

Strange To The Convert

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London Catholic Truth Society No.do0308 (1964)

MOST CONVERTS accept easily all that the Church teaches. Some find it difficult to adopt Catholic practices, either because of a lingering fear that they may have pagan origins, or because they have an exaggerated idea of the spiritual nature of religion and want ceremonies to be few and very simple.

The Church is an all-embracing mother. She will take into her bosom all that is good in human nature and suffuse it with grace. She did not suppress entirely the beautiful ways which pagans and Jews found of expressing to God the deep desires of their hearts. She transformed and Christianized them. She knows that "God is a spirit; and they that adore Him must adore Him in spirit and truth" (John 4 : 2). But she also knows that man's spirit is not disembodied, and therefore it worships through the five senses. Christ himself gave her the seven sacraments, the outward signs of inward grace, and the authority to make laws for their administration. But she does not despise other ways which the human heart has found to help it to reach out to God.

We will examine seven of these ways.

CANDLES

LIGHT dispels darkness and with it ignorance and fear. It is beautiful in itself. Hence it is a joy to the heart of man. It has played a prominent part in all religions. The pagans offered lights to their gods to ward off their anger. But for the Jews it was a symbol of God's Truth. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my paths" (Psalm 118 : 105). It was also a symbol of the presence of God, the 'shekinah'. The curtain of fire, burned always in the sanctuary of the Temple. In the Holy Place also stood the seven-branch candlestick. These were apt symbols of God, who is "like the light of the morning when the sun rises" (2 Samuel 23 : 4). It was in the Temple where these lights burned that Simeon, who stood at the gateway between the old and the new Testaments, took the Child into his arms and called Him, "a light to the revelation of the gentiles and the glory of my people Israel" (Luke 2: 32). And Christ Himself said, "I am the light of the world" (John 9 : 5).

Symbol of Christ

For the Christian, then, a light was the symbol of Christ. In the ceremonies of the Eve of Easter, the Easter Vigil, the deacon holds up the newly lighted candle and cries, "The Light of Christ!" The Paschal candle stands in a tall candlestick on the Gospel side of the sanctuary and is kept lit at the Mass of the Easter Season. [In former times it was only lit at the High Mass. Then, the custom was to follow the rubric: 'It is extinguished for the last time after the singing of the Gospel on Ascension Thursday, so representing the departure of Christ from the earth.']

The sanctuary lamp that burns in every church where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, is a sign of the presence of Christ in the tabernacle, "who enlightens every man born into this world" (John 1: 9). [The veil over the tabernacle is a further sign of the presence of the King in His 'tent'.]

Splendour

Candles are also used to give glory to God by making splendid the place of His dwelling. St John tells how in his vision he saw Jesus surrounded by seven golden candlesticks, bearing seven stars in His hand and His face and eyes full of light. He calls Him, "He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks" (Apoc. 2: 1).

This text may have suggested the custom of surrounding the altar, which represents Christ, with candlesticks. In the twelfth century the custom arose of putting seven candlesticks on the altar. The deacons of the seven great churches of Rome each carried his candlestick to the church where the faithful were gathered and placed it on the altar. When the custom arose of standing a crucifix in the centre of the altar, one of these candlesticks had to be removed. Now there are always six great candles on the main altar. Christ, as in the vision of St John, walks in the midst of the candlesticks. The two small candles used for low masses were originally for the purpose of lighting the book. But they also symbolize Christ, "the light of the world." [The reform of the Liturgy inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council has seen the abolition of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' masses. The best liturgists now use the number of candles to signify the degree of solemnity in the commemoration of the Mass being celebrated. Six are used on Sundays and Solemnities; Four on Feast-Days; and two for Memorials and ordinary and seasonal Masses.]

Sacramentals

Candles are also sacramentals. These are certain prayers, actions and objects blessed by the Church, who prays that those who use them devoutly may receive special favours. On Candlemas Day, 2nd February, the Feast of the Purification of Our Lady and the Presentation of Our Lord, the Church blesses [or makes an effort to bless] all the Candles to be used in worship throughout the year. She prays that they will remind us of Christ, give glory to God in ceremonies and bring blessings to those who use them. They are used in the administration of all the sacraments and in all ceremonies. [Your own candles can be brought to Church on this special day and receive the blessing as well.]

