

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

The Early Dark Ages of the Church –
Some Reflections

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QUASIMODOGENITI

APRIL 5

*Worship Supplement: The Offertory
for Eastertide (p. 31)*

Is a Christian to grow up to be simply a big Christian, or is a measure of his growth that he has grown up to be part of *the Christians*? Even outside of the Christian church the ideal is that a man grow up not only to be big, but to do big things for his world and his fellowmen. We are to desire the milk of the Word that we might grow up—grow up for what?—grow up into what?

The Offertory for Eastertide proposes an answer from passages of Holy Scripture which is addressed to each one of us: "Yourself a temple, your role a priest, your task an offering." But, phrased that way, it would miss an important accent. The pronoun "you" can be either singular or plural in English. Here it must be plural with a singular background. It is always true that the plural "people" is formed of single "persons." The offertory recognizes that; in this combination of passages the preliminaries are all in the singular: "I thank" and "I shall live" and "I shall recount." Every one of us is involved as an individual, a singular person of God. But the *Point* of this sermon is that we, aware of that singular salvation given by our Lord to each one of us, should hear the Lord address us as "you" in the plural: "Your selves a temple; your role a priesthood; your task, offerings."

The three divisions of the *Point* suggest a structure for presentation. The singular preliminaries could be developed under each section, both in the sense of each man being dealt with individually and in the sense of the foundational work of Jesus Christ. The plural conclusion would then

be stressed with the development of "spiritual house," "holy priesthood," and "spiritual sacrifices."

The *Problem* would take its cue in each section from the necessity in each man's background to be answered by God, to be saved by God, to be rescued from death by God. But to be apposite to the *Point*, the plural overtones would always be included. Part of our *Problem*, one of the reasons we are under the judgment of God, is that we are such deliberate individualists. We reject the brother out of individual selfishness, but we also reject him because we refuse to accept the reality of brotherhood. We are individually pleased at being answered and saved and given life, but we reveal strong traces of our basic corrosion in our reluctance to be "the people of God."

The *Power* is cued by the picture of the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone. In a world seeking individual answers, personal salvation, and the solitary life, God Himself moved in to rebuild wholeness into His creation. In Jesus Christ, though He was rejected by men, God restructured the chosen people of the new covenant. He did more than make every man a priest—He bound His people into a priesthood. He made clear their task—that of making offerings acceptable, not only individually but collectively as the church. He was a living stone, this Christ. He did not simply take His place in the world correctly positioned, corners chiseled square and smooth, as an example to men. He was a living stone, and He shared that new life with otherwise inanimate men and enabled them to "come to Him." As each man comes, He builds him into the temple, ordains him into the priesthood, and schedules his days as times of offering.

It would be helpful to achieve the definite first response in worship to alert the con-

gregation to the opportunity for using the offertory in the liturgy. The desire for the people of God to express their intention to dedicate their lives to God as living sacrifices is not new, but the opportunity this offertory presents is a new opportunity. The fresh sense of making an offering can be stimulated by the words that express a different direction from the "Create in me a clean heart" sentence. The people of the congregation should be ready to express themselves, with one another, in saying directly to God, "God, accept us now as an offering; built into a company and a temple, we dedicate ourselves, we offer ourselves." An offertory procession bringing forward the gifts of the people and the bread and wine for the Sacrament can help express the togetherness and the spiritual sacrificing.

Material supplied by
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MISERICORDIAS DOMINI

APRIL 12

Worship Supplement: The Nicene Creed
in New Translation (pp. 24—25)

Two things strike us at once: the place in the service where we confess it, and the fact that the words make it something *we* confess. The sermon follows the reading of the Holy Gospel (the rubric that permits a hymn in between Gospel and sermon is a "may" rubric). "Here ends the Holy Gospel" — and *here* begins the sermon. The Gospel is the text. That is the traditional purpose of the sermon, to make contemporary the thrust of the day's Gospel. It is to give today's vocabulary to the Word which the Christ spoke and *was* in the days He walked on earth. When the preacher has done that work well, we all rise and confess the Nicene Creed that we — all of us — believe what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. But in this new translation we note particularly that we

are enabled to say specifically that *we* believe it, that we are together in this belief, with the whole church.

That is particularly significant on this day, because the Holy Gospel (John 10:11-16) ends with the words of our Lord, "And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed My voice. So there shall be one flock, one Shepherd." We who follow the one Good Shepherd are one universal flock — or, saying it another way in the words of the Creed, we who believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ are one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

Our Problem is not disagreement over whether the word "catholic" should be used. Our Problem is that we can say "church" and not think beyond this sheepfold, that we can even think Shepherd, and not think one-Shepherd-one-flock. Christ died for the whole world, and yet small clutches of the gathered people of God can think and speak and live as if there were nobody here under the wings of the loving God but *us* chickens. If it were nothing more than a case of myopia ("Near-sightedness is chaste," wrote Vladimir Nabokov), that could be corrected simply by supplying the lenses which this Gospel contains; but when men will not look, will not think, will not live, will not *be* catholic, they really create a *Problem*. They are divisive, schismatic. It is true that there is another side to this — that the God of truth commits us to the truth of the Gospel and that error must be called exactly that and errorists be called to account; but in all our calling to account our thought must be "Our *brother* sins against us," "Our *brothers* are blown about by a strange wind of doctrine." And if it must be said to some, "You have another spirit," then still it must be remembered that they are our separated *brothers*.

