

FIRST MASS

Any non Catholic who finds himself interested in the Catholic Church would do well to read Thomas Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*¹. It contains Merton's account of how he came to enter the Church. Set out below is a powerful section in the middle of the book in which Merton describes his first attendance at Mass.

2nd February 2007—*The Presentation of the Lord*

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"Some time in August [1938], I finally answered an impulsion that had been working on me for some time. Every Sunday, I had been going out on Long Island to spend the day with the same girl who had brought me back in such a hurry from Olean. But every week, as Sunday came around, I was filled with a growing desire to stay in the city and go to some kind of church.

"Finally the urge became so strong that I could not resist it. I called up my girl and told her that I was not coming out that weekend, and made up my mind to go to Mass for the first time in my life.

"The first time in my life! That was true. I had lived for several years on the Continent, I had been to Rome, I had been in and out of a thousand Catholic cathedrals and churches, and yet I had never heard Mass. If anything had ever been going on in the churches I visited, I had always fled, in wild Protestant panic.

"I will not easily forget how I felt that day. First, there was this sweet, strong, gentle, clean urge in me which said: 'Go to Mass! Go to Mass!' It was something quite new and strange, this voice that seemed to prompt me, this firm, growing interior conviction of what I needed to do. And when I gave in to it, it did not exult over me, and trample me down in its raging haste to land on its prey, but it carried me forward serenely and with purposeful direction.

"That does not mean that my emotions yielded to it altogether quietly. I was really still a little afraid to go to a Catholic church, of set purpose, with all the other people, and dispose myself in a pew, and lay myself open to the mysterious perils of that powerful thing they called their 'Mass'.

"God made it a very beautiful Sunday... Broadway was empty. A solitary tramcar came speeding down in front of Barnard College and past the School of Journalism. Then, from the expensive tower of the Rockefeller Church, huge bells began to boom. It served very well for the eleven o'clock Mass at the little brick Church of Corpus Christi, hidden behind Teachers College on 121st Street.

¹ Published in England and Australia as *Elected Silence* (London, 1949). My copy is of *Elected Silence*, Universe Books reprint, 1961. The passage cited is on pages 133 to 137. Readers should note that while Merton's early works are generally reliable: his later works should be treated with caution.

“People were going in the wide door, into the cool darkness and, all at once, all the churches of Italy and France came back to me. The richness and fullness of the atmosphere of Catholicism that I had not been able to avoid apprehending and loving as a child, came back to me.

“It was a gay, clean church, with big plain windows and white columns and pilasters and a well-lighted, simple sanctuary. It had a kind of seventeenth-century oratorian character about it, though with a sort of American colonial tinge of simplicity. The blend was effective and original: but although all this affected me, without my thinking about it, the thing that impressed most was that the place was absolutely full. It was full not only old ladies and broken-down gentlemen with one foot in the grave, but of men and women and children young and old—especially young: people of all classes on a solid foundation of working men and women and their families.

“I found a place that I hoped would be obscure, over on one side, in the back, and went to it without genuflecting, and knelt down. As I knelt, the first thing I noticed was a young girl, very pretty too, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, kneeling straight up and praying quite seriously. I was very much impressed to see that someone who was young and beautiful could with such simplicity make prayer the real and serious and principal reason for going to church. She was clearly kneeling that way because she meant it, not in order to show off, and she was praying with an absorption which, thought not the deep recollection of a saint, was serious enough to show that she was not thinking at all about the other people who were there.

“What a revelation it was, to discover so many ordinary people in a place together, more conscious of God than of one another: not there to show off their hats or their clothes, but to pray, or at least to fulfil a religious obligation, not a human one. For even those who might have been there for no better motive than that they were obliged to be, were at least free from any of the self-conscious and human constraint which is never absent from a Protestant church where people are definitely gathered together as people, as neighbours, and always have at least half an eye for one another, if not all of both eyes.

“Since it was summer time, the eleven o’clock Mass was a Low Mass: but I had not come expecting to hear music. Before I knew it, the priest was in the sanctuary with the two altar boys and was busy at the altar with something or other which I could not see very well, but the people were praying by themselves, and I was engrossed and absorbed in the thing as a whole: the business at the altar and presence of the people. And still I had not got rid of my fear. Seeing the late-comers hastily genuflecting before entering the pew, I realized my omission, and got the idea that people had spotted me for a pagan and were just waiting for me to miss a few more genuflections before throwing me out or, at least, giving me looks of reproof.

