

Remembrance, Presence and Contemplation
The Feasts of Our Lord in the Traditional Roman Missal

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Memory is not man's most important attribute; it is reason that sets him apart above all else. One can live without memory, but such a life would be impaired and frequently prone to error. Whilst amnesia is merely a serious handicap for an individual, if it were widespread, it would render all social life impossible, severing all interpersonal bonds, eliminating continuity between generations and preventing an understanding of history. Memory (and the act of remembering) is the necessary condition for recording the past and perpetuating traditions. It lies at the very heart of both the culture of nations and humanity's natural religious relationship with God. Thanks to memory and recollections, this relationship (between the past and the present) is as much the result of a personal realisation of being created, *here and now*, as it is of religious fidelity to humanity's heritage (sometimes passed down with terrible distortions, as can be seen in pagan cults). Whilst this enlightened awareness is the preserve of an elite, the religious heritage is shared by entire communities.

It is worth bearing all this in mind when we consider the feasts of Our Lord in the Church's liturgical calendar and in its traditional Roman Missal. Of course, these Feasts are by no means the epitome of religious memory, nor even its culmination. As manifestations of the supernatural mystery of Christ, they transcend the order of nature and of natural human memory. Their origin and substance come from Heaven and not *from flesh and blood*. Furthermore, (given that everything Christian is intrinsically rooted in and tends towards Christ) these Feasts embody *the harmony of the Incarnation*, which is realised between the divine and the human, between nature and grace, between reason and faith. Christian feasts, and in particular the Feasts of Our Lord, legitimise, purify and elevate to higher realms the profound human desire (already mentioned at the beginning of this text) to maintain a connection with the great past (the beginning, the golden age, the founder and the hero, the pivotal events). Our feasts fulfil this desire, but the act of commemoration (to which, *ipso facto*, all other forms of religiosity are bound to be limited) is merely a means of *making the past present*. Even in this case, let us repeat once more, grace does not replace nature but perfects it.

¹ Lecture delivered at the 6th CIEL symposium, in Versailles, on Thursday 9 November 2000.

Let us return to the anthropological considerations of this text and apply them to the reality of the Church: it is impossible to conceive of the Church without memory, given that she is one with Christ (*Christus totus*), without blemish. She is that body which draws its rich spiritual life from her Head. She is also the perfect society, the *living Tradition* (to use Dom Guéranger's expression) which has its roots in *Sacred History*.

Memory and commemoration

In the **Ordo Missae**, we find interesting accounts of the processes by which the Church's liturgical memory has taken shape.

The starting point and guiding principle of this memory are, of course, based on the account of the institution of the Eucharist, which lies at the very heart of every Mass and every missal. The only person whose actions are mentioned there is: *Dominus Noster Iesus Christus* (whose name does not appear in the text of the Consecration, being replaced by 'who', which refers us back to the preceding prayer '*Quam oblationem*', the Son turning towards the Father and giving the first Communion to his disciples. At the forefront of this account is the recollection of certain acts of Christ in the Upper Room. This choice was made, both in the Gospels and in Saint Paul, not on the basis of the ritual order of the Paschal Meal, but on the basis of the reality of the Mass: the Sacrifice of the Cross (well expressed by the anchoring in time: '*pridie quam pateretur*', in which '*pateretur*' relates to the Passion and serves as the point of reference for '*pridie*' in the Upper Room). Immediately following the institution of the Eucharist, and indeed almost immediately after the words of the Consecration of the bread and wine—that is, after the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord—the celebrant retains the Christ-like first-person formulation, expressing his action **in persona Christi**, saying to the Church, '**Haec quotiescumque feceritis, in mei memoriam facietis**'. By this act, the Church has been commanded to perform the sacrament (to present the offering) in remembrance of the Redeemer and his works.

These two aspects are echoed in the Church's response, when the celebrant, returning to his role as mediator of the People of God, refers to God's commandment spoken previously and addresses God the Father, saying '*Unde et memores, Domine...offerimus*'. Whilst the *Quotiescumque* uses the general expression **in mei memoriam**, the **Unde et memores** prayer reveals the fundamental and Paschal structure of the Church's liturgical memory.

