

The Language of Gesture and Its Calling to Life Some Sacred Signs

Epigraphs

“Man's ability to *see* in decline. Those who nowadays [circa 1946-1952] concern themselves with culture and education will experience this fact again and again. We do not mean here, of course, the physiological sensitivity of the human eye. We mean **the spiritual capacity to perceive the visible** as it truly is. To be sure, no human being has ever *seen* everything that lies visibly in front of his eyes. **The world, including its tangible side, is unfathomable.** Who [not even a lifelong and gifted board-Surfer] would ever have perfectly perceived **the countless shapes and shades of just one wave swelling and ebbing** in the ocean [?!] And yet, there are degrees of perception. [However,] Going below a certain bottom line [of perceptiveness] quite obviously **will endanger the integrity of man as a spiritual being.** It seems that nowadays [even in 1952] we have arrived at this bottom line.... To repeat, then, man's ability to *see* is in decline.

“Searching for the reasons, we could point to various things: modern man's restlessness and stress, quite sufficiently denounced by now, or his total absorption and enslavement by practical goals and purposes. Yet one reason must not be overlooked either: the average person of our time [even long before the protean mutabilities of “cyberspace” and “cyberculture”] **loses the ability to see because *there is too much to see!*** There does exist something like ‘**visual noise,**’ which just like its acoustical counterpart, **makes clear perception impossible....**The ancient sages knew exactly **why they called ‘the concupiscence of the eyes’ a ‘destroyer.’** **The restoration of man's inner eyes** can hardly be expected in this day and age [in 1952]—unless, first of all, one were willing and determined simply to exclude from one's realm of life all those inane and contrived but titillating illusions incessantly generated by the entertainment [and athletic-sports?] industry....Let me repeat: in this obviously continuing process there exists a limit below which human nature itself is threatened, and the very integrity of human existence is directly endangered, Therefore, such ultimate danger can no longer be averted with technology alone.” (Josef Pieper, “Learning How to See Again,” in *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), pp. 31, 32, 33—my bold emphasis added; italics in the original)¹

¹ The book, *Only the Lover Sings*, was originally published in 1988 in German and was entitled *Nur der Liebende Singt*. The second chapter, which is to be conveniently found in the 1990 English translation, is entitled “Learning How to See Again” (pp. 31-36), **although it was published in 1952** in a catalog for an art exhibition, and then also soon reprinted a little later in that same year of 1952, now almost 65 years ago.

“At stake is this: How can man [from the vantage point of 1952] be saved from **becoming a totally passive consumer** of mass-produced goods and a **subservient follower beholden to every slogan the managers [the perception-managers]** may proclaim [and then manipulate]?....How can man preserve and safeguard **the foundation of his spiritual dimension** and an **uncorrupted** relationship to reality? **The capacity to perceive** [the capacity for **attentiveness to**] the visible world 'with our own eyes' is indeed an **essential constituent** of human nature. We are talking here about man's **essential inner richness**—or, should the threat prevail, man's most **abject inner poverty**....

“The diagnosis is **indispensable yet** only a first step [to be more protected from such “visual noise,” for example]. What, then, **may** be proposed; what **can** be done? We already mentioned simple abstention [such as resolute “cognitive asceticism”], a regimen of fasting and abstinence, by which we would try to keep the visual noise of daily inanities at a distance. Such an approach [or self-discipline] seems to me indeed an indispensable first step but, all the same, no more than the removal, say, of a roadblock. A better and more immediately effective remedy is this: *to be active oneself in artistic creation [e.g., sculpture, literature, portraiture, musical composition and performance], producing shapes and forms for the eye to see [to include the “inner eye”]*. Nobody has to observe and study **the visible mystery of the human face** more than the one who sets out to sculpt it **in a tangible medium**. And this holds true not only for a **manually formed** image. **The verbal 'image'** as well **can thrive only when it springs from a higher level of visual perception**. We sense **the intensity of observation required** simply to say, 'The girl's eyes were gleaming like wet currants.' (Tolstoy).

“Before you can **express** anything in **tangible** form, you first need eyes to see. The **mere attempt**, therefore, to create **an artistic form** compels the artist **to take a fresh look at the visible reality**; it requires authentic **personal observation**. Long before a creation [such as a sculpture] is completed, the artist has **gained** for himself **another and more intimate achievement: a deeper and more receptive vision, a more intense awareness, a sharper and more discerning understanding, a more patient openness for all things quiet and inconspicuous, an eye for the previously overlooked**....The artist will be able **to perceive with new eyes** the **abundant** wealth of **all** visible reality, and, **thus challenged, additionally acquires the inner capacity to absorb** into his mind such an exceedingly **rich harvest**. **The capacity to see increases.**” (Josef Pieper, “Learning How to See Again,” in *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*, pp. 33-34, 35-36—my bold emphasis added; italics in the original)

“The key to a Christian conception of studies [“school studies”] is the **realization** that **prayer consists of attention** [*i.e.*, a “receptive attentiveness” and, thus, a developing “faculty” of “watching, waiting attention”]. It is the **orientation** of all the attention of which the soul is capable **toward God**. The **quality** of the attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer. Warmth of heart cannot make up for it. The highest part of the attention only makes [conscious] contact with God when prayer is **intense and pure enough** for such a contact...[when] **the whole attention** is turned toward God [perhaps in the hushed moments of silence at the Consecration, during the *Actio Sacra* of the Mass?]

