RITUAL IN PERFORMANCE AND INTERPRETATION: THE MASS IN A CONVENT SETTING

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'There is nothing more important than the Mass. The Mass means everything to us. It was the ultimate sacrifice. Our lives are consecrated to Him. Our lives are given to Him and He gave his for everyone.' These are the words of a nun talking about a central ritual in the Catholic Church, a woman in her sixties looking back on a lifetime of dedication within a religious institute.

I

In the period 1969 to 1974, I was engaged in anthropological fieldwork among two congregations of working nuns.[1] During this study, I encountered various interpretations of the Mass, the most extreme of which could almost be placed outside Catholicism, within the commensality of the Protestant interpretation of the Eucharist. Here I am concerned with these interpretations of the meaning of the 'ultimate sacrifice' and its symbolic representation in the Mass.

Some justification for bringing the Mass into a discussion of sacrifice is needed. Although the Roman Catholic usage of 'sacrifice' to refer to the Mass has become part of the English language, the rites are far removed from the ritual killings which most of the essays in this collection deal with. Edmund Leach, in his essay on 'the logic of sacrifice' (1976: 92) comments that 'sacrifice in Christianity appears only in vicarious symbolic form as a reference to mythology', which seems to imply that the Mass is not the same kind of activity as the ritual killing with which he is primarily concerned. Nor does the Mass seem at first sight to contain what Beattie regards as the central feature of sacrifice: the killing, immolation, of a living victim.

Beattie is following Evans-Pritchard's definition of Nuer sacrifice, which excludes libations of food and drink, but which significantly includes rites in which a wild cucumber is substituted for a sacrificial

ox (1956: 197). In the case of the Mass, the Catholic belief that the bread and wine used in the Mass are transformed to acquire the status of a real sacrificial victim provides at least as real a victim as the wild cucumber is for the Nuer. This is illustrated by Sister Mary, who sits closer to the tabernacle because she believes in the 'real presence' of Jesus Christ; any remaining consecrated bread is preserved in the tabernacle. Sister Mary believes in the magical transformation of the humble bread and wine. But if you questioned her, she would deny that her beliefs are magical. She would say that it is a mystery. Mysteries are articles of faith. They are not to be questioned. They are part of the *credo* which, as Hubert and Mauss point out (1964: 28), provides an 'unshakeable confidence in the automatic result of sacrifice'. In their classic study of the nature of sacrifice, these French anthropologists commented (1964: 101) 'Religious ideas, because they are believed, exist; they exist objectively, as social facts.' Sister Mary's belief that in the Mass Jesus Christ is actually present as a real sacrificial victim is as important a fact as any ritual action we may observe.

In order to understand ritual from an anthrological point of view, both the actions and the statements about them must be accepted as valid *data*. In examining the Mass as sacrifice, we pay attention not only to what is done, but also to what is said about it. One of the primary qualities of any ritual is its communicability. In listening to the participants we can learn about the context of belief and there lies much of our explanation. We can acknowledge the traditional validations of beliefs. We can even accept the attempts of theologians schooled in divinity and Church history to add an intellectual gloss to the magical and mystical elements of Church rite. Every congregation of nuns has its own specialist interpreter. But when Sister Mary tells you that the closer she sits to the tabernacle the closer she sits to God, the anthropologist must be interested in why that should be.

When we take the actions and the words of the Mass together, we find that the ceremony comprises a re-enactment of the Christian story of the god who came to earth as a man and then sacrificed himself to provide a perpetual link, a channel of grace between mankind and god. In his contribution to this volume Sykes has shown how the symbols of sacrifice are central to this story. The Mass can thus be compared with the Dogon sacrifices described by Mme Dieterlen (1976), which re-act a primordial mythical sacrifice, which in turn is central to the Dogon understanding of the world.

In his discussion of sacrifice, Leach presents a model by means of which we can begin to decode religious rituals, revealing the relationship between the 'world of physical experience and the other world of

metaphysical imagination'. In this model, 'the purpose of religious performance is to provide a bridge, or channel of communication, through which the power of the gods may be made available to otherwise impotent men' (Leach 1976: 82). I shall show that the Mass provides such a bridge or channel for the nuns, who derive spiritual strength from the ritual.

