

*When the sick man is nigh to death:* "We beseech thy clemency, almighty God, that by the virtue of this sacrament thou wouldst vouchsafe to strengthen thy servant with thy grace so that at the hour of his death the enemy may not prevail against him, but he may deserve to pass with thy angels to life."

A man's last hour is solemn and decisive. Upon that moment depends not only his eternity but the very efficacy of the Saviour's Passion, of the sacraments received by the dying man throughout his lifetime, of a treasure of divine graces and love bestowed on a wretched creature. Jesus stands beside the deathbed, for the salvation of that soul is the fruit of redemption and the Sacred Heart yearns to win it. The Church, filled with the spirit of Christ, cannot be indifferent when the last hours of the wayfarer in this land of exile have arrived, and she does all that is in her power to co-operate with the divine Redeemer, in saving the souls of the dying, by the ritual *de visitatione infirmorum*, by establishing pious confraternities for a holy death under the patronage of St Joseph, by indulgenced prayers, and by Masses offered for those about to die. Of all the poor and needy who have a right to our compassion, the souls of the dying are surely those who are in the most dangerous state, even more so than the souls in Purgatory. The latter are sure of their eternal salvation, whereas the souls of the dying, by reason of the assaults of Satan, are in the greatest danger.

This is one of the reasons why the divine mercy, besides the many spiritual remedies offered by the Church to the sick, was pleased to institute a special sacrament to ensure their eternal salvation in that last awful moment, and to enable them to die peacefully in the arms of God.

The sacrament of Penance is the sacrament of spiritual regeneration, and that of Extreme Unction is the final purification and perfection of the Christian.

## V

### THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE ON OCCASIONS OF PUBLIC PLAGUE

We find among the votive Masses in the Roman Missal one under the following title: *pro vitanda mortalitate, vel tempore pestilentiae*, similar to the one we have just described. It does not show great originality, and the compiler has not succeeded in giving a special character to his work. Indeed in some places there is little to distinguish it from the many Masses *pro infirmo* contained in the medieval Sacramentaries.

Apart from these imperfections, the Mass is inspired by a deep sentiment of faith and confidence, and in the first part, before the Offertory, attains to a certain tragic grandeur, especially in the Introit. The teaching to be derived from this Mass is that the best medicine in time of pestilence is purity of conscience ; in other words, that we should keep our soul free from any stain of sin.

Although this Mass *tempore pestilentiae* is a comparatively late composition, prototypes of it are to be found in the ancient Liturgies. The Collects are taken from those at the end of the Gregorian Sacramentary, which contains many other alternative formulas. It is not easy to guess on what considerations the composer has based his choice, but it is certain that the prayers given in the first part of the Sacramentary of Adrian I are very beautiful, and appear better suited to the time of plague than those chosen for the occasion in the present Missal, which are couched in general terms, and would be equally appropriate to any other calamity, as, for instance, a fire, an accident, a hailstorm, etc.

It is well to note here that in the early Sacramentaries all the necessities both public and private of the individual, of the family, and of the nation, are expressed through the eucharistic Sacrifice. While, in the Old Testament, a great number of oblations existed for sins, for purification, for pacification, for propitiation, etc., in the New Law the Sacred Victim on our altars comprehends in one perfect Sacrifice the various significations which those former legal oblations partially expressed. It may be said truly, that, in the New Testament, the Holy Eucharist is the entire worship paid to God by the faithful people.

The Antiphon of the Introit of the Mass *pro vitanda mortalitate* is taken from Kings, Book II, 24, where David implores the Lord to stop the plague which for three days had raged among the people. The verse following it is from Psalm lxxix and is appropriate to the occasion, as it is messianic in character.

Introit, Kings II, 24.

*Recordare, Domine, testamenti tui, et dic Angelo percutienti : cesset iam manus tua, et non desoletur terra, et ne perdas omnem animam vivam.*

Ps. lxxix. *Qui regis Israel, intende : qui deducis, velut ovem, Joseph.—Gloria Patri.—Recordare.*

Remember, O Lord, thy covenant, and say to the destroying angel : Hold now thy hand, and let not the land be made desolate, neither let every living thing be destroyed.

*Psalm lxxix.* Give ear, O thou that rulest Israel : thou that leadest Joseph like a sheep. Glory be. Remember.