“Of course school exercises only develop a **lower kind of attention**. Nevertheless, they are extremely effective in **increasing the power of attention** which will be **available** [to us] at the time of prayer [and likewise enable us to perceive, and **much more discerningly now**, an **afflicted human face in grave need**, so that we could and would **now also be “better able to give to someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him, at the supreme moment of his need”**]...The [purposive and abidingly prayerful] **development of the faculty of attention forms** the real **object** and **almost** the sole **interest** of studies [cf. the ethos of “the love of learning and the desire for God” to be found in the traditional Benedictine Schools]...They [the “school children” thus] should learn to like **all** these [school] subjects [*e.g.*, “French,” “Geometry,” “Greek,” “Latin”] **because** all of them **develop the faculty of attention** which, **directed** [purposively] toward God, is the very substance of prayer....

“**There is a real desire when there is an effort of attention**. It is really light [the light of truth and the truth about love] that is desired **if** all other incentives are absent. Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a **light that is in exact proportion to them** [“our efforts”] will flood the soul. **Every effort** adds a little gold to a treasure no power on earth can take away. [For example:] **The useless efforts made by the Curé d'Ars, for long and painful years, in his attempt to learn Latin bore fruit in the marvelous discernment that enabled him to see the very soul of his penitents behind their words and even their silences.**” (Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” its entirety on pages 44-52 in the *Simone Weil Reader* (edited by George A. Panichas) (Mt Kisko, New York: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977), pp. 44-46, 51-52—my bold emphasis added; italics in the original)

In July of 1974, shortly after I had met him for the first time, Professor Josef Pieper and I memorably attended together a reverently offered Mass in the mountains of Spain. It was at a Benedictine Monastery up in the Valle de los Caída (Valley of the Fallen) in the Guadarrama Mountains some six miles distant from the small town of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, which is itself located almost thirty miles to the northwest of Madrid.

Neither Professor Pieper nor I was adequately prepared for that vividly presented and reverently conducted Sacred Action of the Mass which we were then so soon and uniquely to witness together — and then so promptly to partake of while we were there kneeling beside one another — both of us with thankfulness, then and thereafter.

Perhaps because all of our five senses were so deftly stirred and distinctively appealed to — separately and in combination — that mediating sacrificial-sacramental offering of the Mass, essentially an *Actio Sacra*, understandably left Catholics like us with such a deep and abiding gratitude to which we returned for many years in our memories and in our many reflective discussions together down the years (1974-1997). Moreover, that Sacrifice of the Altar was fittingly presented at General Franco's Granite Monument of Reconciliation, begun in 1940 and magnanimously honoring **all** of those who had fallen in the devastating Spanish Civil War (1936-1939); and the Mass was thus offered by the Benedictine Abbey Community resident at the large underground Nave of that Spanish Crypt Church (the Granite **Basilica of the Holy Cross of the Valley of the Fallen**). For, it was truly a sacred action in a sacred place at a sacred time. Dr. Pieper was seventy years of age at the time, and I only thirty-one, but neither of us professed Roman Catholics had ever known such a manifoldly vivid liturgical action, *sub gratia divina*. The language of gesture and the sacred signs themselves seeped deeply into us, along with the *Memoria Corporis*.

For example, as Josef Pieper and I were ourselves kneeling and concentrated during those “hushed moments” of the imminent sacrificial consecration, **suddenly** all the lights (except a few little candles near the altar up front) in the nave were extinguished — except for one bright light focused on the priest standing at the altar facing east under a Larger-than-Life Illuminated Wooden Crucifix above him as he slowly elevated the Host and then the Chalice. I shall never forget how Josef Pieper quietly

emitted a reverent sudden sound, an “Ah!”: his gesture of wonder and of admiration and of adoration.