What would have happened if the chronology of events were altered and while the disciples were arguing about who should be the greatest in the kingdom they were sud-

denly to look up and see the dead body of the Lord lowered from the cross and carried to the tomb? Would two folds of sheep keep blattering about which is the greatest if suddenly they could see together the Good Shepherd being mauled to death by the ravening lion seeking to devour Him—and them? The *Power* for catholicity lies partly in the lenses through which God shows us that the church *is* one; but the strength that makes it one, that heals the breaches thereof, comes from considering again, together, that He who knows us and whom we know laid down His life for the sheep. He laid it down that He might take it again. And He has laid down that the church is one—and He will take it again to Himself, one flock and one Shepherd. "By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls." (Epistle: 1 Peter 2:21-25)

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JUBILATE

APRIL 19

Worship Supplement: The Form of Intercession for Eastertide (pp. 36—37)

An appropriate accent suggested by this Eastertide form of the intercessions would concern power for life. This *Point* is suggested by the opening paragraph of the prayer—Christ, raised from the dead, will never die again. Death has no more power over Him. Now we pray for ourselves and for all Christ's members—since we have been baptized into that death which destroyed all alien power, may we "proclaim his resurrection to all men."

This is not simply a preaching of the fact—glorious and vital as that is. This is a living proclamation, a proclaiming of it by living it. The Epistle (1 Peter 2:11-20) spells it out: "Live as free men . . . that they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the

day of visitation." "No one will take our joy from us," Christ promises in the Gospel (John 16:16-23), but we can give it away, and one first step is to pray it away, as we will in this intercession. It is but a first step. But it is the first step. And by it we seek the power to walk out boldly from here to take the next steps in our weekdays. Rejoice! The resurrection means power to live for all Christ's members. It means life—power for all "who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion."

Use His Power and Live

The first steps in the prayer suggest a sequence of pertinent illustrations of how our second and third steps, our whole walk, should be directed. The Christian use of power in the church, in international, economic, and scientific areas; for the suffering and the starving, through our use of the amazing productivity of our agriculture; for the members of "this holy assembly"—for all this we pray for power that we might live in His power. "Grant that what we celebrate with faith we may put into practice in our lives."

Is the *Problem* that we are not really celebrating *with faith*? We have made our own doubting Thomas interpretation of what "a little while" means. If not "too little and too late," it is "a little, but later." Do not our hearts rejoice as children of God born out of God's own anguish into the world? The joy of the resurrection escapes us because we let ourselves be unaware that the risen Lord is still present. We let ourselves be negligent about the very process of finding that joy and fail to grasp the power we have for living in the present. In some of your hymnals the glorious word "eschew" is used in the collect. It is as pertinent as a bumper sticker. In fact a company in Rye, N. Y.—its corporate name is "Wry Ideas"—advertises a plaque with the words "Eschew Obfuscation" for \$1.50. (The Deluxe size is

\$2.50; the Grandiose, \$5.00.) Bumper strips are two for \$1.00. Our problem is that we have dropped the word — we are not praying “that we may eschew those things that are contrary to our profession.”

There is *Power* for daily living — it is “the fullness of God’s love.” We pray the power of the Spirit for those to be confirmed that they may witness to it. We pray for the church’s newly baptized that the Spirit may bring them to “a full knowledge of Christ’s love.” We pray for the church — “witness to the risen Christ.” Now in words share again in the fullness of God’s love, share in the Word the power to live. God longed to love and so He conceived of humanity. Though everyone went wrong, still God held to His hope and suffered all the abuse and complaint of Israel that He might still know joy and bring joy to men. Then the anguished labor of God-in-Christ to create again in a dead world His new life. He suffered wrongfully, but endured it patiently. By His suffering have we sons and daughters been brought forth into the world. Oh, the joy! Oh, the power to live!

CANTATE

APRIL 26

Worship Supplement: “At the Lamb’s High Feast We Sing” (Hymn 733)

The theme suggested by the singing of this new hymn is taken from the introit: “Oh, sing unto the Lord a new song, for He hath done marvelous things!” The festive mood created by the hymn and the propers suggests the theme: A New Song for a New Day.

The problem could be suggested by the type of “plain song” our life reflects, a song that does not sense the joy of triumphant living in the risen Lord.

This hymn is filled with power and encouragement to live and sing a new song of praise every day. Rejoice and sing this song, for now Christ “Gives his body for the feast, His sacred blood for wine.” (Stanza 2)

If the congregation is receptive to the singing of new hymns, the entire service might feature pertinent texts from the *Supplement*. After the Old Testament Lesson (Isaiah 12:1-6), for instance, Hymn 748, “Eternal God, Whose Power Upholds”; after the Epistle (James 1:16-21), Hymn 769, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”; and after the Gospel (John 16:5-15), Hymn 754, “Holy Spirit, Ever Dwelling.”

The sermon could be developed around the stanzas of Hymn 733, each section stressing a new aspect of God’s vivifying action for us. The choir could sing the answering stanza after each paragraph of the sermon. The sermon sequence might be:

“Cleansed Through Him” (stanza 1)

“Feasting with Him” (stanza 2)

“Made Alive by Him” (stanza 3)

“Given a Resurrection with Him” (stanza 4)

“Helped to Holiness by Him” (stanza 5)

The congregation could rise for the final trinitarian doxological stanza, or it might use the complete hymn as the offertory. It could be sung by the congregation as a distribution hymn, all rising and moving out into the aisles and proceeding to the altar to receive the Sacrament. (This would provide opportunity for introducing a method of distribution that would express the joy of the celebration, stress the corporate nature of the meal, and, by eliminating practices that take time, make the distribution much more of a “communion” of the family of God.)

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