The Church, which possesses not only the infallible intuition of the Bride of Our Lord, but also her courage, goes beyond Our Lord's recommendation. This is why she is not content merely to recall the events of the Last Supper and the Cross, but justifies the necessity of this offering by recalling: *'beatae passionis, nec non et ab inferis resurrectionis, sed et in caelos gloriosae ascensionis'*.²

Consequently, in the liturgical commemoration of Our Lord's works, the cycle of Paschal memories—essential to the *Proprium de Tempore*—is manifested: Passion, Resurrection, Ascension. It is important to emphasise that the testimonies mentioned above do not originate solely from the very heart of the Missal, but also from its historical roots as found in its most ancient sources. As evidence of this continuity in the Church's memory, let us cite this historically late prayer, of Gallican origin, which concludes the Offertory: *'Suscipe, sancta Trinitas, hanc oblationem, quam tibi offerimus ob memoriam passionis, resurrectionis et ascensionis Iesu Christi, Domini nostri...'*

There is ample evidence to suggest that the Nativity was also mentioned in the Canons of the Mass. However, this reference was removed from the Anamnesis, as it was considered incompatible with the Paschal events.³ The arguments put forward by liturgists and theologians carried more weight than the medieval trend towards services dedicated to the Incarnation. Ultimately, however, some of these traces can still be found in the Roman Ordo Missae, somewhat on the periphery, outside the 'Paschal' circle: before the Mass of the Faithful (the genuflection during the Creed at the words *'Incarnatus est'*) and after *'Ite missa est'* (during the final Gospel at the words *'et verbum caro factum est'*).

The origin of the liturgical commemoration of the Incarnation is quite different from that of Easter: the latter is a development of Our Lord's direct command at the Last Supper, whereas the former is primarily the fruit of piety.

We shall therefore examine here the two different sources of inspiration for the Feasts of Our Lord.

Anniversary Commemorations

The brief overview of the Church's liturgical memory given above, based solely on the **Ordo Missae**, does not, however, tell us how these liturgical commemorations came into being. We can surmise that the process was a lengthy one, fraught with uncertainty: as we become aware, thanks to

² In the Canon of Saint Hippolytus, the Anamnesis refers only to the death and resurrection. The Ascension is first mentioned only in the writings of Saint Ambrose.

³ Cf. (Blessed) Antoni J. Nowowiejski, *Msza swieta*, Plock 1993, p. 868.

St Paul, of the obsolete nature of the Old Testament ritual (at that time Jewish religious festivals), Christianity had too many problems with this Judaizing world to allow itself to create new commemorations.

From this perspective, the initial interpretation of Christian innovation consisted in the radical elimination of *major feast days* in order to focus on the single Paschal memorial celebrated throughout the year, the Lord's Day. Yet it was on the basis of the Paschal memorial that the liturgical calendar began to take shape, that is to say, *the 'year of the Church'*: the establishment of the annual feast of Easter was all the easier as the date of this event was fairly precise in the Gospels. If we consider the care – or rather the piety – with which Christian religiosity treated all material reminders of Christ (remains, objects, relics and places), we shall not be surprised by the creation of a specific service in which reference is made to 'this day' or 'this night' to mark this anniversary each year. This annual Paschal memorial has become a relic that is increasingly impossible to overlook.

There were other 'relics' of this kind, rooted more in time than in space. Remaining within *the Ordo Missae* or even within the Canon of the Mass, we find traces of other annual ceremonies glorifying Our Lord: more specifically, these are various particular variants of the *Communicantes* prayer. We probably owe this to Saint Leo the Great ^{note 4}, during whose time the general framework of the Feasts of Our Lord was already established.

In the current, rather limited collection of these festive *Communicantes*, with the exception of a specific variant for Pentecost, the other variants relate to the various mysteries of Christ: Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and the Ascension. From the point of view of the structure of the Missal, it is precisely here that we find the correspondence between the liturgical commemoration contained in *the invariant *Ordo Missae** (to which the **Communicantes** prayer schematically belongs) and the particular liturgical commemorations expressed in the **Proprium de Tempore** (which introduces modifications to this prayer of the Canon).