Prior to these gestures at the consecration, we had heard the beautiful Gregorian Chanting from the attendant Benedictine Choir and their supplementing, loyally accompanying but separate, Sacred Boys Choir. The antiphonal counterpoint of these manly and youthful voices was especially inspiring and exquisite, as were the bells, especially the Sacring Bells and the poised intervals of Silence before the Consecration. The nave was, all that time, also suffused with the fragrance of the incense; and along the walls of the nave of the crypt church were large and sculpted lights with the artful appearance of torches. The rhythms of the Latin language were audible except at the Consecration. The Benedictine priest who had consecrated *in persona Christi* then distributed the consecrated wafer-hosts to the kneeling faithful with a memorably reverent touch as we ourselves receptively knelt near the altar at the white linen-covered communion rail.

After the “*Ite Missa est*” and after we soon moved outside and stood together after Mass, Dr. Pieper looked at me directly and so serenely with his own “*oculus simplex*”; and then he memorably said to me, with his characteristic **glow** of *simplicitas*, as follows:

That was **truly** an *Actio Sacra*. Such varied sensory enhancements gained our alertness and thereby supported the essential Sacred Action of the Mass. Sometimes, even beyond the intelligible words and surrounding audible sounds and tones of sacred music, I also felt, as with Bach, a wordless jubilation. It makes me once again consider what it must have been like for Saint Thomas himself to be at prayer and adoration in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on the Feast of Corpus Christi and to have heard, with its chanted Latin poetry, the Holy Mass and the whole Divine Office that he had himself composed for the whole Church, at the explicit invitation and request of the Pope. (This is a close paraphrase of Josef Pieper's words, as I faithfully have tried to recall and preserve them.)

Who could forget words such as these, coming as they do from a man like Josef Pieper? For, he was a man about whom one could (and should) truthfully say: “*Kein falscher Ton.*” “He never spoke with a false tone. He never had a false tone in him.” Such was the man I knew. Over many years, some twenty-three years as I now realize.

One of Josef Pieper's own cherished mentors, especially in the formative Catholic Youth Movement after World War I, was Father Romano Guardini (1885-1968), who also cultivated the

combination of philosophy and literature-poetry.² Father (later Monsignor) Guardini was ordained as a Catholic priest in Mainz, Germany in 1910 before the Great War and during the reign of Pope Saint Pius X. Nearby Mainz there was an old castle which later after the War was often used by the Catholic Youth Movement (“Quickborn”) at Jugendburg Rothenfels on the Mainz River; and where young Josef Pieper (b. 1904) in 1924 heard a formatively illuminating, even decisively influential, lecture by Romano Guardini himself on “Goethe and Thomas Aquinas,” a lecture which combined once again Poetry and Philosophical Anthropology (and the Virtues). Only two years earlier, in 1922 — though he first circulated it as a pamphlet during the War itself — Father Guardini had published a book in Würzburg, entitled *Sacred Signs (Von heiligen Zeichen)*.³ And it is to this little book that we should now turn, in order to appreciate better its timeliness, as well as its timelessness.

Moreover, we shall thereby also better perceive its fresh and lasting influence on Dr. Pieper and on some of his own later writings: on the Sacred and on the Priesthood; and on a “truly festive” Feast, for example, as well as on receptive contemplation and sacrifice and public worship (*Musse und Kult*, 1948).

Although there have been later English translations of *Sacred Signs*, I shall use the one first published in 1930 in London, and excellently translated by the Jesuit priest, G.C.H. Pollen, S.J.⁴

Writing in the Spring of 1927 (from Mooshausen in the Swabian Allgäu, in Western Bavaria), Romano Guardini first introduces his theme, with characteristic modesty:

The little essays in this book have development in the course of some ten years [1917-1927]. They were intended to help in opening the door to the liturgical world....

In liturgy we deal **directly** not with thoughts but **with actualities**. And not with

2 Another of Josef Pieper's gratefully remembered mentors of that time in the Catholic Youth Movement—with all of its wholesome time (hiking and singing) in the out of doors, as well as its demanding studies in the spiritual and intellectual colloquies and friendships—was the learned Jesuit Priest, Erich Przywóra, S.J. Father Przywóra's own academic work on Analogy, especially on the *Analogia Entis*, was very important for Dr. Pieper and for his own later work on Saint Thomas Aquinas, to include, first of all, Saint Thomas' own Commentary on the Prologue to the Gospel of John. Dr. Pieper often spoke warmly to me about Father Przywóra, and even about some of that brilliant man's eccentricities!

3 This little book, *Von heiligen Zeichen* (Sacred Signs), published in Würzburg, Germany in 1922, was Romano Guardini's **third** published book, coming after his 1918 book on the Spirit of the Liturgy (*Vom Geist der Liturgie*, 1918) and after his 1921 book (also his post-doctoral *Habilitationsschrift*) on Saint Bonaventura's Doctrine on the Redemption (*Die Lehre des heiligen Bonaventura von der (über die) Erlösung*, 1921)

4 See Romano Guardini, *Sacred Signs* (London: Sheed & Ward, September 1930—Second Impression February 1937), 97 pages. All further references to this text will be placed above in parentheses in the main body of this essay.

past actualities but **with those [actualities] now present** [to include the living “**presence of the past**” as in our Memory and in the “*Memoria Corporis*” of Christ Himself and continuous Sacred Tradition]; with **actions** ever done on and by us; with human activity **in form and performance**....

