

## THE BETSINGMESSE

by Rev. Clifford Howell, S.J.



Father Howell

FEW READERS WILL be unaware that in September 1953 there met at Lugano the most important Conference of Liturgists which has ever come together; that they discussed possible reforms in the Liturgy of the Mass; that they did this with the approval of the Holy Father who sent a Cardinal and several officials of the Sacred Congregation of Rites from Rome; and that they ended by submitting certain petitions to the Holy See.

The third of these should be of great interest to all who are concerned with church music. Its text is as follows: —

“III. In order that the people may participate more easily and more fruitfully in the liturgy, this Congress most humbly asks that the local Ordinaries be empowered to permit the people (if they so judge opportune) not only to hear the Word of God in their own tongue, but also, as it were, to respond to it by praying and singing in their own tongue even during a *Missa Cantata*.”

According to present rubrics the people (and, for that matter the choir also) are not permitted to sing anything whatever at a *Missa Cantata* unless it be in Latin. If the Lugano petition is granted (as seems very likely, according to well informed opinion, after some period of delay for study) then we of the English-speaking countries will be faced with the problem of finding vernacular hymns suitable for Sung Mass.

The easiest solution would seem to transfer to the Sung Mass those hymns which are at present lawfully used during Low Mass. For even now the singing of vernacular hymns at Low Mass is permitted, and the practice is quite common in some countries. We, however, are at a grave disadvantage in that we have never evolved any repertoire of hymns suitable for this purpose. In Germany and Austria they have many hymns which are explicitly “Mass-hymns”, and are eligi-

ble for use according to the words of the Pope in *Mediator Dei* (# 111 of the C.T.S. Edition) “The whole congregation, always conformable with the rubrics, may recite the responses in an orderly manner; they may sing hymns corresponding to the various parts of the Mass; or they may do both.” But when we do have hymn-singing at Low Mass, the hymns we use could hardly be called “hymns corresponding to the various parts of the Mass”; they are liable to be anything and everything, from “Holy God We Praise Thy Name” to “Mother Dear O Pray for Me”, having nothing whatever to do with the Mass. They are put on merely to keep people (usually the children) piously occupied; and they are, in point of fact, not a participation in the Mass itself, but an organized distraction from it.

If we are ever to face this problem of evolving hymns in English really suited to the various parts of the Mass, we shall do well to examine the work of others who solved the problem successfully in their own country, to see how they went about it, to disengage the principles on which they worked, and apply them to our own circumstances. For this purpose our best examples are beyond doubt the Germans and Austrians. Let us examine what progress they have made.

### *The Singmesse*

For generations now they have had what they call the *Singmesse*. This is a Low Mass, during which the people sing hymns. There is nothing but singing—no public prayers. A well known example is that set of hymns beginning *Hier liegt vor deiner Majestät* which will serve as an illustration.

As soon as Mass begins, the people sing this hymn of which I give a non-rhythmic literal translation (for the object is only to see how the words “correspond to the various parts of the Mass.” We are concerned only with their meaning, not their form).

“Before Thy Majesty the Christian people now lie in the dust; they raise their hearts to Thee, O God, and their eyes to Thine altar. Father! Grant us Thy favour! Forgive the guilt of our sins!”

These words undoubtedly correspond with the

sentiments of the *Confiteor* and the *Kyrie*; and by the time they are ended the priest will have reached the *Gloria*. Whereupon the people sing a hymn, with rhyme and rhythm, of which a literal translation would be:

"Let God be praised, let His Name be blessed in Heaven and on earth now and for ever. Praise, glory, thanks and honour be to the Three-in-One. May the whole world, O God, increase Thy glory!"

By which time the priest will have reached the Gospel; so the people sing: — "From the Mouth of God comes the Gospel by which we Christians stand. It is God Himself Who teaches us, He Who is Eternal Truth. How happy is the Christian who hears God's teaching!"

There is a verse expressing faith for the *Credo*, another expressing Offering, and then comes "Holy, holy, holy is our Lord and God; sing with the angels: Holy is the God of the Sabboth" and so on to a hymn after the Consecration, another for the Agnus Dei, one for the Communion and one to end the Mass: "Let us go forth in peace; the sacrifice is over; we have seen, O God, Thy Body and Thy power . . . keep us without sin in Thy sight."

There the many sets of similar hymns for the *Singmesse*; one hymn book which lies before me has no less than twenty versions. And there is no denying that they have a lot of good in them; they are mostly "to the point" and keep the people's minds united, in a general way, with what is going on at the altar.