Great calamities or public misfortunes are generally inflicted by God as punishments for the sins of the nation. The individual will expiate his faults in the next world, but nations and states cannot do so, and therefore the Lord punishes their social sins here. He desires, by these public scourges, to bring them to repentance, and the surest means to avert the divine justice is the conversion of the people and their return to God. St Gregory had this object in view when he instituted the famous *litania septiformis* with the procession to the Vatican Basilica, in order to stop the plague desolating Rome in 590.

This thought inspires the following Collect :

*Deus, qui non mortem, sed poenitentiam desideras peccatorum : populum tuum ad te revertentem propitius respice ; ut, dum tibi devotus existit, iracundiae tuae flagella ab eo clementer amoveas. Per Dominum.*

“ God, who desirest not the death but the repentance of sinners, mercifully look upon thy people who return to thee ; and grant that they, being devoted to thee, may by thy mercy be delivered from the scourges of thine anger. Through our Lord.”

The Lesson is taken from the same chapter as the Introit. The plague was raging throughout the kingdom of David, and slew seventy thousand victims in three days. The angelic minister of the sanctity of God was sent to punish the sin of vainglory committed by the king, when he ordered the census of the nation to be taken. The people suffered for his sin on the principle of solidarity so strongly felt by the ancients, who regarded the sins or the virtues of parents and rulers as drawing down punishment or blessings upon their children and subjects. By permitting this, God commits no injustice, for it is merely a question of temporal goods which he is in no way bound to bestow, and if he deprives certain individuals of these advantages, it is for their eternal welfare. For instance, the plague was in reality ordered to the greater good of the Israelites, for God, who does not punish the same sin twice, allowed them to expiate their sins by that death, and the poor victims were carried away by the pestilence at the moment when it was to the greater advantage of their souls.

Even those who by the inscrutable judgement of God were not saved, were spared from adding to their guilt, and their eternal punishment was less terrible in consequence.

David propitiated the Lord by erecting a votive altar on the spot where he had beheld the angel with the drawn sword ; that altar is a symbol of our Redeemer who reconciles all humanity to God through the merits of his precious Blood.

The Gradual is taken from Psalm cvi : “ The Lord sent his

word, and healed them: he delivered them from their destructions. *Ÿ*. Let the mercies of the Lord give glory to him, and his wonderful works to the children of men. Alleluia."

Not only did Jesus heal the sick, but he left this power to his Apostles, and we still see miraculous cures performed by the more holy members of the Church even to this day.

The alleluiatic verse taken from Psalm lxxviii follows. As we know, it was originally separated from the responsorial Psalm by a second Lesson from the New Testament. "Alleluia, alleluia. Save me, O God, for the waters are come in even unto my soul. Alleluia."

From Septuagesima to Easter the alleluiatic verse is omitted, and the verse from Psalm cii: *Domine non secundum peccata* is sung. This Tract has been sung on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays in Lent since the time of Adrian I. In Paschal time the alleluiatic verse is said instead of the Gradual, and therefore, in the place of the second Lesson now suppressed, another Psalm, curtailed and reduced to a single verse, is added. The verse in this Mass is not taken from the Psalter but from the minor prophets.

Alleluia (Zach. viii, 7-8): "I will save my people Israel in their evil day, and I will be their God in truth and in justice."

When confronted with some great catastrophe such as an earthquake or a pestilence, the pride of man is brought low; all his discoveries and his boasted wisdom are powerless before God, whose touch can wither and dissolve the earth. Man raises his towers of Babel, his palaces and monuments, as though they were to endure for ever, but an earthquake of the duration of a few seconds is sufficient to make of a populous city a heap of ruins. Science performs miracles; man thinks that he has penetrated all the secrets of nature, he boasts that he has mastered creation and has now no need of God. An epidemic breaks out: a mysterious bacillus slays thousands and thousands of victims, and upsets all the calculations of the learned. It is a microbe, an almost invisible organism, which annihilates human pride. Such is our life, the span of which can be shortened by such microscopic enemies. God alone is strong, wise, and good. In him only can we trust, for he alone will never fail us. All other things, science, art, glory, health, and strength, are but vanity.