Leach also speaks of the way in which 'the continuous flow of normal secular time' is broken by the insertion of 'intervals of liminal, sacred non-time' (1976: 34). Another anthropologist, Victor Turner puts the same point more positively:

> In the life of most communities, ancient and modern, there appear to be interludes in historical time, periods of 'timeless' time, that are devoted to the celebration of certain basic postulates of human existence, biological and cultural. This 'moment in and out of time' (to quote T. S. Eliot) is the moment when ritual is being performed. In most known societies it is a time for meditation upon, or veneration of, the transcendental . . . (1968: 5)

He points out that the appropriate behaviour in such interludes is formalized, even rigidly so, and symbolic, to the effect that gestures, words and objects used, together with myths and doctrines which explain them, convey more than their superficial meanings. Turner suggests that the repetitiveness of rituals instil beliefs and values, and that rituals have real, purposive effects on the lives of the people performing them (1968: 6). All this clearly applies to the Mass, in which the nuns cut themselves off from their normal working lives to participate in what they believe to be 'one and the same sacrifice' as the offering by Jesus Christ of himself on the cross nearly two thousand years ago.

The ceremony of the Mass, like all rituals, is conducted as a drama, in a stage setting with actors and audience. My first task is to describe this 'significant space' as Leach calls it, and to sketch in the major elements and participants. Those closer to the faith than I will recognise only the simplest references to the complexity of procedures. I make little reference, for example, to the various degrees of solemnity with which the Mass can be celebrated, and none to the calendrical variations in the Catholic Church's liturgical celebrations. Further, I am not concerned with the variety of explanations and interpretations of the Mass which can be found in theological and other cicles outside the convents.

I have selected three contrasting settings to illustrate three main types among the numerous interpretations and social groupings which

exist in the congregations I studied. All three could be found in England in 1970, but the first more rightly represents the past: a rigidly conservative convent barely touched by the reforms that overtook the Catholic Church in the early 1960s. The second setting is a contemporary progressive convent of the same congregation. The third is a traditional Franciscan congregation which felt little need to change. These three settings highlight different aspects of the Mass, which correspond with particular sacrificial themes: the offering of a gift and the symbol of death in the first setting; the communion meal in the second; and consecration and making contact with the deity in the third.[2]

II

There was, in the North of England, a large convent, custom-built in the 1890s for a congregation of nuns who taught middle-class girls in an attached boarding school. The spatial and temporal dimensions of the convent are expressive of both social requirements and religious beliefs. It has high walls, windows well above peering height, a massive metal-studded front door and a slim wooden side door for tradespeople and for lay sisters (those engaged in the menial work of the convent). The boarding school was enclosed to the south, and the sisters' living quarters to the north of the main hall. The hall itself had a very high ceiling and, opposite the main door of the convent, three stone arches, the middle one leading to a chapel entrance—a doorway flanked by stone recesses for holy water. Thus the chapel became at once an inner sanctum and the focal point for the architecture of the convent.

Not only architecture: colours, too, played a part in the preparation of the faithful for the full glory of the chapel. The ceiling of the outer hallway was painted pale blue in contrast to the long corridors leading away on either side which were uniformly dark red or dark green, relieved only by the dark castellated architraves of doorways. The sisters moved from the earthy, secular colours of the convent corridors into the azure haze of the chapel. There the colours were white, pale pink, pale blue; and high above the vault was the focal point—impaled on a huge red cross, the nailed figure of the suffering Christ. Add to this sensuous imagery, the smell of incense and the gentle flickering of candles, lush floral tributes and maybe a dark veiled sister, arms outstretched, swaying before the representations of the crucifixion agony in the 'stations of the cross'. This was the setting for the daily re-enactment of the nuns' belief in their God's sacrifice for them. On the huge crucifix the suffering Christ was their heavenly spouse,

the sacrificial victim, the saviour to whom the daily prayers and the whole life of the nuns were dedicated.

