On Torches and Torch-bearers.

IN most of our Catholic churches the office or function of a torch-bearer represents the lowest grade of service connected with the sanctuary, and it is generally discharged by a band of little "clergeons," to use Chaucer's word, whose extreme youth may fairly be held to excuse them from any too serious view of the responsibilities of their charge. Whether the prominence given to these restless young people, by dressing them in cassock and cotta and stationing them within the sanctuary-rail in full view of the congregation, is in all cases calculated to add to the majesty of Catholic ritual, may perhaps be open to doubt. Nevertheless, our parish priests are probably right in thinking that it is a good thing to encourage the boys and young men as far as possible in a certain familiarity with the altar, and also that this is the only effective means of providing for the training of that indispensable aid but dubious blessing, the youthful server at Mass.

But in any case the torch-bearer is a familiar figure, and though he has not the standing of the thurifer or the acolyte, whose very names announce their ancient lineage, one would be glad to explain the origin of the torch-bearer if sufficient evidence were available. A passage which I have recently struck upon seems to convey a suggestion upon the matter which is not without a certain plausibility. The theory is crude and immature, but it may perhaps claim some little notice here in default of any better solution. No one, so far as I know, has yet concerned himself with the history of torch-bearers. What I propound is a mere conjecture, which obviously demands much fuller examination than I have been able to give to it, if it is to win general acceptance.

So much has been said at various times in these pages[1] of

[1] See especially in THE MONTH, June to September, 1901, the articles on "Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament," and *ibid*, December, 1907, "The Blessed Sacrament and the Holy Grail."

the deep impression left both upon the devotion of the people and upon the ceremonial of the Church by the eager desire to see the Body of Christ, that I am almost afraid of being regarded as a crank possessed by an *idée fixe* if I seek to attribute still another familiar practice to this cause. And yet it is the same mediæval idea of the merit and profit which a man may gain by gazing upon the Blessed Sacrament with his bodily eyes, which seems to me to offer the best explanation of the torches which are now the almost invariable adjuncts of the most solemn part of the Canon at High Mass. The notion may appear fanciful at first sight, but the extravagance of the idea will perhaps be mitigated when we consider the matter a little more closely.

And here let me put in the forefront the one piece of positive evidence which I have to adduce. It deserves the first place because it is also in order of time the earliest example which I have so far been able to discover of any reference to torches in connection with the great climax of the Mass ritual. It will, of course, be understood that one or more candles had been used to burn either upon the altar or in front of it from a very much earlier period, probably, indeed, from the very beginning of things. But these remained lighted throughout the whole liturgy. What we are speaking of now are torches or candles lighted during the Mass for a temporary purpose and extinguished when that purpose is served. So far as I am aware, the earliest recorded instance of such a light occurs in the history of the Carthusian Order, and the introduction of the new practice is recounted by Dom Le Conteulx in the following terms. It should be premised and borne in mind throughout the present discussion, that artificial light, and especially wax candles, formed one of the most serious items of expense in the upkeep of all mediæval churches.[1] It was therefore a general rule that a single candle sufficed for Low Mass in poor churches. On the other hand, the multiplication of lights was a mark of solemnity or a special honour paid to dignitaries. Those Religious Orders which laid special stress on austerity and the practice of poverty, like the Carthusians, reduced the number of lights in church to what was rigorously necessary, just as they prescribed that their church vestments should be made of the poorest and cheapest material, without orphreys or embroidery. But here is the passage which Dom Le Conteulx

[1] See Bridgett, *History of the Holy Eucharist*, Second Edition, pp. 91, 92.

has extracted from the Constitutions passed in the Generalate of Father Martin, the successor of Jancelin, about the year 1233:

Two lamps may be allowed in the churches of the monks [as distinguished from the oratory of the lay-Brothers], and while the Divine Offices are being celebrated they should both be lighted. On great feasts also a number of lights may be burned, according to the wish of the Prior. At private Masses let two candles be lighted.[1] And when the Body of Christ cannot be seen, because it is too early in the morning, the deacon may hold a brightly burning taper of wax behind the priest in order that the Body of Christ may be seen on this side. This, however, is not a matter of precept.[2]

