THE STRIPPING OF THE ALTARS

Traditional Religion in England c.1400–c.1580

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CHAPTER 3

THE MASS

The liturgy lay at the heart of medieval religion, and the Mass lay at the heart of the liturgy. In the Mass the redemption of the world, wrought on Good Friday once and for all, was renewed and made fruitful for all who believed. Christ himself, immolated on the altar of the cross, became present on the altar of the parish church, body, soul, and divinity, and his blood flowed once again, to nourish and renew Church and world. As kneeling congregations raised their eyes to see the Host held high above the priest's head at the sacring, they were transported to Calvary itself, and gathered not only into the passion and resurrection of Christ, but into the full sweep of salvation history as a whole (Pl. 40).

> Then shal thou do reverence
> to ihesu crist awen presence,
> That may lese alle baleful bandes;
> knelande holde up bothe thi handes,
> And so tho leuacioun thou behalde,
> for that is he that iudas salde,
> and sithen was scourged & don on rode,
> And for mankynde there shad his blode,
> And dyed & ros & went to heuen,
> And yit shal come to deme vs euen,
> Ilk mon aftur he has done,
> That same es he thou lokes opone.[1]

The body of Christ, greeted as "journey-money for our pilgrimage, solace of all our longing",[2] was the focus of all the hopes and aspirations of late medieval religion. The sacrifice of the Mass was the act by which the world was renewed and the Church was constituted, the Body on the corporas the emblem and the instrument of all truly human embodiment, whether it was understood as

[1] *The Lay Folk's Mass Book*, ed. T. F. Simmons, EETS, 1871 (hereafter = *LFMB*) p. 38.
[2] "viaticum nostre peregrinationis . . . solatium nostre expectationis", phrases from the indulgenced prayer "Salve lux mundi", prescribed for use at the elevation at Mass in many primers. See Hoskins, p. 127.

individual wholeness or as rightly ordered human community.[3]

Accounts of late medieval spirituality often emphasize the growth of individualism, not least in the intense devotion to the Blessed Sacrament evident in works like the *Imitatio Christi.* Yet the unitive and corporative dimension of the Blessed Sacrament is in fact repeatedly insisted on in late medieval sources. That theme is set out at length in the prologue to the ordinances of the York Corpus Christi gild, established in 1408, which may be taken as representative here. The Body of Christ, "beaten and crucified by the Jews", is the true "medium congruentissimum", the instrument of harmony. That Body is made present daily in the Mass, so that "as Christ unites the members to the Head by means of his precious Passion, so we shall be united in faith, hope and charity by the daily celebration of this sacrament of remembrance." The Mass is the sign of unity, the bond of love: whoever desires to live, must be "incorporated" by this food and drink. Thus the unity and fellowship of the Corpus Christi gild is just one aspect of the "mystical body of Christ", a unity rooted in charity and expressed in the works of mercy. Only in that unity can anyone be a member of Christ, and all the natural bonds of human fellowship, such as the loyalty and affection of one gild member for another, or the care of rich for poor, or of the whole for the sick, is an expression of this fundamental community in Christ through the Sacrament.[4]

Such an insistence on the communal dimension of the Sacrament is readily grasped in the context of Corpus Christi gilds. Its centrality in the ordering and control of the late medieval town, through the Corpus Christi processions and plays, has been explored by Mervyn James and Charles Phythian-Adams. The coercive and hegemonic exploitation of this unitive theme by late medieval power-brokers in both church and secular community has recently been emphasized by Miri Rubin.[5] But it is important to grasp that the Eucharist could only be used to endorse existing community power structures because the language of Eucharistic belief and devotion was saturated with communitarian and corporate imagery. The unitive theme was not simply a device in the process of the establishment of community or the validation of power structures. It was a deeply felt element in the Eucharistic piety of the individual Christian too. The sense that the Host was the source simultaneously of individual and of corporate renewal and unity is

[3] Though the quizzical remarks of Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 1991, pp. 265–7 need to be weighed.

[4] Edited by Paula Lozar, "The Prologue to the Ordinances of the York Corpus Christi Guild", *Allegorica*, I, 1976, pp. 94–113.

[5] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, esp. chapter 4.

perfectly caught in the striking prayer regularly printed in early sixteenth-century primers for use before receiving communion, the "Salve salutaris hostia".

In this prayer the communicant greets Christ in the Sacrament as the "saving victim" offered for them and for all humanity on the altar of the cross, and prays that the blood flowing from the side of the Crucified may wash away all their sins, so that they may be worthy to consume His body and blood. Pleading that Christ's sufferings for humanity may be to them the means of mercy and protection and not of condemnation, the communicant asks for a renewal in heart and mind, so that the old Adam may die and the new life begin. And at the climax of the prayer this new life is seen as essentially communal, not individualistic. The communicant prays that

> I may be worthy to be incorporated into Your body, which is the Church. May I be one of Your members, and may You be my head, that I may remain in You, and You in me, so that in the resurrection my lowly body may be conformed to Your glorious body, according to the promise of [St Paul] the Apostle, and so that I may rejoice in You and your glory eternally.[6]

The Host, then, was far more than the object of individual devotion, a means of forgiveness and sanctification: it was the source of human community. The ways in which it was experienced in communion underpinned and endorsed this. It is true that frequent reception of communion probably did encourage religious individualism, as it certainly often sprang from it. Margery Kempe's weekly reception, representing a claim to particular holiness of life, marked her off from her neighbours, and was almost certainly resented by them.[7] But frequent communion was the prerogative of the few. Lady Margaret Beaufort received only monthly, and even so was considered something of a prodigy. For most people receiving communion was an annual event, and it was emphatically a communal rather than an individualistic action. In most parishes everyone went to confession in Holy Week and received communion before or after high Mass on Easter Day, an act usually accompanied by a statutory offering to the priest. Only after the completion of all this was one entitled to break one's Lenten fast and resume the eating of meat.[8] In large communities extra

[6] Hoskins, p. 127: *Horae Eboracenses: the Prymer or Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary, According to the Use of the Illustrious Church of York*, ed. C. Wordsworth, Surtees Society, CXXXII, 1919 (hereafter = *Hor Ebor*) p. 73.

[7] See *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 11, for an example of her neighbours' irritation with her ostentatious piety.

[8] Cf. Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, III p. 593.

clergy were drafted in to help deal with the numbers involved, as row after row of communicants lined up before the chancel screen, holding the long houseling towel which prevented any fragments of the Host falling to the ground. The priest addressing his people at the Easter Day Mass, therefore, was expected to emphasize the bonds of community which were so visibly being celebrated. The sins which specially damaged community – wrath, envy, backbiting – were to be particularly eschewed, and those at odds were to be reconciled:

> Thys day ych cristen man, in reverence of God, schulde forgeve that have gylt to hom, and ben in full love and charyte to Godis pepull passyng all other dayes of the yere; for all that is mysdon all the yere befor, schall be helyd thys day wyth the salve of charyte . . . wherfor, good men and woymen, I church you heyly in Godys byhalve that non of you today com to Godys bord, but he be in full charyte to all Godis pepull.[9]

Receiving communion at Easter (Pl. 41) was called "taking one's rights", a revealing phrase, indicating that to take communion was to claim one's place in the adult community. Exclusion was a mark of social ostracism. At All Saints, Bristol, the right to take Easter communion was linked to payment of parish dues, in particular one's contribution to the parish clerk's wages; defaulters were denied their Easter housel. Shame and outrage at exclusion from the honesty of the parish, rather than simple piety, seem to be at work in an incident at Little Plumstead in Norfolk on Easter Day 1530. Nicholas Tyting had quarrelled with his rector, who therefore refused him communion. He went weeping into the churchyard after Mass, other parishioners gathering round, and one of them went to the rector on his behalf, saying "How is it, Mr Parson, that Titing and you can not agree, it is pitie that he should goo his way without his rightes."[10]

The importance of parochial unity, endlessly reiterated in Easter homilies and exhortations, has rightly been stressed by John Bossy and others. It was of course an ideal which was probably rarely attained, as late medieval people themselves were well aware, and as the clergy often pointed out. The parishioners were required to come to communion "arayde in Godys lyvere, clothyd in love and charyte", not "the fendys lyvere, clothyd in envy and dedly

[9] *Festial*, pp. 130–1; for a very similar from of exhortation to be used by curates see W. Maskell, *Monumenta Ritualia Ecclesiae Anglicanae*, 1846–7. III pp. 348–9.

[10] *The Clerk's Book of 1549*, ed. J. Wickham Legg, Henry Bradshaw Society, XXV, 1903, p. 64; E. D. Stone and B. Cozens-Hardy (eds), *Norwich Consistory Court Depositions*, Norfolk Record Society, X, 1938, no. 428.

wrathe", but one of the standard exempla for Easter sermons told of a bishop or priest at the Easter communion granted a vision of the true state of the communicants' souls "when the pepull com to Godys bord". Many came "wyth hor face red as blod, and blod droppyng out of hor mouthys". These, an angel explained, were "envyous men and woymen, and full of dedly wrathe, and woll not amend hom". One much repeated exemplum told of a rich woman with a grudge against a poor neighbour, forced to reconciliation at Easter by the parson, who threatened that unless she "forgeve the pore woman here trespasse" he would "with-drawe fro hure here ryghtes that day": the wealthy woman dissembles forgiveness, and is choked by the Host.[11] The ideal of parochial harmony and charity was often just that, an ideal. It was, however, a potent one, carrying enormous emotive and ethical weight. In 1529 Joanna Carpenter, of the parish of St Mary Queenhithe, sought to exploit that weight by seizing the arm of her neighbour Margaret Chamber, with whom she was at odds, as Mistress Chamber knelt waiting her turn to receive Easter communion. "I pray you let me speke a worde with you," she said, "for you have need to axe me forgyvenes, before you rescyve your rights." This disruption of the annual parochial houseling landed Carpenter in the church courts, but the incident is eloquent testimony to the force of the theme of reconciliation and charity in lay perception of the Eucharist.[12]

Seeing the Host

But the reception of communion was not the primary mode of lay encounter with the Host. Everyone received at Easter, and one's final communion, the viaticum or "journey money" given on the deathbed, was crucially important to medieval people. As we shall see, many people recalled that final communion at every Mass.[13] But for most people, most of the time the Host was something to be seen, not to be consumed. Since the end of the twelfth century it had been customary for the consecrating priest to elevate the Host high above his head immediately after the sacring (the repetition of the words of institution, "Hoc est enim Corpus Meum" which brought about the miracle of transubstantiation) for adoration by the people. The origin of the custom is debated, but it was probably designed as a protest against the view that the consecration of both elements was incomplete till the words of institution were

[11] *Festial*, pp. 131–2; *Middle English Sermons*, pp. 62–3, 347.

[12] W. Hale (ed.), *A Series of Precedents and Proceedings in Criminal Causes, Extending from the Year 1475–1640*, 1847. p. 108; Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 149–50.

[13] See below, pp. 120, 311.

pronounced over the chalice as well as the Host. Although a matching elevation of the chalice was subsequently added, it was never so important in the lay imagination: seeing the Host became the high point of lay experience of the Mass.[14] When artists sought to portray the sacrament of the Eucharist, as in the many Seven-Sacrament fonts surviving in East Anglian churches, or the related Seven-Sacrament windows in churches such as Doddiscombsleigh in Devon, it was the moment of the elevation of the Host which they almost invariably depicted (Pl. 42). In churches with elaborately carved or coloured altar-pieces the custom emerged of drawing a plain dark curtain across the reredos at the sacring, to throw the Host into starker prominence. In some places this provision was improved: at St Peter Cheap in London the cloth displayed at the elevation had a Crucifixion scene on it. In 1502 a Hull alderman left money for the construction of a mechanical device above the high altar which caused images of angels to descend on the altar at the sacring, and ascend again at the conclusion of the Paternoster – he had seen such a device in King's Lynn.[15]

The provision of good wax lights, and especially of torches, flaring lights made with thick plaited wicks and a mixture of resin and wax, which burned from the elevation to the "Agnus Dei" or the priest's communion, became one of the most common of all activities of the gilds. It was also very common for individual testators to specify that the torches burned around their corpses at their funerals should be given to the parish church, to burn around the altar at the sacring time.[16] The provision of such lights was often indulgenced, and they may in addition have had the utilitarian function of lighting up the chancel to make the Host more visible, but they were also conceived of as forming a sort of proxy for the adoring presence of the donor close by the Sacrament at the moment of elevation. This was probably particularly true of funeral torches used as elevation lights, just as testators often left kerchiefs or bedlinen to make altar-cloths and corporases, a gesture clearly designed to bring their domestic intimacies into direct contact with the Host.[17] The notion of the torch as a proxy for the worshipping donor is certainly uppermost in the explanation offered by the group of shepherds and herdsmen of their motives in