Votive Offerings

Candles are used as offerings given in fulfilment of a promise made to God or a saint when asking for a favour. They also express all the aspirations of prayer. In human relationship we express our feelings of love, sorrow, gratitude, by giving little gifts, even as inexpensive as a birthday card. We make a sacrifice of money to get something pleasing as a mark of affection. Christians sacrifice a little money to adorn the shrine of a saint with a light which burns when they are gone as an abiding symbol of their devotion. We write messages on birthday cards, or make our own the words printed there. When we give our gift to the shrine we express our thoughts to the saint in our own words or the words of set prayers given to us in prayer books.

Votive lights are not blessed, and they are not sacramentals. There is danger that ignorant people should become too attached to them and exaggerate their importance. For this reason the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, in 1932, forbade the use of them in the churches of Rome. He suggested that the faithful should make offerings of the beeswax candles blessed on Candlemas Day and used in liturgical worship. But this was to stop an abuse in a particular place. Our shrines are beautified by candlelight and many fervent prayers are said on the occasion of offering a candle.

INCENSE

THE ancient pagans used incense. They heaped this powdered or granulated resin on glowing coals to send up a fragrant smoke to please the king whom they wished to honour or the god whom they wished to placate. Carvings in Egyptian tombs show us kings offering incense in round containers, with holes in the top, suspended on chains, very like the censers used in Catholic churches today. The Book of Leviticus told the Jews to burn incense in the tabernacle so that "when the perfumes are put upon the fire, the cloud and vapour thereof may cover the oracle" (Lev. 16: 13). Zachary was offering it when "there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar of incense" (Luke 1: 11). It was used during Jewish religious meals, and may well have been burned at the Last Supper.

Symbolism of incense

The fragrant smoke was used in ancient times to sweeten the air in the presence of kings, and so became a mark of honour. The Magi brought to Bethlehem gifts befitting a king, "gold, frankincense and myrrh" (Matt. 2: 11). For the Jews it was also a symbol of prayer, which rises before the throne of God like the smoke before the thrones of earthly kings. They sang in their psalm, "Let my prayer be directed as incense in Your sight" (Psalm 140: 2).

We may presume that like so much of the Jewish ritual, the use of incense was carried into Christian usage in the first century. But we have no certain historical evidence of its use until the fifth century. Then it became universal in East and West. Its symbolism has not changed.

The Church, like God's people of old, uses it to show honour to God Himself, to His ministers and to the sacred objects used in His service. At the High Mass [and now at any Mass if the celebrant chooses to use it,] the priest swings the smoking censer towards the Crucifix, honouring Christ who reigns from the Cross. He swings it about the altar, which represents Christ, the bread and wine which is to be consecrated into the Body and Blood of Christ. The deacon, swinging the censer towards them, honours first the celebrant, then the attendant clerics, then the congregation of the people, worthy of honour as "a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people" (1 Peter 2: 9). At the little ceremony of Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, the priest twice puts incense on the lighted charcoal and swings it towards the Blessed Sacrament.

As for the Jews, so for the Church, it is a symbol of prayer also. St John saw "the smoke of the incense of the prayers of the saints" rising before the throne of God (Apoc. 8: 4). As the priest in the High Mass incenses the bread and wine at the Offertory, he says, [when he follows the Missal of 1962,] "May this incense blessed by You ascend to You O Lord; and may Your mercy descend upon us." As he incenses the crucifix and the altar he recites the words of the 140th psalm: "Let my prayer, O Lord, be directed as incense in Your sight; the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice. Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth and a door round about my lips. Incline not my heart to evil words, to make excuses in sin." Finally, "May the Lord kindle in us the fire of His love, and the flame of everlasting charity. Amen."

MEDALS

A MEDAL is a coin-like disc with an image and an inscription. They are given as marks of distinction by the State to citizens who have served it well. Sometimes they commemorate some great event. But religious medals are wholly different in purpose.

Pliny tells us that amulets, talismans and charms, thought to have power to ward off evil, were worn round the neck by Romans of all classes. Again, Christian religious medals are wholly different from these.

We possess Christian medals of the second and fourth centuries. Their wording and inscriptions show that they were worn as memorials of religious events such as Baptism, First Communion or Confirmation. In medieval times tokens in lead were sold at all places of pilgrimage, and were worn as a sign that the wearer had made the pilgrimage. Giraldus Cambrensis went on pilgrimage to the shrine of St Thomas of Canterbury only ten years after the saint's death. He tells us he saw pilgrims with medals of St Thomas hanging about their necks. No doubt they were worn out of devotion as well as boastfully. Innocent III in 1200 granted the canons of St Peter's the monopoly of casting lead and pewter images of the saints, to be worn by pilgrims "for the increase of their devotion and a testimony of the journey which they had accomplished."