It will, I think, be readily admitted that this passage can have only one meaning. The object of the extra taper, brightly burning (probably it was by no means every taper in the Middle Ages that even relatively speaking could be said to burn brightly), and held by the deacon behind the priest, is here clearly declared to be that the community on dark mornings might be able to see the Body of Christ when It was held up at the Elevation. And here at once the reader who is at all familiar with mediæval manuscripts cannot fail to recall the countless miniatures representing the Mass at the moment when the Sacred Host is raised on high, while behind the celebrant kneels the deacon or a server, holding, not a mere candle, such as we use in our bedroom candlesticks now-a-days, but usually a torch or column of wax, four or five feet long, which rises high above the server's own head. Does it not seem probable that, however much the motive may have been lost sight of in later times, the original purpose with which this torch was introduced, was to throw light upon the Sacred Host which the priest was elevating for the adoration of the faithful?

[1] It is to be remembered that at this period among the Carthusians the priests of the Order were far from saying Mass daily. Even on feasts not more than two or three Masses were said in the whole community. Probably there were still many days on which not even a "private Mass" was said. A "private Mass" seems to be contradistinguished against a Mass at which the whole community assisted. But even a "private Mass" seems to have been regarded as a matter of some solemnity deserving two candles. The words which follow, on account of the mention of the deacon, I take to refer to the more solemn community Mass.

[2] Le Conteulx, *Annales*, vol. ii., p. 384. "Et quando non potest videri Corpus Christi, eo quod mane celebretur, possit diaconus tenere cereum bene ardentem a retro sacerdote (*sic*), ut Corpus Christi in hac parte possit videri." My attention was drawn to this interesting extract by a valuable paper of Dom Mouyel on *L'Eucharistie et l'Ordre Cartusien*, presented at the recent Eucharistic Congress.

Although this is unfortunately the only piece of direct evidence I have to offer, two or three considerations deserve to be dwelt upon which throw this plain statement into much higher relief. In the first place, full weight ought to be given to its early date. We may probably say with confidence that the general introduction of the practice of showing the Host to the people, or in other words, at the Elevation as we now know it, did not begin much before the year 1200.[1]

Now, the Carthusians were not quick to adopt innovations, and we know in point of fact that St. Hugh of Lincoln, a Carthusian, celebrating Mass in the year 1196, did not practise the Elevation of the Host in any proper sense. Even in 1217, or later, the language of the synod of Durham requiring the people to adore when the Sacred Host was replaced on the altar seems to show that the Elevation, such as we know it, was not yet familiar there. Assuming, as I think we may fairly do, that, in any case, the practice of lighting torches only came in as a consequence of the Elevation, it becomes more and more clear that the Carthusian taper must belong to quite the early days of the movement. No doubt it may be maintained, that the extra torch or torches were only intended to honour the Blessed Sacrament, and that they might well have been employed during the Canon, the great prayer of consecration, long before the exact moment of transubstantiation became so clearly defined by the showing of the Host to the people. None the less I think that we may confidently ask for the production of any evidence, either written or pictorial, earlier than the thirteenth century, which represents the deacon or server at Mass as holding a candle behind the priest. It would certainly be rash to say that it does not exist, but I cannot recall an example of anything of the sort. We are therefore probably right in inferring that the extra taper or torch came in in the wake of the Elevation. The earliest representations known to me of this torch are of the thirteenth century. One of these is a fresco at Assisi belonging to the middle of this century, representing the Mass of St. Martin.[2] Here the torch held by the server is some five or six feet high and would be

[1] I must refer the reader upon this point to my articles in *The Tablet*, October 19th to November 2nd, 1907.

[2] It is reproduced by Robault de Fleury, *La Messe*, vol. i. plate 20. The vast collection of Mass pictures and miniatures included in this work seems to me fully to bear out the assumption that the torch in the hands of the server at Mass only dates from the thirteenth century.

admirably adapted for the purpose of throwing light on the uplifted Host.