[14] H. Thurston, "The Elevation" in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, V pp. 380–1.
[15] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 62.
[16] See e.g. *Bedfordshire Wills Proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury 1383–1548*, ed. M. McGregor, *Publications of the Bedfordshire Historical Records Society*, LVIII, 1979 (hereafter = *Beds Wills* III) pp. 19–21; for gilds providing elevation torches see Westlake, *Parish Gilds*, nos 13, 21, 23, 25, 34, 36, 40, 57, 58, 60, 67, 104, 108, 119, 121, 135, 165, 223, 224, 225, 226, 313, 330, 331, 333.
[17] See below, pp. 128–9, 330–4.

founding a gild of the Blessed Virgin at Holbeach. The gild, they explained, maintained torches at the elevation, because its members were often unable by reason of their work to be at Mass themselves.[18] Such torches were normally held by the clerk or the altar-boys in the sanctuary, and they often appear thus in carvings and pictures of the elevation (Pl. 43). But where gilds provided large numbers of torches for Sundays and festivals – sometimes up to a dozen or more – the gild members themselves would have gathered round the altar at the moment of elevation. In fifteenth-century Eye on All Saints' Day, and probably other festivals as well, "at the time of the elevation of high mass . . . many of the parishioners . . . lighted many torches, and carried them up to the high altar, kneeling down there in reverence and honour of the sacrament", in all probability in accordance with the ordinances of the parish gild.[19]

Just before the sacring in every mass a bell was rung to warn worshippers absorbed in their own prayers to look up, because the moment of consecration and elevation was near, and here different aspects of cult came into conflict. If the Mass was being celebrated at the high altar, those kneeling near the Rood-screen might have their view of the Host blocked by the dado. It was difficult to do anything about this in churches with panel-paintings of the saints on the dado: but where the screen was ornamented only with floral or geometric designs, or the names of the donors, the dado might be pierced with rows of "elevation squints" placed at eye-level for kneeling adults, as they are at Burlingham St Edmund (Pl. 44) and South Walsham in Norfolk, or Lavenham in Suffolk. At Roxton in Bedfordshire, where there were saints in the panels, squints were nevertheless drilled above their heads, those on the north screen, where a nave altar prevented the devotee getting close, being made much larger than those on the south (Pl. 45).[20] In great churches where many Masses were celebrated simultaneously, those at side altars were timed so that their sacrings were staggered, none preceding that at the main Mass at the high altar. Side altars were sometimes provided with squints which enabled the celebrating chantry or gild priest to see when his senior colleague at the high altar had reached the sacring. An especially elaborate arrangement of this sort survives at Long Melford, where the priest celebrating

[18] Westlake, *Parish Gilds*, no. 120.
[19] Westlake, *Parish Gilds*, nos 23, 67, 165; Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* III, p. 599.
[20] I deduce the presence of the altar from the abrupt line below which the wood is unpainted under the figures, and the fact that the figures on the north side are much shorter than those on the south. But if so the screen must have been placed higher up the wall, or the nave floor, as is likely, lower.

at the altar at the east end of the north aisle was provided with a double squint enabling him to see across the rear angle of the Clopton chantry and through the north wall of the chancel to the exact centre of the high altar. The same arrangement survives at St Matthews, Ipswich (Pl. 46).[21]

This staggered arrangement of Masses allowed the laity to see the Host at several sacrings within a short space of time. The warning bell might summon devotees at prayer in another part of the church, or even hearing a sermon, to view the Host. At Exeter the bishop legislated to prevent sacring bells being rung while the choir Offices were being recited, in case the clergy and choir should be deflected from the task in hand.[22] The early fifteenth-century Lollard priest William Thorpe was enraged when preaching to a crowd of lay people in the church of St Chad in Shrewsbury, "bisiinge me to teche the heestis of God", when "oon knyllide a sacringe belle, and herfor myche peple turned awei fersli, and with greet noyse runnen frowardis me" to see the Host at an altar elsewhere in the church.[23] A century and a half later Cranmer testified to the same eagerness on the part of the laity when he asked bitterly:

> What made the people to run from their seats to the altar, and from altar to altar, and from sacring (as they called it) to sacring, peeping, tooting and gazing at that thing which the priest held up in his hands, if they thought not to honour the thing which they saw? What moved the priests to lift up the sacrament so high over their heads? Or the people to say to the priest "Hold up! Hold up!"; or one man to say to another "Stoop down before"; or to say "This day have I seen my Maker"; and "I cannot be quiet except I see my maker once a day"? What was the cause of all these, and that as well the priest and the people so devoutly did knock and kneel at every sight of the sacrament, but that they worshipped that visible thing which they saw with their eyes and took it for very God?[24]

It is a commonplace of the literary and religious history of the period that royalty. aristocracy, and the gentry habitually heard several Masses each day. The glimpse Margaret Paston affords us of

[21] One of the reasons for this "staggering" was to make sure that parishioners did not shirk their duty of attending the (usually longer) main parish Mass on Sundays, by attending one of the chantry Masses in the same church; see K. L. Wood-Legh, *Perpetual Chantries in Britain*, 1965, p. 294.

[22] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 59–60.

[23] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, III p. 263; Douglas Grey (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Fifteenth Century Verse and Prose*, 1985, p. 15.

[24] Thomas Cranmer, *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. J. E. Cox, 1846 (hereafter = *Remains*), p. 442.

the devotional habits of her neighbour, Sir John Hevingham, who went to church one morning and heard three Masses, "and came home again never the merrier, and said to his wife that he would go say a little devotion in his garden and then he would dine", could in its essentials be matched for hundreds of the well-to-do in the period. The desire for ready access to daily Masses, rather than any more fundamental detachment from the parish, is no doubt one of the principal reasons why the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century gentry increasingly sought licences to keep altars, and therefore priests, in their households.[25] But Cranmer clearly implies here that many "lewd" lay people also sought to see the Host at least once a day, and the records of gilds and parishes all over England testify to the anxiety of communities and individual testators to provide for "the increase of Divine Service" by securing several daily celebrations in their parish churches, including the dawn or "morrow Mass" for servants, labourers, and travellers. Doncaster parish church, in addition to daily sung matins, Mass, and evensong, had six "low" Masses, provided by the various chantry chaplains, hourly from five in the morning each day, "as well for th'inhabitants of the sayde towne as other strangers passing through the same". At Pontefract there were two chantry Masses daily, in addition to the "morrow Mass" said at dawn and the daily parish Mass at the high altar.[26] Archbishop Warham's Kent visitation of 1511 provides abundant evidence of parishes seeking to maintain a routine of daily Masses, with the help of chantry and gild priests as well as the parochial incumbent, and makes clear too the sense of grievance and deprivation which ensued in places where "many times in the yere they have no mass in the said church not in a hole weke togidre."[27] Jean Quentin's "Maner to lyve well", printed in many of the best-selling primers produced in the 1520s and 1530s and intended as spiritual advice for persons of "mean estate", stipulated that each day after saying matins from his primer the layman should "go to the chyrche or ye do ony worldly werkes yf ye haue no nedefull besynesse, & abyde in the chyrche the space of a lowe masse."[28] Clearly, daily Mass attendance was commonplace, and in

[25] N. Davis (ed.), *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 1971, I pp. 39, 250, and see below chapter 4, "Corporate Christians", pp. 132, 139–40.

[26] C. Wordsworth, *Notes on Medieval Services*, 1898, pp. 83–8; Wood-Legh, *Perpetual Chantries*, pp. 291–5.

[27] *Kentish Visitation of Archbishop Willaim Warham and his Deputies 1511*, ed. K. L. Wood-Legh, *Kent Archaeological Society: Kent Records*, XXIV, 1984 (hereafter = *Kentish Visitation*), pp. 56, 62, 67, 112, 132, 140 etc.

[28] *This prymer of Salysbury use* 1531, Hoskins 98, RSTC 15973, see p. 15v: Hoskins, pp. 147–8 for modernized text (from another edition). On the "Maner to lyve well" see Mary C Erler "The Maner to Lyve Well and the Coming of English", *The Library*, 6th series, VI, 1984, pp. 229–43.

communities divided by heresy, which consequently put a high value on sacramental orthodoxy, to "come not to church oftener on the work day" might even be taken as a sufficient indication of Lollardy.[29]

Behind all was the sense that those cut off from the opportunity of hearing Mass devoutly and seeing the Host were being deprived of precious benefits for body and soul. Mothers in labour could secure safe delivery, travellers safe arrival, eaters and drinkers good digestion, by gazing on the Host at Mass.

> Thy fote that day shall not the fayll;
> Thyn eyen from ther syght shall not blynd;
> Thi light spekyng, eyther in fabill or tale,
> That vēniall synnes do up wynd,
> Shall be forgeven, & pardon fynd . . .
> Thy grevouse othes that be forgett,
> In heryng of messe are don a-way;
> An angel also thi steppis doth mete,
> & presentith the in hevyn that same day . . .
> Thyn age at messe shall not encrease;
> Nor sodeyn deth that day shall not the spill;
> And without hostill [housel] yf thou hap to dissease,
> It shall stond therfore; & beleve thou this skyll,
> Than to here messe thou maste have will,
> Thes prophitable benefitts to the be lent,
> Wher God, in fowrm of bred, his body doth present.[30]

It was this sense of the blessings which flowed from seeing the Host which lay behind the increasing elaboration of all movement of the Blessed Sacrament, especially the founding of gilds or private endowments to provide a light to go before it in the street as it was carried to the sick, thereby alerting all who passed by to a further opportunity to kneel (whatever the weather and the state of the street) and reverently see the Host.

> For glad may that mon be
> That ones in the day may hym se.[31]

Margery Kempe, in a passage on her attendance at deathbeds, records the special veneration accorded to the Sacrament in fifteenth-

[29] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, IV p. 227.
[30] Dyboski, *Songs*, p. 70. The list is standard – Cf. LFMB, pp. 131–2, 366–73; *Festial*, pp. 169–70; *The Doctrinal of Sapyence*, fol. 63r.
[31] Westlake, *Parish Gilds*, nos 38, 135, 279, 367; Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, pp. 312–13: in this context of seeing the viaticum go by, he goes on to outline the benefits of seeing the Host.

century Kings, Lynn, as it was borne to the dying "abowte the town wyth lyte and reverens, the pepill knelyng on her kneys". This reverence was probably due to the work of the Corpus Christi gild which had functioned in Margery's parish church since 1349. In that year pestilence had swept through the town, and the sight of the sacrament being hurried through the streets to the dying, "with only a single candle of poor wax burning in front of it, whereas two torches of the best beeswax are hardly sufficient" scandalized some of the parishioners. In the heightened devotional atmosphere brought by the imminence of death three men resolved to fund more lights to be carried before the viaticum: they were quickly joined by others, and a gild devoted to Corpus Christi was the outcome.[32]

To see the Host, however fleetingly, was a privilege bringing blessing. Those robbed of this privilege by misfortunes such as poor eyesight might be rescued by heavenly intervention.[33] Conversely, the sacrilegious might be deprived of the ability to see the Host which they profaned. A mid-fifteenth-century chronicler recorded a spate of robberies in London churches, in which the pyxes hung over the altars to reserve the Host had been the only targets. It was widely believed that the thefts were motivated by heresy, and indeed the organizer was a Lollard who boasted at a supper that he had eaten "ix goddys at my sopyr that were in the boxys". But his accomplices were not heretics, and "it was done of very nede that they robbyd." One of the thieves, a lockyer and coppersmith, was in fact shocked to the core by the gang-leader's blasphemy, and went to Mass, and "prayde God of marcy". But Heaven was deaf, for

> whenn the pryste was at the levacyon of the masse, he myght not see that blessed sacrament of the auter. Thenn he was sory, and abode tylle anothyr pryste went to masse and helpyd the same pryste to masse, and say howe the oste lay apon the auter and alle the tokyns and sygnys that the preste made; but whenn the pryste hylde uppe that holy sacrament at the tyme of levacyon he myght se nothynge of that blessyd body of Cryste at noo tyme of the masse, not so moche at Agnus Dei.

A stiff drink at the local alehouse and attendance at three more Masses with the same result convinced him that his selective blind-

[32] *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 172: it is just possible that Margery is talking here about the Corpus Christi procession, but the context makes it more likely that the parish priest's journey with the viaticum is intended; Westlake, *Parish Gilds*, no. 279. For the growth of devotion to the Host as it was carried to the sick, see more generally, Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 77–82.
[33] See below, pp. 189–90.

ness was not "febyllnes of hys brayne", but that "bothe he and hys felescyppe lackyd grace." Only after a sincere confession to a priest was he enabled to "see that blessyd sacrament well inowe" and so make a good end.[34]

Seeing and Believing

That story was recorded to refute the impieties of the Lollards, and there is an evident preoccupation with the refutation of attacks on the sacramental teaching of the Church in much fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century writing about the power and pre-eminent sanctity of the Eucharist. In part this sprang from the audacity and strangeness of the Church's Eucharistic faith, and the discrepancy it seemed to posit between perception and reality. Grace came by gazing on the Host: to see it was to be blessed. But what one saw was misleading, and Lollardy was only possible because the appearance of bread in the Host cloaked the divine reality which was the true source of blessing. The Host did not look like the thing it was.