“Soon we all stood up. I did not know what it was for. The priest was at the other end of the altar, and, as I afterwards learned, he was reading the Gospel. And then the next thing I knew there was someone in the pulpit.

“It was a young priest, perhaps not much over thirty-three years old. His face was rather ascetic and thin, and its asceticism was heightened with a note of intellectuality by his horn-rimmed glasses, although he was only one of the assistants, and he did not consider himself an intellectual, nor did anyone else apparently consider him so. But

anyway, that was the impression he made on me: and his sermon, which was simple enough, did not belie it.

“It was not long: but to me it was very interesting to hear this young man quietly telling the people in language that was plain, yet tinged with scholastic terminology, about a point in Catholic Doctrine. How clear and solid the doctrine was: for behind those words you felt the full force not only of Scripture but of centuries of a continuous and consistent tradition. And above all, it was a vital tradition: there was nothing studied or antique about it. These words, this terminology, this doctrine, and these convictions fell from the lips of the young priest as something that were most intimately part of his own life. What was more, I sensed that the people were familiar with it all, that it was also, in due proportion, part of their life also: just as much integrated into their spiritual organism as the air they breathed or the food they ate worked into their blood and flesh.

“What was he saying? That Christ was the Son of God. That, in Him, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, God had assumed a Human Nature, a Human Body and Soul, and had taken Flesh and dwelt amongst us, full of grace and truth: and that this Man, whom men called the Christ, was God. He was both Man and God: His acts were the acts of God. He loved us: God, and walked among us: God, and died for us on the Cross, God of God, Light of Light, True God of True God.

“And how did we know? Because it was revealed to us in the Scriptures and confirmed by the teaching of the Church and of the powerful unanimity of Catholic Tradition from the first Apostles, from the first Popes and the early Fathers, on down through the Doctors of the Church and the great scholastics, to our own day. *De Fide Divina*. If you believed it, you would receive light to grasp it, to understand it in some measure. If you did not believe it, you would never understand: it would never be anything but scandal or folly.

“And no one can believe these things merely by wanting to, of his own volition. Unless he receive grace, an actual light an impulsion of the mind and will from God, he cannot even make an act of living faith. It is God who gives us faith, and no one cometh to Christ unless the Father draweth him.

“I wonder what would have happened in my life if I had been given this grace in the days when I had almost discovered the Divinity of Christ in the ancient mosaics of the churches of Rome? What scores of self-murdering and Christ-murdering sins would have been avoided—all the filth I had plastered upon His image in my soul during those last five years that I had been scourging and crucifying God within me?

“It is easy to say, after it all, that god had probably foreseen my infidelities and had never given me the grace in those days because He saw how I would waste and despise it: and perhaps that rejection would have been my ruin. For there is no doubt that one of the reasons why grace is not given to souls is because they have so hardened their wills in greed and cruelty and selfishness that their refusal of it would only harden them more... But now I had been beaten into the semblance of some kind of humility by misery and confusion and perplexity and secret, interior fear, and my ploughed soul was better ground for the reception of good seed.

“The sermon was what I most needed to hear that day. When the Mass of the Catechumens was over, I, who was not even a catechumen, but only a blind and deaf and dumb pagan as weak and dirty as anything that ever came out of the darkness of Imperial Rome or Corinth or Ephesus, was not able to understand anything else.

“It all became completely mysterious when the attention was refocused on the altar. When the silence grew more and more profound, and little bells began to ring, I got scared again and, genuflecting hastily on my left knee, I hurried out of the church in the middle of the most important part of the Mass. But it was just as well. In a way, I suppose I was responding to a kind of liturgical instinct that told me I did not belong there for the celebration of the Mysteries as such. I had not idea what took place in them: but the fact was that Christ, God, would be visibly present on the altar in the Sacred Species. And although He was there, yes, for love of me: yet He was there in His power and His might and what was I? What was on my soul? What was I in His sight?

“It was liturgically fitting that I should kick myself out at the end of the Mass of the Catechumens, when the ordained *ostiarii* should have been there to do it. Anyway, it was done.

“Now I walked leisurely down Broadway in the sun, and my eyes looked about me at a new world. I could not understand what it was that had happened to make me so happy, why I was so much at peace, so content with life.

“All I know is that I walked in a new world. Even the ugly buildings of Columbia were transfigured in it, and everywhere was peace in these streets designed for violence and noise. Sitting outside the gloomy little Childs restaurant at 111th Street, behind the dirty, boxed bushes, and eating breakfast, was like sitting in the Elysian Fields.”