Not till the end of the sixteenth century do we find medals worn merely out of devotion and enriched by the Church with indulgences. Since then hundreds of different types of medals have been struck. They are a reminder of some point of doctrine, such as the Sacred Heart, or some event, such as the apparitions at Lourdes, or some holy place, such as Rome, or of a patron saint. Embossed on the medals are images and words to explain their purpose. They are also worn as badges of sodalities or confraternities.

Aids to Devotion

They are aids to devotion for many thousands of people. They remind them of the doctrine commemorated and are an inspiration to brief meditations and little prayers. Or they remind them of the patron saint and encourage them to pray for help. The very act of wearing them is a prayer and a pledge of love. If they are worn in the lapel of the coat or round the neck, they are also a public profession of faith. There is a danger that ignorant people might use them superstitiously, thinking that these pieces of metal have power to drive away evil. That is a pagan idea. The medal is effective only because of the blessing of the Church, and the prayers of the wearer.

The Church's motive in encouraging their use is shown by the prayers she uses when blessing them. For instance at the blessing of the Miraculous Medal, first struck on the insistence of St Catherine Laboure in 1830, [she, in turn, said it was Our Lady who had insisted!] the Church prays: "Almighty and merciful God . . . bless this medal that they who meditate on it and wear it with devotion may feel her (Mary's) protection and obtain Your mercy. Through Christ Our Lord, Amen."

Many people put themselves under the protection of Our Lady of Lourdes by wearing her medal about their neck. Many motorists have in their cars the medal of St Christopher, patron saint of travellers.

ATTITUDES IN PRAYER

THE Catholic manner of praying in public might seem strange to the convert. He may have been taught to attach great importance to the words of prayers pronounced by the minister in an audible voice and said slowly and meaningfully by the people. He may be puzzled by the rapid Latin of the priest at Mass and the gabbling of the people in their rosaries and litanies. He may also feel that the endless repetition of the same words is meaningless. [Fortunately, now that many Masses are in the vernacular, most priests now make a sincere effort to pronounce the relevant prayers in a clear and

audible voice so that the words of the prayer may feed the minds of the participants with up-lifting spiritual food. Increasing efforts are now being made to ensure that people say community prayers in a slower and more meaningful manner.]

He must learn that the priest at the altar is not there to impress the people with his own devotion, but to do something in the name of God and the people. He submerges his own personality with its idiosyncrasies, adopts garments, actions and tones of voice fixed precisely by laws, because he is acting not on his own behalf, but rather lends limbs and voice to Christ who offers the Sacrifice through him.

Attitude of Mind

The Catholic does not seek to talk to God phrase by phrase. He seeks to acquire an attitude of mind towards God, to be turned towards Him lovingly and familiarly, whether practising vocal or mental prayer. He may remember a story from Scripture, or dwell on a dogma of the Faith, in order that he might be moved to make acts of adoration, love, thanksgiving, sorrow and petition. In his vocal prayer the words are not as important as his attitude and serve him best if they inspire him to lift up his mind and heart to God. He may chatter rapidly without disrespect, for God knows the thoughts before the mouth has uttered them. As for repetitions, it is hard to be always thinking of one's own words, and the words of others serve as well to lift up the heart. Some will use missals, others prayer books, others rosary beads and some few will remain deep in mental prayer. But all seek to be in the presence of God with the priest who offers the Sacrifice. [All Catholics now seek to have full, conscious and active participation in the Church's public Liturgy. That Liturgy (when celebrated according to the 'mind of the Church') provides frequent opportunities for moments of 'sacred silence'. Then, and only then, is it permissible. for those who need it, to use their rosary beads. Outside of the public Liturgy, of course, the Rosary is one of the most popular and highly recommended forms of private prayer. The Popes have been promoting the Rosary for many centuries.]

The repetitions of the rosary and the litanies may be the hardest for the stranger to understand. But these very repetitions help to put the soul into a state of prayerfulness. The lips are busy, but the soul rides calmly above their efforts, as the gull rides serene above the storm-tossed waters, seemingly motionless, though the tiny feathers at the wing-tips are trembling in the busy motion that keeps it in flight.

