

Gregory Dix: The Shape of the Liturgy

THE Editor of the *Annual* has asked me to set down some thoughts on Dom Gregory's monumental work, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, and I do so with pleasure. Neither space nor time, however, afford me the opportunity of examining a vast number of the points raised by this important work, and I must content myself with selecting some of primary interest to Scottish readers.

First of all, let it be said that one cannot read and re-read Dom Gregory's rambling and leisurely volume without a deep sense of gratitude to him for the fresh light he constantly throws on old questions and for the way in which he has so successfully brought his descriptions of the liturgy to life. At the same time, this book should not be accepted as the last word, and I am confident that the author himself would not wish us so to accept it. Indeed, while most liturgiologists would now agree with his main thesis, there can by no means be general agreement on many points; scholarly and apparently cautious (for the caution is often misleading) as this work is, it is not a work of unbiassed and dispassionate scholarship, but might be more properly described as a subtle pamphlet in the grand manner. Every page and every argument therefore has to be scrutinised with care, and a lively eye kept on Dom Gregory's logic, which is not his strong point. It is, in fact, almost as weak as his index, and these two weaknesses conspire to make the work of both reader and reviewer extremely difficult. He has also a disarming way of making important statements in footnotes, and elsewhere in passing, without troubling to quote his authority; and we are apt to find these later embodied in an argument as though there could be no debate about their actuality. And when one turns to the index to check the matter, no indication of it is to be found there. Ampler and more exact references to authorities would have been helpful, and the index is inexcusably insufficient for a work of this importance.

For example, on p. 32, footnote 2, we are informed that the change of the celebrant from the basilican posture to the eastwards position in front of the Holy Table "took place in the East at large between the fourth and fifth

centuries, and in the West in the eighth-tenth centuries. It had originally no particular reason beyond that of fashion and convenience". But is the whole matter as simple as this? And what is the authority for it? It would have been interesting to know why Dix arrives at this conclusion. There is, of course, evidence which points to the change as being about the times stated, but what gives Dix such confidence? Has he further evidence than that generally known? If not, it is insufficient for such simple certainty.

One cannot enlarge upon this matter in a brief paper, but again and again we find statements blandly made without sufficient documentation, and we are expected to accept them. We have a similar over-simplification of the problem of the relationship between bishop and presbyter on pp. 33-34. A quotation from Hippolytus is not enough to establish that presbyters were originally only rulers of the flock and had "no strictly liturgical functions at all". The problem was never so simple as that, and even St. Thomas Aquinas thinks of the bishop as a presiding presbyter, the difference between bishop and presbyter being not one of order but of function. Or again, his interesting reconstruction of the liturgy in the house of a Roman noble (pp. 19 *sqq.*) is very largely imaginative, and unsupported by much historical evidence. One values it for what it is worth, but we must not suppose it to be worth too much.

Dix, however, has two basic theses that will command the general assent of Scottish liturgiologists. The first is that the shape of the liturgy was from the beginning, broadly speaking, constant throughout Christendom (p. 5, &c.), although the content varied widely in local churches; and the second is his proper emphasis upon the corporateness of the early rite celebrated not so much by a celebrant as by the whole priestly body of the Church acting under his leadership (p. 7, &c.). An example, however, of his eclecticism and "logic" is found, on the same page, where we are told that the "only thing" in the rite which was "pliable" was the eucharistic prayer, "the 'president's' own 'special liturgy'", while the deacon's litanies were, for example, fixed. The ground of this statement is that the eucharistic prayer was recited by the bishop alone, while the litany was shared by deacon and people. This is so, but not wholly so. The people had a very small share in the litany—they merely responded "Lord have mercy" at the end of each clause. And there is every reason to believe

that the clauses were quite variable for a considerable period, as the signal for the response was either the tone used by the deacon or the keyword "Let us beseech"—or both. Its structure, therefore, allowed of great freedom in its composition; it was very "pliable" and may even have been originally extemporary.

To return, however, to the main theses. They are not, in fact, so new as Dom Gregory would have us believe. Scottish liturgiologists have not been of the opinion that there was ever one fixed form of apostolic words from which all liturgies developed, but have preferred the conception of an early fluid rite. Anglican and Roman Catholic scholars have not so readily agreed to this, but Dix has probably now converted them to it; although we may expect it to be some time before they, or indeed he himself, recognise its implications for present practice.

Dix expresses it in this way: "What was fixed and immutable everywhere in the second century was the Outline or Shape of the Liturgy, what was *done*. What our Lord instituted was not a 'service', something said, but an action, something done—or rather the continuance of a traditional Jewish action, but with a new meaning, to which he attached a consequence". The new meaning was that henceforward this action was to be done "for the *anamnesis* of Me"; the consequence was that "This is My Body" and "This cup is the New Covenant in My Blood" (pp. 214-5).