The nun's understanding of the Mass depends on its context of a dedicated life. Sykes has pointed out that the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice depends not simply on the moment of Calvary but on the Bible story of the man who dedicated his whole life to mankind. The nuns say, 'our lives are consecrated to him. Our lives are given to him as he gave his for everyone'. Sister John, entering the convent in the 1920s, as a young girl, was preparing for a lifetime of renunication and self-sacrifice. In his discussion of the economics of sacrifice, Raymond Firth concludes that sacrifice is the giving of oneself or part of oneself, through the offering of a surrogate. He comments, 'in the ideology of the symbolic equivalent of things—the greatest surrogate of all is the sacrifice of mind and heart, the abnegation of individual judgement and desire in favour of devotion to more general moral ends.' (Firth 1963: 21). We can apply this to the nuns' understanding of their self-offering. A girl entering the old conservative convent left behind her clothes, her name, her legal rights, her talents and her freedom of action. Total self-abnegation was expressed in the interpretation of the vows. The vow of obedience, for example, bound the nun to obey any command or demand of her superior, and to guard her behaviour at every moment of the day. To leave a tap running would merit a penance. In the morning the nuns were spreadeagled on the floor of the chapel in 'profound genuflection', in the evenings they stooped to kiss the dust of the floor of their cells reminding themselves that they were as nothing —dust. These symbolic actions reinforced the images of death and the destruction of the self which were repeated in the sacrifice of the Mass.

A series of dramatic rituals separated a new novice from the world outside and confirmed her in her new identity as a member of a community of consecrated virgins. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience bound her to the congregation and gave her a special relationship, the Bride of Christ. She now stood between the carnal secular world and the Other-world—an intercessor, a witness, for believers in the Other-world of saints, spirits and God himself. She was in effect a member of a spiritual élite. Familes were, in general, happy for their daughters to enter the convent; their pride might well be tinged with relief that someone close to them was now closer to God. Someone whose life of prayer might be answered favourably. No sacrifice is made without some expectation of a good return.

The nuns who entered the Gothic chapel were themselves part of the drama of sacrifice. They were in a liminal position between this world and the Other-world. But they were not the most intimate with

the source of power which was believed to emit from the Other-world: there was yet another intermediary—the priest. In the traditional world order of Tridentine Catholicism the priest was as much feared as respected. The groups of nuns, under their mother superior, saw their relationship to their father/priest as one of dependency, awe and respect. God the Father was also held in awe: he had a 'fearful majesty'. At the Mass, the priest repeated for the congregation the words and actions of his sacred prototype, Jesus Christ—God the Son. The nuns were 'brides of Christ': it was to him that they offered their consecrated virginity. The relationships between deity, priest and congregation was extremely complex. To engage in the sacrifice of the Mass, both priest and congregation underwent various purifactory rituals and put on special clothes. All the participants would recently have confessed their sins and received absolution from a priest; and they would have prepared themselves for Mass and the eucharist with fasting and prayer. The choir nuns took an additional veil over their heads for Mass, and the priest's vestments included an amice over the shoulders, the long white alb, the cinture, the stole and the chasuble. While the priest's proper domain was the sanctuary, the nuns were restricted to the nave of the chapel, separated from the altar—the focal point for action—by the altar rails. This concern for the maintenance of boundary, and the attention given to purity and pollution, is an expression of the social divisions (class hierarchy and status differentiation) of Church and convent. The only nun allowed beyond the altar rails was the Sacristan. She was always a lay sister and held her office for life. She was generally held in special affection by the the other sisters. It was her primary duty to keep a lamp burning before the tabernacle. She was allowed to touch the chalice, paten, palls and corporals but not after they had been used in the ceremony of the Mass. They had to be washed by a cleric in major orders and the water of consecration poured into a sacrarium or thrown on a fire. The extreme caution with which ritual objects, including consecrated oil and water, were treated reflects not only their concern with the boundary between this world and the next, but with Church hierarchy; the humble nun must not contaminate articles handled by the consecrated priest.[3]

The Gothic chapel was designed so that the nuns sat in rank order in prie-dieu before the altar rails. There were three steps up to the main altar which was set behind pillars carrying three arches, the recurring multiple of three being a reference to the Holy Trinity. The tabernacle could be seen through the central arch. In the ceremony of the Mass, bread (the host, from *hostia*, a sacrificial victim) and wine are taken before the altar, and consecrated with solemn invocations by the

priest. On solemn occasions, burning incense is shaken over the offerings and about the altar. At the moment of consecration, the bread and wine are mysteriously changed into the actual flesh and blood of Christ, the Son of God. Catholics are instructed to believe that it is not just Christ's body substance which appears under the guise of bread and wine, but his whole personality, renewing his sacrifice on the Cross (Denzinger 1967: 386; cf. 389 can. 2). The Council of Trent declared that this is 'the same Christ contained and immolated in an unbloody manner, who, on the altar of the Cross, offered himself once in a bloody manner' (Latin text in Denzinger 1967: 408). The doctrine of the 'real presence' adds considerably to the mystery and magic of the Eucharistic sacrifice. Hubert and Mauss contribute to our understanding of this ritual. They find a consistent relationship between god and victim, priest and victim, such that it is a god already formed that both acts and suffers in the sacrifice:

> Nor is the divinity of the victim limited to the mythological sacrifice; it also appears in the actual sacrifice which corresponds to it. Once the myth has taken shape it reacts upon the rite from which it sprang and is realised in it. Thus the sacrifice of the god is not merely the subject of a good mythological story. Whatever changes the personality of the god may have undergone . . . it is still the god who undergoes the sacrifice, he is not a mere character in it. (Hubert and Mauss 1964: 88)

The relationship between the Christian myth of the God who sacrificed his son to redeem mankind is not, either in the terms of the Council of Trent, or in the beliefs of the nuns in their Gothic chapel, a 'vicarious symbolic form only' as Leach suggests. In the daily Mass the repetition and reiteration of God's sacrifice, which involved according to the story the horrific and bloody sacrifice of a man, acts to ward off the chaos and evil of this-world with help from the divine power of the Other-world. The Mass contains the central piacular idea of substitution—son of God for mankind, bread and wine for son of God. Thus the redemptive sacrifice of the god is perpetuated throughout time. It opens up a channel (grace) between sacred and profane worlds through the meditation of a victim which is, in the course of the myth and the ceremony, destroyed. In the context of the Gothic chapel, the nun comes close to the immanence of her God but not too close. She takes a little comfort and a lot of spiritual strength from her participation in the sacrifice. In providing for a liminal priest to perform the sacrifice in the liminal zone before the altar, she has moreover, 'provided a bridge between the world of the gods and the world of men across which the potency of the gods can flow' (Leach 1976: 14). The

nun at Mass was witness to a drama. A drama played out in a representation of cosmological space: the high altar, the shrine representing the Other-world; the area before the altar, liminal space; the place for the congregation, this World. The action takes place in cosmological time, in which mythological events are replayed for the present.

In the course of this dramatic ceremony, the nun approached the altar rail, provided she was in a state of ritual purity, and took the bread (host) in her mouth. The priest alone could drink the wine. The taking of the host was both a commemorative act, in remembrance of the Last Supper, and 'food for our souls'. Great emphasis was placed on the need for purity for the reception of the Eucharist. To receive unworthily is sacrilege, and this thought provides the Mass with a strong normative influence on the lives of the nuns. It is only through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, in which the nuns shared, that anyone could dare to approach so sacred a meal and receive from it an abundance of spiritual strength: they explained that the 'sanctifying grace' received through communion kept one's soul alive and helped one to keep free from sin.[4]

Since the sacrificial ritual depended on the priest's correct performance of the consecration rite, the priest held a position of immense power. He alone could open and close the channels of life——renewing grace which flow from the sacraments. As one of the sisters said, 'If the priest was not there then that bread would not change into the body of Christ. The priest has to be there. It's a tremendous power isn't it? The Church hierarchy held an unrivalled position as guardian and sole introit to the supernatural.

The setting of the rigidly conservative convent was one of clearly defined and hierarchical boundaries. God is awesome and remote. He was approached through a priestly intermediary, who alone had access to the sacred objects of the sanctuary, and who was himself an authoritative figure. The nuns in turn were in a position to intercede for the world at large, by sharing in the offering of the priest and the sacrifice of Christ. In this hierarchical setting, sacrifice was primarily understood as the death of a divine victim, who alone could atone for the outrage of disobedience to so awesome a God. The nuns' sharing in this sacrifice was understood as a sharing in death, through the self-abnegation in their lives. Through this propitiatory sacrifice, man and God are brought together in communion.