> Hyt semes quite [white], and is red
> Hyt is quike, and seemes dede:
> Hyt is flesche and seemes brede
> Hyt is on and semes too;
> Hyt is God body and no more.[35]

Late medieval Eucharistic piety was underscored by the problem of doubt, inevitably understood by the orthodox as the work of the Devil: as one preacher insisted, "If there cum any wickyd temptacion to thee of the fende by the whiche thou semyst be thy foly that it scholde nat be the very body of criste then it commyth from the devyll."[36]

Many of the stories routinely used to expound the meaning and power of the Host addressed themselves to this problem of seeing and not seeing. And as in the story of the blinded coppersmith, the true nature of the Host is almost always approached and endorsed in the standard exempla by means of a story about a doubter. A representative example is included by Robert Mannyng in his *Handlyng Synne*, and tells of a learned monk who doubts the Real Presence. At the prayers of two older monks to whom he confided his doubts, he and they were granted a vision during Mass. As the

[34] Gray, *Oxford Book*, pp. 11–12.
[35] R. H. Robbins, "Popular Prayers in Middle English Verse", *Modern Philology*, XXXVI, 1939, p. 344.
[36] R. L. Homan, "Two Exempla: Analogues to the Play of the Sacrament and Dux Moraud", *Comparative Drama*, XVIII, 1984, p. 248.

priest broke the Host after the consecration, they saw in his hands a child being stabbed by an angel, so that the child's blood ran into the chalice. At the communion the doubting monk was offered the sacrament, and was horrified to see in the priest's hands bleeding morsels of flesh. On acknowledging his error and crying for mercy, the sacrament returned to its normal appearance, and the monk is duly houselled.[37] Mirk tells a very similar story of "St Ode that was bischop of Canterbury", who convinced doubting clergy in his entourage by showing them the blood oozing over his fingers from the broken Host and dripping into the chalice: after their confession of error "the sacrament turnet into his forme of bred as hit was beforn."[38] The story has endless variants, but in its most common form Pope Gregory the Great convinced a woman who, having made the bread for the Mass, laughed aloud at the communion because she could not accept that her handiwork had become the very body of God. Once again the doubter was convinced and terrified by the sight of "raw flessch bledyng", and the Host only returned to its normal appearance after the Pope and all the people prayed that it should.[39]

There is here a striking fusion of devotional and polemical concerns. A preoccupation with inculcating the shared belief about the Eucharist which forms the community is expressed in the form of stories attacking the unbelief which breaks the bonds of community. Maybe this reflected actual experience of heresy: Lollards frequently seem to have set out to shock and antagonize their neighbours by ridiculing not merely their beliefs, but the forms in which these beliefs found expression. At the elevation at high Mass at Eye in Suffolk on Corpus Christi Day 1431, "when all the parishioners and other strangers kneeled down, holding up their hands and doing reverence unto the sacrament" Nicholas Canon went behind a pillar, turned his back on the altar, and "mocked them that did reverence unto the sacrament", an outrage on communal convictions and communal proprieties which he was to repeat on other festivals.[40] Holding up of the hands and the more or less audible recitation of elevation prayers at the sacring was a gesture expected of everyone: refusal or omission was a frequent cause of the detection of Lollards. And the refusal of such gestures might be held to exclude one from the human community, since they excluded one from the church, as when Thomas Halfaker denounced a group of his Buckinghamshire neighbours because

[37] C. Horstmann (ed.), *Minor Poems of the Vernon Mss*, EETS, 1892, 1901, I pp. 201–2.
[38] *Festial*, pp. 170–1.
[39] L. G. Powell (ed.), *The Mirrour of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu*, 1908, pp. 308–9: *Festial*, p. 173.
[40] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, III p. 599.

"coming to church, and especially at the elevation time, [they] would say no prayers, but did sit mum (as he termed it) like beasts."[41] Indeed, the very beasts might offer heretics an edifying example of how community should be structured by faith in the sacrament. A common Corpus Christi exemplum concerns a parson of Axbridge, in the Mendips. Rushing to bring the viaticum to a dying parishioner, he let fall a host from the pyx, and unbeknown to him it trundled away into the grass of a meadow. On discovering his loss he went to the meadow, to find all the beasts of the field gathered in adoration round the lost Host. Caesarius of Heisterbach has a similar story about a hive of bees who create a chapel for a stolen Host placed in the hive in order to promote honey production, and gather round to worship, thereby confounding the sacrilegious hive-owner.[42]

In many of these Eucharistic miracle stories the doubter is portrayed as a culpable deviant, an outsider, who is restored to the company of believers, made an insider, by a shocking revelation of the fleshly reality of the Sacrament. The bleeding child, the morsels of flesh, are ghastly, and have to be hidden once again under sacramental forms before they can be consumed. The overwhelming physical realism of these stories is an inescapable element of late medieval Eucharistic piety, but it is important to grasp that, for the late medieval believer, the horrifying vision of bleeding flesh was not intended as the only or even the normative image of the saving reality of the sacrament. It could not be, for such stories offered an image of Christ's blood which, like Abel's, cried out for vengeance. Its presentation to the eye of the unbeliever was meant to be frightening, designed to convict of sin and shock into faith. For this reason, in the early sixteenth-century legend of the Blood of Hailes, when a Lollard priest attempts to say mass

> The holy sacrament of cristes owne blod there
> Reboyled anone up: unto the chalyce brynke.[43]

The angry boiling blood was not designed to provide a model of how the sacrament should be understood by the believer. Christ in the sacrament was not a wounded child, nor was the Host mangled flesh. In one sense such images did indeed convey "the form and truth of the Blessed Sacrament"[44] and calming and beautiful versions

[41] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, IV p. 225.
[42] *Festial*, pp. 173–4; Rubin, "Mastering the Mystery": I am greatly indebted to Dr Rubin for allowing me to see this unpublished paper.
[43] J. C. T. Oates, "Richard Pynson and the Holy Blood of Hayles", *The Library*, 5th series, XIII, 1958, pp. 260–77.
[44] Love, *Mirror*, p. 310.

of them might be told, like the tender revelation of the Christ-child in the hands of the priest granted to Edward the Confessor.[45] But in the versions of such stories current in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century England, the visionary images more frequently emphasize an aspect of the Eucharistic reality which was only presented to sin and unbelief, to those outside the household of faith. To those within, by contrast, the Host was manna, food, the bond of unity, the forgiveness of sins.

The classic medieval representative of culpable unbelief, the ultimate outsider, is of course the Jew, and unbelieving Jews regularly feature in Eucharistic miracle stories. In one example a Jew following a Christian friend into a church witnesses what he thinks is a revolting act of cannibalism, when he sees the priest and every member of the congregation devour a beautiful child.[46] His friend explains that this vision is in fact a sign of God's wrath against the Jews who crucified his Son; had he been a faithful Christian, he would have seen only the Host.

> This is the skille, quath the Cristene man,
> That god nout soffreth the than
> The sacrament that ben so sleye,
> That his Flesh mihte ben so hud
> To us cristene with-inne the bred.
> And thy kun made hym dye,
> Therfore al blodi thou hym seye.

What is torn and bleeding flesh to the Jew, in other words, is the bread of Heaven to believers, and is intended by God to be experienced in the reassuring form of bread. This is enough for the Jew, who immediately seeks baptism, so that he may never again be harrowed by such a vision:

> Help that I were a Cristene mon;
> For leuere ichaue cristned ben
> Then euere seo such a siht ayen.[47]

The late medieval audience for such stories would have recognized in the behaviour attributed to the Jew not a personal squeamishness, but a much more generally applicable reference to the Last Judgement. That was the moment when the sinner or unbeliever would

[45] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 117–19.
[46] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 123–4, 130–1. Interestingly, although the Jew sees all eat, only the priest has actually received communion. As the congregation views the Host a replica child flies to each of them and is eaten, a revealing manifestation of belief in "spiritual communion".
[47] Horstmann, *Minor Poems from the Vernon MS*, I p. 177.

see once more the gruesome images of the Eucharistic miracle stories, the terrifying sight of Christ with bloody wounds: "they shall look on him whom they have pierced."[48] Mirk has a macabre story in the Lenten section of the *Festial* which illustrates that dimension of the image of the wounded Christ. It tells of a Norfolk chapman who, though gravely ill, refuses to go to confession: Christ appears to him in a dream "bodyly with blody wondys" to plead with him. When the chapman remains obdurate, Christ casts a handful of his blood in the chapman's face and warns him that it will be a witness against him on Judgement Day. The chapman dies and is damned.[49]

This is the conception at work in these Eucharistic miracle stories, and the most sustained late medieval English treatment of the miracles of the Host embodies just this theme of the appearance of the bloody Christ in the Sacrament as a warning of the need to repent. The *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* was written in East Anglia in the later fifteenth century.[50] It tells the story of a miracle which took place in Aragon and was reputedly authenticated at Rome in 1461. A group of Jews, led by one Jonathas, bribe a Christian businessman to steal and sell them a consecrated Host. Determined to prove for themselves the falsehood of Christian belief, Jonathas and his friends subject the Host to a series of indignities which re-enact the torments of the Passion. They pierce it with five wounds, from which of course it bleeds profusely. They then "crucify" it by nailing it to a post with three large nails. In a scene of pure farce, Jonathas's hand ludicrously comes away from his arm and cleaves to the Host he has abused, and there follows a comic interlude based on traditional mumming plays, complete with a drunken quack doctor and his smart-alec assistant. The Host and the hand are cast into boiling oil, but the cauldron, like the Lollard priest's chalice, fills with blood and spills over. Finally the Host is "buried" with the hand in an oven. Like the tomb on Easter Day the oven is riven open, and Christ appears standing in the ruins as the Image of Pity, displaying his wounds and reproaching the Jews for once more crucifying him. Jonathas and his friends repent and believe, Jonathas is healed, and all seek baptism from the bishop. In a phrase reminiscent of other Eucharistic miracles they tell the Bishop that Christ has shewed himself to them as "A chyld apperyng with wondys blody". As in the story of Gregory and the unbelieving woman, the bishop cries to Christ for mercy and

[48] See below, pp. 247–8.
[49] *Festial*, pp. 91–2.
[50] Edited by Norman Davis, *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, EETS, 1970.

forgiveness, and the terrifying and reproachful image of Christ displaying his bleeding wounds is changed again into the comforting of the sacramental bread. Thus "dread" is changed to "grett swettnesse". The bishop takes up the Host, and the Jews, the merchant, and his chaplain form a Corpus Christi procession. The bishop preaches a sermon on the importance of the sacrament of penance, the merchant confesses his sins, the Jews are baptised, and the play ends with a "Te Deum" in honour of the Holy Name of Jesus.[51]

The Croxton play is an extraordinary amalgam of a whole series of late medieval devotional *topoi*. It should perhaps be called the Croxton play of the sacraments, for it is almost as directly concerned with the sacrament of penance as with that of the Eucharist. The play also dramatises the conventional devotional call to repentance which was part of the cult of the Image of Pity. It is true that the sin of the Jews in the play in recrucifying the Sacramental Christ is specifically that of unbelief: to an East Anglian audience they would perhaps have recalled those other unbelieving outsiders, the Lollards. But their repentance is also presented in terms which assimilate it to the repentance required not only of heretics, but of all sinners, and hence of the audience itself.[52]

"Dredd" into "Sweetness"

When Christ appears in the Croxton play the stage direction stipulates that "Here the owyn must ryve asunder and blede owt at the crannys, and an image appere owt with woundys bledyng." When Jesus first speaks the direction runs "Here shall the image speke to the Juys." Despite the use of the word "image", we are not dealing here, of course, with a puppet or a ventriloquist's dummy, but with an actor painted with wounds and scourge marks, naked to the waist, representing the "Imago pietatis", The Image of Pity or "Man of Sorrows" (Pl. 47). The reproaches spoken by the Croxton Jesus are modelled on the appeals which usually accompanied the prints and drawings of the Image which circulated so widely in the period, such as Hawes's "See me, be kind".[53] In the Croxton play, as in so many of the Host stories, the

[51] *Non-Cycle Plays*, pp. 83, 89.
[52] C. Cutts, "The Croxton Play: an Anti-Lollard Piece", *Modern Language Quarterly*, V, 1944, pp. 45–60; the thesis is tellingly criticized in A. E. Nichols, "The Croxton Play of the Sacrament: a Re-Reading", *Comparative Drama*, XXII, 1988–9, pp. 117–37. Cutts's approach to the Croxton play is extended to the Towneley cycle in L. Lepow, *Enacting the Sacrament: Counter-Lollardy in the Towneley Cycle*, 1990.
[53] *Non-Cycle Plays*, p. 80; see below, pp. 244–8.

bleeding Christ behind the Host is intended to be seen as a figure of Judgement, as one of the Jews declares:

> They that be ded shall come agayn to Judgement,
> And owr dredfull Judge shalbe thys same brede.