This, of course, has always been the view of the Church of Scotland. While having its own rite, either in specific forms or in detailed specific directions so that the general outline and essential content of the action should be preserved, it has never attached the importance to rigidly fixed and uniform forms which some other communions have done. Further, no Church in Christendom has been more conscious than the Church of Scotland that the celebration of the Eucharist is essentially an action. Indeed, its common designation for centuries has been "The Action"; and this has not been a phrase merely inherited from "Actio" in the Mass, but one pregnant with meaning, and popularly understood. Moreover, in Scotland "service" has never meant "something said", but something done—as the word itself implies. One is indeed at a loss to know why it came to bear that meaning anywhere! To go to church to "hear" or "say" a service is a conception of worship, which the Scottish and Calvinian Reformers

successfully eradicated. The emphasis placed upon the reading and preaching of the Word of God often caused people to say they went to Church to "hear the sermon", but "hearing" was never used of prayers or services in Scotland. People were conscious always that the service was an action in which they shared, not words to which they listened, and not something that was done for them by another. This was supremely so of the Eucharist, which from the time of the Reformation has been a great corporate action.

Dom Gregory is not at his most perceptive, however, when he deals with the Reformers, their practice, and their doctrine. Perhaps he is constitutionally incapable of understanding them. The suggestion that Cranmer was a Zwinglian need not detain us here, for this is an English matter; but as G. B. Timms has effectively shown in his *Dixit Cranmer*, read before the Alcuin Club in May, 1946 (published by Mowbray's), Dix misunderstands both Zwingli and Cranmer. It is worth while, however, examining some of his misconceptions of Calvin. There is, first, his notion that "receptionism" (a purely Anglican conception derived from Hooker) is related to "Calvinist teaching" (p. 676). This is completely to misunderstand Calvin, who saw the Eucharist as a whole, and whose cardinal wish was to restore it *in its entirety* as a corporate action of all the people every Sunday morning. Calvin detested the medieval practice (and doctrine) of separating communion from the Eucharist, but did not base its validity upon "receiving".

Again, although it is true, as Dix states repeatedly (e.g., p. 615), that the medieval western rite was the only liturgy the Reformers had ever used, and that they did not and could not possess the "scientific" knowledge of primitive practice now becoming available to scholars through the researches of several generations of inquirers—it is also true that they were nevertheless attempting, as best they could, to return to primitive usage. This is true in particular of Calvin, and he was not entirely ignorant of what was implied; in fact, he was singularly conscious of its implications. And he was careful to state his intention on the very title-page of his Service-Book, where he declared his rite to be "selon l'usage de l'église primitive". It was this fluid rite, in its fullness of action and corporateness, that Calvin desired to restore. His performance may not have been perfect, but his intention was clear.

It is, furthermore, erroneous to attribute to Calvin, as Dom Gregory does, an exclusive emphasis upon individual reception as the heart of the Eucharist. "The real eucharistic action for Calvin", Dix writes, "is individual and internal, not corporate" (p. 633). Misapprehension of Calvin's teaching could hardly be more complete. Dr J. S. Whale's competent interpretation, based upon a deep study of Calvin, provides a pretty contrast. "Calvinism", he writes, "is above all churchmanship. . . . Worship is not primarily designed to bring the consolation of grace to the sin-laden soul, but to be a solemn offering on the part of the whole congregation of the elect" (Micklethorp: *Christian Worship*, p. 158). That, of course, is the view endorsed generally by modern re-examination of Calvin's teaching, long obscured by layers of interpretation at second-hand. Doumergue has clearly and indubitably shown that what Calvin was chiefly concerned to restore was the ancient sense of corporate communion and the full participation in the whole action by all. What else does Calvin's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers mean? Or his desire to make the rite comprehensible to all?—not, as Dix would say, so that they might *hear* it, but that they might *share* and assist fully in the action. We cannot overlook, furthermore, his urgent efforts to restore the weekly Eucharist with communion of *all* the people as the Sunday morning service, or his metricization of the Psalter so that *all* might join in the praise, or his restoration of the basilican posture so that the Minister might lead the people in worship rather than "conduct" it, or be a "sacerdos" offering his own offering only, as in the medieval Church.

Nor is Calvin's final meaning, as Dix says, "that in the Eucharist Jesus bestows His Spirit on the spirit of the individual who believes in Him as Redeemer, and partakes of the bread and wine as He commanded" (p. 633). We know it is not, because Calvin himself tells us what his final word is—and he eschews such attempts at cosy precision before so great and holy a mystery, which he holds to be ultimately both inexplicable and inexpressible. He would have abhorred such words as those being put in his mouth. His final word is this: "It is too high a mystery either for my mind to comprehend, or my words to express. The truth of God in which I can safely rest, I here embrace without controversy. He declares that His flesh is the meat, His blood the drink of my soul. I give my soul to be fed with such food". The First Scots Confession also was

particularly careful to rebut the kind of error Dix attributes to the Reformers, namely, that they do "not meet the difficulty that what our Lord said He was giving was not His Spirit, but *His Body*" (p. 633). "We confess and undoubtedly believe", the Confession states, "that the faithful, in the right use of the Lord's Table, do eat the body, and drink the blood of the Lord Jesus, that He remaineth in them and they in Him: yea, they are so made flesh of His flesh, and bone of His bone, that as the eternal Godhead hath given to the flesh of Christ Jesus, life and immortality, so doth Christ Jesus, by His flesh and blood, eaten and drunken by us, give unto us the same prerogative". This is surely explicit enough in all conscience, and if writers like Dix will keep complaining about such aspects of the Reformers' teaching, one is forced to the conclusion that they are unaware of what the Reformers wrote, or that they suppress it. One looks for something better than this in a work of professed and massive scholarship.