Decorum

Non-Catholics are usually impressed by the devotion of Catholic congregations. They might notice the absence of that studied decorum and dignity of Protestant behaviour in church. These are desirable. But their importance can be exaggerated. There is a danger that public worship should be turned into a performance with minister and people acting to impress each other. We go to church to join with the Christian family in the family spiritual meal. Familiarity with all things sacred is natural to this sacred family. The gurgling of infants, chattering of small children, yawns of youth and groans of the aged are to be expected. As for those who stand apparently vacant, or fidget and look around, they could do better. But they do far more than those who stay away. And the mothers whose Mass-time is a series of interruptions from restless children do not waste their time. Their patient attention to their little ones is a prayer very precious in the sight of Jesus and His Blessed Mother.

NOVENAS

THE name novena comes from the Latin word novem, which means nine. It is nine days of prayer to obtain special favours.

The ancient Romans and Greeks had a nine-days commemoration of the dead. This was Christianized, and a novena of masses after death became customary.

Novena of Preparation

Our Blessed Lord told the Apostles that after His Ascension into Heaven they were to return to Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the Holy Ghost (Acts 1: 4). We are told, "All these were persevering with one mind in prayer with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren" (Acts 1: 14). They had nine clear days of prayer before Whit Sunday (Pentecost). This gave Christians the idea of preparing for great feasts with nine days of prayer.

The number nine had another significance too. It was presumed that Christ had lain nine months in His Mother's womb. The custom began in Spain of preparing for Christmas by saying a Votive Mass of Our Lady on the nine days before the feast.

Novena of Petition

With the number nine thus sanctified, the custom began of saying special prayers on any nine successive days, or on the same day of the week for nine successive weeks, to obtain special favours from Our Lord, Our Lady or a patron saint. Nine is a suitable number. It is not too long a period to be a strain and not too short to be easy. It calls for the two essential elements in prayer. The first is perseverance. We must be like the man in the parable who comes knocking on the neighbour's door, refusing to go away until heard. Our Lord said, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you" (Luke 11: 9). "Pray without ceasing" says St Paul. (1 Thess. 5: 17). The second essential element of prayer is penance. St Jane Frances de Chantal said, "Prayer without penance is like meat without salt; it quickly corrupts." The very endurance in prayer, when the novelty and the first fervour have worn off, is a penance.

Nine first Fridays

Our Blessed Lord showed that He likes the practice of making novenas when He spoke to St Margaret Mary Alacoque about the year 1675. This is His "Great Promise," in the saint's own words.

"One Friday, during Holy Communion, He said these words to His unworthy servant, if she is not mistaken: "I promise you, in the exceeding great mercy of my heart, that its all-powerful love will grant to all those who will receive Holy Communion on nine consecutive first Fridays of the month, the grace of final repentance, not dying in my disfavour and without receiving their sacraments, (my divine heart) becoming their assured refuge at the last moment" (Vie et Oeuvres, 1920. vol. 2 p. 397).

In canonizing St Margaret Mary, the Church has given us an assurance that her writings contain nothing that merits theological censure. This Promise was among her writings submitted to the Congregation of Sacred Rites for examination, and it was underlined. Six popes have given their commendation to this devotion of the Nine First Fridays. So although the Church did not guarantee the authenticity of these private revelations when she canonized the saint, she has given her approval to the devotion so widely practised throughout the Catholic world of going to Holy

Communion on nine successive first Fridays of the month to do honour and make reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

IT has been a custom since Apostolic times to bless actions, persons and things by tracing with finger or hand a sign of the Cross and saying the scriptural words, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28: 19). The Christian lawyer and theologian Tertullian, writing about the year 202 A.D., says, "At our every advance, entrance and exit, when putting on clothes and shoes, when we wash and eat, light the lamp, lie down, sit down, and in whatever business occupies us, we sign our foreheads with the sign of the cross" (De Corona Militis).

Nowadays we trace the sign from forehead to breast and left shoulder to right. The early Christians needed to be cautious, living in a pagan world, and did it secretly with a finger on the forehead. In medieval days it was the custom to make three such small signs, on forehead, lips and heart, in honour of the Blessed Trinity. This custom is continued in the Mass, at the Gospel.

Act of Dedication

The Sign of the Cross is not a charm to ward off danger, as many non-Catholics think. It is an act of dedication to God of the action to be done. It is also a meditation on the central truths of our religion, the three Persons in one God and the death of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, God-made-man, on the Cross for the salvation of the world. It is also a prayer calling down a blessing upon ourselves. The great mystic, St Teresa of Avila, began her meditation each day with a solemn sign of the cross.