In each case, the *Communicantes* prayers refer to an event in Sacred History:

- *the Blessed Virgin Mary, preserving her spotless virginity, 'gave birth' to the Saviour;*

⁴ Ibid., p. 829

- *United in the same communion and celebrating the most holy day on which Your only Son, co-eternal with You in Your glory, revealed Himself visibly, truly clothed in our mortal flesh,*
- *United in the same communion and celebrating the most holy day of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh.*

All these events, whilst forming part of the supernatural mysteries, took place in time, thereby sanctifying it. This is why we venerate not only the mystery itself, but also the time in which it took place: *diem sacratissimum (noctem sacratissimam)*.

Naturally, we seek to align the sacred time of that era with our contemporary calendar: every commemoration drawn from the memory of the Church takes its place on a specific day or night of the year, thus becoming the anniversary of that particular day or event, the holy day chosen from among the others. In this way, the commemoration of a holy day gives rise to the feast. The commemoration of the anniversary becomes the celebration of that holy day. We thus arrive at the principal type of feast in the liturgical calendar: the anniversary commemoration.

All the *Communicantes* found in the traditional Roman Missal belong to the principal feasts of anniversary commemorations.

These feasts are the cornerstones of the liturgical year. They are grouped into two cycles: the Paschal cycle (Holy Thursday, Easter, Ascension) and the Christmas cycle (Nativity and Epiphany).

Apart from these feasts, which are characterised by changes to the Canon of the Mass, there are a few other commemorations.

Within the Christmas cycle, we find:

- the Circumcision of Our Lord (which is observed rather modestly due to its coincidence with the Octave of Christmas),
- the feasts of the Annunciation and Candlemas (traditionally classified in the Sanctoral as Marian feasts but possessing a strong Christological aspect),
- the Memorial of the Baptism of Our Lord (added by Pius XII to the Christmas season to bring it to a close).

Within the Paschal cycle, it is worth mentioning Palm Sunday, which marks the beginning of Holy Week and commemorates Our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

The only feast of an ‘anniversary’ nature that falls outside these two cycles is the Transfiguration (of Eastern origin, which spread to the West in the early Middle Ages, and was extended to the universal Church by Callistus III in 1457).

The festive ‘Present’

The annual celebration tends to unite the moment of commemoration with that of the event being commemorated in a single liturgical ‘today’. This is most evident in the Easter Triduum: on Holy Thursday, the Roman Missal instructs the celebrant to modify the words of the Canon—which are otherwise immutable—and, after stating the historical context (*pridie quam pro nostra omniumque salute pateretur*), to add significantly: *hoc est, hodie*.

The same occurs in the Collects for several feasts of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

- In the night Mass of the Nativity: ‘*O God, through whom the splendour of the true light shines forth on this most holy night (hanc sacratissimam noctem)...*’.
- On the Feast of the Epiphany: ‘*O God, on this day (hodierna die) when, through the course of a star, you led the pagan peoples to the knowledge of your only Son...*’.
- At the Purification of the Most Holy Virgin Mary: ‘*Almighty and eternal God, ...on this day (hodierna die) when your only-begotten Son was presented to you in the temple, clothed in our flesh...*’ (similarly in the second and fifth prayers of blessing over the candles).
- At the Mass of the Resurrection: ‘*O God, who illumine this sacred night (hanc sacratissimam noctem) with the glory of the Lord’s Resurrection*’.
- At the Easter Mass: ‘*O God, who on this day (hodierna die) through your only Son, the conqueror of death, have opened for us the gateway to eternity...*’
- At the Feast of the Ascension: ‘*Grant us, almighty God, who believe that on this day (hodierna die) your only Son, our Redeemer, ascended into Heaven...*’.

This union of our ‘today’ with the ‘today’ of the mystery being celebrated is particularly evident in the Easter hymn, the *Exsultet*, when the same night (*haec nox*) brings together the Exodus of Israel (*Haec nox est, in qua primum patres...*), the Resurrection (*Haec nox est, in qua... Christus ab inferis victor ascendit*), and the present liberation of the faithful (*Haec nox est, quae hodie per universum mundum in Christo credentes...*).