As for the immense importance formerly attached to the looking upon the Body of Christ, it seems superfluous to insist upon the point anew when so much has been said in these pages upon other occasions. We may safely pass over such details as the widely-diffused catalogues of miraculous effects which resulted from the sight of the Host at the Elevation, or the testimony of writers like Henry of Hesse. Let us only notice two details of mediæval practice, somewhat akin to the lighting of a torch behind a priest. The first is a direction, which the Carmelite *Ordo* impresses upon the deacon or thurifers, not to allow the smoke of the incense to intercept the view when the Body of Christ is being elevated. This seems to appear for the first time about the year 1324, in the *Ceremoniale* of Sibert de Beka recently studied by Father Benedict Zimmermann, but it is also found in the printed Ordinals of later date.[1] Still more curious is a practice which is seemingly maintained in some parts of Spain to this day,[2] but which was certainly known both in pre-Reformation England and in many dioceses of France, viz., that of drawing a black curtain across the upper part of the altar at the time of the Consecration in order that the white Host when held up by the priest might more easily be seen against the dark background. Thus, in a York will of about 1504, a benefactor leaves "a heart of gold to be hung upon the black cloth which is drawn at the Elevation time at the high altar in the said church of York."

So at Chartres we learn that even at the end of the seventeenth century.

> A little violet curtain about a foot square hung upon a little cord above the altar; and the deacon, just before the consecration, drew the curtain to the middle of the altar so that those at the end of the choir might see the Host. After the Elevation of the Chalice the curtain was drawn back. At Laon the subdeacon immediately before kneeling down for the Elevation of the Host drew a little black curtain to the middle of the altar and the deacon drew it back at the end of the Canon before the Lord's prayer.[3]

[1] "Caveat tamen ne fumus incensi sit talis aut tantus quod visum sacramenti impediat vel aliunde offendat sacerdotem." (Wickham Legg, *Tracts on the Mass*, p. 244; Zimmermann in *Chroniques du Carmel*, vol. iv.)

[2] *Ibid*, p. 235.

[3] Legg, *Tracts on the Mass*, p. 235. It seems difficult to suppose with Mr. Micklethwaite that this was intended to veil the statuary above the altar.

We may fairly assume, then, that in the state of feeling which these practices illustrate, it would have seemed just as natural to make the Host visible at a distance by lighting torches in front of It as by placing a black cloth behind It.[1]

Moreover, although I can quote no explicit statement of later date that the additional illumination resulting from the kindling of more tapers was intended to light up the figure of the priest at the altar, still it seems to me very significant that these tapers were commonly treated and spoken of as belonging to the Elevation only. There is no obvious reason in the nature of things why the showing of the Host and Chalice should alone be honoured by a display of lights. One would expect that the lights would be retained as long as the Eucharistic Presence remained upon the altar. Yet this was not originally, and indeed according to the existing ceremonial law is even now not ordinarily the case. To begin with the forms of expression used, we nearly always find that in any mention of these torches in a mediæval document they are described as expressly intended "for the Elevation." For example in an Ordo of Lyons of about 1280, from which Martene quotes, we are told that two little clerks (*clericuli*) are to kneel behind the deacon holding two lighted torches for the Elevation (*tenent duas torchias ardentes pro clevatione*).[2] So again, the General Chapter of the Cistercians in 1288 permitted lights or torches (*luminaria sive torticia*) to be lighted at the high altar "at the Elevation of the Saving Host."[3] It is true that amongst the injunctions of the Synod of Exeter at about the same date, 1287,[4] the clergy are bidden to induce their parishioners to contribute to buy torches to burn "at the Canon of the Mass," but this was not the phrase usually employed. So again at a later date Burckhard's *Ordo Missae*[5] (1502) prescribes that the server at a Low Mass is to light a torch just before the *Hanc igitur*, and to extinguish it

[1] De Vert speaks of remuneration given at Soissons in 1375 to the boy who pulled the cord of the black curtain at the Elevation (*Explication*, iv. 34). We find mention of a similar device with wire and string at St. Michael's, Cornhill, in 1459 (Micklethwaite, *Ornaments*, p. 27). Probably the references to this custom in old wills are also numerous, though they are not always easy to recognize. The "Cloth of Velvet to hang before the high altar" at Tenderden, Kent, is probably an example of this kind (*Testamenta Cantiana*, ii. p. 337).

