

from “The Mystic Way” by Evelyn Underhill (1875 – 1941)

... in the ceremony of the Mass, we have a work of art designed and adapted by the racial consciousness of Christendom for the keeping and revealing of something This “something” is still the true focus of that Christian consciousness which has not broken away from tradition. The great dramatic poem of the liturgy is still for that consciousness the shrine in which the primal secret of transcendence is preserved. We may yet experience the full force of its immense suggestive magic when we will. Here, from within the circle of the static, the authoritative, the apparently mechanical, the spirit of Life now makes its most subtle appeal. In this strange reliquary it has successfully endured through centuries of change ... In the Christian liturgy, the deepest intuition, the rich personal experiences, not only of the primitive but of the patristic and medieval epochs, have found their perfect expression. Herein has been distilled, age by age, drop by drop, the very essence of the mystical consciousness. ... here it is that Life’s instinct for recapitulation is found at work: here she has dramatised her methods, told in little the story of her supreme ascent.

The fact that the framework of the mass is essentially a mystical drama, the Christian equivalent of those Mysteries which enacted before the Pagan neophyte the necessary adventures of his soul, was implicitly if not directly recognised in very early times. It was the “theatre of the pious” says Tertullian in the 2nd century; and the steady set of its development from the Pauline sacrament of feeding on the Spiritual Order, the *Fractio Panis* of the catacombs, to the solemn drama of the Greek or Roman liturgy, was always in the direction of more and more symbolic action, of perpetual elaboration of the ritual and theatrical element. To the sacramental meal of apostolic times, understood as a foretaste and assurance of the “Messianic banquet” in the coming Parousia, there was soon prefixed a religious exercise – modelled perhaps on the common worship of the synagogue – which implied just those preparatory acts of penance, purification and desirous stretching out towards the Infinite, which precede in the experience of the growing soul the establishment of communion with the Spiritual World. Further, the classic exhibition of such communion – the earthly life of Jesus – naturally suggested the form taken by this “initiation of initiations” when its ritual development once began; the allegory under which the facts of the Christian mystery should be exhibited before men. The Mass therefore became for devout

imagination during the succeeding centuries, not only the supreme medium through which the Christian consciousness could stretch out to, and lay hold on, the Eternal Order, not only the story of the soul's regeneration and growth, but also the story of the actual career of Jesus, told, as it were, in holy pantomime: indirect evidence that the intuitive mind of the Church saw these as two aspects of one truth. Hence every development of the original rite was made by minds attuned to these ideas; with the result that psychological and historical meanings run in parallel strands through the developed ceremony, of which many a manual act and ritual gesture, meaningless for us, had for earlier minds a poignant appeal as being the direct commemoration of some detail in the Passion of Christ.

As Europe now has it then, in the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox and the Mass of the Catholic Church, this ceremony is the great living witness to – the great artistic expression of – those organic facts which we call mystical Christianity: the “transplanting of man into a new world over against the nearest-at-hand world,” the “fundamental inner renewal, “ the “union of the human and the divine”.

That central idea, as we have seen, is simple and yet complex. Here, as nowhere else, we find it in its many sided unity. “The divine initiation of the Eucharist,” says Dionysius the Areopagite, “although it has a single, simple and indivisible Source, is multiplied out of love to man into the holy variety of the symbols, veiling itself in all those external forms whereby Divinity is manifested to us. Yet this multiplicity of symbols always returns to the fundamental Unity: to which Unity all worthy participators in this mystery are drawn.” Transmutation and communion: the pushing out as it were of a bit of the time world into the eternal world, or - the same thing seen at another angle – the discovery of Reality's substance under simplest accidents within the framework of the Here-and-Now: the paradoxical encounter of divine Personality under profoundly impersonal forms: Divine Union actually achieved by the separated human creature: the feeding of crescent spirit upon Eternal Life: the slow growth and pilgrimage of the soul up from its new birth to an actual attainment of God, under the cyclic law that governs the Mystic Way – all these aspects of Life's movement have their place in it.