THE VESPER SERVICE AND ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCHES.

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HOW would you like to step suddenly from the twentieth century into the Middle Ages? Are you one of those who occasionally tire of the newness and bustle which accompany the growing age and delight in the quaint customs, the primitive methods, the repose and picturesqueness of the older time? Do you enjoy the spectacle of an ancient and impressive symbolism? In fine, are you one of those for whom the past has a mysteriously potent charm?

Then come with me some clear, warm afternoon in the early fall, when the mellow, autumnal sunshine is at its best and, entering one of the great Catholic cathedral churches, take a seat well down on the side aisle from which point the best general view of the interior can be obtained. The edifice itself, aside from other considerations, is extremely impressive. Sitting there in the rich, subdued light which filters through the high, lancet windows, gazing about one at the vast, echoing pillared interior, with its wonderful wall-paintings, impressive statuary and terraced altars above which the distant roof, groined and mullioned, arches majestically; one finds himself slipping swiftly away out of the world of modern, familiar, commonplace things and into a world of things remote, unusual, and long abandoned. The place recalls to mind the cloisters of Chester, Durham, Westminster and York, the tapering spires of Milan, Strasbourg and Notre Dame. We stand in the choir of venerable Canterbury, the mother church of Christian England, among the sculptured memories of past and forgotten ages, and before the spot where, in the cold December twilight of seven hundred years ago, the martyred Becket, saint and cavalier, faced the royal assassins and rendered up his life that the privileges of civil and religious liberty might be maintained. We are in the nave of ancient Cologne, a structure over six hundred years in building, and beneath the struc-
tural accomplishments of generations of departed men, surrounded by the work of famous prelates, kings, princes and scores of other unknown builders who helped to carry the great work forward, century after century, into triumphant completion. We recall the famous cathedral churches and monastic retreats of the English Middle Ages, we live over again the religious history of Europe, following the evolution of significant social and religious changes, and we hear through the silent avenues of the centuries the sweet chanting of the old monks, arising like the faint odor of incense from cherished relics of the past.

Even the modernized versions of these Medieval temples are very interesting and suggestive. American cathedrals have departed slightly from the cross-form of the early Gothic structures and the nave has been shortened, doing away entirely with the old choir and choir-screen, the glory of so many European cathedrals. The American cathedrals are of course patterned after the English-Gothic style and the severe Norman influence which was so important a factor in the English church building of the Middle Ages survives here in the American models giving a wonderful power and dignity to the architectural scheme. To be impressed by the antiquity of his surroundings the casual visitor has only to reflect that the structure takes its name, Gothic, from the barbarian vandals who swept down from the North to destroy the glory of ancient Rome, and that the conquerors after some centuries of conversion and civilization patterned their temples of worship after the old “basilica” form of the very Romans whom they had come to conquer.

Many centuries after the barbarian invasion, when the name, Gothic, had ceased to be a term of reproach and had founded an art-cult of its own, this form of church architecture had become classic and ironically enough the hall of pagan justice had become the Christian house of God. Nor can one fail to see how peculiarly appropriate this type of structure is for church purposes. The general form of the edifice, built in the form of an imposing granite cross, of which the nave formed the main shaft, the transepts the cross bar, and the apse the head piece, must have appealed to the early builders, in the fire of their religious zeal, as particularly fitting and suggestive. The solid, ivy covered exterior, braced and buttressed, rising grandly from the roof into a maze of towers and tiny pinnacles, combining dignity and strength with grace and beauty, was suggested by the natural loftiness and grandeur of the primeval wood in which the ancestors of the architects had passed their lives. Utilizing the main part of the nave for seating purposes, filling the
long windows with rich mosaics of stained glass exquisitely soft in coloring and glittering like clustered jewels, covering the walls with masterpieces of sacred sculpture and mural painting, occupying the transepts with side altars and chapels and tombs of greatness, erecting in the apse, the tribune of the Roman basilica, the high, terraced altar with its forest of spires and cupola, finishing the entire wood and stone work of the interior, not otherwise occupied, with that wonderful hand-workmanship upon each tiny part of which some faithful monk spent a lifetime of love and toil, and finally covering all with the high, domelike roof suggesting nothing so much as the depth and shadow of arching forests—the Medieval builders produced not merely a house of worship, but a masterpiece of art, "a poem in stone," a monument to the unexampled persistence, heroism and devotion which made the triumph possible.

But meanwhile the church has been filling silently with hosts of human beings, amongst whom moves an occasional black-robed priest and hooded nun with noiseless footsteps and clinking rosary. A tiny altar boy in cassock and surplice ascends the altar and begins to light the countless candles with a long taper. The church is quite dark now except for the western windows, and the distant candles flaming gustily in the drafts of the great interior, gleam out of the northern shadows like brilliant stars. The absolute quiet of the first quarter of an hour is now disturbed by the soft tread of arriving worshipers, the creak of pews and kneeling-benches, the flutter of hastily opened prayer books and the subdued clatter of the aged, the infirm and the tardy composing themselves for divine service. Presently a file of white robed altar boys followed by the priest in ceremonial vestments, enters the enclosure at the foot of the altar from the right of the apse, the congregation rises with a vast, rustling sound like the upward beating of a thousand invisible wings, and the service commences.