#### *Deficiencies of Singmesse Form*

But the form has also grave deficiencies which the spread of liturgical ideals in the past twenty years has rendered ever more glaring. As Dialogue Mass became increasingly popular among university circles and student bodies and youth movements, and thence spread into parishes, the people began to have some familiarity with the actual words of the liturgy; also they came to appreciate genuine active participation in the Mass itself, and to understand that the Mass has a structure involving different types of activity in its different parts.

A growing proportion of the people who had advanced thus far in liturgical spirit began now to find the *Singmesse* unsatisfactory. It was lacking in variety — nothing but singing from beginning to end. The words were never those of the

liturgy itself; there was no actual interplay between priest and people; it was not one thing going on, but two — the "real thing" at the altar, and some "choral devotions" in the nave. The structure of the Mass, with its different activities of praying, singing, listening, giving, receiving, was completely obscured; and there was no difference between a *Singmesse* of the Third Sunday after Epiphany and that of the Third Sunday after Pentecost, between that on the Feast of Corpus Christi and that of the Assumption.

Many liturgists wrestled with this problem of combining the advantages of singing hymns during Mass with the advantages of active participation and "liturgical realism" of Dialogue Mass done with Lectors and Speaking choirs. But the one who, in my opinion at least, worked out the most satisfactory solution, artistically good and liturgically sound, was the late Father Pius Parsch. He evolved a new Mass-form known as the *Betsingmesse* (Prayer-hymn-Mass) which admirably combines the good points of the *Singmesse* and the Dialogue Mass. Recently I have obtained a copy of the hymn book which he compiled for use at the *Betsingmesse*, and propose now to give some account of its salient points.

#### *The New Betsingmesse*

Father Parsch began from the principle that the authentic form of the Mass is the Solemn High Mass. Here there is differentiation of function — separate parts for the priest, deacon, subdeacon, choir, and people all clearly indicated. Also variety of activities in offering prayer to God, listening to the word of God, giving gifts to God, and receiving the return-gift from God. There is singing — sometimes by one functionary, sometimes by a group, sometimes by the entire community. There is stability, because some of the texts sung are unchanging; yet there is variety, because other texts change according to the feast or season. It is liturgically the ideal form of Mass. But, alas, it is not practically the ideal because of two tremendous difficulties which confront the common people, namely, the strange tongue (Latin) and the strange music (Gregorian).

It seemed, then, that the "ideal Mass for the people," liturgically perfect and practically feasible, would have to be modelled on all the good points of the Solemn High Mass, and yet avoid its language and music difficulties. But because

present legislation forbids the singing of vernacular during High Mass, it must be a Low Mass (so that the people could sing German), and yet must display the differentiation of function, the clear structure, the variety, the stability, and the active participation of the High Mass. Now these five advantages of High Mass are realized in one form of Low Mass, to wit, the Dialogue Mass. All it lacks is the singing. Whence came the idea of integrating singing, in a logical and liturgical manner, into Dialogue Mass. Thus — after a number of experiments, the Prayer-Hymn-Mass was devised.

The principle of taking High Mass as the model was analyzed by Father Parsch into the following details: —

(a) Singing must be integrated into the Mass structure.

(b) Singing must be of two kinds — constant, and variable; the constant to be the same at every Mass, and the variable to have reference to the feast or season.

(c) There must be singing only at those points where there is singing in the High Mass (to preserve the structure clear).

(d) Where the priest chants aloud in High Mass, he will read aloud at Low Mass — and thus will need a Lector to translate his words to the people.

(e) Where there is silence at High Mass, there should be silence in the Prayer-hymn-Mass.

By these means everything essential would be included and everything incidental would be avoided (such as prominence of those things which a priest reads either as merely personal prayers or as mere “doubling up” of functions rightly belonging to other functionaries).

#### *The Music of the Ordinary*

Now to examine the singing-problem in more detail: the “constant element” will correspond to the “Ordinary” of High Mass (*Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei*); the “variable element” will correspond to the “Proper” of High Mass (Introit, Gradual, Offertory and Communion).

For the “Ordinary” there would be a set of hymns corresponding as closely as possible to the *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*, and sung at those points of the Mass. For various reasons too long to explain Father Parsch decided not to have a hymn for the *Credo*, but to have it

recited in German while the priest recites his Latin *Credo* at the altar. But the others were all to be hymns.

For the “Proper” the best solution was seen to be the use of one single hymn tune (preferably some well-known but really good melody) supplied with a verse or verses suitable for use at the appropriate moment; Introit verses, Gradual verses, Offertory verses and Communion verses. The content of these verses would be the content of the Introit, Gradual, Offertory and Communion *of the day*.