But the bleeding Christ displaying his wounds was not only an image of justice and of judgement. The devotional ubiquity of the Image of Pity in late medieval England testifies to its ability to console as well as to frighten or disturb. If Christ's wounds reproached, the believer might respond, as the characters in the Croxton play did, by repentance and compassion. In that response to the blood of Christ, grace flowed.

All the sacraments, it was believed, took their meaning and power from the blood of Christ. As John Fisher explained:

> This moost holy and dere blode of Ihesu cryste shedde for our redemcyon, bought and gave so grete and plenteous vertue to the sacramentes, that as ofte as any creature shall use and receyve ony of them, so ofte it is to be byleved they are sprencled with the droppes of the same moost holy blode.[54]

This perception was no theological abstraction, the possession of clerical or lay élites, for it was given vivid iconographic expression in the popular art of the period. All over England, though perhaps especially in the West Country and the West Midlands, late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century donors paid for the installation of Seven-Sacrament windows in their parish churches. These windows all contained a centrally placed figure of Christ, displaying his wounds. From the wounds rays or bands of red glass, representing the precious blood, flowed to the other panels of the window, in each of which one of the seven sacraments was portrayed (Pl. 48).[55]

But of all the sacraments, the Mass was supremely the sacrament of Christ's blood, and it had its own distinctive iconographical representation of that special link. The "Mass of Pope Gregory", modelled on one of the many Host miracles associated with the saint, shows the Pope celebrating Mass (Pl. 49). As he bends to consecrate the elements, kneels to worship them, or stands to elevate them, the figure of Christ emerging from his tomb, displaying his wounds and surrounded by the implements of the Passion, appears above the altar. This was a highly compressed

[54] Fisher, *English Works*, p. 109.
[55] For a list of surviving Seven-Sacrament windows and fragments see Painton Cowen, *A Guide to Stained Glass in Britain*, 1985, p. 252; for a discussion of their iconography see G. McN. Rushforth "Seven Sacrament Compositions", *passim*.

theological image, teaching the real presence and the unity of Christ's suffering with the daily sacrifice in every church in Christendom. Though it certainly evolved out of a fusion of the story of the doubting woman who had baked the Eucharistic bread[56] with the devotional Image of Pity, because both were associated with the name of Gregory, it was emphatically an image of forgiveness and grace, not of judgement. Its consolatory power for English men and women is attested by the fact that both in its full-blown form and in the simpler version of the Image of Pity, without the figure of the Pope, it found its way into primers and other prayer-books, devotional paintings, and prints circulating with or without text, into stained glass, and even on to tomb brasses and carvings. In the tiny Norfolk parish church of Wellingham in the 1530s the parishioners erected an altar which dominated the south side of their new Rood-screen. Over the altar the painter set as reredos a naively painted version of the Image of Pity (Pl. 50). Rather more lavishly, Alice Chester in the 1470s gave to the Jesus altar in her church of All Saints Bristol an altar-piece with the same image, "our Lord rising out of the sepulchre, sometimes called our Lord's Pity".[57] Every Mass at these altars thus became a re-enactment of the Mass of Pope Gregory, and the presence of the crucified Lord in the Host was impressed on everyone who raised their eyes at the sacring. And because it did portray "Our Lord rising out of the Sepulchre", it had a particular appropriateness to the Easter observances associated with the Host. It was in a three-dimensional image of this sort, "an ymage of silver of our Saviour with yhs woundes bledyng" and with "a little pixe for the saccrament uppon the breste" that the parishioners of St Peter Mancroft, Norwich, buried the Host each year in their Easter sepulchre, clinching the image's Eucharistic resonances.[58]

Spectators or Participants? Lay Religion and the Mass

The power to consecrate the Host was priestly power. Christ had left to his Apostles "yee and to al othyr prestes, power and dignite forto make his body of bred and wyne yn the auter, so that eche prest hath of Cristis geft power forto make this sacrament, be he bettyr, be he wors."[59] Margery Kempe, grilled by the Abbot of Leicester about her belief concerning the Sacrament, knew what was expected of her, and replied that

[56] See above, pp. 102–3.
[57] Bristol All Saints CWA (b) pp. 258–9.
[58] Norwich, St Peter Mancroft CWA, p. 209.
[59] *Festial*, p. 169.

> Serys, I beleue in the Sacrament of the awter in this wyse, that what man hath takyn the ordyr of presthode, be he neuyr so vicyows a man in hys levyng, yef he say dewly tho wordys over the bred that owr Lord Ihesu Criste seyde whan he mad hys Mawnde among his disciplys ther he sat at soper, I be-leve that it is hys very flesch & hys blood & no material bred ne never may be unseyd be it onys seyd.[60]

The prestige of the Sacrament as the centre and source of the whole symbolic system of late medieval Catholicism implied an enormously high doctrine of priesthood. The priest had access to mysteries forbidden to others: only he might utter the words which transformed bread and wine into the flesh and blood of God incarnate, those "fyue wordes. withouten drede / that no mon but a prest schulde rede".[61] No layman or woman might even touch the sacred vessels with their bare hands. When the laity drank the draught of unconsecrated wine which they were given after communion to wash down the Host and ensure they had swallowed it, they had to cover their hands with the houseling-cloth, for the virtue of the Host and blood affected even the dead metal of the chalice. Power "leaked" from the Host and the blood: whooping cough could be cured by getting a priest to give one a threefold draught of water or wine from his chalice after Mass.[62]

The mystery that surrounded the central sanctities of the Mass were reflected in the language in which, like the rest of the liturgy, it was celebrated. The combination of the decent obscurity of a learned language on one hand, and clerical monopoly – or at least primacy – in the control and ordering of the liturgy on the other, has led to the view that the worship of late medieval England was non-participatory. The fact that in most churches the high altar was divided from the nave by a Rood-screen has lent support to this notion. Bernard Manning, in what remains one of the most suggestive and sympathetic accounts of late medieval religion, nevertheless wrote of a tendency "to leave the service more and more to the clerks alone", and a more modern commentator has even talked of a "lay society separated by rood screens and philo-

[60] *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 115.

[61] LFMB, p. 147. The *Golden Legend*, in making this point, tells a theologically rather confused story of some shepherds who recited the words of institution, turned bread into flesh, and were promptly roasted by a thunderbolt, "and therefore the holy fathers stablished these words to be said low, also that none should say them without he were a priest." *Golden Legend*, VII p. 239.

[62] *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. J. S. Brewer, J. Gairdner, and R. H. Brodie, 1862–1910 (hereafter = L&P) XVIII/2 p. 309; *A Hundred Merry Tales*, pp. 100–1.

sophical abstractions from the 'alienated liturgy' of the altar".[63] Enough has been said in the first chapter about lay assimilation of liturgical themes to make any such notion of general lay alienation from the liturgy untenable. But what of the specific case of the Mass: to what extent was lay involvement with this most sacred and central of the rites of Christendom passive or alienating?

Any attempt to tackle this question must start from the recognition that lay people experienced the Mass in a variety of ways and in a range of settings. The parish Mass was indeed celebrated at the high altar, and that altar was often physically distanced even from the nearest members of the congregation, and partially obscured by the screen. In some of the great parish churches, like St Margaret's, Lynn, or Walpole St Peter, parishioners would have been well out of earshot of anything said, as opposed to sung, at the altar. During Lent, moreover, a huge veil was suspended within the sanctuary area, to within a foot or so of the ground, on weekdays completely blocking the laity's view of the celebrant and the sacring.[64] However, we need to grasp that both screen and veil were manifestations of a complex and dynamic understanding of the role of both distance and proximity, concealment and exposure within the experience of the liturgy. Both screen and veil were barriers, marking boundaries between the people's part of the church and the holy of holies, the sacred space within which the miracle of transubstantiation was effected, or, in the case of the veil, between different types of time, festive and penitential. The veil was there precisely to function as a temporary ritual deprivation of the sight of the sacring. Its symbolic effectiveness derived from the fact that it obscured for a time something which was normally accessible; in the process it heightened the value of the spectacle it temporarily concealed.

[63] B. L. Manning, *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif*, 1919, p. 11; G. McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, 1989, p. 41 – she is paraphrasing, apparently with approval, a paper by Clifford Flanigan.

[64] W. H. Frere, *The Use of Sarum*, 1898–1901, I pp. 139–40; Rock, *Church of Our Fathers*, IV pp. 257–62; Ludlow CWA, p. 3 records payments for the cords to draw up the cloth "that hangyth in the mydes of the heygh chancelle in the Lent". It should not be confused with the cloth which hung "afore the roode on Palme Sunday". Similar payments for the "velum templi" are recorded at Leverton in Lincolnshire – Leverton CWA, p. 347. The phrase "velum templi" was no idle one, since the veil was dramatically lowered at the mention of the rending of the veil of the Jerusalem temple, during the reading of the Matthean Passion narrative in Holy Week. The veil was not used during the canon of the Mass on the solemn days of Lent and was raised for the reading of the Gospel at masses on the ferial days. On these days it was lowered again at the "Orate Fratres", just before the canon of the Mass, in order to conceal the elevation, though it appears that pressure from the laity to see the Host was eroding this custom at the end of the Middle Ages (*Use of Sarum*, I p. 140). Brackets and attachments for the Lent veil can still be seen in the chancels at Horsham St Faith and Haddiscoe in Norfolk, and at Monk's Soham, Troston, and Norton in Suffolk.

The screen itself was both a barrier and no barrier. It was not a wall but rather a set of windows, a frame for the liturgical drama, solid only to waist-height, pierced by a door wide enough for ministers and choir to pass through and which the laity themselves might penetrate on certain occasions, for example, when, as at Eye on festivals, they gathered with torches to honour the sacrament, and in processions like the Candlemas one and the ceremonies and watching associated with the Easter sepulchre. Even the screen's most solid section, the dado, might itself be pierced with elevation squints, to allow the laity to pass visually into the sanctuary at the sacring.[65] This penetration was a two-way process: if the laity sometimes passed through the screen to the mystery, the mystery sometimes moved out to meet them. Each Mass was framed within a series of ritual moments at which the ministers, often carrying sacred objects, such as the Host itself at Easter, or, on ordinary Sundays, Gospel texts, the paxbred, or sacramentals like holy water or holy bread, passed out of the sanctuary into the body of the church. We shall explore some of these moments shortly.

But in any case, it is vital to remember that the parish Mass, important as it was for lay experience of the liturgy, was by no means the only or perhaps even the most common lay experience of the Mass. Many lay people, perhaps even most of them, attended Mass on some weekdays. These weekday masses were not usually the elaborate ritual affairs, with a procession, the blessing of holy water and holy bread, and some singing, which most parishes could have mustered on Sundays. The daily Masses to which the laity resorted to "see my Maker" were "low" Masses, short ceremonies celebrated at altars which, far from being concealed behind screens and out of earshot of the worshippers, were often within arm's reach. In his version of the *Doctrinal of Sapyence*, a treatise aimed at instructing "symple prestes . . . and symple peple", Caxton complained that far from standing well back in awe and reverence at Mass,

> moche peple . . . go nyghe and about the aulter and stond so nyghe the aulter that they trouble oftimes the preest for the dissolucions that they doo in spekyng in lawhing and many other maners and not only the laye men and women but also the clerkes by whom the other ought to be governed and taken ensample of.[66]

[65] Regional variation was a factor here; the heavily carved screens of Devon, stretching across the whole width of the church and having massive lofts, or like the one at Flamborough in Yorkshire, similarly massive, may have had a different ritual "feel" to the more slender and open screens of eastern England. For general discussion of these differences see Aylmer Vallance, *English Church Screens*, 1936, and F. Bond and B. Camm, *Roodscreens and Roodlofts*, 1909.