The central event of Redemption not only took place, but, thanks to the liturgical celebration, is taking place now, becomes present: ‘*Haec sunt enim festa paschalia, in*

which that true Lamb is slain, by whose blood the doorposts of the faithful are consecrated –
It is no coincidence that these words are spoken in the present tense and not in the past.

In the case of the festive celebration, our ‘present’, in a certain sense, is transformed into the ‘present’ of the mystery, where time seems to stand still, focusing on the Paschal centre. We follow in the footsteps of the mysticism of the liturgical year linked to the annual celebration of the feasts in which the events commemorated become present – *acta et passa Christi in carne*.

In the prayers of the Proper of the Feasts of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we also find Prefaces. These prayers offer yet another perspective on the festive celebration. In these prayers, the constant reminder (present in the Ordinary Preface) prevails that it is right and just, fitting and salutary to give thanks to the Lord *semper et ubique*, that is, without distinction of time or place. In their development, the Prefaces – with the significant exception of the Paschal Preface, which states: **in hac potissima die** (*in hoc potissimum*) – do not direct us towards ‘this time’, but sing of the mysteries that have been fulfilled, emphasising their significance for our present and for which we must be grateful today.

Before entering into the silence of the Canon, amidst the joyful exaltation (visible above all in the celebrant’s chant), the Church, with theological precision, expresses its gratitude for the Nativity, the Epiphany, the Passion, the Resurrection and the Ascension:

- ‘...that, through the mystery of the Incarnate Word, a new light from Your radiance has shone forth before the eyes of our spirit, so that, now knowing God visibly, we may be drawn by him into the love of invisible things” (Christmas Preface);
- ‘for your only-begotten Son, by revealing himself clothed in our mortal flesh, has restored our nature by imparting to it the new splendour of his immortality.” (Preface of the Epiphany).
- ‘...who had placed the salvation of the world in the tree of the cross, to bring forth life in the very place where death had taken root, and to conquer by the wood him who once triumphed by the wood’. (Preface of the Passion and the Cross, recited, amongst other occasions, on Maundy Thursday);
- ‘On this day, when Christ our Paschal Lamb was sacrificed. For he is the true Lamb who has taken away the sins of the world, who has destroyed our death by his own and restored life to us through his resurrection.” (Preface of Easter);

- *'Who, after his Resurrection, appeared openly to all his disciples and, before their very eyes, ascended into Heaven so that we might share in his divinity.'* (Preface of the Ascension).

The Easter *Exsultet* prayer is a marvellous theological and poetic reflection on the Saviour's gifts: *'He who paid to the eternal Father the debt of Adam on our behalf and, by his blood, wiped away the penalty for the ancient sin.'*

It should be noted that the Preface prayers specific to each feast are less closely tied to a particular day than the *Communicantes* prayers: the latter are recited on the feast day itself or, at the latest, during the Octave. By contrast, the designated Prefaces are recited over longer periods and even serve as a link between the various feasts. (For example, the Preface of *Nativitate* is recited on the day of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary).

We note the existence of a new reason for festive celebrations. On the foundations of an annual feast, a devout contemplation of the mystery made present develops, along with a desire for gratitude and thanksgiving for all the blessings received. This constitutes a second level of the Feasts of Our Lord. These Feasts have origins and functions different from those of their 'elder sisters' in the liturgical year. I would not hesitate to regard these feasts (which are so scorned by the adherents of the latest 'liturgical movements') as a delicate flower of Christian *fides and devotio* mentioned in the first *Memento* of the Canon. It is also a sign of the maturity of *Christianitas* and of resistance to the forces of decay.

We might even say of these secondary feasts what Cardinal Journet wrote about the doctrine of indulgences: they are like the branches of a tree, which play a secondary role in relation to the trunk and the roots. We were not overly saddened whilst they did not exist, but their appearance and continued existence prove the good health of the whole tree, whilst their withering signals a disease. (Let us add, for our part, that pruning these branches with the scissors of reformers risks giving this tree a sad and artificial shape)⁴. To scorn these feasts born of piety leads us to ask whether we are properly observing the great anniversary feasts (just as contempt for the doctrine of indulgences reveals shortcomings and difficulties in assimilating Catholic teaching on sins, penance, justification, etc.)