The priest and his attendants come to the center of the altar and kneel beneath the heavy brass candelabra with its unsteady crimson flame and before the heroic picture of the dying Christ. The priest is a young man; as he passes under the sanctuary window the dying sun strikes gold from his short, curly hair, and we catch a fleeting glimpse of a rapt, inspired countenance, as he kneels before the altar. He begins with the opening prayer: "Oh, Lord, open my mouth that I may bless Thy Holy Name; cleanse my heart from all vain, evil, and wandering thoughts; enlighten my understanding; kindle my affections, that I may worthily attentively, and devoutly recite this office, and may deserve to be heard before the presence
of Thy divine Majesty. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.” The celebrant then rises and goes to the Epistle side of the sanctuary and after a few moments of prayer he seats himself in a large arm chair, surrounded by his attendants and as the congregation becomes seated the choir bursts forth into the impassioned melody of the Hebrew psalmist.

The Vesper Service is a very old institution and formerly constituted the seventh exercise in the celebration of the monastic day. The office consists of Psalms, Canticles and Lessons from the Holy Scripture suitable for the occasion. The chanting of the Psalms never fails to excite the interest and delight of the sympathetic listener. They are perhaps chiefly interesting as the spiritual expression of primitive Hebrew thought and as examples of the wonderful rhapsodies of the poet king of Israel, the greatest of the Hebrew singers. But aside from their personal and poetic interest the Psalms have for us a deep, historical significance. They conjure up for us pictures of that arid desert country where Christ worked and preached, and of the simple, pastoral people among whom He passed His life. More particularly they bring before us the men and events of that earlier day when the Hebrew race, then a tribe of homeless wanderers, was laying, under the leadership of Abraham and Joseph and Moses and the Psalmist himself, the foundation for a strong and mighty nation. Forming as they do the body of the service, the psalms greatly add to the charm and picturesqueness of the ceremony, for it seems that almost no language from almost no tongue or time could be quite so appropriate for this particular purpose.

When the choir has finished with the psalms the priest rises and in a deep, musical tone chants the “Little Chapter.” “Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and God of all consolation, who comforteth us in all our tribulation.” He then seats himself and the choir begins the Hymn of the day. The sweet young voices fling the rich old phraseology out into the body of the great church, until, rising and falling in bay and niche it is lost to the ear amid the caverns and hollows of the vaulted roof. We are carried away for a moment by the dignity and beauty of the original Latin, but presently glancing at our prayer books, we find opposite the Latin version Cardinal Newman’s beautiful rendering of the hymn into English; the first three stanzas of which are of singular sweetness:
"Father of Light, by whom each day
   Is kindled out of night,
Who, when the heavens were made, didst lay
   Their rudiments in light;

"Thou who didst bind and blend in one
   The glistening morn and evening pale,
Hear Thou our plaint, when light is gone,
   And lawlessness and strife prevail.

"Hear, lest the whelming weight of crime
   Wreck us with life in view;
Lest thoughts and schemes of sense and time
   Earn us a sinner's due."

After singing the Hymn of the day the choir chants the Magnificat or Canticle of the Blessed Virgin during which the priest goes to the center of the altar and, assisted by an attendant, puts on the cope, a flowing garment of yellow reaching nearly to the ground. Blessing the incense and filling the censer which is now brought to him, he slowly mounts the steps and incenses the altar. After the Antiphon of the Blessed Virgin is said, following the incensing of the altar, the priest goes up to the tabernacle, kneels and takes out a small gold locket which he places in the center of the monstrance, a large circular vessel of gold in the form of an upright sun. Descending to the foot of the altar, he again fills the censer and incenses the Host which is now contained within the monstrance. When the choir has finished the Hymn the priest chants briefly. He then kneels, and a white veil or robe embroidered with gold and long enough to cover his hands is spread across his shoulders by an attendant. Ascending to the altar he kneels and then rising spends a few moments in adjusting the veil in such a way as to permit him to grasp the shaft of the monstrance firmly. Presently he turns wrapt in the mantle with the vessel raised and clasped in both hands and faces the people. As he raises it upward, following it devoutly with his eyes, every head is bowed and save for the measured clank of the swinging censer the silence is absolute. After a moment we steal a look at him from between our parted fingers and over the bowed heads of the congregation—a shaft of crimson light strikes diagonally across his white robe like an arrow of blood from the western window. His figure arrayed in the flowing costume of white and gold seems mystical and unreal. His face, lifted to the elevated Host is tense and transfigured by the extraordinary solemnity of the moment. The sweet pungent fumes of burning incense recalling old and sacred associations, float across to us from the
sanctuary enclosure. An altar bell strikes a soft, musical chime and almost simultaneously the great cathedral bell booms in reply. Three times interrupted by regular intervals, the chime on the altar is struck and three times the heavy boom from the distant belfry supplies the echo. Then the priest turns and replaces the monstrance upon the altar, heads are raised, the Host is replaced in the tabernacle, the priest divested of his benediction robes puts on his hat and follows the attendants from the sanctuary, the people rise and stream out of the pews into the aisles, the choir bursts forth into jubilant song and the service is ended.