On p. 623, Dom Gregory criticises "the Reformers" on another point. Since for them, he declares, "the passion is wholly in the past, the Church can now only enter into it purely mentally, by *remembering* and imagining it. There is for them, therefore, no real sacrifice whatever in the Eucharist. The external rite is at most an acted memorial, *reminding* us of something no longer present". Whether Dix includes Calvin in his vague phrase "the Reformers" I do not know. But Calvin did not, nor did the Scottish Reformers, think of the Eucharist or the passion in terms of time merely but in terms of eternity—in contrast to many medieval theologians (Dix, p. 623). Thus Calvin could write, in order to avoid such misrepresentation of his teaching as Dix ingenuously presents to us: "When I say that Christ is received by faith, I do not mean that he is conceived merely by understanding and imagination; for the promises present Him to us, not that we may stop with the sight and bare knowledge, but that we may enjoy a "*vera communicatione*", a real participation of Him" (Inst. iv.). It is interesting to observe, too, that in the well-known 35th Paraphrase used at Scottish Communion the words are carefully chosen:

And oft the sacred rite renew,
That brings My wondrous love to view . . .
In this the Covenant is seal'd,
And Heaven's eternal grace reveal'd.

As the last line quoted shows, the emphasis is upon eternity, and a celebration of the Eucharist is not a *fresh* re-enactment, a repetition of something in the past, but a "renewal" of that which, though once done in history, is eternally there. Unless this fundamental point is grasped, Calvin's theology of the Eucharist is liable to such misunderstanding as is patent in Dix. If you remove the keystone of the arch, it is not difficult to cause the arch to collapse.

One should add also that when Calvin speaks of faith, as in the passage above-quoted, he does not mean merely intellectual assent, but the committal of the whole man to Christ, the linking of the whole personality with Him.

It is interesting to find Dom Gregory himself falling into the trap of limiting the Eucharist to history. In his proper desire to emphasise the place of the Resurrection in the Eucharist, he makes a distinction between the Last Supper and the first Eucharist, the latter of which he conceives as taking place after the Resurrection (*e.g.*, pp. 50 *sqq.*). One sympathises with the truth Dix tries to preserve, but such a distinction is as meaningless as any attempt to separate the work of Christ from His Person or into parts. It is all of one piece, including the Eucharist, and is of eternity though once enacted in time. All that was said and done at the Last Supper was "sub specie aeternitas", and as "the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world" the Eucharist both before and after the Resurrection is similarly timeless and a unity. This point could be expanded, but it should not be passed unnoticed.

A caution also is required about Dom Gregory's contrast between the Eucharist and the Lord's Supper (pp. 48-102). By the Lord's Supper, following Hippolytan terminology, he means the Agapé, and so uses the term throughout his work. This might cause some confusion. It is, therefore, worth while stating categorically that in the Reformed use of the term, the Lord's Supper (and in modern Scottish use of it) is synonymous with the Eucharist, not with the Agapé. The Reformers did not restore the Agapé, but reformed the Eucharist; and when doing so chose the inclusive title "The Lord's Supper" to describe it, preferring that term to the more restricted titles "the Breaking of the Bread", the "Eucharist", or "Holy Communion". This caution, perhaps, would hardly be necessary, were it not the habit of some Anglican writers to-day to suggest that in the Reformed Churches the "Lord's Supper" is in fact nothing more than an Agapé, without any eucharistic validity.

Space forbids the examination of many other points of interest raised by Dom Gregory. His researches into the early history of the liturgy are absorbing, though one will not always be in agreement with his conclusions. His defence of the Anglican method of "consecration by formula" (pp. 238 *sqq.*) is interesting; but here, as often elsewhere, he uses words with a meaning agreeable to himself. The difference between the use of the words of Institution and a whole prayer of consecration is not, as he says, the substitution of a short formula for a long formula; it is the difference between consecration by a declaration and consecration by prayer, which is an important difference. Further, in spite of the urgency of his pleading, we may believe that to look at the liturgy of the fifth and sixth centuries for its classical shape, will provide the best guidance for modern liturgical reform. The study of evolution is always interesting, but we understand man best when we see him fully developed rather than in his more primitive stages. This is true also of the liturgy, and the more so when we believe in the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

At the same time, Dom Gregory has rendered a signal service to liturgical study. He has brought out many new points, and has given added sharpness to many familiar facts. His indication of the source of the modern "said" and "simple" service as deriving from low mass, and not at all from primitive usage, should cause many to think again when they attempt to defend the so-called "simple" service and object, for example, to sung services. This fact has long been well-known to liturgical scholars, but Dom Gregory has brought to it added point and clarity. This is true of vast tracts of his book, which deserves to be read and re-read. The chief proviso, however, is that one's sense of gratitude must not be permitted to dull one's critical faculties, for one's gratitude to him is immense.

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