III

Tridentine Catholicism relied on the 'closed' nature of its belief system

and on discrete social groups for its plausibility. Changes in the last fifty years threatened the plausibility of these religious definitions of reality.[5] The sacrificial drama in the Gothic chapel could only belong to the old order. It was an age when an ordered hierarchy of officials discharged their duties within the demands of the religious Rule. It was an age of obedience and rank, of self-sacrifice and abnegation. The congregation had been founded not only with religious aims but also to educate Catholic girls. By the 1950s, the demand for private schooling had dropped: not only was the value of this secondary objective questioned, it was becoming an economic straitjacket. The bureaucracy's response was even greater conformity. Instrumental values tended to become terminal values. There was pressure for change, for a change of goals, of government, of life-style. Then the Second Vatican Council insisted on all religious congregations submitting themselves to a rigorous questioning of values and goals. This congregation of teaching nuns was in crisis. There was a fundamental incompatibility between their traditional beliefs, their Rule, their founder's precepts, the demands of religious life and the radical Catholicism of the 1960s.

The teaching congregation has now sold all its large schools and its nuns pursue a number of different secondary vocations, including nursing, social work and looking after the aged. They live in ordinary houses, often in run-down city areas. The doors of their convents look like any other door in the street. There are no purpose-built chapels. I was talking to a jolly middle-aged nun in a comfortable sitting room. She was wearing comfortable clothes, a brown skirt and cardigan, sensible shoes, a pretty blouse. One of her fellow sisters came in wearing a plain blue dress, lace-up shoes and a small veil perched on the back of her head. Both had known years of the full religious habit, the old system of permissions, silences, enclosure. Now they laughed and told me that the Church is alive in the world and that the work they do is out there, in the living Church. Tonight they will celebrate Mass in the house. Have a meal, then the Mass, then a discussion. 'The priest uses the desk over there for his things. We don't mind where, it gets a bit crowded if there are more than four of us.' The relationship with the priest was crucial. He had to be 'understanding', the Bishop had to by 'sympathetic'. In the old order, the nuns accepted the authority of the Church and its representatives without question. Now an individual might travel many miles to find a confessor-priest to suit her, and in the case of disagreement with a local bishop the organization simply moved into another diocese. In this way, the power of the hierarchical Church had been modified.

In the Mass, the power of consecration still rests in the priest, but he is now willing to share the ceremony with his congregation and bring the audience into the action, expressed in their drinking the communion wine and passing the chalice from hand to hand. The 'real' presence' is experienced through people in their relationship with one another around the communion table. The supernatural force of that presence is felt as the cup is passed from hand to hand. One sister said, 'I don't think the priests realise what an impact that makes on people. It hits you like anything when you go into Mass and the chalice is passed round. You don't lose anything of your belief that it is the real presence.' Another confirmed this view by saying, 'I can't explain, but it gives me a wonderful feeling, the sharing and the receiving the precious blood . . . it does something to me.' Whereas before communion involved a relationship between each nun and the awesome God, now communion also expressed inter-relationships within the community.

Barriers and the boundaries they marked have been weakened, both the barriers between the nun and the supernatural and those between the nun and the secular world. Breaking down the latter barrier makes her feel more vulnerable. But the full burden of that position is deflected from the individual nun into the group. The nuns emphasize the ritual *sharing* of the eucharist. Sister Therese said, 'a few years ago, the receiving of communion was something intensely personal . . . now I see it in a different way, apart from the individual relationship and the contact with Christ, I can see it is historically based on a meal and it's a social event.' Another sister always told her catechetics class that the covenant with God was made over a meal, including the unleavened bread. 'The idea that the bread is nourishment, and in this case it nourishes us to love one another. The Eucharist is just like family meals at home, the bread nourishes spiritual life. But the blood and body are more difficult to grasp. A body to a child is dead and lifeless. ' I asked whether she thought of the Eucharist in this way. She did. Moreover she took only the bread at communion.

