our Father. The light has gone out of our lives, and we cannot find our way back to Him. To light that way, a savage spear-thrust had to tear open the fierce furnace of love burning in the breast of a dying God. And only so was reconciliation made possible.

That reconciliation is in the Mass about to be renewed in all its sufficiency, in all its fullness. While the priest mounts the altar steps, as Jesus did the arid hill, Mary reminds us of the treasures that are ours for the asking. Prompted by her, we acknowledge the sins which we so much regret; we heap them upon the back of the priest; we beg for forgiveness, for healing, for strength against future temptation.

Introit and Kyrie

The priest first reads the Introit. This varies from day to day. Generally it consists of a few words from the Old Testament; words rich in memories, often on the lips of God-fearing men during the long centuries before the coming of Christ; words which watered wilted hopes and fed those who looked with hungry eyes for the dawning of the day which would see the dominion of sin shattered and men reconciled with their Father; words familiar to Mary, lovingly repeated by her as she awaited the advent of the blessed Messias.

Moving to the centre of the altar, the priest gives utterance to an ancient prayer, simple but grave with significance: "Lord, have mercy on us!" It is the cry of the sin-oppressed, the cry of those who are lost in the night of human weakness and terrified by the realization, the voice of one saying:

Cry!

And I said: What shall I cry?

All flesh is grass, and the glory thereof as the flower of the field.

The grass is withered, and the flower fallen.

But the mercy of God endureth forever!

With Mary in her humble home we say,

"Lord, have mercy on us!"

And instant He is in mercy, instant and bountiful.

Be comforted, be comforted, my people, saith your God.

Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem and call to her;

For her evil is come to an end; her iniquity is forgiven.

To save men from their fallen selves, God, so loving the world, promises salvation.

Gloria

And in the pregnant quiet of Nazareth a Virgin's womb comes thrillingly alive with incarnate love. Mary is miraculously with child. She moves unknown, unnoticed down through the land of promise, through the very midst of those who are groaning for deliverance. And between the night's end and the day's beginning, under a roof of rock, in a lonely hillside cave Mary brings forth the Son of God, flesh-bound, and lays Him in a bin where oxen feed. High in the shining night wondering angels sing, and it is their song which the priest next takes up: "Glory to God in the highest and, at long last, peace to men. We adore thee; we bless thee." God has given us His only Son. Can we adequately phrase our gratitude? "We give thee thanks, O God the Father, and thee, Lamb of God, come to bear away the sins of the world."

Epistle and Gospel

How to live in and by the eternal Son made man, as Mary did in the cloistered peace of the Holy Family, we learn from the Epistle. And as the Gospel is read, we stand with Mary on the fringe of the dusty, eager-faced throng that the words of the eternal Word rouse like lightning flashes or the shouts of a lusty wind.

Credo

After the Gospel comes the Creed, that sweeping, majestic act of faith in Christ and the truths He proclaimed by the lakeside. The awed Elizabeth had said to Mary: "Blessed art thou who hast believed." And we, as soon as we have heard the magnificent message of Him whom Mary bore, are at once reminded that however naturally attractive the message may seem proper acceptance of it, worthy and fruitful living by it require divine faith. Our Blessed Lord Himself says:

*For God so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son,
That whosoever believeth in Him may not perish, but may have everlasting life.
He that believeth in me is not judged. He that believeth not is already judged:
Because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.*

Christ demands faith of us that we may carry Him into the sharp tests and crises of our every day, involving as they do temptation and sin. Christ demands faith of His Mother and His disciples that at the dramatic, humanly bewildering finish of His life they may stand firm and not fall miserably away.