⁴ Cf. Charles JOURNET, *'On the Forgiveness of Sin and the Role of Indulgences'*, Editions Saint Augustin – Saint Maurice, 1985, p. 6

Second-generation feasts or feasts of devotion

Of all the Prefaces contained in the traditional Roman Missal, there are only two that mention the existence of these second-generation feasts: the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Christ the King (in a certain sense, also the Preface of the Holy Cross, recited on the feast day of the Precious Blood).

We know that in the liturgical calendar, the first consequence of this contemplative ‘unfolding’ of the feasts commemorating the anniversaries of Our Lord was the institution, in the thirteenth century, of the feast of *Corpus Christi*. This first feast of devotion in memory of Christ paved the way for those that followed by creating, in a certain sense, a model for all feasts. At the root of these feasts lie the piety of the people, the depth of the mystics, sometimes a request made during a private revelation, and, of course, the authority of the hierarchy⁵.

In this way, the Paschal cycle has been enriched by:

- *the feast of Corpus Christi*,
- *the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (prepared by a centuries-old liturgy, enriched by the revelations of Saint Margaret Mary, and extended to the whole Church by Blessed Pope Pius IX in 1856),
- *and the feast of the Precious Blood* (popularised by the Congregation of the Precious Blood and extended to the whole Church by Blessed Pius IX in 1849). The Christmas cycle has been enriched by
- *the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus* (this feast having its origin in the office of Saint Bernardine of Siena, adopted by the Franciscans in the 16th century, and extended to the whole Church by Innocent XIII in 1721),
- *and the feast of the Holy Family* (celebrated in various dioceses from the 18th century onwards, confirmed by Leo XIII and extended to the whole Church by Benedict XV in 1921).

The Feast of Christ the King (introduced by Pius XI in 1925) occupies a special place. We can see the continuation of this process (going beyond the traditional Roman Missal) in the Feast of Divine Mercy, established on *Low Sunday* by our Most Holy Father John Paul II.

Unfortunately, it must be noted that it is precisely these devotional feasts that were impoverished and ravaged during the last liturgical reform of 1969: some have not

⁵ Cf. *Dictionary of Spirituality*, entry ‘Devotions’.

even found a place in the new Missal (of the Feast of the Precious Blood, only a trace remains in the new name of Corpus Christi; as for the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, only a votive Mass remains).

Other feasts have lost their original character (such as the Feast of Christ the King, which was scrupulously censored to remove all allusions to the Saviour's contemporary and social reign).

Bearing in mind the specific origins of these feasts, one may assume that their revival and development are directly dependent on the intensity and continuity of the para-liturgical services observed by the faithful (the July service of the Precious Blood, and the movement for the enthronement of Christ the King).

The ideologues of the pre-conciliar liturgical movement treated these devotional feasts as superfluous growths and repetitions of the major feasts commemorating anniversaries. This approach was characterised by a typical archaeological reductionism, consisting of removing everything that was not 'primitive'.

The very question of the link between these two categories of feasts is worthy of analysis.

When we look, from this perspective, at the medieval feast of *Corpus Christi*, we can observe something very interesting: this devotional feast of the Eucharist is not merely a contemplative extension of Maundy Thursday, but is perceptibly linked to the feast of Christmas (as indicated by the use of the '*Nativitate*' preface), bringing together in an unexpected (and unique) way the themes of the two festive cycles of the liturgical year. As a result, we gain a deeper understanding of the Eucharist, which, through transubstantiation, becomes, in a certain sense, the renewal of the Incarnation.

This is far more than a superfluous 'repetition' of the memorial of the Last Supper. It is a monument of faith, which has reached a new level of clarity. Even in terms of participation in the sacred realities, the feast of *Corpus Christi* is neither a repetition nor a distortion of Holy Thursday, but its complement and development: the analogy of the complementary relationship between communion and adoration seems to us particularly apt. One without the other is incomplete , vol. 6.

When the Gospel for the Mass on the feast of *Corpus Christi* reminds us of the need to eat the Body of the Lord, the Collect speaks to us of the consequence of God's sacrificial gift ('*O God, who in this marvellous Sacrament have left us a memorial of your Passion*') and of adoration ('*Grant that we may revere the sacred mystery of your Body and*

⁶ Cf. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Der Geist der Liturgie. Eine Einführung*, Herder, 2000, p. 74.