[2] Martene, *De Antiquis Ecclesiae Ritibus*, i. p. 182.

[3] Fowler, *Cistercian Statutes*, p. 148.

[4] Wilkins, *Concilia*, ii. p. 132.

[5] *Tracts on the Mass*, pp. 155—157.

again immediately the Elevation of the Chalice is over: "Postquam celebrans calicem super corporale reposuerit (minister) surgit, extinguit intorticium: et reponit in locum suum." This still remains the rule according to the authoritative rubrical code of the *Missale Romanum* and the *Caeremoniale Episcoporum*, though there is question in these last, not of the server at a Low Mass, but of the acolytes or torch-bearers in a High Mass, celebrated, of course, with deacon and subdeacon. It will be interesting perhaps in view of the practice which now prevails in so many of our churches both in England and abroad, to note how very restricted is the use of these torches as sanctioned by the official rubrics, which speak in this matter without any ambiguity. In the Missal[1] we read:

In a High Mass, at the end of the Preface, at least two torches are lighted by the acolytes, which are extinguished after the Elevation of the Chalice.

The *Caeremoniale*, in the description of the Pontifical High Mass,[2] prescribes that

When the *Sanctus* has been said or the Canon begun, four, six, or at most eight servers, vested in cottas, bring in as many lighted torches of white wax, and after making the proper reverences, they take their places on their knees on each hand of the subdeacon who is holding the paten, or if it be more convenient, at the sides of the altar.

After this it is laid down that when the Elevation is over,

the choir continue the chant *Benedictus*, and the servers holding the torches, rise, and after the proper reverences, withdraw to extinguish their torches outside the sanctuary.

Both in the *Missale* and the *Caeremoniale* certain exceptions are made to this law of extinguishing the torches immediately the Elevation is over. It is directed that when Communion is to be publicly given, and also in Masses for the dead and at Masses said on fast-days, the torch-bearers remain with torches lighted until after the Communion. But these modifications, which it would take us too far to discuss here, are clearly indicated as exceptions to the rule. The normal practice was, as Burckhard indicates without hinting at any departure from it, that the torches were lighted for the Elevation

[1] *Ritus Celebrandi*, viii. 8.
[2] Book II. cap. viii. §§ 68 and 71.

and put out immediately it was over. Since the compilation of the *Caeremoniale*, and the printing of the Missal in its authorized form at the end of the sixteenth century, all rubrical legislation upon the subject of torch-bearers has turned upon the question of their number. The Congregation of Sacred Rites has at various times intervened, when appealed to upon the subject, to restrain the ambition of minor prelates and ordinary parish priests who desired to crowd their sanctuaries with as many torch-bearers as were permitted at a Pontifical High Mass. But even in this matter the Congregation has not been severe. They have sometimes condescended to humour local customs, and torch-bearers have been tolerated even at a *Missa Cantata*. A curious usage is referred to by Catalani in his commentary upon the *Caeremoniale*. He tells us that it was the custom in many places for royal personages assisting at High Mass in state, to send their pages to the sanctuary to kneel there with lighted torches during the Elevation. In this way the number of torches round the altar often exceeded the maximum number of eight, but Catalani seems to consider this permissible, and he quotes with approval the reply of one Barnius, Bishop of Piacenza, who maintained that the presence of the pages in the sanctuary was something for which the Bishop himself was not in any way responsible.[1]