We must help ourselves to read in the **outward form** the **inner state** [cf. the principle: “*anima forma corporis est*”]: **to read from the body what is in the soul**; to read from the earthly process what is spiritual and hidden.

The liturgy is **the world of sacred and hidden events which have taken visible shape—it is sacramental**.

The most important things to learn, then, are **those living acts by which the believer grasps, receives and performs the sacred “visible signs of invisible grace.”** (ix-x—my emphasis added)

After making a few distinctions between education and teaching, Father Guardini speaks a little more of the purpose of his book:

We desire to point out, or at least to stimulate **the living vision and performance of the Sacred Signs**. (x—my emphasis added)

If one only briefly considers the titles of his sequential little chapters, one will at least incipiently grasp Guardini's refreshing conception and his desire to understand more fully (“*fides quaerens intellectum*”): the sign of the cross; the hand; kneeling; standing [cf. the “*Orante*”]; walking; striking the breast [the “*planctus*”]; the steps; the door; the candle; holy water; the flame; ashes; incense; light and heat; bread and wine; the altar; linen; the chalice; the paten; blessing; sacred space; the bells; sacred hours — morning; sacred hours — noon; sacred hours — evening; and the Name of God.

Father Guardini then adds:

Thus it seemed to me both right and fruitful [also for the children and for their attentive courtesy] to begin with the simplest elements out of which the higher structure of the liturgy can be built up. We want **to give an impulse to those feelings roused in man** by such elementary signs—**to make them realize them precisely as signs and symbols**.

We hope that they will thus be filled with **living expression**, as a man **ever renews his recognition of what comes to him** from within **through** the recurring **outward forms**; and constantly aims at **expressing in his own bodily acts what he realises in his soul**. [cf. “*anima forma corporis*”] (x-xi—my emphasis added)

Once again Guardini speaks of “**the creative vision of forms inherent in Christianity.**” For, a baptised Christian, he believes, will likely and gradually (and sometimes even suddenly) come to “grasp these [elementary] signs **as sacred symbols, as the elements of the sacraments and of the sacramentals.**” (xi—my emphasis added)

With further graciousness, Father Guardini says:

I know very well who could speak better [than I] and more aptly: a mother who was herself trained in liturgy, and is now **teaching her child how to make a sign of the cross correctly**; she teaches it [the child] **how to recognise in its inner self what it sees outwardly in a burning candle: what is meant by standing with his living manhood in the House of its Father....**

So also could a teacher speak, who really lives with his pupils, who trains them **to realise and carry out the true idea of a Sunday; of a Feast; of the [ecclesiastical] calendar with its seasons; of door and bell, of Church-space and pilgrimage....**

Seeing and doing are the ground work on which all the rest [of “liturgical life” as well as “liturgical education”] is founded. **Illustrate it by clear doctrine; join in with Catholic tradition by historical teaching....But** it must [also] be a **doing—and a true doing** [as in a performed “*Actio Sacra*” in a simple Sacrament]....Doing is something elementary, in which **the whole man** must take part, **with all of his creative powers**: a live carrying out; a live experience, undertaking, seeing [and coming forth “from [one's] own experience of the sacred signs”].(xii-xiv—my emphasis added)

It is fitting that we now present some representative illustrations of those elemental “sacred signs,” as Romano Guardini so perceptively saw them, depicted them, and recurrently lived them. The first of the sacred signs considered is “The Sign of the Cross”:

You can **make the sign of the cross, and make it rightly. Nothing in the way of hasty waving of the hand**, from which no one could understand what you are doing—no, a real sign of the cross: **slow, large, from forehead to breast, and from one shoulder to the other**. Don't you feel that it takes **the whole of you? Gather up all thoughts and all feelings** into this sign as it goes from forehead to breast; **pull yourself together**, as it goes from shoulder to shoulder. **It covers the whole of you, body and soul; it gathers you up, dedicates you, sanctifies you.**

Why? Because it is **the sign of the whole man and the sign of redemption. On** the Cross our Lord **redeemed** all men. **Through** the Cross He **sanctifies** the **whole** man, to the very last fibre of his being.