Catholics sometimes make it in a slipshod manner. This is not good. When Bernadette first saw Our Lady at Lourdes, she was about to make the sign of the cross hurriedly before beginning her rosary. But she could not lift her arm. Our Lady turned sideways and showed her how to make the sign slowly and with devotion, touching forehead, breast and shoulders with the cross of her rosary beads.

Ever afterwards St Bernadette edified her friends by the devout way she made this sign.

The devout Catholic makes it on himself as he rises, before and after his morning prayers, before and after his meals and again at his night prayers and as he blesses himself with Holy Water on entering and leaving a church. Many make it as a prayer when they sense a danger, or when they begin a journey. In public it is a profession of faith as well as a prayer.

Blessings

The Church uses the sign of the cross in all her blessings. The priest makes it many times during the Mass, over his own person, over the book, the incense, the bread and wine and the Blessed Sacrament. He makes it over objects and people in the administration of all the sacraments.

So the whole of life is dedicated to God with the sign of the Cross that wrought our salvation and in the name of the three Persons in one God.

MONEY

MONEY plays a very prominent part in the Catholic Religion. The priest often mentions it from the pulpit and sometimes in vigorous language. Hardly has the money offered at the door stopped tinkling when the Offertory collection begins, and that is only just finished when the Post-

Communion collection starts. Then there are whist-drives, jumble sales and raffles. On top of these, parish football pools may be an embarrassment to one trained in a Protestant notion of gambling.

Necessary

It is all necessary. The expenses of a parish are enormous. There are no 'livings' in the Catholic Church, no ancient endowments, central funds or State aid, in this country at least, on which to rely. Moneys for salaries and the upkeep of church, house and property must come from collections taken at the Offertory of the Mass. The priests' house is really flats for two or three bachelors and separate apartments for housekeeper and maid. It is expensive. Most parishes have a large debt on the church to pay off and the interest to find yearly. Nearly all have two schools to maintain, and some as many as four. Very many have to build one or two schools, receiving inadequate financial support from the Government. With such demands on them and no sources of revenue outside the parish, the parish priests cannot be fastidious about appeals for money.

Desirable

But it is desirable that money should play a prominent part in the life of the parish. The collection is not merely the obtaining of money to meet the bills. It is a practical way in which the Christian can identify himself with the sacrifice offered on the altar. The man gives the price of a short period of his week's labour, the woman the price of a loaf or a small object of clothing for her children, the young the price of a simple pleasure. That is a proof of their love.

There is a close connection between the money and the Mass. It builds the church and maintains it, provides the vestments, chalice, bread and wine and supports the priest. The giving of it is an important act of religion, and even if a parish had no financial worries, a collection would still be desirable. Money should be integrated with the service of God. It is sanctimonious to be disgusted at the jingling of coins during Mass.

The Mass Stipend

This is a way of identifying oneself even more intimately with the Sacrifice. A free offering is made to the priest on the occasion of his agreeing to offer Mass for the special intention of the donor. The money does not buy the Mass. It is a gift to the priest for his support. St Paul says, "You know surely that those who do the temple's work live on the temple's revenues; that those who preside at the altar share the altar's offerings" (1 Cor. 9: 13, Knox translation).

The Church encourages the giving of stipends, and makes precise laws about it, which it is not our purpose to study here. She wants the people to give something of themselves that they might identify themselves more intimately with the Sacrifice of the Mass and obtain its fruits in a special way. When St Ignatius of Loyola was founding the Society of Jesus, he asked permission of the Pope to forbid his priests to receive Mass stipends. Permission was refused. The stipend had to be given, even though the members of the Society could be forbidden to keep it. The people were not to be denied the opportunity of obtaining the special fruits of the Mass enjoyed by the one who offers the stipend.

The Church then is uninhibited in her appeals for money. She is not ashamed of asking for 'filthy lucre'. She cheerfully demands that men should give that honest money which they have earned in their daily toil. In this she is true to the spirit of apostolic times. St Paul makes several references to collections made among the congregations he founded. He it is who says, "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9: 7).

There are many other devout practices permitted or encouraged by the Church. These seven are universal, and are a normal part of Catholic life. That is not to say that they are necessary for salvation. It is possible to become a saint without wearing a medal or lighting a candle before a shrine. The Church offers us a rich variety of devotions and practices from which each soul may choose that which pleases it. To attempt to practice them all might prove wearisome. To neglect them all would be to deprive the soul of precious opportunities of spiritual refreshment and nourishment.