The surviving evidence of the ritual arrangements of countless English churches confirms this picture of the accessibility of the daily celebration to the laity. Great churches, of course, had many altars, in side chapels, in chantries divided from the body of the church by parclosing or wainscot, or against pillars. But even small churches had their quota of altars for the celebration of gild and chantry Masses, all crammed into the nave. Often these altars made use of the Rood-screen, not as a barrier against contact with the Mass, but as the backdrop for it. At Ranworth in Norfolk these altar arrangements survive intact, with two altars flanking the central portion of the screen, using the paintings on its extreme northern and southern sections as reredos. An identical arrangement operated at Bramfield in Suffolk (Pl. 51), where the elaborate piscina to the south of the screen reveals the presence of an altar of some importance.[67] Even the tiny church of Wellingham, only sixteen feet wide, had an altar pushed up against the south screen, while at South Burlingham the mark of an even more substantial altar against the north screen is still visible. The altars at Wellingham and South Burlingham must have crowded the east end of the nave, and awkwardly interrupted the decorative schemes of the screens against which they were placed. But many of these nave altars were much more carefully integrated into the planning of the screen, as at Ranworth, Bramfield, and, even more spectacularly, at Attleburgh.[68] They were clearly among the most important focuses of ritual activity in the building. This prominence given to nave altars was no merely regional phenomenon. Jesus altars in many parishes attracted multiple benefactions for the maintenance of the worship of the Holy Name, and the Jesus altars in cathedrals like Durham, in great town churches like St Lawrence, Reading, and smaller buildings like All Saints, Bristol, were prominently placed in the people's part of the church, and had elaborate sung services endowed at them. The Jesus Mass at All Saints, Bristol, was celebrated several times a week, had a choir of its own and a set of organs; in addition to the Mass the priest and singers performed the "Salve" anthem at night.[69]

[66] *Doctrinal of Sapyence*, fol. 63v.

[67] H. Munro Cautley, *Suffolk Churches and their Treasures*, 5th ed. 1982, p. 228 and plate 119.

[68] Illustrated in N. Pevsner, *Buildings of England: North-West and South Norfolk*, 1962, plate 31(a).

[69] Bristol All Saints CWA (b) pp. 237–8.

The laity controlled, often indeed owned these altars. They provided the draperies in which they were covered, the images and ornaments and lights which encoded the dedication and functions of the altar and its worship. They specified the times and seasons at which the appearance and worship of the altar was to be varied. Their wills show an intense awareness of varying season and occasion – particular frontals or curtains for "good days", sombre array for requiems and year's minds, velvet or silk coats and bonnets and silver shoes to dress the altar images on festivals, and so on. The liturgy celebrated at these altars reflected the greater degree of lay involvement possible at them. The parish liturgy was fixed, following the order specified in calendar, missal, breviary, or processional. But most of the Masses said at the nave altars were votive or requiem ones, or Masses in honour of Our Lady or some favourite saint. As a consequence, the laity who paid for these celebrations could have a direct control over the prayers and readings used at them. It was standard practice for testators, whether founding a long-term chantry or less elaborately laying out a fiver on endowing an "annualer", to specify the use of particular collects, secrets, and post-communion prayers, or the celebration of a specific Mass or sequence of Masses on particular days of the week, or to stipulate the use of variant or even additional Gospels within the structure of a particular Mass. These extra Gospels were inserted at the end of Mass, just before the reading of the first chapter of St John's Gospel, with which every Mass concluded.[70] And since this was a culture in which specific prayers or Gospel passages were believed to be especially powerful, to bring particular blessings or protection from certain evils, even the unlettered laity noticed, and valued, such variations. In many cases, perhaps in most, these variant liturgical prescriptions would have been arrived at in consultation with clerical advisers, "my ghostly father". But the fact remained that it was lay men and women who hired, and who could often fire, the clergy who carried out their instructions. It makes no sense to talk here about an 'alienated liturgy of the altar". This was Eucharistic worship in which lay people called the shots.

The proprietary control of individuals, families, or larger groups like gilds over the liturgy of the nave altars raises another difference between the Masses said there and at the parish altar. Among the furnishings of these nave altars were their own "paxes", with their attendant peace rituals. Consequently, they represented a different ordering of community from that expressed or imposed by the Sunday Mass. Some of the implications of this can be teased out by considering the arrangements made in many places for the provision of a Jesus Mass at a nave altar.

[70] Wood Legh, *Perpetual Chantries*, pp. 295–6.

The Mass in honour of the Holy Name of Jesus was, throughout the fifteenth century, one of the most popular of all votive Masses. From the 1470s onwards, Jesus brotherhoods proliferated throughout England, dedicated to the maintenance of a regular celebration of the Mass of the Holy Name, often on a Friday, at an altar over which there might be its own Jesus image, distinct from the Crucifix.[71] These Masses often began as the specific devotion of a small group, or as an individual benefaction, but invariably generated other donations and bequests, large and small, "to the sustentation of the Mass of Jesus". Wherever it occurs, the Jesus Mass has all the hallmarks of a genuinely popular devotion.[72] Yet the Mass of Jesus was also emphatically an observance seized on by élites in every community as a convenient expression, and perhaps an instrument, of their social dominance. From its beginnings in England the cult of the Holy Name had aristocratic backing, and it achieved status as a feast in the 1480s under the patronage of Lady Margaret Beaufort, whose domestic clergy composed the Office.[73] In many towns, the well-to-do and powerful emulated the court's patronage of the cult. At Reading, the Jesus Mass at the church of St Lawrence began on the initiative of one of the town's wealthiest clothiers, Henry Kelsall, "fyrst mynder, sustayner and mayntayner of the devocyon of the Masse of Jhu". The Jesus altar dominated the nave at St Lawrence's, and the Mass itself was funded and controlled by an exclusive gild of ten wealthy men and their wives. The gild acquired considerable land in the area, and was responsible for paying the sexton's wages, in return for his care of the gear of the altar and gild. The importance of this group in the life of the parish can be gauged from a town ordinance of 1547, which stipulated that the wives of former members of the Jesus gild "shall from henseforth sitt & have the highest seats or pewes next unto the Mayors wifs seate towardes the pulpitt".[74]

The Jesus Mass at the town church of All Saints, Bristol, was similarly sustained by the benefactions of the wealthy, and celebrated at the former Lady altar (increasingly in the late fifteenth

[71] As at Long Melford, but the precise nature of "Jesus" images in late medieval England is a subject yet to be researched.

[72] The evidence from Kent is conveniently accessible in *Testamenta Cantiana: East Kent*, ed. A. Hussey, 1907, pp. 14, 19, 30, 48, 53, 55, 57, 61, 90, 101, 107, 113, 126, 163, 202, 234, 235, 260, 285, 336, 355, 360, 367. A wide range of material on Jesus Masses, anthems, and fraternities was brought together by E. G. C. Atchley, "Jesus Mass and Anthems", *Transactions of the St Paul's Ecclesiological Society*, V, 1905, pp. 163–9.

[73] Pfaff, *New Feasts*, chapter 4.

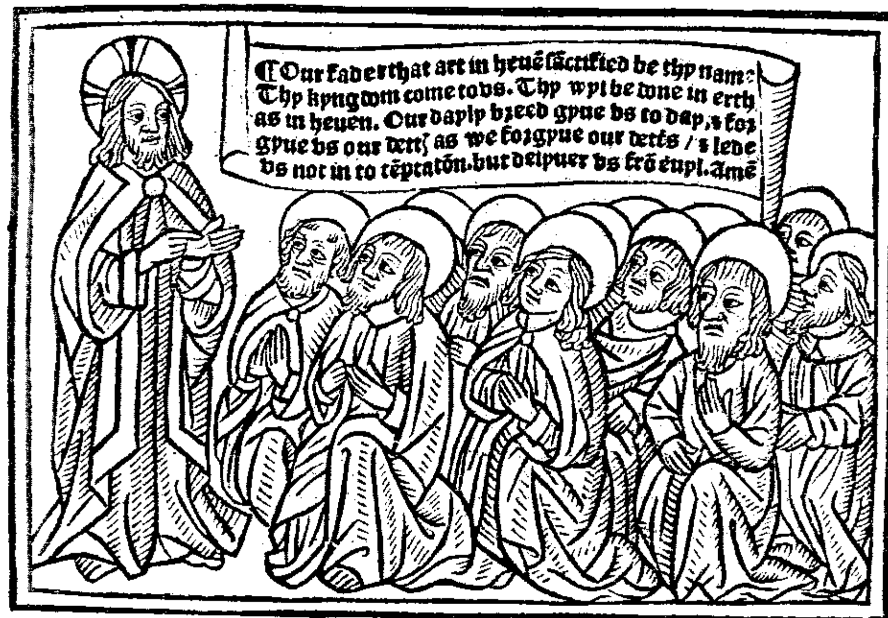
[74] Reading, St Lawrence CWA, pp. 28–32.

and early sixteenth century called the Jesus altar) in what was effectively the private chantry chapel of Thomas Halleway, a former mayor of Bristol, who had installed fixed pews with doors for himself and his family directly in front of the Jesus altar.[75] On the other side of England, the Jesus Mass at Long Melford was celebrated at an altar in "my aisle, called Jesus aisle", as Roger Martin wrote. The aisle was the burial chapel of the Martin family, and when iconoclasm reached Long Melford in Edward's reign Martin took the reredos of the Jesus altar to his home, as much a manifestation of proprietary rights as of his undoubted traditionalist piety. As elsewhere, the wealthy of Long Melford were conspicuous in their bequests to the ornaments and maintenance of the Jesus Mass.[76]

That the parishioners of St Lawrence, Reading, All Saints, Bristol, or Holy Trinity, Long Melford, came in numbers to the Jesus Masses is not to be doubted, and the existence of bequests to these masses and to hundreds like them up and down the country leaves no doubt that they felt that, whoever had begun it, the Mass was now the possession of the community at large. But the altars, vestments, vessels, and clergy belonged not to the community at large, but to Henry Kelsall and his gild brethren, to Thomas Halleway, to the Martin family. The pax kissed at those masses was not the property of the parish, but the possession of the gilds, families or individuals who had established the devotion. The Mass belonged more to some than to others (Pl. 52–3).

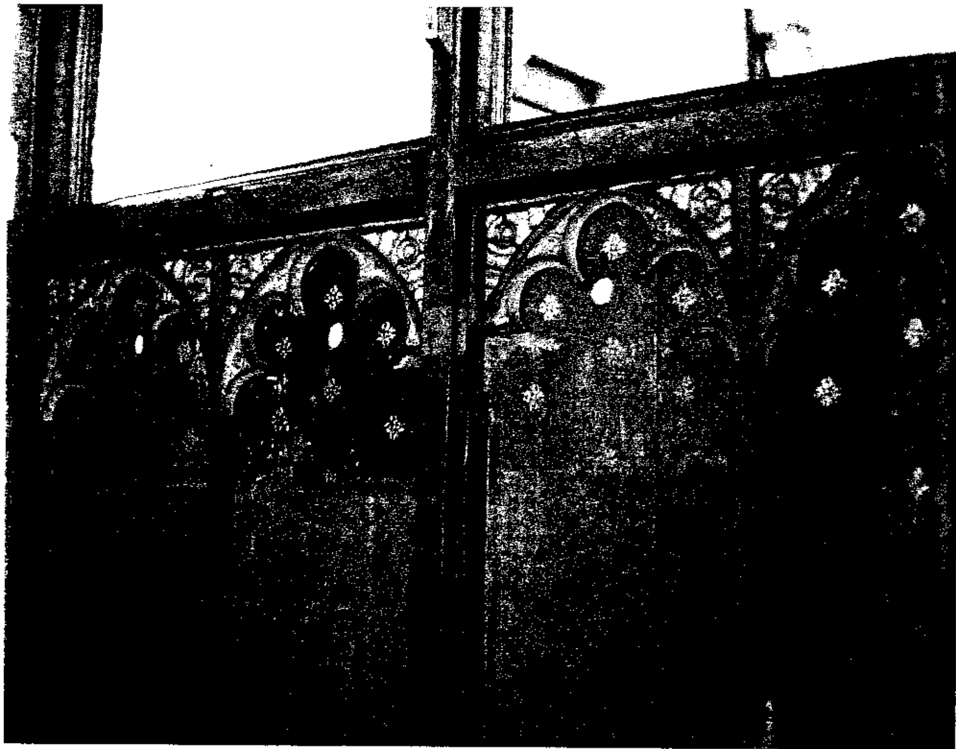
This is not to suggest that the liturgy at these altars was in any simple sense an instrument of social hegemony or, worse, social control. The founders and donors of such Masses saw themselves, and were seen by others, as benefactors bestowing a spiritual amenity on their parish, and such benefactions earned one an honoured place in the parish bede-roll.[77] But the implications for the perception of the religious dimensions of community in towns and villages at such Masses were clearly more narrowly defined and more problematic than that at the parish altar on Sundays. We shall explore further dimensions of the complexities of the notion of communality in a late medieval religious community in a later chapter. Here it is sufficient to notice that in this respect, as in others, it is impossible to talk of a single type of experience of the Mass.

