

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

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CHAPTER 20 - CATHOLIC DEVOTIONS AND PRACTICES

There are many devotions or forms of worship that are particularly Catholic in nature. Once upon a time, they were so popular that they almost rivaled the Mass but now some have disappeared altogether while others are, sadly, neglected. It is my intention in this last chapter to give a short account of the origin and purpose of the most common of them and, hopefully, to arouse some interest in them again. Most of them fall under one of two headings: EUCHARISTIC devotions, and MARIAN devotions. Among the former are BENEDICTION and the FORTY HOURS ADORATION whilst among the latter are the ROSARY and the ANGELUS. At the end of the chapter I shall say a word on such practices as GENUFLECTIONS, the use of INCENSE, HOLY WATER, and several other things.

EUCHARISTIC DEVOTIONS

I think a word of introduction would be helpful here and for this I shall go back to the days of the Old Testament. When God's people were in the desert, He gave them two clear signs of His presence among them. First, He gave them a VISIBLE sign of His presence - what they called the SHEKINAH. This was a PILLAR OF CLOUD by day and a PILLAR OF FIRE by night, and secondly He provided them with FOOD which, if you remember, was called MANNA.

We, the NEW PEOPLE OF GOD, the members of His Body, the Church, also have our SHEKINAH and our MANNA and both are to be found in the EUCHARIST. First, we have a visible sign of His continued presence among us in the tabernacle with the sanctuary lamp burning to remind us that He is there, and of course we are fed upon JESUS, THE BREAD OF LIFE, in Holy Communion. In the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, as we saw in the chapter on the Eucharist, there are two distinct elements: one of SACRIFICE - Jesus, the Lamb of God, offering Himself to the Father; and the other of a MEAL - Jesus, the Bread of life, feeding us upon His body. Jesus Christ, our Shekinah, continuously present among us for our worship and Jesus Christ, our Manna, always ready to nourish us.

Over the centuries, the EMPHASIS has shifted from one aspect to the other. In the eighteenth century a custom was introduced, which is maintained to this day, whereby the priest, visiting the house of a sick person, to give them Holy Communion, used to bless them with the Host. Gradually, the custom arose of placing the Blessed Sacrament in a special vessel in which it could be clearly seen. The vessel in question is called a MONSTRANCE. We say we DEMONSTRATE something when we show it clearly. A Monstrance shows the Blessed Sacrament clearly so that we can see and worship since we are looking at Jesus Christ, God the Son, under the appearance of bread. Various devotions grew up round this practice of EXPOSING the Blessed Sacrament, such as Benediction and 'Quarant Ore' or Forty Hours when the Blessed Sacrament would be exposed for forty consecutive hours.

Some parishes have the Forty Hours in periods of exposition spread over three days. Many parishes have EXPOSITION each week for an hour during which confessions are heard. It is surely unnecessary to say just how precious those opportunities are to have Him all to ourselves in silence with, perhaps, just an occasional piece of sacred music to help us focus our attention on Him. Please don't neglect these opportunities to deepen your love and knowledge of Our Blessed Lord.

I mentioned earlier that one aspect of the Eucharist usually receives more emphasis than the other. Until VERY recently, the Shekinah has been eclipsed by the Manna. The result, I think, is that we lose something very precious. So many of the young say they are BORED at Mass. I believe that this is because they simply have not grasped the fact that they are in the presence of Mystery, NOT an entertainment, and that the only way to solve their problem is to get to know and love more, the ONE who is at the centre of it all - JESUS CHRIST. Those who regularly attend Exposition or pay regular visits to the Blessed Sacrament, come to love the Mass. Their devotion is BALANCED - they WORSHIP the One whom they receive in Holy Communion. During the LAST FEW YEARS the Church has encouraged a return to the Blessed Sacrament Exposed, recommending various readings from Scripture, followed by periods of silent prayer. What better devotion can you have than quiet, prayerful reflection on the Word of God, in the presence of the WORD OF GOD HIMSELF?

THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS

In the Middle Ages, a devotion centred on the sufferings and death or PASSION of our Lord began to appear. This is one of the devotions which has not lost its appeal. I am speaking, of course, of the STATIONS OF THE CROSS or the WAY OF THE CROSS (the Via Crucis). On the walls of Catholic Churches can be seen fourteen pictures or carvings depicting incidents in the last hours of the life of Jesus Christ from the moment when He is condemned to death by Pilate, until His crucified Body is laid in the tomb. A verse of Scripture and a short meditation are read before each station then various prayers are said in unison. Often, a verse of the hymn called the Stabat Mater is sung as those making the devotion move from one station to the next. This devotion can be carried out privately as well as publicly and people are encouraged to do so - especially in Lent.

MARIAN DEVOTIONS

Now, let us look at devotions concerning the BLESSED VIRGIN MARY. The first and easily the best known is, of course, THE ROSARY - a word which comes from the Latin word ROSARIUM meaning a bouquet. The rosary as we know it today is the result of a long period of development starting in the twelfth century when it was devised by St. Dominic following a vision in which Our Lady revealed it to him. The purpose of the Rosary is to help people to MEDITATE, or PRAYERFULLY REFLECT, upon incidents in Our Lord's and Our Lady's lives while reciting the prayers. At first, this consisted of the OUR FATHER together with the greetings of the angel Gabriel to Mary, "HAIL, FULL OF GRACE" and of St. Elizabeth to Mary, "BLESSED ART THOU AMONG WOMEN..." as recorded in the New Testament. The second half of the prayer was added later in order to ask Our Lady to help us by her prayers "NOW AND AT THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH".

Monks and nuns say the Divine Office every day. This comprises all 150 psalms (which are said over the whole week) together with readings from Scripture and writings and lives of the saints. Humble lay brothers and sisters, and the majority of lay people in the Middle Ages could not read and so they were given 150 prayers to say instead which they knew by heart. To help them keep a count of how many prayers they had said, cords with 150 knots or beads were made. Then the custom arose of reading a verse of Scripture before each individual bead. This became the SCRIPTURAL ROSARY. Gradually, this developed into the rosary we now have, with its fifteen prayer-thoughts or 'Mysteries' - five Joyful, five Sorrowful, and five Glorious. The Rosary is a wonderful devotion which encourages us to meditate while asking for Our Lady's powerful intercession. It is equally suitable for individual or group recitation - and, most importantly, in the home with all the family together!

Another Marian devotion is the ANGELUS, which gets its title from the first word of the prayer in the original Latin: 'Angelus Domini nuntiavit Maria' - "THE ANGEL OF THE LORD DECLARED UNTO MARY", with the response "AND SHE CONCEIVED OF THE HOLY SPIRIT", then the 'Hail Mary' is said. The next verse is "BEHOLD THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD" to which the response is, "BE IT DONE UNTO ME ACCORDING TO THY WORD" then the Hail Mary is said again. The final verse goes, "AND THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH" with the response "AND DWELT AMONGST US" then a final Hail Mary and concluding prayer. Traditionally, this is recited at 6 a.m., 12 noon, and 6 p.m. and the monastery or church bell would be rung at intervals so that anyone within earshot might join in.

There are devotions known as NOVENAS - nine consecutive days of prayer in honour of Our Lord, the Holy Spirit, Our Lady or one of the Saints. Then there is the devotion called the NINE FIRST FRIDAYS which entails going to Mass and Holy Communion on the First Friday of each month for NINE CONSECUTIVE MONTHS - an astonishingly difficult thing to do because nearly always something crops up to prevent you completing it, and then you have to start again! All these novenas have this much in common - they not only encourage prayer but also, what is more important, they encourage PERSEVERANCE in prayer.