That is why we cross ourselves before our prayers, so that the sign may **pull us**

together and set us in order, may **fix thought, heart and will in God**. After prayers we cross ourselves, **so that what God has given us may stay with us**. In temptation, that it may strengthen us; in danger, that it may protect us; when a blessing is given, that **the fullness of life from God** [sanctifying grace] may be **taken into our soul**, and may **consecrate** all in it **and make it fruitful**. (3-4—my emphasis added)

The Dominicans have often expressed, also in Latin, the following adage about Sanctifying Grace: “Grace is Glory begun, Glory is Grace perfected” (“*Gratia est Gloria incepta, Gloria est Gratia perfecta*”).

Father Guardini concludes his own brief insights with the following earnest exhortation:

Think of **[all] this** when you make **the sign of the cross**. **It is the holiest sign there is**. Make it **carefully, slowly**; make a **large one, with recollection**. For then it embraces your whole being, body and soul, your thoughts and your will, imagination and feeling, your doing and resting; and in it all will be strengthened, stamped, **consecrated in the power of Christ, in the name of the Holy Trinity**. (4—my emphasis added)

Let us now consider the hand as a sign, especially in the context of sacred signs, and we begin with some principles (in metaphysics more Thomistic than Augustinian):

The whole body is the tool [instrument] and the expression of the soul. The soul does **not** merely dwell in the body, as if it dwelt in a house, but it lives and works in every member and every fibre. It speaks in every line, and form, and movement of the body. [*Anima forma corporis est.*] **But in a very special way the face and the hand are the tool and mirror of the soul**.

This is obvious with regard to the face. But watch anyone—yourself—and see how a movement of temper, of joy, of astonishment, of expectation is **revealed by the hand**. How often a **quick raising**, or a **slight twitch** of the hand **says more** even than a spoken word. It seems sometimes as if a **spoken** word were **almost coarse** compared with **the delicate language of the hand** [the gesture of the hand], which tells so much....

It [the hand] is truly a machine **through which** a man can **reveal** his soul. By the hand we **welcome** the stranger and **join** souls when we join hands [as with our freely given **vow** in sacramental matrimony]—with **this act** we express trust, joy, agreement, sympathy.

So we cannot think that the hand will be without its language [a language of gesture], **when the soul has so much to say and to receive** in God's **presence**, when it desires to give itself to God and to welcome Him in prayer. (5-6—my emphasis added)

Father Guardini then considers the differentiated ways we hold ourselves in prayer (for example, “finger folds on finger,” or when “one hand firmly clasps the other” especially when we wish to be alone and recollected with God, “staying at home with the hidden God”; or, if in “an inner distress,” then more urgently “hand locks in hand” until it “forces the soul into calm” and trust):

But **if** anyone stands **in a humble, reverent attitude** before God [*coram Deo*], **then** the outstretched hands meet flat with each other. That speaks of firm control, of overmastering **homage**. It is a **humble, well-ordered telling** of our own mind, and **an attentive ready hearing** of God's word. Or **it tells of dedication, of giving ourselves, as if the hands**, with which we defend ourselves, **were placed bound, in the Hands of God**. (6-7—my emphasis added)

Considering another form of gesture that expresses a reverent inner attitude, Guardini says:

Frequently the soul lays itself **entirely open before God**, in great happiness or thanksgiving. Like an organ, it opens its whole register, and **the fullness within flows out**. Or, a desire raises itself and calls on God. Then a man parts his hands and lifts them wide open, so that the stream from the soul may flow freely, **and the soul may fully receive what it thirsts for**....It may happen that he wishes to give himself to God **in complete dedication** with all that is in him, all that he is and all that he has, **knowingly offering himself victim for sacrifice**. Then he draws in his arms and hands, and folds them crosswise on his breast.

Beautifully and greatly do the hands speak. Of them Church says that God has given them to us, **in order that we may “carry our souls in them.”**

Take, therefore, this holy language in earnest [this language of expressive gesture]. **God listens to it. It speaks from the inmost soul**. It can **also** speak of **sloth of heart**, of distraction and of other failings. **Hold your hands rightly, and be careful that the outer and the inner truly respond to each other**. (7-8—my emphasis added)

Again with modesty and dignity, lest he seem too aesthetical or sentimental, Father Guardini concludes his chapter with these deft and cautionary words:

It is a **delicate matter** of which we have been speaking. **It is not a subject to be lightly talked about**. We shrink from it unconsciously. **So much the more careful we must be** to keep to the right way. We must not make of it an idle, artistic play; but it must speak for us, **so that in very truth the body may say to God what the soul means**. (8—my emphasis added)

After briefly considering and more deeply savoring this representative essay on the hand as a sacred sign, we may now better imagine how Romano Guardini again and again throughout his little book opens up new and precious things for us. When next reading about, and reflecting upon, the sacred sign of kneeling, for example, we further discover Father Guardini's own limpidity and nourishing graciousness — which, with my wife's indispensable help, could also enrich and better teach good manners to our own two growing (and feisty) little children:

When you bend the knee, let it not be a mere hasty gesture. Give it a soul! But the soul of kneeling, of a genuflection, is the bowing down of the innermost heart in reverence and awe before God. When you come into the church and before you leave, or when you pass the altar or the Blessed Sacrament, then kneel; let your knee really rest on the ground. Do it slowly, and let your heart respond, so that the outward and inward act may proclaim the greatness of God. That is humility, and it is truth; and every time you do it, it will do your soul good. (8—my emphasis added)

Here is how Father Guardini makes a transition to another gesture and also thereby makes us more perceptive and more attentive:

We have spoken of reverence towards the eternal God as **demanding a definite, respectful attitude**. He is so great and we are so little, that **we must acknowledge this even outwardly**: it makes us small, **it bids us kneel**. **But this reverence can also be shown in another way....Standing** [for an approaching person “worthy of special respect” while we are seated] **signifies, above all, that we pull ourselves together**. Instead of the slack position of sitting, we take up a stiff, controlled attitude. It means that **we are attentive: we are, as the soldiers say, “at attention.”** Standing has in it something of stress, of **watchfulness**. **It shows that we are ready**: he who stands can immediately go off here or there; he can undertake any task without delay; he can begin any work, as soon as he is shown what to do.

This is the other side of reverence for God. We kneel when we want to pray, to rest before God; here **we are ready for action**. This is **the reverence of the attentive servant, of the armed warrior**: they show **their readiness....**

Sometimes we feel as if we could not pray kneeling—as if it cramped us. **Then to stand will free us** from that feeling, and will do us good. But it must be the right kind of standing. On both feet, with straight knees and back, not leaning against anything—**upright and full of self-control**. Then our prayer also comes under control **and is yet free, in reverence and readiness....**

The greatest mysteries lie hid in the simplest things. (11-13, 24—my emphasis added)

Throughout his *Sacred Signs*, even when considering some of the graded implications of

the physical steps at a church (“The Steps”) and the more abstract spatial relations of the “above or below,” Romano Guardini offers additionally memorable spiritual insights:

We only get to God **by becoming purer, more upright, better. What has purity to do with standing on a hilltop?** We cannot explain it. We can only recognise that it is natural to us to join...being above with being noble and good. Mounting on high speaks, of its own accord, to us of the rising of our soul towards God, the All-Highest. We cannot explain it, but it is so: we feel it, we see it. That is why steps lead from the street to the church. They say: “You are going up to the house of prayer, nearer to God.” And **from the nave of the church steps lead to the sanctuary**; they say: “Now you are going up to the Holy of Holies.” And **more steps lead from the sanctuary to the altar....The altar is the threshold of eternity....All we want is that the inner truth may be clearly seen**—that we may, in spirit, mount to the Lord. (24-25, 26—my emphasis added)

In his chapter on “The Candle” he says:

All [created] things speak to it [the soul], every form, every movement, **every gesture**. Without rest, the soul seeks **to express its own innermost meaning** in these outer things; **to make them symbols of its own life....[As in] “Lord, in this candle, I stand before Thee.”.... [For] The most profound sentiment of our being is to be consumed in truth and for love of God, as the candle turns into light and heat....The [warming] flame of the ever-burning lamp.** (31, 33, 41—my emphasis added)

Romano Guardini's chapter on “Light and Heat” (51-54) is especially profound as well as exquisitely beautiful, since it is cumulatively interwoven with the prior and gradually preparatory chapters on The Candle, Holy Water, The Flame, and Incense (as well as on Ashes, and on the Reality of Death); and the chapter on “Light and Heat” could then be further fulfilled by the subsequent chapters, respectively entitled “Bread and Wine” (55-58) and “The Altar” (59-60).

As one closely reads and re-reads these chapters, and savors them — as one would do with good wine — one would also remember the virtuous character and insights of Josef Pieper, but also the liturgical poetry of the great Saint Thomas Aquinas — and not only his Latin compositions for the Feast of *Corpus Christi*. Father Romano Guardini was manifoldly a mentor to Josef Pieper, as was, later more fully, Saint Thomas himself. All three of them had a special attentiveness to the Creation, to the Incarnation, and to the “Incarnation continued,” as it were, in the divinely founded Sacramental Order, where **mystery and intimacy** (a sensible intimacy) are subtly conjoined and fostered. Such was

also so in the case of the great and wholehearted Hilaire Belloc and his own vivid “Sacramental Imagination.”