Offertory

The finish of His life, the sacrifice that was to set the solemn seal on His mission of saving us from sin, is at once foreshadowed in the priest's next action, the offering of the bread and the wine. Our thoughts seek out Gethsemani, the moon-swept garden where the Son of Mary, come to earth in a new and more humiliating sense, lies motionless under the crushing weight of human guilt there in the blood-wet grass. He is giving His all. God is yielding up His infinitude to the limits set by three nails and a thorny crown. He is making to God the Father the surrender of His body to be broken, His blood to be poured out. This for us. Where Mary is during this endless night, we do not know. Wherever she is, her heart, ready now for the final thrust of that sword foreseen by Simeon as sunk deep into it, is upraised to the hidden face of God the Father; and she prays, as we must pray in all things trifling or tremendous: "Thy will be done. That sin may be atoned for; that it may cease to stand as a barrier between us and thee that every sacrifice linked with that of Jesus Christ Thy Son may be availing unto life everlasting; Thy Will be done!"

Consecration

The accomplishment of that will is manifest as the Mass moves forward to the Consecration. With Mary we are silent, wrapped up in wordless prayer, as the body of Christ is breathed into the bread, His precious blood into the wine. They are lifted up—the body and the blood of Jesus Christ, elements of sacrifice. The one is drained of the other, separated in the condition of redeeming death. We adore.

Pater Noster

Now that the Sacrifice has been outwardly realized, there pours from Mary's lips, from our lips, the prayer taught us by Him slain for us, the perfect prayer to the offended Father placated by His obedient Son: "Our Father...thy kingdom come; thy will be done ... forgive us our trespasses...."

Agnus Dei

Under Mary's brimming eyes, the spear is run through the heart which has ceased to quiver with the agonizing urgency of its love, and the body of Christ is broken, the price of our peace. The priest says the *Agnus Dei*: "Lamb of God, who at such great cost dost bear away the sins of the world, have mercy on us; give us peace."

Communion

As the disturbing dusk sets in, the body of Christ is taken down from the cross and laid in Mary's arms. She looks into the wasted face with its mask of blood and sweat, spittle and dust and tears. She looks at the arms and legs, bloodless: and stiff and cold. The victim is utterly destroyed. And Simeon's sword is now thrust ruthlessly into her tender heart. She has nowhere to lay Him, this victim of sin, her first-born. From her aching arms He is hurried with scant ceremony into a stranger's tomb. Mary has: recovered Him but briefly, and that only in death, only in her arms. She who loves Him loses Him. And we, unworthy, receive Him in communion into our hearts, to live within us, to intensify the friendship of God so dearly bought by Him, to remain with us forever.

Thanksgiving

Communion finished, the priest reads prayers for our perseverance in the dispositions which attendance at Mass with Mary has fostered. Then with a blessing he bids us go—as the cross, bare but eloquent against the soft, spring twilight, bids Mary go—back to the everyday ways of life, with the remembrance of what we have shared driving us to Christian living. And the Mass will be with us through the monotonous days—as it was with Mary during the long years after the death of her Son—a source of strength, a principle of life. It will be with us in the grey mornings when, perhaps ill, we go off to tiring occupation which may at any. time be taken from us; it will be with us in the moment of temptation, when we are seized and shaken and our whole being seems irresistibly drawn to ruinous evil; it will be with us in the time of misunderstanding and piercing disappointment, when our every act is misjudged and there is no one too lowly to cast at us a stone of rebuke or of ridicule; it will be with us in the hour of bottomless sorrow, when all that warms and colours life falls to dust and all that was wonderfully sweet becomes as gall to the taste.

Then will the Mass be with us, to soothe and solace, to save us from sin, to confirm us in the grace purchased by the quenching of the Light of the World.

Last Gospel

Finally there is the Last Gospel, a perfect resume of the purpose and meaning of the Mass just offered, set at the end to balance the Confiteor at its beginning.

The Word was made flesh.

The light shineth in darkness... .

He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not... .

He came unto His own, and His own received Him not... .

Today He comes to us, His own, to us won back from perdition by His blood. May it never be said of us: "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not."

Rather, as we go forth, grateful and thoughtful, let us remember that we

Are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh,

Nor of the will of man,

But of God.. . In Him is life.

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