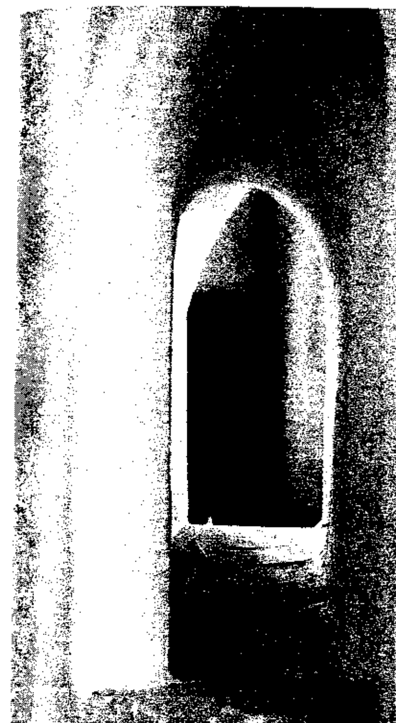
[75] Bristol All Saints CWA (b), pp. 236–7.
[76] Parker, *History of Long Melford*, pp. 73, 221.
[77] See below, pp. 139–41, 327–337.



37. The Our Father, from the *Arte or Crafte to Lyve Well*.

38. Matrimony, from the *Arte or Crafte to Lyve Well*.



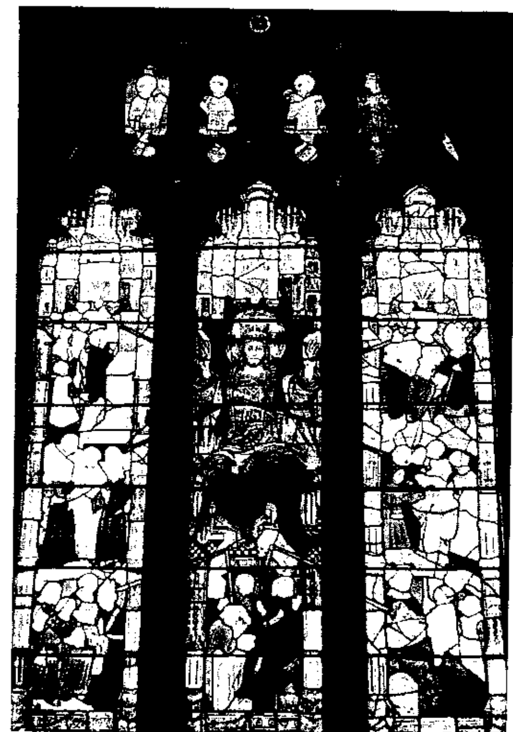


46 (above left). This piscina and squint allowed the priest celebrating at the altar of St Erasmus in St Matthew's Ipswich to see his colleague at the high altar.

47 (above right). The Image of Pity, Wigginhall St Germans.

44 (facing page, above). Elevation squints in the screen at Burlingham St Edmund. Note the unpainted marks of a nave altar.

45 (facing page, below). Elevation squints above the heads of St Sebastian and St Dorothy, Roxton, Bedfordshire.



48. The Seven-Sacrament window, Doddiscombsleigh, Devon. The central figure of Christ is Victorian, replacing the medieval image smashed by iconoclasts.

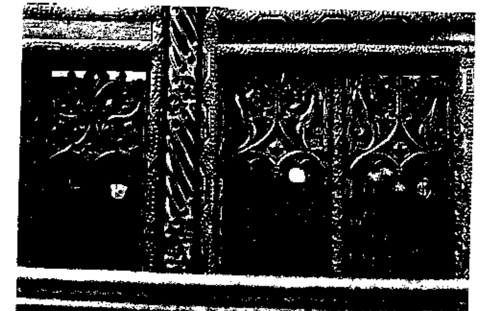
49. The Mass of Pope Gregory, from a Sarum primer of 1497.

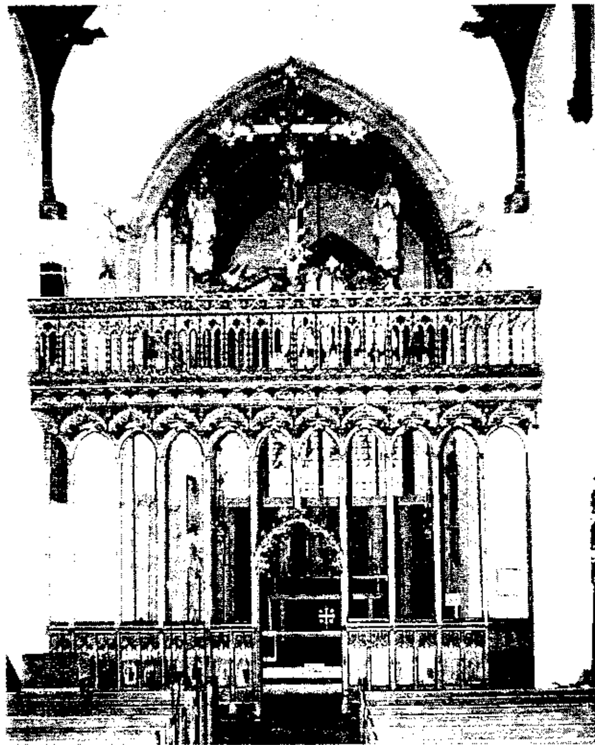
50. The south screen, Wellingham, Norfolk. The blank space beneath the Image of Pity marks the former nave altar site.

51. The south screen at Bramfield; the two blank bays at the end next to the elaborate piscina indicate a nave altar.

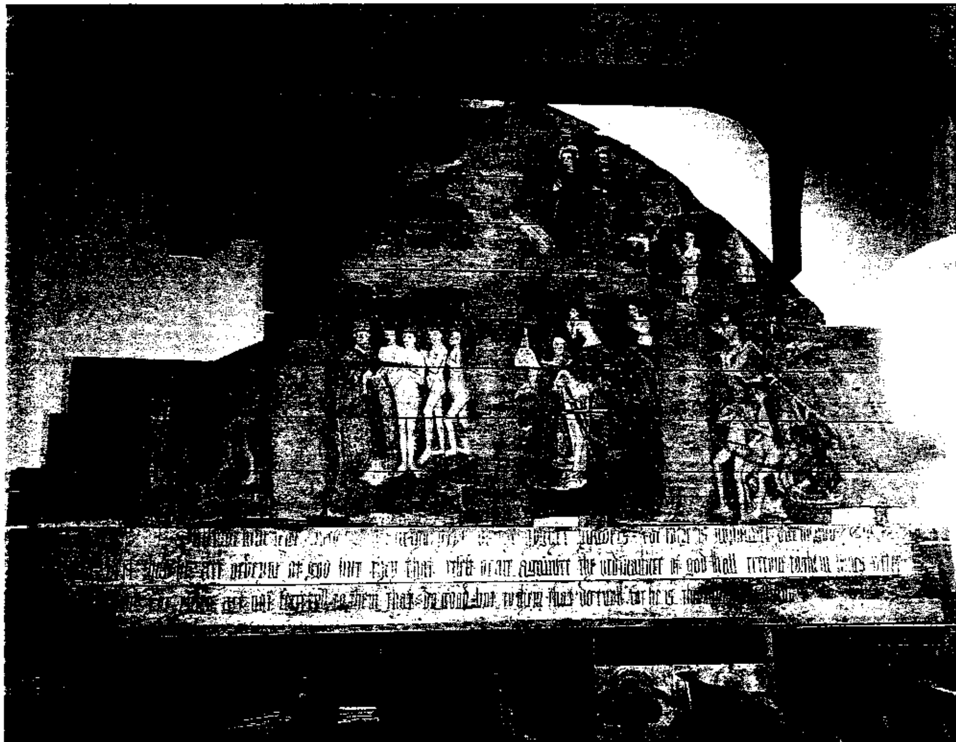
52. Private liturgy? The Spring chantry chapel at Lavenham, 1523.

53. Private liturgy breached: elevation squints at the west end of the Spring chantry enabled those kneeling outside to see the sacring.





54. The restored Rood-screen at Eye, Suffolk.



55. The Doom tympanum at Wenhaston, Suffolk. Bare patches mark the position of the carved Rood, Mary, and John. The Bible texts at the bottom, enjoining obedience to the monarch, are the remains of the Reformation overpainting of the Crucifixion and Doom scene.

56. The Apostles from the north screen at Ranworth, Norfolk.

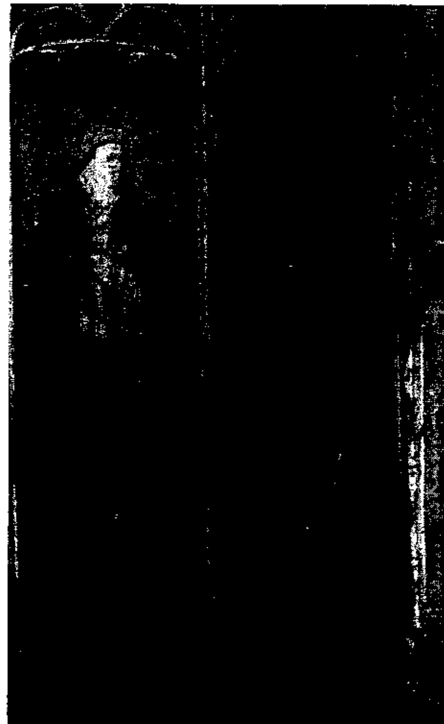
57. The Apostles Sts Simon and Jude from the screen at Carleton Rood, Norfolk.

69. St Agatha, Wigginhall St Mary, Norfolk.

70. Scene from the legend of St Margaret, Combs, Suffolk.

71. Helper saints: the presence of plague saints like St Roche (right) on this late screen at North Tuddenham, Norfolk, reveals anxieties about the growth of epidemic disease.

72. Helper saints: Master John Schorne, portrayed (right) at Gateley in Norfolk, was invoked against the ague.



Praying the Mass: the Individual's Experience

According to Lyndwood, the canon of the Mass was recited by the priest in silence "ne impediatur populus orare", so that the people might not be hindered from praying.[78] As that explanation reveals, it was not thought essential or even particularly desirable that the prayer of the laity should be the same as that of the priest at the altar. According to John Mirk, the parish priest should teach his people that

> whenne they doth to chyrche fare,
> Thenne bydde hem leve here mony wordes,
> Here ydel speche, and nyce bordes,
> And put a-way alle vanyte,
> And say here pater noster & here ave.

While at Mass they were neither to stand nor to slouch against pillars or walls, but to kneel and pray meekly and quietly on the floor. There were certain moments in the Mass when they might rise:

> whenne the gospelle i-red be schalle
> Teche hem thenne to stonde up alle,
> And blesse feyre as they conne,
> Whenne gloria tibi is begonne.[79]

These were the fundamental requirements for the laity at Mass: to kneel quietly without idle chatter, saying Paters and Aves, to respond to certain key gestures or phrases by changing posture, above all at the sacring to kneel with both hands raised in adoration, to gaze on the Host, and to greet their Lord with an elevation prayer. Mirk supplies a sample:

> Ihesu Lord, welcome thow be,
> In forme of bred as I the se;
> Ihesu! for thy holy name,
> Schelde me to day fro synne & schame.
> Schryfte & howsele, Lord, thou graunte me bo,
> Er that I schale hennes go,
> And verre contrycyone of my synne,
> That I lord never dye there-Inne;
> And as thow were of a may I-bore,
> Sofere me never to be for-lore,

[78] LFMB, p. xx.
[79] *Instructions for Parish Priests*, 9, lines 265–81.