CODA

After Professor Josef Pieper and I had gratefully attended together that unforgettable June 1974 Mass in Spain — near the El Escorial and up at the Benedictine Abbey in the Valley of the Fallen, with its formidable Granite-Sculptured Way of the Cross wending its way up the steep mountain — I also vividly recalled what Hilaire Belloc himself had experienced in Narbonne, France **fifty** years earlier, in May of 1925 on the Feast of Pentecost — or “**the High Feast of the Holy Ghost,**” as Belloc often called it.

A few excerpts from Belloc's own expressive essay may also provide a clarifying contrast and thereby be a fitting counterpoint and bolstering enhancement to what we have already so gratefully presented from Romano Guardini himself, who was writing about the same time as Belloc, in 1927 (and a little earlier, too). I therefore propose to quote now from Chapter XXXI of Hilaire Belloc's own 1927 book, *Towns of Destiny*, specifically from his vivid chapter entitled simply “Narbonne.”⁵

When I thus came to Narbonne [in 1925, “back again in the unbroken tradition of our people and of the Faith”], it being yet long before noon in the mid-morning, **a strong May sun** poured through that glass [of the “Gothic church”] **and made the whole airy cavern celestially alive**. It seemed to have...the height of Beauvais, the majesty of Paris, and something of the magic of Chartres. For the thirteenth century learned to work **this miracle of contrasts**: [*i.e.*,] so to arrange the **external** stonework that its characteristic to **the onlooker from without** was the strength of this world [as with the Spanish **granite**], but so to devise **the interior** with the least **proportion** of fine, long-drawn supports, that **the lights** were **its universal mark**, and that [from the inside] the building itself **seemed half air**.

I came to the town [about 9:00 A.M.] just in time for the Great High Mass of Pentecost, and going straight...into the cathedral, I took my place..., till **the procession entered, and the Sacrifice began**. It was **an experience such as I shall not have again**, I suppose, **in this life; such as I had not had before in all the many years and towns of my travels**. For **there met in combination there**, by some divine [providential] chance, **certain streams of emotion, their combination all enhanced by the quality of the place**. What I had just

⁵ See Hilaire Belloc, *Towns of Destiny* (New York: Robert M. Mc Bride & Company, 1927). Chapter XXXI on “Narbonne” will be found on pages 223-239. Further page references and quotations from this text will be placed in parentheses above, in the main body of the current essay. My emphasis will be often added, as well.

seen in Barbary, the several crossings of the Mediterranean Sea, the town [of Narbonne] under the strong light, the mountains to the south and to the north, far away, the richness of the [nearby Narbonnese] plain, the great [historical] story of activity and of decay, **all this combined to give an immense significance** to this [Mass] which I was about to follow, **this Act** [*Actio Sacra*], repeated daily upon ten thousand altars, **which is also more significant than anything else in the world.** (225-226—my emphasis added)

It is then that our beloved Belloc gets even more expressively intimate:

It was as though this High Mass which was about to open had something about it especial; catching up the spirit of the myriad others [the other Masses] which in succession were rising to meet the sun **in the progress of morning light** around the world; and I [at 55 years of age] was **filled with the recollection** that I had [gratefully] chanced, by the best of fortunes, to find myself here **upon the Feast of the Holy Ghost**. It was a little after nine o'clock of the morning of that Whitsunday [in 1925, when Josef Pieper was himself then an adventurous young 21 years of age]. (226—my emphasis added)

Hilaire Belloc himself now raises his own clarifying contrast about the living *Memoria Corporis Christi* (the living “Memory of the Body of Christ”) in Sacred Tradition and about how one thus now makes use of **an appeal to the five senses in the Liturgy**; and it all seems to be rooted in how one first understands the meaning of the Incarnation and the Seven Sacraments:

Men are often blamed (and more often justly blamed) for permitting the sensual to invade the intellectual; that is, for allowing their judgment (which is our highest faculty, after love) to be warped by the appetitive in man.

On this account it is that the **detestable** Manicheans (for whom the modern name is “Puritans”) **reject the proper glories of public worship and the unison of the whole of man into the act of God's praise and of God's service**. Without considering **their unhappy malformation**, it remains true that a man must never misinterpret his mere emotion [or “a sentimental memory”] for faith, nor his mere mood for intellectual assent and conviction; still less must he ever substitute intention for act, and a feeling, however strong, for [an] achievement. Faith is of the will. **He would be a poor heir of the Catholic Church who should consider the splendours of her most noble pageantry in the greatest Mass, as in some way adding to the inward values and to the unseen glory of a low Mass said hurriedly in some chapel of a hamlet.**

Nevertheless, I would advance it to be true that the soul is supported by all sacramental things; that is, **by all unison of the mind and the body upon a proper object** [e.g., Adoration and the Memory and Presence of the Sacrifice of Christ]; and that when **great architecture and glorious colour and solemn music** [such as Gregorian Chant], and **the profound rhythms of the Latin tongue**, and **the ritual of many centuries**, and **the uncommunicable**

atmosphere of age, all combine to exalt a man **in his worship**, he is made greater and not less. He is supported [by such “sacramental things”]. He is fed. (226-227—my emphasis added)