'your Blood with such veneration...'). The main argument put forward by supporters of the liturgical movements of the 1940s and 1950s against these 'mystery feasts' was that they celebrated abstract concepts rather than mysteries—events (actions)⁷

In this context, it is interesting to consider the feast of the Most Holy Name of Jesus. According to the logic of the 'development' of devotional feasts based on anniversary commemorations, the feast of the Most Holy Name of Jesus was simply an offshoot of the feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord, celebrated on the day of the Octave of Christmas (as recounted in the same Gospel passage for both events: the circumcision of the Child and the bestowal of His name). Despite this, the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus played an independent role, as the celebration of the Christmas Octave traditionally left ample scope for the veneration of the divine motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Paradoxically, when, following the post-conciliar reform, the Christmas Octave took on the character of a most beautiful and pious ceremony in honour of the Holy Mother of God (in fact, the feast commemorating the anniversary of the Circumcision disappeared), the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus was neither strengthened nor reformed in the sense of an anniversary, but was abolished. In this way, all trace of both the anniversary of the Circumcision and the Office of the Holy Name of Jesus disappeared from the liturgical year.

These feasts are sometimes veritable masterpieces of renewed faith and ardent piety.

Modern reformers ought to be particularly offended by the coexistence in the calendar of two twin feasts of devotion relating to Good Friday: the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Feast of the Precious Blood (both instituted by Blessed Pius IX), which share virtually the same Gospel reading (John 19:31–37 and John 19:30–35) and spanning, through their para-liturgical celebrations, the two consecutive months of June and July. This meditative sequence, which begins with the Passion through the pierced Heart and extends to the shed Blood, must have been deemed inappropriate, for the final part of this sequence was removed and, in the central section, the focus on the Passion was weakened by the addition of two other Gospels (this link remains in the Preface of the Sacred Heart, but is entirely absent from the new Collect). However, as we can see in the Collect, these feasts, contemplating the Passion—or rather its cause (sin), its essence (love and the

⁷ Father Bouyer in his letter of 8 October 1943 addressed to Father Duployé, co-founder of the Centre Pastoral Liturgique (CPL): *'First of all, we need to renew our understanding of the nature of these feasts: they are the mystical re-enactments of events in the history of salvation, and not artificial ceremonies relating to abstract concepts, however venerable they may be (the kingship of Christ, the motherhood of the Virgin Mary, the priesthood of Jesus, etc...)'*.

supplication), its value ('the price of Redemption'), were a realistic response to the growing sufferings of the Mystical Body, which was being persecuted and seeking comfort in the example and strength of the Passion of its Head (*a praesentis vitae malis eius virtute defendi in terris* – Collect of the Precious Blood) and striving to make amends for the increasingly frequent offences committed against the Saviour (*digne quoque satisfactionis exhibeamus officium* – Collect of the Sacred Heart).

One of the reasons for the reform that abolished these feasts was the conviction that these sufferings of the Mystical Body had ceased. This attitude was characteristic of the reformist faction of the early post-conciliar years, ^{no. 8}.

In turn, the meticulous scrutiny of the texts for the liturgical feast of Christ the King was dictated by a radical shift in the understanding of the relationship between Christianity and the present age. Consequently, this modified feast took on the unprecedented character of awaiting the end of a glorious age rather than celebrating the royal dignity of Christ 'here and now', in the present life (In this way, the focus of this feast is no longer what was and what is, but what will be – This is confirmed by eschatological interpretations of the shift of this feast to the end of the liturgical year).

The social references to the Kingdom of Christ have also been removed. Whilst in the traditional Missal the Collect expresses the petition '*that all the families of the nations (cunctae familiae Gentium), divided because of the wound of sin, may submit to his most gentle power (subdantur imperio)*', the new Collect asks that '*all creation, freed from bondage, may acknowledge his power and glorify him unceasingly*'. Clearly, this shift in emphasis from the concrete dimension of the human community to a much broader cosmic dimension was intended to appease many 'families of nations' who had no desire whatsoever to submit to any higher power; yet this approach ran counter to the very purpose of establishing this feast: '*A feast celebrated annually by all peoples in honour of Christ the King will be supremely effective in denouncing and, to some extent, redressing this public apostasy, so disastrous for society, which secularism has brought about.*' (Quas primas).

