

LETTER N° 1 ON THE LITURGY

10 March 1991.

Dear Sisters,

We are half-way through Lent, and as we prepare ourselves for the great feast of Easter, our hymns and our office, our reading and meditation as well as our silence lead us up to Jerusalem with Jesus. We ready our minds and our hearts, reciting the age-old prayers and inventing new ones inspired by current events and by the clamours and groans of our world. The atmosphere is of penance and purification. All this preparation, our efforts, our longings converge and are summed up and expressed in the Liturgy.

Lent and Easter are not isolated feasts; they are part of the Liturgical Year. Throughout the whole year our life is centered around the Liturgy. Just as we say our communities are apostolic and contemplative, so too we can say that they are liturgical. In fact, the liturgy quite literally brings the community together; it nourishes and colours both our contemplation and our apostolate.

Thus, the great Prayer of the Church is an essential element of the Assumption, integrating and structuring our daily life and our vocation as religious. Without the rhythm and liturgical structure of the days, weeks and seasons, our lifestyle would be different and we would no longer be religious of the Assumption. For us, the Liturgy is both a source and an expression of that adoration where, as M. Marie Eugenie said, our lives unfold and find their fulfillment.

In this Letter, I want to speak about the meaning and the place of the Liturgy in our lives. I would like to suggest that during this Paschal season or in the months ahead, you study and discuss this subject in your community.

THE GATE OF HEAVEN

At the heart of our christian and ecclesial life, the liturgy is our "entry" into the **mystery** of Christ. A mystery long hidden, revealed by God in the Incarnation, this mystery is Christ in us and we in Him. It is the mystery of our salvation and of the Kingdom, Christ in whom all things in heaven and on earth are reconciled. Through Him and in Him, we are in communion with God, and the full, deepest and most intimate meaning

of each of our existences lies embedded in this mystery. Revealed and comprehensible, the mystery remains nevertheless hidden, for it is infinitely beyond what we humans can hope to penetrate or grasp. It brings us rest and contentment, yet leaves us unsatisfied and draws us forward. It is the true measure of our vocation and of our destiny.

The Liturgy is a door which opens into the Mystery. It unites for us Heaven and Earth, God and the created Universe. In the Incarnation God has become like us, assuming our bodily and earthly nature. And this divine condescension is continued in the Liturgy, because through words and gestures, images and human symbols, God continues to make Himself accessible to us. Jacob's dream, in which he saw a ladder joining Heaven to Earth becomes a reality of our everyday existence.

The needs as well as the aspirations of our world are manifold. We are witnesses to so much suffering and sorrow; we see so much goodness and beauty too. But so many of our brothers and sisters live these experiences with no reference to God, unaware of their source and their end. Can we not believe that when we meet for the liturgy, we are not only in communion with God, but through our celebration we also create a space of communication and communion between heaven and earth ?

Entrance into the mystery of Christ implies an encounter with Him. To participate in the Liturgy is first of all to become present to his Presence. We need not envy those who saw and touched, listened to and followed Jesus on earth. His contemporaries had no greater share in his mystery than we have today.

We want to be present in a way that enables us to say: "It is the Lord !" (Jn. 21:2) and to proclaim his presence to the community as did the beloved disciple. Without this lively awareness of his Presence in the sacred symbols, we will remain on the threshold of the mystery; like the Samaritan woman who did not recognise the One who spoke to her at Jacob's well, we will have missed the inner reality. We will not become the adorners in spirit and in truth whom Jesus came to raise up for his Father.

Christ is present in the Liturgy in several ways. He is present above all, in the Eucharist where we re-present the Passion-Resurrection and Glorification of the Son and where we are taken with Him in his Passover towards the Father. The fundamental sacrament is Jesus Himself and all the sacraments of the Church are privileged means of encounter with God in Christ. Just as Jesus is their true administrator, so is He their true substance. Christ present in his Word speaks to us through Holy Scripture and his Word becomes a saving event for the community. Jesus speaks and what

He says. He does. And when the Church prays and chants the Divine Office, which is the prolongation of and preparation for the Eucharist, Christ is present. He is in the community; He prays in us. It is to Him also that we pray.

Jesus promised to be present each time the Church assembles in his Name. It is an invisible presence, mysterious but real, as real as the immense Love which enfolds us and is open to us at every moment in Him. Do we realize that the steps which lead us to the Liturgy, lead us also to an encounter with Him ?

The Liturgy is a place and a process of integration. The world, human growth and progress, the whole Cosmos are all woven into the fabric of salvation history by the liturgical action. It is a theological locus where all things find their correct place, are situated in their relation to God and to their ultimate end. It is there that all the tears and labour, all the combats for goodness and truth, all human successes and victories are brought into the Kingdom of God. There, we can discover the meaning or give meaning to all the dimensions of life, all personal and collective experiences. Through the Liturgy, the multiple and manifold aspects of our lives fall into place revealing their inner harmony and design. They are transformed into a work of beauty and truth which gives glory to God and at the same time deeply satisfies us as both creatures and creators.