Then once again — as with Romano Guardini and Josef Pieper themselves — Hilaire Belloc anticipates some worthy objections and thereby winsomely shows his modesty, his humility, when he candidly acknowledges that other men have different capacities and experiences and aspirations; and they also do not appear to have Belloc's own special need and consequent vulnerability:

Well do I know that the greatest of visions have come to men in small rough huts of stone, round in shape, piled by their own hands above the Western seas of Ireland or in the Hebrides [of northwest Scotland]. And I know that these men scaled heaven.

I know also that men similarly isolated in the deserts between the Nile and the Red Sea **perceived our final inheritance and were admitted** into divine company.

There is no necessity of any aid from the senses [for some men]; and the greatest of those who were **adepts in the search for heaven** did, upon the contrary, **withdraw** themselves from all influence of the senses **when they most desired the satisfaction of the *praegustatum*—the foretaste of that [Beatitude] for which we were designed: our home.**

But I can not boast myself to be of such a kind, and on my own poor level it is landscape, the sea, human love, music, and the rest that help to make me understand: and in their absence I am very empty indeed. (227-228—my emphasis added)

(Down the years, I have read and re-read this last paragraph many times, and it is always fresh and piercing and is still close to my heart.)

Hilaire Belloc now returns us to the Gothic cathedral of Narbonne and to the chanted Latin High Mass on the Feast of the Holy Ghost. And our chivalrous Belloc — this magnanimous and combative man of gratitude — is himself unmistakably quickened thereby:

Now here in the Cathedral of Narbonne, upon the Whitsunday of 1925 [when Father Romano Guardini himself was still a young 40 years of age], having come in with one companion in the morning of a hot summer's day, **after so much exploration of the heights** of [the Maghreb of north] Africa, **so much watching** of the conflict between Islam **and ourselves**, so much content with the glories of Spain and in the peace and wealth of Palma, of Majorca [in the Balearic Islands], **so much breathing of the Mediterranean air in long nights upon the decks at sea, certainly all the support requisite, all the**

augmentations valuable to a man of my kind, came very fortunately [indeed blessedly] together; and I received, at this Whitsunday High Mass in the cathedral of Narbonne, what I had desired to receive: a great good. (228—my emphasis added)

He finally come to tell us of the *Actio Sacra* itself and of the radiating Grace:

Well then, the Mass began. They bore above the head of the celebrant that round shade of silk which had also come centuries and centuries ago from Rome. They had their particular rites of the bishopric, and of their tradition. They read the Gospel, not from the altar steps, but from high up near the roof, above the heads of the whole people; from the organ loft in splendid fashion. **And when they sang [that hymn to the Holy Ghost] the *Veni Creator*, I could swear that the light which fell in the place took on another quality.**

And I remembered the singing of that same song [the *Veni Creator Spiritus*] on that great day, when St. Dominic sang it upon the scaling ladder, and our people stormed the wall and destroyed the Albigensian [cf. Manichean, Iconoclastic, Gnostic] peril and restored Europe [in the Thirteenth Century].

I must tell you that **all this time the Blessed Sacrament was exposed [in the golden Monstrance] above the altar on a very high place in a blaze of light.** The Mass proceeded; and the final prayers were said [chanted]; the thing was over.

If I could have got into that nave of Narbonne all the starved unbelieving men cut off from the past [and thus from Sacred Tradition] in the dissolution of the modern world, there would have come out some reasonable proportion restored to the traditions of Europe [hence “of the Catholic Faith”]. (228-229—my emphasis added)

It is almost a century ago that those poignant and resonantly elegiac lines were written.

What would the *hilaritas mentis* and the candid integrity of Hilaire Belloc now resiliently and robustly say, especially to those of us of the Faith? For, there are new as well as old forms of Iconoclasm, Gnosticism, Syncretism, and Indifferentism afoot and permeating; and the Cultural Immune System of the Catholic Church seems now to be increasingly weak and even self-sabotaging (like an “auto-immune disease”). And it is difficult to preserve a virtuous and sustaining, **affirmative** Purity and Sacrifice as Josef Pieper so well understood, as did his mentor Father Romano Guardini.

As Father Guardini himself wrote in his *Sacred Signs*, we must remember: “The power of sacrifice is the most profound power of the soul” (60); and “True purity is no sickly thing: it does not run away from life; it does not wander away in unreal dreams and lose itself in empty ideals. True

purity means the red cheeks of a joyful life and the firm grasp of a brave warrior.” (61)

--Finis--

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