Perhaps, however, the most interesting point for our purpose in the data available regarding later usage is the statement made in the commentary upon the Missal rubrics by Gavantus and Merati, that the torch-bearers at the actual moment of the Elevation, ought, though still kneeling, to lift their torches from the ground until the butt end of the torch is opposite their breasts. It may be noted also that Catalani mentions and seems fully to approve of this practice. Now, of course, it is possible that this lifting of the torches represents nothing more than a salute, and corresponds more or less to the action of a company of soldiers in presenting arms, but I confess that I am much more tempted to regard it as a survival of a practice, which I take to be the primitive one, of lifting the torches in order to throw a better light upon the Host and chalice when the celebrant shows them to the people.[2]

[1] Catalani, *Caeremoniale Episcoporum*, Rome, 1744, vol. ii. p. 117.

[2] "Quando elevatur hostia acolyti debent elevare intortitia, extrema scilicet parte eorum pectori admota, quae sic elevata sustineant usque ad depositionem calicis inclusive." (Gavantus-Merati, *Thesaurus*, vol. i. part 2, tit. 9, Ed. 1823, p. 298.)

Of course, the difficulty remains that these Elevation torches seem at all times to have been used in broad daylight when they could not have contributed to the general illumination, nor have facilitated in any way the seeing of the Body of Christ. Nevertheless, this does not seem to me to be a conclusive argument against our explanation of the origin of the practice. No one can have any serious doubt that the Bishop's *bugia*, or hand candlestick, was really intended in the beginning to aid him in reading, and yet the *bugia* is now uniformly lighted and employed at the altar even in the most brilliant sunshine. Furthermore, we must all admit that the origin of ancient rubrical practices readily passes out of sight when once they have become a part of an almost mechanical ceremonial. The *stolone*, or broad stole, worn by the deacon from the Gospel to the Communion during penitential seasons might be quoted as a conspicuous example. It really represents a chasuble folded up and thrown over the shoulder like a soldier's great coat; but certainly no one who assists at a High Mass in Lent and sees the deacon vested in his broad stole, could by any possibility suspect such a history. Or to take another example more akin to the subject before us, we find even such a liturgist as Claude de Vert unwilling to believe that the black cloth stretched above the altar at the Elevation was really intended as a background against which the white Host might be seen more readily. But the evidence of the fact seems clear, and neither de Vert's explanation that the cloth bore a cross upon it and supplied the place of an altar crucifix, nor Mr. Micklethwaite's suggestion that it was due to "a feeling that in the presence of the Sacrament, imagery should be veiled" can possibly claim to be considered adequate. De Vert himself admits that at Chartres the curtain had no cross upon it,[1] while the dimensions of the cloth in some recorded instances were far too small to lend support to the idea of veiling the reredos.[2]

[1] De Vert, *Explication des Cérémonies*, iv. p. 33.

[2] In many cases the language of the entries which mention this elevation-cloth are highly significant. Thus in 1508 the churchwardens of St. Lawrence's, Reading, paid one penny for "a carpenter's line to draw the black sarsenet before the Sacrament at the high altar." The phrase "before the Sacrament" must surely represent a clumsily worded attempt to say that the curtain was there for the sake of the Sacrament, *i.e.*, to make a background to It. And in 1521, ninepence was paid at Leverton, Lincolnshire, for "threequarters of black 'tuyke' to hang betwixt the table of the high altar (*i.e.*, the reredos) and the Sacrament at sacring time." (See Micklethwaite, *Ornaments of the Rubric*, p. 26.)

I am inclined, then, in default of better evidence, to adopt the view that the torches of our modern torch-bearers represent only a primitive attempt to light up the Blessed Sacrament and make It more visible when It was raised on high at the Elevation. The supplementary candle which, according to the rubric of the Roman Missal, ought always to be lighted from the *Sanctus* to the Communion, has also, no doubt, a similar history. But whereas the array of torches represents the more elaborate ceremonial which could only be observed at High Mass, the candle bracket with its single light, has probably descended from the taper, which, as already pointed out, is so commonly seen in the hand of the server in mediæval representations of the Elevation at a Low Mass.

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