Once again, we come to the issue of the origins of devotional feasts. We have mentioned that, originally, there were faith and piety, but it should be added that the context was one of moral decline, growing aggression against the Church and

⁸ Cf. Lorenzo Bianchi, 'Vocabulary and Syntax in the Prayers of the Roman Missal', in: Historical and Theological Aspects of the Roman Missal, C.I.E.L., 1999, pp. 163–214.

mass apostasy added to the two preceding causes the element of heroic resistance and the proclamation, against the tide, of suppressed truths. One must not see in all this merely human initiative. On this subject, Dom Guéranger made a very apt remark: *'The unceasing help, one might say, has warmed every generation by giving it a new reason to trust in divine Redemption. From the thirteenth century onwards, whenever a cooling of faith was felt... in every age a new source of grace would open up. The first was the Feast of the Most Holy Sacrament, which led initially to processions, expositions, salutes and the Forty Hours' Devotion.'*⁹

The Mysticism of the Feasts of Our Lord

The various Feasts of Our Lord are brought together in the single cycle of the liturgical year and form its central axis.

We ought to ask ourselves about the true meaning of these feasts, without being content with one-sidedly naturalistic interpretations. Pope Pius XII, responding to these false interpretations of the feasts of Our Lord in the liturgy, explained that they are not *'a cold and lifeless representation of past events, nor a mere reminder of the events of centuries past. Rather, it is Christ Himself, present in His Church, who walks the path of His great mercy, begun during His earthly life when He went about doing good, with the simple and charitable aim that human souls might draw closer to His mysteries and live in union with them. These mysteries are alive and active today, not in the uncertain and occult manner suggested by certain modern writers, but in accordance with Catholic teaching'* (Mediator Dei).

Both each Feast of Our Lord and the entire liturgical cycle are a particular form of Christ's presence and of the working of these mysteries – *'so that the faithful may encounter them and attain the grace of salvation'* (Sacrosanctum concilium 102).

Echoing the language of the Church Fathers, we may say that each of these feasts is a kind of *'sacramentum'* making present in our time *the* salvific *'mysterium'* of Christ: during the festive celebration, the Lord himself descends among us in his Paschal 'hour', from which all the other elements of the festive liturgy draw their strength, being linked in content to the various mysteries of Christ. All these elements – such as the proclamation of the Gospel, the processions (Palm Sunday, Corpus Christi), the

⁹ Dom Prosper Guéranger, The Liturgical Year...

Adorations, blessings (Epiphany and the Presentation) and Vigils – *‘prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it’*.¹⁰

Union with the mysteries of Christ is necessary for the life of grace in souls *‘for the Son of God intends to bring about a participation in, and to make a sort of extension and continuation of, his mysteries within us and throughout his whole Church, through the graces which he wishes to communicate to us and through the effects which he wishes to bring about in us through these mysteries. And by this means, he wishes to fulfil them within us.’*¹¹

In his masterful encyclical, Pius XII states that *‘Mother Church, with loving care, presents the mysteries of Our Saviour for our meditation and, through her supplications, obtains supernatural gifts, by which the spirit of these mysteries fully permeates her children with the power of Christ.’* By examining the prayers of the various feasts, we gain a better understanding of what these gifts are.

Some prayers focus on the mediating role of these feasts:

- *‘Grant us purity of heart and mind, that we may come to understand the mysteries we honour on these solemn feasts’* (Post-Communion Prayer for the Feast of the Epiphany);
- *‘May a light from Heaven prepare us, Lord, everywhere and always, to contemplate with a pure gaze and to receive with the proper disposition the mysteries in which you have deigned to let us share.’* (Post-Communion Prayer for the Baptism of Our Lord);
- *‘...and grant that the light of your grace may bring to fruition within us what you give us each year to honour.’* (Prayer after the distribution of candles on the Feast of the Purification).