We can say that the Liturgy is a process of ontological integration where all things are recapitulated in Christ, and where every situation becomes an access to the Kingdom. By the word "ontological" I mean that integration is in fact accomplished. It is not a mere matter of art, ceremony or devotion, nor is it just an expression of a religious intention. Its fruit is neither intellectual understanding nor religious consolation, it really is the integration of all things in Christ.

In this sense, the prayer of the Church actualizes the event of the cosmic Christ in time and in history; it effects the Passover of the whole of creation in Christ. Through the Prayer of the Church which is the liturgical action of the Body of Christ, the Spirit animates and transforms all that is human - persons, communities, history and the universe - and offers them up to the Father. All the stuff of our world and of our existences takes a paschal form and that of the new Creation. We are not only saved and sanctified by his grace; we are also rendered actors with Christ in God's work, the work of salvation and sanctification.

The Liturgy is also a piece of personal integration: it involves our whole person, our intelligence, our liberty, our will as well as our body, our

emotions and our imagination. It has the power to develop and mature, to purify and transform all that we are; it can harmonize all our faculties in an act of adoration.

This unification and harmonization which is, indeed, a "Christification", cannot be achieved without us. We must desire it and give both active and passive consent. This implies for us a constant challenge to create liturgies which are relevant to our experiences, and which assume them. It means that we will participate actively ourselves and encourage the community to do likewise. Much effort will be required but, there where the community invests fully and wholeheartedly in the liturgy, it becomes a real celebration and a source of strength for the community.

THE MYSTERY OF FAITH

I believe it is important to point out these more interior and less obvious aspects of the Liturgy, for I have the impression that many of our contemporary cultures leave little room for the spiritual dimension of human existence and are no longer attuned to religious symbols.

Many of us have inherited a rationalism which stresses purely verbal and abstract modes of expression, and in our mental universe, symbols are often relegated to the sphere of poetry and art. They are treated as if somehow detached from reality or even opposed to it, for they concern "only" the area of subjective feelings and emotions. Symbols for some people form part of that sensibility which should be avoided or considered as merely accidental. For human beings, however, the essential role of symbolism is to enable us to penetrate beyond the physical appearance of experiences and things so as to discover or confer inner meaning. Religious symbolism points beyond the reality of the sign to a still greater reality, transcendent, ineffable and, without the symbol, incommunicable.

I think we are sometimes more schizophrenic than we care to admit. In a world which cares little about the sacred and does not worry about the relationship between sacred and profane, religion and culture, we religious, living more or less like everyone else, find it difficult to explain exactly how we can belong to a scientific-technological culture where only the material and measurable is considered truly real, and at the same time belong to the Kingdom of God. Even for us, faith has become divorced from reason and religion from culture. The understanding of faith is divorced from everyday life, and we do not participate "intelligently" in the sacramental life of the Church. We live them side by side and one after the other. Therein however, lies the essential: through visible

signs we have access to the invisible; God gives Himself through the liturgical rites.

On the other hand, it is true that many of us are not deeply affected by the modern technico-scientific culture and symbolic expression comes to us spontaneously. But, even if we enter easily into the world of symbols, and even if our minds see the divine in daily life, I think we can still ask ourselves how we live the Liturgy. Where the celebrations of our people tend to try to render God closer and more accessible we risk being satisfied with religious "experiences" and feelings. We can be more attached to religious experiences than to the God of our experiences. We can be more attached to our "liturgies" than to the prayer of the Church. Also, those of us working among the more simple and poor people who seek consolation and strength in their liturgical celebrations so as to be able to bear their sufferings may identify with their people excessively. We may well let ourselves enter into their collective faith or religiosity and fail to assume the challenge of a more personal response. In so doing, we can fail to fulfill our mission to these same people.

Another difficulty has nothing to do with the culture but results from our human condition. Symbolic language is fragile; faith can fall easily into routine and the repetition of rites. Unless there is a constant effort to invent links, to relate the signs to the signified, the symbol to the reality.

In current language we describe those who "have the faith", who assist at Mass and receive the sacraments as "practising" Catholics. At the same time, we meet more and more people who are not practising but who truly believe. This even leads us to question the faith of the "practising" Catholics. We too can become mere practising religious if we assist daily at the Eucharist and recite the breviary without participating fully for lack of a lively and intelligent faith. For lack also of that interiority which is the habit of dwelling in the depths of our own hearts and acting from that center.

THE LITURGY IN THE ASSUMPTION

Our Congregation finds both its meaning and raison d'être in the mystery of the Incarnation. It is through the Liturgy that this mystery of God in us and we in God is revealed and celebrated, actualised and communicated. Through the Liturgy our whole life is centered on the Incarnation and offered in homage. Our life becomes adoration of the God who gives himself to us through his Word and his Spirit in this same Liturgy. Our worship becomes an *admirabile commercium*, a loving exchange.

The Eucharist is the summit and source of the whole liturgical action of the Church. The prayer of the Church prepares the Eucharist and flows each day from it. The rhythm of the Church's prayer corresponds to the natural rhythm of our days: rising, working, returning home to rest and then sleep. It is principally through praying the "hour" of the Divine Office that our time is converted and extended into God's time and that the hours of each day, brim-full with human activity, are gathered up together and sanctified.

