

The Spirituality of Processions and Pilgrimages.

As we all know, our religious belief is expressed in two very complementary ways; the internal and the external. Both are necessary and both express important aspects of our composition as beings both corporeal and spiritual. An inner faith animates and enlivens us, and we cannot help but express it in our actions and in our behaviour. Public prayer accompanies private prayer and serves as an encouragement and a celebration of the supernatural life within. We necessarily act out how we feel inside and what we do in the public domain is a sure indication of the belief we carry in our hearts.

The venerable Christian tradition of expressing our faith by the public witness of a procession is one of the clearest and most dramatic expressions of this principle. God has created us as communal creatures. We do not live alone each to his own planet, like the Little Prince of Antoine de Saint Exupery's tale. Rather, God has placed us in company with others, indeed with great multitudes of others so that we can mediate the Faith and all manner of virtue to each other and be a help to each other on our common path to heaven.

The public procession is a way of expressing in a bold and dramatic way before the eyes of our co-religionists as well as of our other brothers and sisters, deep truths of our faith and devotion. This is not a distinctively Christian phenomenon. On the contrary, there is hardly a great religion of the world which does not have public processions of one type or another which serve to celebrate aspects of belief and devotion, but there are nevertheless, some distinctive aspects of Christian processions which have special meaning for us.

The Christian procession is obviously tied closely to the idea of pilgrimage. Life for us is a journey from one place to another. Heaven is our true home and in this world for a brief period in eternity, we labour towards a fixed goal. We are far from aimless wanderers, simply accumulating experiences, for we believe that Divine Providence and the operation of grace lead us on. In this way a journey becomes a pilgrimage when it is undertaken for God and seeks God as its ultimate goal. Part of the genius of Catholicism is the understanding of the bodiliness of our worship. For us, worship is not reduced to simply a cerebral matter, but takes place in fixed time and space. It employs the senses which God has given us as means to find our way in this world. We consecrate each of them to Him in ways that are familiar to every Catholic. Our music, art, incense etc. inspire the various senses and help us to express our idea of the sacred. In the same way, sacred movement is a hallowed and well tested means of acting out our faith in the external world. While we can all make the Stations of the Cross quietly to ourselves, there is no substitute for physically walking them and recalling the progressive journey of the Lord. With each step we leave our place of origin further behind and draw a bit closer to our goal. This helps us express a great truth of Christianity - its call to self transformation, to trying to be a bit better than we were, each day and through the whole course of our lives.

Consequently, we who are in a Christian procession recall the pilgrim people of God, never wholly at home in this world, but always passing through, for our home is in another place. The great example of all this is, of course, the pilgrimage of the old People of Israel out of the bondage of Egypt through the desert to the promised land. God guides their procession and His angel protects it from harm. While we are on our journey we are under His protection and we are engaged in his business. He has laid out the path for us and he calls us forth from the house of bondage, from the life of our sinful habits to the promised land where we will be free and dwell with him. Often the liturgy gathers the Christian worshippers together and directs them in a procession for a feast of the church such as at the Feast of Candlemas, or the Presentation of the Lord, or on Palm Sunday. We recall the activities of those who went so long before us and joyfully associate ourselves with them and their movement of heart. While in a procession, we must remember that we are engaged in an act of worship and consequently worldly behaviour and casual conversation should be far from us. On the contrary, prayerful recollection is the best form of participation in any procession, whether it is the Great Corpus Christi procession, or those processions we are all more familiar with- The offertory procession, the communion procession and the little processions which begin and end each Mass

As a bodily act of worship the Christian procession is also a joyful public proclamation of our faith and trust in God. Probably the Corpus Christi procession is the grandest and most dramatic expression of this principle, whereby we carry Christ forth into the streets of our community to bless that community with His wonderful Presence. We announce to our community a truth dear to us in a way which is deeply

human. Even civil groups and political associations feel the need for public manifestations and demonstrations from time to time and similar sentiments motivate us. We want others to know what is dear to us, not just because it gives us life, but because it is meant for them as well. The procession is a wonderful form of evangelisation where people who might never enter a church receive Christ's blessing and are lead to an encounter with Him. He does not wait for them to come to him, but rather, He goes forth to meet them, to invite them to participate, to be drawn into the flowing stream of devotion, ever moving, which is the Church.