But whenne that I schale hennes wende,
Grawnte me the blysse wyth-owten ende. Amen.[80]

A century on, Richard Whytford gave the devout Tudor householder almost identical advice, telling him to instruct his children that the church was "a place of prayer / not of claterynge and talkynge . . . charge them also to kepe theyr syght in the chirche cloce upon theyr bokes or bedes. And whyle they ben yonge / let them use ever to knele / stande or syt / and never to walke in the chirche." They were to hear the mass "quyetly and deuoutly / moche parte knelynge. But at the gospell / at the preface / and at the Pater Noster, teche them to stande / and to make curtsy at this worde Jesus as the preest dothe."[81] This was indeed a modest requirement: It demanded from the laity no more than decency in church and the recitation of the rosary while the priest got on with the sacrifice at the altar. His liturgy and theirs converged only at the climactic moment when Earth and Heaven met in the fragile disc of bread he held above his head, and everyone found some heightened form of words to greet and to petition the sacramental Christ for salvation, health, and blessing. The parishioners of Woodchurch in Kent, complaining about their neighbour Roger Harlakinden in 1511 that "he janglith and talkithe in the chirche when he is there and lettithe others to say their divociones" give us a glimpse of that modest ideal actually in practice.[82]

In fact this minimum requirement was frequently felt to be inadequate both by the church authorities and by the laity themselves. Texts to assist the devout laity to a fuller participation in the Mass were produced thoughout the later Middle Ages, of which the best known is the rhyming *Lay Folk's Mass Book*, perhaps originally produced in Norman French, and Englished in the fourteenth century. Lydgate produced a somewhat more elaborate but essentially similar work for the Countess of Suffolk in the mid fifteenth century, and Caxton published a lengthy prose guide, "the Noble History of the Exposition of the Mass" at the end of his version of the *Golden Legend*.[83] None of these works is a translation of the Mass itself, though they all contain paraphrases of some of the prayers in the outer sections of the mass, such as the "Gloria in Excelsis" or the Lord's Prayer. All adopt essentially the same method, offering moralized or allegorized meditations on the stages

[80] Ibid, lines 290–301.
[81] *Werke for Householders*, p. 34.
[82] *Kentish Visitation*, p. 160.
[83] LFMB, *passim*; *Minor Poems of John Lydgate: Part I*, ed. H. N. MacCraken, EETS, 1911, pp. 84–117; *Golden Legend*, VII pp. 225–62; Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 98–108, 155–63.

of the Mass, in which the more distinctive actions of the priest, such as ascending or descending the altar steps, changing position at the altar, extending his arms, or turning towards the congregation, are related to the incidents of Christ's life and Passion, or to generalized aspects of Christian doctrine. So at the offertory the *Lay Folk's Mass Book* provides a prayer which recalls the gifts of the Magi, while Lydgate moralizes the priest's departure at the end of Mass as recalling Moses' leading of Israel through the Red Sea.[84] In some later medieval Mass devotions, such as those associated with the Brigittine house of Syon, the correspondences with the Passion are very closely worked out, on the premise that "the processe of the masse representyd the verey processe of the Passyon off Cryst." Thus as the priest places the fanon or maniple on his arm the devotee is to recall the rope with which Christ was led "fro Tyrant to Tyrant", while the chasuble was to recall the purple vestment in which Christ was mocked.[85]

Devotion at Mass on this method became a matter of inner meditation on the Passion, using the stages of the liturgy as triggers or points of departure, and Margery Kempe's visionary practice shows how far it could be carried. But all fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century methods of hearing Mass, however reflective or comparatively learned, were essentially elaborations of the basic method outlined by Mirk: intense prayer at the elevation, preceded and followed by private prayers keyed to a few significant moments in the ceremony – the confession of sins, the Gloria and Sanctus, the offertory, the commemorations of the living and of the dead before and after the sacring, the receiving of the pax. And these few moments did, in fact, encompass the essentials of Christian prayer – praise and self-surrender to God, confession of sins, intercession for one's own needs and those of one's "even-christians", and for the building of community in charity. All these were focused on the event which made all of them possible and meaningful, the consecration which renewed and gave access to the salvation of mankind on Calvary.

The overwhelming majority of prayers provided for the laity at Mass were, therefore, elevation prayers. The primers invariably included a range of such prayers in Latin, many of them with indulgences; some sixteenth-century printed primers supplied dozens. Though often repetitious and litany-like in form, these prayers offered a remarkably balanced and comprehensive Eucharistic theology. Linked firmly to the death of Christ on the altar of the

[84] LFMB, pp. 22–3.
[85] *Tracts on the Mass*, pp. 19–21.

cross, they nevertheless emphasized the glorious and risen character of the body on which the devotee gazed. The prayers invoked Christ not only by his death but by his resurrection, by the descent of the Spirit, by his coming again in glory. His flesh was seen as life-giving "salus, victoria et resurrectio nostra", and the Host was seen as the pledge of delivery from every type of evil afflicting humanity, spiritual or physical.[86] The primer prayers were generally in Latin, but vernacular prayers proliferated, often in verse for easy memorization: they follow fairly closely the pattern found in Mirk's *Instructions*. Lay people attending Mass regularly collected such vernacular devotions for their own use. A manuscript Sarum primer compiled in London about 1500, whose owner was a member of the Jesus gild at St Paul's, has an English prayer of adoration of the sacrament for every day of the week copied into blank spaces on the back of the illuminations which precede the Hours. The prayers typify the tone of this Eucharistic piety, and the cult of spiritual communion by gazing on which it was built:

> O thu swettest manna aungyll mete o thu most likyng gostly drynke brynge in to myn inwarde mowthe that honyful tast of thin helthful presence and also thin charite. Quenche in me alle maner of vices, send in to me the plente of vertues, encrese in me giftis of graces and geve to me hele of body and sowle to thi plesyng.[87]

One preoccupation in particular is especially notable in vernacular elevation devotions, though it is also found in many of the Latin prayers. This was prayer for delivery from sudden and unprepared death, without the benefit of communion. Late medieval believers, gazing on the Host, were often moved to reflect on the last moment when they would gaze on it, the hour of death. Petitions for "schrift, housil and good ending" are one of the most frequently encountered elements in such prayers, and it was believed that for those who did die suddenly, the mere sight of the Host that day would be accounted to them as housel.[88] It may be significant that the sight of the Host was thus linked instinctively with the solitary communion of the deathbed, and the lonely journey into the other world for which it was preparation. But there was here no necessary contradiction with the communal character of most Eucharistic experience. Communal and individual experience could be held together without tension as the rhythm of the Mass, from pro-

[86] *Hor. Ebor.* pp. 70–4.
[87] E. S. Dewick, "On a manuscript Sarum Prymer" *Transactions of the St Paul's Ecclesiological Society*, V, 1905, pp. 170–5.
[88] See below, chapter 9, "Last Things", pp. 311–3.

cession to prayer to rapt gaze and outwards once again to the bustle of offertory or pax. And as we shall see, the solitary character of the medieval experience of the deathbed may itself be questioned. The hour of death was one not of isolation, but itself an experience of community.

Praying the Mass: Privatization?

Nevertheless, the private and privatizing dimensions of lay Eucharistic experience have tended to catch the attention of some historians of late medieval religion, not without apparent justification. Richard Whitford, as we have already seen, thought that devout lay people at Mass should "kepe theyr syght in the chirche cloce upon theyr bokes or bedes", except at the sacring and other key moments. Colin Richmond has argued that the religion of the gentry was developing away from the religion of the rest of the parish in this period, precisely because they, more than others, had their sights "cloce upon theyr bokes". They sat in their private pews, even sometimes in their own family chapels screened off from the rest of the church, and read.

> Whether they followed the Mass in the liturgical books or in a paraphrase and devotional commentary, or they read something unconnected with the service, they were, so to speak, getting their heads down, turning their eyes from the distractions posed by their fellow worshippers, but at the same time taking them off the priest and his movements and gestures. Such folk, in becoming isolated from their neighbours, were also insulating themselves against communal religion.[89]

Pamela Graves has taken this argument further, arguing that the primers and similar texts encouraged lay people "to muster their own thoughts, rather than construct a communal memory of the passion through the action of the Mass", and has suggested that literate people at Mass "already isolated in their pews and chapels" may even have "experience[ed] religion in probably quite different ways from their illiterate neighbours".[90]

There are several causes for unease with any such arguments. In the first place, too much is being assumed here about the difference between literate and illiterate experience of religion.[91] In the

[89] C. Richmond, "Religion and the Fifteenth century Gentleman", in B. Dobson (ed.), *The Church, Politics and Patronage*, 195, p. 199.
[90] Pamela Graves, "Social Space in the English Medieval Parish Church", *Economy and Society*, XVIII, 1989, pp. 297–322.
[91] See below, pp. 295–8.

second, the evidence on the relationship of the literate and the gentle to parochial or communal religion in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century seems to this observer at least to run overwhelmingly in the opposite direction. It was often the gentry who paid for the vestments, vessels, processional crosses, monstrances, sepulchres which beautified the parish's Eucharistic worship, for these simultaneously established within the community the "worship" and importance of the Host and of the donors. The Cloptons, Martins, Halleways, Chesters did indeed have their private pews and even chapels, but those chapels were the location for observances valued by the whole community, and many gentry loaned vestments, vessels, and books from their private chapels to beautify the parish worship on feast days. Our most valuable single commentator on early sixteenth-century parochial religion in East Anglia is Roger Martin. His grandfather seems to have managed Long Melford's summer processional round, and the family's estate chapel was one of the focuses of that round. Roger Martin himself played a leading role in the reconstruction of parochial religion under Mary. Yet the Martin family owned and sat in one such proprietary chantry chapel in their parish church, and Martin's writing about the figure of Christ and his Mother reveal a sensibility saturated in the devotional commonplaces which filled the literature being read by the pious. There seems little tension here between the communal and the private. Martin is not unrepresentative. In most communities the gentry and the urban élites chose not to withdraw from communal worship, but to dominate it. To call this process privatization seems unhelpful.[92]

But did the gentry and other literate people experience the Mass in a qualitatively different way from those who could not read? Everyone at Mass was expected to participate in two quite different modes – private prayer, focusing on the relation between the Host and the Passion of Christ, and ritual action, geared to the community. The gentry may be assumed to have valued ritual participation, since they so often provided its props. Clearly, the scope of their private devotion was enormously broadened and deepened by literacy. There was a qualitative difference between those who could greet the Host only with a Pater or an Ave, and those who were able after the sacring to read the Eucharistic and Passion prayers of the primers, most of them in Latin and many of them with a long tradition of learned and patristic imagery behind them.

[92] See C. Carpenter, "The Religion of the Gentry in Fifteenth-Century England", in D. Williams (ed.), *England in the Fifteenth Century*, 1987, pp. 53–74.

But here above all we need to beware of attractively stark polarities. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a formidable warning against any assumption that the religion of ritual, relic, and miracle is somehow at odds with the religion of meditation, reading, and the quasi-monastic devotion of the mystics and spiritual guides, as filtered into the devotional handbooks of the later Middle Ages. For Margery as for many of her contemporaries, the liturgy and above all the Mass was the natural focus of her private religion. She, of course, was no gentlewoman, but it is a mistake to see the access to primers and related books as the preserve of the gentry, especially once printing dramatically reduced the cost of a Book of Hours. As we shall see, such books were used by a very wide range of lay people, especially in the towns.[93] To read during Mass a religious book which no one else has access to might indeed cut one off from communal religion. To read a book which in its essentials might be read by a duchess or by a brewer's wife, and which was jammed with highly conventional phrases, metaphors, and images which were part of the stock repertoire of devotional *topoi*, derived from or echoed in the liturgy itself, and in the paintings, screens, carvings, and windows of the church, was hardly to retreat into élitist privacies. The illiterate gazing during Mass on a cheap indulgenced woodcut of the Image of Pity was not necessarily worlds away from the gentleman reading learned Latin prayers to the wounds of Jesus, and both of them would have responded in much the same way when summoned to put aside book or block-print to gaze at the Host. We shall return to this issue in the next chapter, and also when we come to consider the prayers of the primers themselves.

Praying the Mass: the Parochial Experience

None of the devotional guides to the Mass produced for lay people in the later Middle Ages can really be said to have had the main parish Mass on Sundays in mind, for none of them refer to the ceremonies which differentiated the parish Mass from low Masses said at other altars. The Mass fell into four main sections. In the first the priest vested himself, on weekdays often at the altar, recited the "Confiteor" and an opening prayer or collect, read the scripture lessons of Epistle and Gospel, and if it were a solemn day recited the Creed. The second section of the Mass was called the offertory, when the priest received the Mass pennies, if any were to be offered, and prepared the bread and wine for consecration. He

[93] See below, chapter 6, "Lewed and Lerned", pp. 212–3.

ritually washed his hands, and at this point in requiem and chantry Masses would turn to the congregation and invite them, in English, to pray for the deceased in whose memory the Mass was being said. The third section, the canon, was the most solemn, the long prayer of consecration at the centre of which the priest recited Christ's words at the Last Supper, and during which he elevated the Host and chalice for adoration by the people. In the final section, starting with the Lord's Prayer, he received communion and then dismissed the people with a blessing. As he left the altar, or while still standing at it, he recited the last Gospel, the first fourteen verses of St John's Gospel, "In principio". Indulgences were attached to hearing this Gospel read, perhaps in order to encourage the laity to remain to the end of Mass, even after the climactic moment of elevation: to gain the indulgence one had to kiss a text, an image, or even one's own thumbnail, at the words "The Word became flesh."[94]

To this basic weekday pattern a number of crucially important ceremonies were added at the high Mass on Sundays. Mass began with an elaborate procession round the church, at the commencement of which salt and water were solemnly exorcised, blessed, and mixed. In the course of the procession the altars of the church, and the congregation, were sprinkled with holy water, which would later be taken to the households of the parish, where it was used to banish devils and ensure blessing. The importance of this blessing and distribution of holy water is indicated by the fact that in many places the parish clerk's wages were linked to it, and he was generally known as the "holy-water clerk".[95]

The second additional ceremony on Sundays was the bidding of the bedes. This was a solemn form of prayer in English, which took place before the offertory. The priest from the pulpit called on the people to pray for the Pope, the bishops, the clergy, and especially their own priest, for the king, lords, and commons, for the mayor or other authorities of the town or village, for "all our good parisshens", and for those in special need such as pilgrims and travellers, prisoners, "and all women that be with chylde in this parysshe or any other", and finally for the household which that week was to supply the holy loaf, the basis of another parochial ceremony peculiar to Sundays. In the second half of the bidding the congregation prayed for the dead, especially the parish dead. Recently deceased parishioners or special benefactors of the church

[94] E. G. C. Atchley, "Some Notes on the Beginning and Growth of the Usage of a Second Gospel at Mass", *Transactions of the St Paul's Ecclesiological Society*, IV, 1900, pp. 161–76.