From the very beginning, the Divine Office has been a basic and essential component of our style of life. It was essential to the contemplative lifestyle of the ancient religious Orders and of that Tradition to which M. Marie Eugenie wished to attach the Assumption. On the one hand, the choral recitation of the Office was the "Opus Dei" or the praise of God in the name of the whole Church and intercession for all of humanity; on the other hand, it nourished personal prayer and led to contemplation. Like her Benedictine friend Dom Guéranger, M. Marie Eugenie was convinced that the Liturgy is the best school of spirituality, both deep and broad. Her innovation was to make of this contemplative way, the principle, not only of our apostolate but also of a whole approach to education.

You are familiar with our history and of how M. Marie Eugenie had to insist many times on the importance of the Office for our Congregation. When the ecclesiastical authorities maintained that the choral Office was too heavy a burden for a teaching order, she explained that the Office was not only an attraction for all the sisters, but was in fact a necessity for those specifically involved in education. Here we touch on the originality of the Assumption charism. The Office plays no small role in our vocation to christianize the intelligence, *acquiring a lively faith, a faith that governs judgment, tastes and feelings*. This ideal is at the heart of both our spirituality and our mission. The Breviary in its beauty, its doctrinal and spiritual richness can be a school for educators. The psalms and readings, the prayers and hymns which we repeat day after day, week after week, in an attitude of receptiveness and desire, permeate the heart and mind leaving their imprint on memory and imagination. Like study, the Liturgy fosters not only a sound personal spirituality but also a mature doctrinal and ecclesial formation. For Marie Eugenie, it ensures a certain seriousness and serenity in our teaching.

On a more personal level, contemplatives involved in the intense activity of an educational apostolate, constantly associated with secular realities, need to be re-immersed in the things of God. The rhythm of the Office transforms the substance of our lives into an ongoing dialogue and sharing between us and the Lord.

Furthermore, since we desire to restore all things in Christ, we assure the constant flow between the daily affairs of the world and the Prayer of the Church. We are active participants in our people's history, and are at the same time delegated by the Church to bring this history with Christ to the Father. Our prayer embraces the current events of history, the lives of our contemporaries - and brings them to Christ and with Christ to the Kingdom, offering them in adoration to the Father; God becoming all in all. The liturgy prolongs in time the work of the Incarnation - that mystery in which man is divinised and all things are reconciled in Christ, or as the Rule of Life says: *the mystery which is the foundation of their personal spirituality and educational activity*.

Mère Marie Eugenie gives us yet another reason to treasure the Roman Breviary; it is the logical consequence of her understanding of the Church. By a kind of mystical insight rather than by a theological understanding, she loved the Church as a presence of Christ, the Christ who continues his life in our world and incorporates us into his life. Today we say that the Church is the Sacrament of Christ. Marie Eugenie was not familiar with such a concept but she would have found this an exact expression of her own thought. For her, communion with the Church was communion with Christ. For her, participation in the life of Christ implied an intimate and intense experience of the life of the Church, being of one heart and mind with her. If our life is Christ, then our life is also the Church. And the Liturgy was a powerful means of being identified with the Church, of making its life one's own. All that makes up the life of the Church: her past and present members, her history, her works, were for Marie Eugenie, the object of her interest, her affection and her contemplation. She found holiness in the long and rich Tradition of the Church, in the life and works of her saints, in the literature, art and music inspired by faith, as well as in worship and the sacraments. Her prayer spontaneously assumed the causes and calls of the Church.

The theological vocabulary of the 19th Century did not permit Marie Eugenie to speak of the Church as People of God, but her writings show that she felt that through the Church she belonged to this people. She felt in communion with all its members throughout the world and through all ages. For her they made up a people with a unique and sacred history having a unique destiny. This collective memory, knowledge of the past, and sense of belonging to a people, to the Church, strengthened and confirmed her personal identity as it does for us today. The Liturgy is the prayer of this people of God, offering us the treasures of a magnificent inheritance, inserting us in a sacred history. As Marie Eugenie wrote to Monsignor Gros: *The Office makes us daughters of the Church, and the first sisters preferred to go to heaven a little earlier or reduce their apostolic activity rather than give it up.*

You see then the place of the Liturgy in the constellation of the essential elements of our Assumption spirituality. It is part of its basic structure and it shines in each part just as light is reflected and refracted in the facets of a diamond. The Liturgy and personal prayer, the community and the apostolate are complementary and inseparable in our Christian and religious experience. It is not surprising that Marie Eugenie could say: "Love and zeal for the Office are the signs by which one recognizes a religious of the Assumption". (25.6.1893)

CONCLUSION

I deeply desire to live this Easter with you. I want to share with you the Paschal experience of Christ in which all the situations we as Congregation and as sisters are immersed in today - personal or collective, dramatic or joyous, crushing or uplifting - are taken up by the Spirit in the Passover of Christ to the Kingdom and to the Father.

And may all these situations become a theological locus where we find the living Christ, the one who died and rose from the dead, who continues to die and rise in us. Is not this the dynamism of our prayer in the great Prayer of the Church ?

Devotedly yours in Christ,

Sister Clare Teresa

Superior General.