The Gospel is that of Saturday of the Summer Ember Days (Luke iv, 38-44), and relates the healing of St Peter's mother-in-law, and of the many sick persons who came to Jesus in consequence of this cure. When the Word took flesh he conferred upon that flesh the power to bestow health, grace, and holiness. The Saints, especially in early Christian times, regarded the Holy Eucharist as a remedy not only for the soul

but for the body. The Fathers of the Church relate many cases of bodily cures effected by Holy Communion. Indeed St John Chrysostom tells us that many sick people were restored to health after having been anointed with the oil from the lamps which burnt before the altar. We have already mentioned in the preceding pages that since the second century the bishop always blessed the oils for the sick at the Sunday Mass. When, subsequently, the performance of this rite was limited to the *missa chrismalis* of Maundy Thursday, the faithful of Rome in the Middle Ages used to bring their own phials of oil to be blessed by the Pope or the clergy celebrating with him. This *oleum infirmorum* was reverently preserved in every house as holy water is now. A great change has taken place since those days in the mind of Christians, some of whom now appear to have a great fear of Extreme Unction.

The Antiphon accompanying the Offertory Psalm, now no longer used, is taken from the Book of Numbers (xvi, 48), and tells how the people of Israel rebelled against Moses, and how fourteen thousand were destroyed by fire from heaven. The great legislator commanded Aaron his brother to place himself as mediator between the bodies of the dead and the living, and the justice of God. The prayers of Aaron ascended like incense and God was placated. This is the place and the vocation assigned to the clergy. The priest is called away from the multitude to be a mediator between God and man. Among all the ministries and offices he is chosen to fulfil, there is no office more worthy, none more essential, than the offering up of the Eucharistic Sacrifice and liturgical meditation, the psalmody *in loco sancto, in quo orat sacerdos pro delictis et peccatis populi*.

The priest makes prayer and intercession for the sins of others, for it is understood that he must be holy and pure from every sin, or else *si non placet, non placat*, as St Bernard wisely says. St Jerome, too, when speaking of the legal purifications of the Jews, remarks: "Does any man among the people fall into sin? The priest prays for the culprit and his sin is forgiven. But should the priest sin, who shall make intercession for him?"

The prayer over the Oblations, which formerly in Gaul accompanied the reading of the diptychs, and at Rome preceded the Canon of the Consecration, is as follows:

*Subveniat nobis, quaesumus, Domine, Sacrificii praesentis oblatio: quae nos et ab erroribus universis potenter absolvat, et a totius eripiat perditionis incursum. Per Dominum.*

"Let the sacrifice which we now offer up succour us, O Lord, may it wholly release us from sin and deliver us from ruin and destruction. Through."

In time of plague when the chief need is to find the cause and the remedy for the disease, the Church is indeed wise to point out the true source of all evil, sin. When this is removed by a sincere return to God, the epidemic will disappear, God will be placated, and will restore his grace, which will purify the body, too, from every contagion.

The Communion (Luke vi, 17-19), contrary to rule, is not taken from the Psalter nor from the Gospel of the Mass. This proves that it is a composition of a later date when these canons were no longer adhered to. "A multitude of the sick, and those that were troubled with unclean spirits, came to him ; for virtue went out from him and he healed them all."

The fruit of the fatal tree poisoned the lives of all mortals, but the fruit of Mary's blessed womb is the medicine of immortality, the antidote against the virus of sin, spread through the soul as well as the body.

The ancient Liturgy always supposed that the faithful, who had offered the Sacrifice to God together with the priest, would also devoutly participate in it by Holy Communion. To people accustomed to pagan sacrifices, a sacrifice in which those present did not participate by means of a sacrificial banquet would have been almost incomprehensible. The following is the prayer after Holy Communion :

*Exaudi nos, Deus, salutaris nos-  
ter : et populum tuum ab iracun-  
diae tuae terroribus liberum, et mis-  
ericordiae tuae fac largitate securum.  
Per Dominum.*

"Hear us, O God of our sal-  
vation, and deliver thy people  
from the terrors of divine anger,  
and make them secure by the  
bountifulness of thy mercy.  
Through our Lord."

There may well be physical causes for the spread of epidemic diseases, and remedies for combating them. But anyone who considers these scourges, before which human science is conscious of its own impotence, from a supernatural point of view, will easily recognize that they are the consequence of sin—more especially of the sins of Society. The remedy is to be sought in conformity to the Will of God, who disposes and orders all things to our own greater good, in sincere conversion and the amendment of our sins ; and, lastly, in an ardent zeal and activity, according to our social influence, in order that our individual conversion and expiation may bear fruit in a sincere return to God of modern society : *generatio mala et adultera.*