Such hymns did not exist; they had to be called into being. So Father Parsch, through his Klosterneuburg Liturgical Institute, publicized a great “Competition” asking poets to produce the verses needed for the Ordinary. More than three hundred competitors from all over Austria and Germany sent in sets of verses to be judged; and Father Parsch and other experts selected what they considered the twelve best sets for use.

Then another competition was organized, asking composers to produce good “people’s tunes” for these sets of verses. About 150 composers responded, and a music committee selected the twelve best of those. The “Ordinary” was now provided. In fact twelve different “Ordinaries.”

#### *The Music of the Proper*

To handle the Proper by similar competition methods would be far too difficult; so Father Parsch entrusted the task of turning the Missal-proper into verse to the winner of the first verse-competition. He was Prof. Dr. Karl Frank, a priest of the Vienna Diocese, a man deeply penetrated by the spirit of the liturgy and also an expert hymnologist. He wrote verse-texts for all the Sundays and big feasts of the year. Melodies of corresponding rhythms were then selected by the music committee from the best extant in German and Austrian hymnals. And thus the “Proper” was provided. To be precise, seventy-seven different Propers. And all are published in the “*Betsingmesse*” hymn book which I obtained recently, and which — with words and music — costs less than a dollar!

I propose now to give a sample or two from this book, that readers may see how things work out in practice. The singers are divided into Cantor, Schola, and People. Here is one of the settings for the “Kyrie”: —

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**"Kyrie":-**

*Cantor* *People*

Va-ter, hör den Ruf der Ar-men; Ky-ri-e e -

*Schola*

le-i-son. Va-ter, send uns dein Er-barm-en;

*People* *Schola*

Ky-ri-e e - le-i-son. Va-ter, en-de

*People*

un-sre Not; Ky-ri-e e - le-i-son.

For those who do not understand German I append a literal translation (admittedly not elegant) of this and the two following verses to the same tune:

Father, hear the cry of us poor men;	Kyrie eleison!
Father, bestow on us Thy mercy;	Kyrie eleison!
Father, grant us what we need;	Kyrie eleison!
Saviour, come to redeem us;	Christe eleison!
Saviour, remove from us the curse of evil;	Christe eleison!
Saviour, break for us the Bread of Life;	Christe eleison!
Comforter, bestow on us Thy grace;	Kyrie eleison!
Comforter, heal our ills and guilt;	Kyrie eleison!
Comforter, unite us all with God;	Kyrie eleison!

The *Gloria* is too long for its German verse and its music to be quoted; but here is (again a literal) translation to show how close it comes to the Latin text:

"Glory to Thee, O God, in the heights of Heaven; peace to all good men. Thanks and adoration to Thee, Lord, God and King for Thy glorious greatness and power. Praise to Thee, Lamb of God, Son of the Father. Thou takest away the guilt of mankind. Hear our prayers, O Lord Christ; mercifully grant us God's favour. For Thou alone art our most holy Saviour, Thou art the Most High Lord; One with the Father and the Holy Ghost Thou dost lead us to God's glory."

The *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei* are even closer to the Latin than these examples. All are intoned by the Cantor, taken up by the Schola and finished by the people who must find them extremely easy to sing.

Now an example from the Proper. Let us take that for the Feast of the Ascension (because it has only ten bars to its tune).

*Cantor* *Schola*

Was steht ihr, Ga-li - lä - er, hier und

*People*

schaut zum Him-mel mit Be-gier? Wie

Chri-stus auf zum Him-melstiege, so kommt er einst zum

letz-ten Sieg, Al - le-lu - ia, al - le-lu - ia.

Here is a literal translation of the whole Introit (which has two verses):

"Ye men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up to Heaven so eagerly? As Christ went up to Heaven, so will He come down again victorious, Alleluia, alleluia. Exult, all ye nations, and praise your God with shouts of joy. Praised be the glory of Christ now and for all eternity, Alleluia, alleluia.

Compare this with the translation from the O'Connel-Finberg Missal, of the Latin Introit "*Viri Galilaei*": —

"Men of Galilee, what are you wondering at, looking heavenwards? Alleluia. In the same way as you have watched Him going into heaven, He will come back, Alleluia. Clap your hands, all you nations, in applause; acclaim your God with cries of rejoicing. Glory be . . ."

Taking the latter as an accurate translation of the Introit, is not the former — considering that it has to be in verse with rhyme and rhythm — a remarkable achievement?