Other prayers describe the successive stages of the spiritual life, from purification to mystical union:

- *‘...may the new birth of Your only Son in the flesh deliver us, which the ancient bondage still holds captive under the yoke of sin’* (Collect for the 3rd Mass of Christmas, that is, the Mass of the day);
- *‘Purify us from the stains of our sins by the splendour of the light that shone from within him’*. (Secret Prayer of the Transfiguration);

¹⁰ Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1669 (or rather 1670, translator’s note)

¹¹ Saint John Eudes, **Tractatus de regno**, cited in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 521

- *'...who, by enabling us to savour the sweetness of Your most tender Heart, may teach us to despise the goods of the earth and to love those of Heaven'* (Post-Communion Prayer for the Feast of the Sacred Heart);
- *'Deign, Lord, to come to our aid and fulfil our wishes, as You Yourself You Yourself have inspired them in us'* (Collect for the Mass on Resurrection Sunday);
- *'...that... we may let the faith that enlightens the spirit shine forth in our works'* (Christmas, Collect for the Dawn Mass);
- *'Grant that we may follow the lessons of His Passion, so that we may share in His Resurrection'* (Collect for Palm Sunday)
- *'May she obtain for us that we may constantly feel within ourselves the fruits of Your Redemption'* (Collect for Corpus Christi);
- *'Pour out Your grace into our souls, that we may rejoice in having our names inscribed in Heaven following the glorious Name of Jesus'* (Post-Communion Prayer for the Holy Name of Jesus)
- *'May we, whilst confessing his divinity beneath his human form, be inwardly renewed by him'* (Collect for the Baptism of Our Lord).

Sometimes, in these prayers, we find allusions to the fate of the communities in which we live:

- *'We beseech you... to establish our families in peace and in the firm possession of Your grace'* (Secret of the Mass of the Holy Family)
- *'Grant, in Your goodness, that all the families of the nations, divided because of the wound of sin, may submit to His most gentle power'* (Collect for the Mass of Christ the King).

There are also prayers which open up the eschatological horizons of life by projecting them onto the present life:

- *'May we... through a holy life, one day merit to share with him the glory of Heaven.'* (Christmas, Post-Communion Prayer of the Midnight Mass)
- *'Grant that, having come to know the mysteries of this light here on earth, we may also enjoy its joys in Heaven'* (Christmas, Collect of the Midnight Mass)
- *'May the Saviour...also be for us the bestower of immortality.'* (Christmas, Post-Communion, Mass of the Day).
- *'May we, whilst venerating his holy Name on earth, enjoy his life in Heaven.'* (Collect for the Mass of the Most Holy Name of Jesus)

- “*Having already granted us to know You through faith, may You lead us on to the face-to-face contemplation of Your sublime Majesty.*” (Collect for the Feast of the Epiphany)
- ‘*May we be welcomed by You into the eternal tabernacle*’ (Post-Communion of the Holy Family)
- ‘*We ask You, Lord, that one day, through the gift of immortality, we may possess what we celebrate during our mortal life.*’ (Post-Communion Prayer for Holy Thursday)
- ‘*Grant that we too may dwell in spirit in Heaven*’ (Collect for the Ascension)
- ‘*Grant us, in Your goodness, to be delivered from the perils of this present life and to attain eternal life.*’ (Secret Prayer for the Ascension)
- ‘*May...we too be presented before You with purified souls*’ (Collect for the Purification)
- ‘*May we, having had the honour of fighting under the banner of Christ the King, reign with Him for ever in Heaven.*’ (Post-Communion Prayer for Christ the King)

Conclusion

Moving from *the Ordo Missae* to *the Proprium de Tempore*, we have observed the link between the Church’s liturgical memory and the various feasts scattered throughout the calendar. Taken as a whole, they have proved to be diverse, rich in anniversaries and devotions, the interactions between which would merit a more in-depth analysis. The Church’s infallible memory enables her to commemorate the mysteries, and her priestly power, received from the Lord Himself, to make Him present in the liturgical celebration. The mysteries thus made present become the object of contemplation spread over the Octaves or longer periods of the liturgical year, but particularly concentrated in the feasts of devotion.