[95] For the ritual, *Missale*, cols 29**–33**; for the holy-water clerk, *The Clerk's Book*, *passim*.

or parish were mentioned by name, and once a year every name on the parish bede-roll would be read aloud, at the parish requiem. At the conclusion of these prayers the priest gave warning of any feast or fast days in the coming week.[96]

A further ceremony was added on certain days of the year, the offering days, when people paid parochial dues in coin or wax. A procession was formed (in order of seniority, wealth, or "worship" in the parish pecking order) and the offerings were delivered to the priest at the chancel step. On certain feasts objects to be blessed might be brought up at this point: candles at Candlemas, butter, cheese, and eggs at Easter, apples on St James's day.[97]

The next ceremony which was elaborated on Sunday was the pax: just before his own communion the priest kissed the corporas on which the Host rested, and the lip of the chalice, and then kissed the paxbred, a disk or tablet on which was carved or painted a sacred emblem, such as the Lamb of God or the Crucifix. This pax was then taken by one of the ministers or, in small parishes, by the clerk, to the congregation outside the screen, where it was kissed by each in turn, once more observing seniority. Primers often supplied a short prayer for use at this point, asking for peace in our times and deliverance from enemies, spiritual or bodily.[98]

The pax was clearly a substitute for the reception of communion. At the end of the parish Mass an even more obvious substitute for lay communion was provided. A loaf of bread presented by one of the householders of the parish was solemnly blessed, cut up in a skip or basket, and distributed to the congregation. The offering of this loaf, which was regulated by a rota, was attended with considerable solemnity, the provider processing to the high altar before matins, reciting a special prayer, and offering a candle to the priest at the same time. It was usual for the curate to pray explicitly "for the good man or woman that this day geveth bread to make the holy lofe" when he bid the bedes. This holy loaf was meant to be the first food one tasted on a Sunday; eaten or simply carried in one's pocket, it was believed to have apotropaic powers. If one died without a priest, reception of holy bread was accounted a sufficient substitute for housel.[99]

[96] For the bede-roll see below pp. 334–7.

[97] On these blessings in general see Scribner, *Popular Religion*, pp. 5–12, 39–41; for those mentioned, *Manuale ad Usum Percelebris Ecclesie Sarisburiensis*, ed. A Jefferies Collins, Henry Bradshaw Society, XCI, 1960, pp. 7–8, 65, 66.

[98] Hoskins, p. 108.

[99] On the method of offering the holy loaf see Stanford CWA, p. 71; for examples of bidding the bedes for the provider see *Church of Our Fathers*, II pp. 295, 7, LFMB, pp. 71–2, 79, and *Manuale et Processionale ad Usum Insignis Ecclesiae Eboraciensis*, ed. W. G. Henderson, Surtees Society, LXIII, 1875, pp. 126, 224.

What all these dramatic Sunday ceremonies have in common is an emphasis on the location and maintenance of blessing, healing, and peace within the community. Absence from these ceremonies was resented and might be taken as a mark not merely of sloth or carelessness, but of heresy.[100] Quite clearly, the use of these ceremonies on Sunday must have reorientated the Mass, giving it a communal dimension, expressed in dramatic and time-consuming ceremonial, wholly lacking at weekday Masses. Parishioners at the Sunday Mass would perhaps have had time for quiet prayer amid the bustle, activity, and loud gossip which countless court presentments and sermon exempla portray. The sacring at the Sunday Mass would certainly have been especially solemn, surrounded by torches and accompanied by the mutter of elevation prayers from one's fellow parishioners, and the tolling of one of the great bells, so that those abroad in the parish would know, kneel, and share. But the corporate dimension of the sacrament of the altar, its role in building and maintaining community, would have been inescapable at these Masses, as it was not on a weekday. Here again, the recognition of a plurality of Eucharistic experience is vital.

Making the Peace

Of course these ceremonies, so clearly concerned with peace and charity, are as much a testimony to the fragility of those blessings in the communities of late medieval England as they are to their presence. They were used not only to promote harmony, but to impose hegemony, the dominance of particular individuals and groups within the parish and the wider community. The Wife of Bath's rage in parish processions when another woman claimed precedence is well known, and her concern was widely shared; quarrels for precedence seem at times less the occupational hazard of churchgoers in late medieval England than their principal occupation. Thomas Rode and William Moreton at Astbury in Cheshire quarrelled ferociously in 1513, "concerning which of them shold sit highest in church", and which should "foremost goe in procession".[101] In 1494 the wardens of the parish of All Saints, Stanyng, presented Joanna Dyaca for breaking the paxbred by throwing it on the ground, "because another woman of the parish had kissed it before her". On All Saints Day 1522 Master John Browne of the parish of Theydon-Garnon in Essex, having kissed the paxbred at the parish Mass, smashed it over the head of Richard

[100] *Kentish Visitation*, pp. 205, 207; L&P XVIII/2 pp. 205, 306.
[101] Richmond, *Gentleman*, p. 198.

Pond, the holy-water clerk who had tendered it to him, "causing streams of blood to run to the ground". Brown was enraged because the pax had first been offered to Francis Hamden, the patron of the living, and his wife Margery, despite the fact that the previous Sunday he had warned Pond "Clerke, if thou here after gevist not me the pax first I shall breke it on thy hedd."[102]

The procession and the pax were by no means the only moments of the Mass in which such matters of precedence might generate friction, endangering the very unity they sought to affirm, for Eucharistic ritual was felt to be well suited to the demarcation and endorsement of social hierarchy as well as social bonding. The distribution of the holy loaf was no exception. The rotas of providers themselves constituted a list of the "honest men" of the parish, and in some communities the loaf after being blessed was cut into pieces of varying sizes, according to the importance of the recipients, and so dealt out to "every man in his degree", a recipe for friction in the contentious communities of Yorkist and Tudor England. John "Kareles", denounced to the Archdeacon of Lincoln by his neighbours in 1518 for taking too large a piece of the holy loaf, so that other parishioners were bilked of their share, was being accused of pride, of usurping the principal place in the community, not of gluttony.[103]

Yet, as with the ideal of charity and reconciliation before reception of Easter communion, the unitive and harmonizing dimension of the holy bread rituals clearly exercised considerable influence over the lay imagination, an influence vividly illustrated by an incident in late fifteenth-century Bristol. In the early 1460s a dispute arose between the parish and wardens of the small church of St Ewen and a well-to-do merchant, John Sharp, over arrears of rent for a corn shop which Sharp leased from the church. The dispute was bitter and involved the parish in expensive and prolonged litigation. It was finally resolved early in January 1464, when Sharp and the parish came to a settlement. He solemnized this agreement by declaring that he was "advysed of his conscience to depart of sum of his goodes and to leve to this church" in order to have his own name, and those of his wife Elizabeth and his parents and deceased son, entered "yn the general mynd yerly . . . and so after ther dethe to be prayed for evermore yn the commune bed[e] roll." More was to follow. On Sunday, 8 January, it was Sharp's wife's turn to

[102] Hale, *Precedents*, pp. 53–4; J. C. Challenor-Smith, "Some Addition to Newport's Repertorium: ii", *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society*, VII, p. 175. I am grateful to Michael O'Boy for the latter reference.
[103] *The Clerk's Book of 1549*, pp. 58, 62 (Holy Trinity, Coventry); *Lincoln Visitation*, I. p. 6.

provide the holy loaf. Elizabeth Sharp, clearly a woman with a sense of style, duly turned up before matins and "ful womanly bro[gh]t the Cake with Candels in to this Churche, hyr mayden beryng the same after hyr and a fayre twylly towel with werkys at bothe endys and hool". Having duly offered the holy loaf and candles, Mistress Sharp summoned the parson, the leading parish notables, "and others dyvers bothe men and women", who were assembling for matins. Declaring her great joy at the happy resolution of the dispute between her husband and the parish, she announced her intention of symbolizing the restoration of their mutual charity by bestowing her splendid long embroidered towel "after my decesse" for use at Easter as a houseling-cloth, to be held under the parishioners' chins to prevent fragments of the Blessed Sacrament falling to the ground. Till her death she intended to keep custody of the towel, which would therefore be fetched from her house by the parish clerk "every Estur day only yn wurshyp of the sacrament": on her decease it would pass to the parish without condition.[104]

The symbolism of this vividly recorded incident is fairly easily deciphered. The centrality of the bede-roll and the anxiety of the Sharps, husband and wife, to be restored to the community of the "good doers and wellwylleres" of the church is very striking and is buttressed by related symbols.[105] Mistress Sharp chose the appropriate moment of the presentation of the holy loaf for her gesture, and underlined the implicit Eucharistic symbolism in a further gesture of reconciliation and unity. She provided an embroidered towel "to serve the parysshens of an Estur day". This towel was no casually chosen gift: its symbolic identification with herself was emphasized by her retention of custody of it till her death, and it was designed for use on the one day in the year when the whole parish celebrated its unity by receiving communion together. The record of the incident in the church book lays some emphasis on the towel being a single "hool" piece of cloth, and Mistress Sharp explicitly commented that she intended it to replace the parish's existing makeshift arrangement, in which several smaller towels were pinned together. I do not think it fanciful to find here a further underlining of the theme of unity.

Mistress Sharp did not have to invent her own symbolism. Bequests of personal items like the towel were very common: wedding rings to adorn an altar or a saint's robes, a velvet pillow to serve as a book-rest at the altar, embroidered gowns, bedspreads,

[104] Bristol St Ewen's CWA, pp. 60–1.
[105] On the bede-roll and its importance see below pp. 334–7.

or hangings to make frontals or vestments. Above all, again and again one encounters bequests of linen for use in the Mass. Gifts of this sort gave those of modest means a way of perpetuating their personal presence at the heart of the community's worship of the Sacrament. One did not need to be a millionaire to provide the parish with a "kerchief to make a corprax" or a "diaper towell for goddys borde in Ester tyme".[106] In physical terms at least one could hardly draw closer to the sacrifice which united quick and dead in one great act of intercession. These bequests might be commemorated in the bede-roll, but offered little other scope for the public display of one's name. And maybe in these cases the actual naming of the testator was of less importance than his or her symbolic proximity to the Blessed Sacrament, the centre of the community's self-awareness. The same desire was no doubt behind the action of the Bassingbourn parishioners who clubbed together to buy a canopy for the Host on Corpus Christi Day, and had embroidered in the centre a Crucifix, "and the namys off the gifferes in the iiij corners", surely too small for anyone but the figure on the cross to read.[107]

If the worshipper kneeling at a weekday Mass was encouraged in a form of participation which approximated to monastic prayer, a form of intense affectivity which was essentially private and individualistic, the experience of Sunday Mass, while not excluding such an emphasis, had a different thrust. The Sunday Mass was surrounded with lively movement and ceremony, lit by many candles, accompanied by plainsong and pricksong. The solemn biddings set the prayer of the parish community within the context of the greater community of "the gloryous virgyn . . . and all the company of heven", who glinted in gold leaf and bright paint from the screens, the tabernacles and the side altars. Participation in this dimension of Eucharist, even for the élite and the literate, was not solitary, penitential, interior. Its dynamism and zest are captured for us in one of the most distinctive and striking of fifteenth-century carols, described by its editor as "true folksong", and by Douglas Gray as "vividly combining homeliness and mystery". In it we catch something of the spirit of English parochial worship before the solemnities of reform slowed and darkened its music:

> And by a chapell as y Came,
> Met y whyhte Ih[es]u to chyrcheward gone
> Petur and Pawle, Thomas & Ihon,

[106] *Test. Ebor.* V p. 119; *Lincoln Wills*, ed. C. W. Foster, 1914–30, I p. 109; Croscombe CWA, pp. 35–6; *Northants Wills*, II pp. 314, 375, 419.
[107] Bassingbourn CWA, fol. 3b.

And hys desyplys Euery-chone.
  Mery hyt ys in may mornyng
  Mery wayys for to gonne.

Sente Thomas the Bellys gane ryng,
And sent Collas the mas gane syng,
Sente Ihon toke that swete offeryng,
And By a chapell as y Came.
  Mery hyt ys.

Owre lorde offeryd whate he wolde,
A challes alle of ryche rede gollde;
Owre lady, the crowne off hyr mowlde,
The sone owte off hyr Bosome schone.
  Mery hyt ys.

Sent Iorge that ys owre lady knyghte,
He tende the taperys fayre & Bryte -
To myn yghe a semley syghte,
And By a chapell as y Came.
  Mery hyt ys.[108]

[108] Greene, *Early English Carols*, no. 323 and notes on p. 428; Carleton Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, no. 116; D. Gray, *Themes and Imagery in the Medieval English Religious Lyric*, 1972, p. 163.