The Gradual, Offertory and Communion are likewise expressed in two, four and four verses respectively; that which stands in the Missal appears in the verses with wonderful fidelity, but, in the case of the Offertory and Communion, extra verses expressive of suitable internal dispositions are added to fill up the time during the Offertory and the distribution of Holy Communion. There is also a final verse to be used as a recessional.

One more example, since I can quote it without printing the tune. The Proper for Passion Sunday is set to the very appropriate melody "*O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*", so familiar even in America that the music need not be reproduced. The accurate translation of the Communion is:

"This is the Body which is to be given up for you; this is the cup of the New Testament, in my Blood, says the Lord: do this, whenever you drink it, for a commemoration of Me."

And here is a literal translation of the way it turns out in Dr. Frank's verse which goes to the above melody (as also do his verses for Introit, Gradual, Offertory and Communion): —

"This is My Body given for the salvation of all men; this is my life-giving Blood which many will share. Whenever you drink it according to the command of My Testament, remember that salvation comes to you from My sacrificial death."

Again the fidelity of thought as compared with the original is complete almost to the details.

### *Integration*

How are these hymns and other elements fitted together in the actual celebration of a Prayer-hymn-Mass? Here is a description: —

There are needed a willing and collaborative celebrant who will constantly have the people in mind, adapting himself to their needs and feeling himself as their leader; a liturgically trained Lector, a practiced Schola, a competent and understanding organist, and the provision of texts for the people. The schola should be near the altar, to act as a link between celebrant and people; the Lector should be on a Rostrum facing the people. (If he is a priest he can use the pulpit).

The Introit verse is sung by all as the priest enters; it is followed by the *Kyrie*. During this singing the priest and server do the prayers at the foot of the altar, the priest goes up and reads the Introit, which he will finish about the time the people come to the end of the *Kyrie*. He then says the words *Gloria in excelsis Deo* and continues while the people sing their *Gloria* verse. He may have to wait a few moments, but far less than would be the case at a Sung Mass. The *Gloria* finished, he turns and says *Dominus vobiscum* to which the people reply. He says *Oremus* and reads the Collect quietly while the Lector reads the translation. He comes out loud for the termination, that all may answer the *Amen*. He reads the Epistle while the people (now sitting) hear it in their own tongue from the Lector. He reads the Gradual while the people sing the Gradual hymn-verse. Again he may have to wait a moment or two till they have finished.

Now he moves to the Gospel side, says *Domi-*

*nus vobiscum*, etc., which the people answer; he reads the Gospel quietly while the Lector reads the translation. He comes to the centre and says the words *Credo in unum Deum*, continuing the rest while the people *say* (not sing) their Creed in their own tongue. That finished, he says *Dominus vobiscum* and *Oremus*; and the Offertory Hymn is sung while he reads the Offertory and goes through his private prayers and actions. The hymn will finish in time for him to do the Preface responses with the people; they sing the *Sanctus* hymn at the appropriate moment. Silence during the Canon (unless, for didactic reasons, in the case of an inexperienced congregation, the Lector leads one or two Canon-prayers out loud); all answer *Amen*, and *sed libera nos a malo* and *et cum spiritu tuo*, starting the *Agnus Dei* hymn immediately afterwords. The Communion hymn is sung during the distribution of Holy Communion, being repeated if the crowd is large. After the Post-communion (of which the translation is read by the Lector) and the Blessing responses, the recessional hymn is sung as the priest goes out.

Thus the Mass is an organic whole; song, prayer, reading and action are all fitted together, the people being able to follow everything and do all that the differentiation of functions allots to them. All the essentials are clearly brought out, the inessentials kept in the background, and the structure of the Mass, with the purpose of each part, made manifest.

This form of Prayer-hymn-Mass aroused much interest when it became widely known through the competitions organized to evoke its verses and music; it became famous, and all doubts of its possibilities were dispelled on the occasion of the *Katholikentag* in Vienna in 1933, when a crowd of two hundred thousand Catholics in a huge stadium, took part in it with the greatest ease, only the Schola having had any practice before. Since then it has made its way throughout the whole of Austria and Germany.

So if the Lugano petition is granted, the Austrians and Germans will find things easy; they have this fine repertoire of vernacular Mass hymns ready to be transplanted into the Sung Mass. We English-speaking Catholics are in a very different position. Must we not urge our composers to take note of this problem? Would we not be wise first to evolve a Community Mass form of this "Prayer-hymn" type, so that we too may have something to transplant? The work of

Father Parsch should be of immense value in showing us the way to success.



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