CATHOLIC PRACTICES

So now we come to deal with Catholic Practices and to introduce them I shall say a word on something not much talked of now - INDULGENCES. Abuse of, and ignorance about, this doctrine and practice was one of the things that triggered-off the Reformation. The word 'Indulgence' means FORGIVENESS but the forgiveness is NOT of sin but of the TEMPORAL PUNISHMENT still due after a sin has been forgiven. Do you remember the chapter on the "FORGIVENESS OF SINS"? When God forgives our serious sins it means we won't go where we deserve to go - Hell - but it does NOT mean that we get off 'Scot Free' as the saying goes. There is still punishment to undergo - PURIFICATION or PURGING to undergo.

In the early days of the Church very severe penances, or CANONICAL penances as they were called, were imposed. FASTING, ALMSGIVING, standing outside church wearing penitential clothing while asking for the prayers of those going in to Mass! Gradually, the Church introduced the practice of 'FORGIVING' or letting people off a certain number of days of this penance if they said certain prayers or gave alms. Thus, for example, an "INDULGENCE" of 30 days attached to some prayer would remit an equivalent amount of punishment that 30 days of the old canonical penances would have done. The Church was able to do this since She is the TREASURY of the infinite merits gained by Our Lord on the Cross which have the power to wipe out sin and the punishment due to sin.

The Church no longer specifies days and years in relation to Partial Indulgences. She now says She will match from her treasury the equivalent remission of temporal punishment that the act to which the indulgence is attached would itself acquire. In other words, you get as much again from the Church as the act you perform earns. Some devotions are so highly RECOMMENDED and ENCOURAGED by the Church that a PLENARY indulgence, that is remission of ALL the temporal punishment due to sin, is given. For example, the 'Stations' or 'Way of the Cross' have a plenary indulgence attached to them.

It is important to remember that Indulgences are always, and only, granted under what are called 'THE USUAL CONDITIONS' - that is: CONFESSION, HOLY COMMUNION, and PRAYERS FOR THE POPE'S INTENTIONS (one Our Father, one Hail Mary and one Glory be...) within eight days of performing the act to which the indulgence was attached. The sins are ALREADY forgiven - the indulgence or forgiveness is for the punishment still due for them.

Here are some of the other more common Catholic practices:

- GENUFLECTIONS, that is, bending the right knee and placing it on the ground beside the left foot. This is normally done before entering your pew in a church where the Blessed Sacrament is 'reserved' - that is, present in the tabernacle. This is a unique sign of the worship due to God alone and it is NOT done, therefore, when the Blessed Sacrament is NOT 'reserved' such as on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday when the tabernacle is empty.
- THE DOUBLE GENUFLECTION or going down on BOTH knees and bowing, is always used when the Blessed Sacrament is Exposed.
- THE SIGN OF THE CROSS we have already dealt with. In making the sign of the Cross we are asking for protection 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit' - so this should never be done casually.
- BLESSED or HOLY WATER is normally used, with the sign of the cross, on entering a church, to remind ourselves of the waters of baptism (when we received God's life) and also as a sign of our desire to be cleansed of sin on entering God's presence. Many Catholics have a small Holy Water container on the wall by their front door to use each time they leave the house.
- THE BLESSING OF A HOUSE is normally done when Catholics first move into a house and want to ask for God's blessing upon all who are to live in it. Sometimes this is repeated during Eastertide with water blessed at the Easter Vigil and which is called Easter Water.
- STRIKING ONE'S BREAST with one's hand, for example, during the Penitential Rite at Mass when we say the 'I confess...' as this is a traditional sign of humility.
- BOWS FROM THE WAIST are a sign of respect which is used on entry into a church where the Blessed Sacrament is NOT reserved, or during the Creed at Mass, whereas simple bows of the head are a sign of respect used by altar servers when handing something to the priest at Mass.
- INCENSE which was a sign of respect reserved for Royalty, is used on certain occasions as a special sign of respect such as for the Blessed Sacrament at Benediction; for the Book of the Gospels at Mass; or for the Coffin at a funeral. The smoke, rising upwards, symbolises our prayers going up to God.

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