Those nuns whose belief in the 'real presence' was unshaken, shared modern egalitarian relationships with their priest which echoed their relationship with a close, friendly divinity in touch with humanity. It is a move to a more mature relationship in which the father is no longer to be feared. Freudian interpretations would draw attention to the importance sisters attached to taking the bread and 'feeding ourselves.' Sister Anne tried to explain, 'You see as a child I had always a great fear of the retaliation of God—I think this lies at the heart of the relationships with God, whether he is an awesome and wrathful

figure or whether he is kind and forgiving. When personal responsibility suddenly became the keynote I suddenly felt infantile.' This sister spent three years in religious crisis until she found an answer for herself, 'Man is the image of God's thought. God is an essence. It is in the nature of God to be self-sufficient, eternal, and that is expressed in the human personality. When man commits a sin or destroys himself he is commiting evil because he is destroying the image of God. It is up to us to preserve God's image.' Sister Anne was one of a group of sisters who lived by the credo: 'We are all one body because we are all partakers of that one bread.' It is expressed by Norman Brown (1966: 167): 'The transubstantiation is the unification; is in the eating. By eating we become his body; eating makes it so.'

The progressive sisters used the symbolism of the Eucharist to express their sense of community. There had always been a sense in which the white circle of bread symbolised the body of the faithful. But now God himself had become a small-group member and the nuns could talk to God directly and without intermediaries. There have always been channels open to the faithful which give them direct access to heaven, channels which were exemplified by the mystics' face-to-face communion with their God (exemplified in the lives of St Therese of Avila, St John of the Cross). There is no secularisation of beliefs among the progressive nuns, rather a shift in interpretation to make allowance for changes in organisational patterns and forms of lifestyle. I would not want to take a determinist stance in explaining this change, rather to hint at an internal dialect between the believer, her beliefs and her social life.[6] When the sisters say that they put less stress on the sacrificial aspects of the Eucharist and more on the covenant they are talking about the divine drama. Their own evidence shows them to be just as dependent on the original myth, that God sacrificed his son for them and that his covenant was to leave open a channel of grace for the redemption of mankind. To this extent at least, the Mass remains a purificatory ritual and a piacular sacrifice.

The emphasis of the progressive nuns on commensality brings to mind Robertson Smith's communion theory of sacrifice, in which the victim is a totemic symbol of a clan or group. According to this theory in various ways the sacrificial victim is, at the moment of destruction, identified with the deity. This is clearly illustrated in the sacrificial words of the Shilluk divine king: 'The flesh of this animal is as my flesh, and its blood is the same as my blood.' (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 280n.) These words are comparable to those of the Christian 'King of Heaven' which are repeated in the Mass. There is a totemic significance in communion with the gods: the sharing of one flesh clearly delineates a

ritual group. In the Christian story, the god takes on human form, he bleeds and dies. The act of consecration recreates this humanity under the form of bread and wine. In the ritual partaking of flesh and blood, the identification between man and god is complete, and the participating group is united in a blood covenant of immense power.

The modern nuns can cite early precedents for finding God in a small group around a living-room table. In the first three centuries of the Church's history, not only was the Mass primarily an act of community but the bread used in the ceremony was a staple foodstuff. The historian Nicholas Lash (1968: 100) gives evidence that the ordinary Christian in the early Church had a most concrete image of the Mass, comprising blessing, sharing and consuming food and drink. It was only later, during the Middle Ages, when the Church made more of its power as a mediator and the Latin language created an ever-widening barrier, that ordinary people became excluded—audience rather than actors.

The two settings we have examined so far have provided distinct, though not contradictory, interpretations of the Mass, emphasizing the propitiatory death of the victim in the first case and the community meal in the second. In accordance with the ambiguity that is to be found in symbols in most cultural and social contexts,[7] the Mass is sufficiently ambiguous to allow alternative interpretations to co-exist. If we can agree with Raymond Firth (1973: 419) that the Eucharist contains a statement about power and the source of power, we can readily understand how the complex of sybols contained in that ritual can represent a hierarchical power structure in one context and a loosely-structured group in another. 'Religion legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference.' (Berger 1969: 33.) The ritual provides a 'sacred canopy' of symbols making up a world picture appropriate to the structure or organization of the celebrants, whether thay are a practising ritualized group like the convent of nuns, or a disparate collection of laity recognising their common membership of the wide Church.

IV

We come now to the third social setting, that of the Franciscan congregation, modelled on the Franciscan Order, which has its origins in a reaction against the hierarchical exclusiveness of the Church during the Middle Ages.

The congregation of Franciscan missionary sisters were distinguished to me as being one of the most 'conservative' congregations in England.

They still lived, in the 1970s, in large convents or out on the missions, in the full habit, enclosure and silence of traditional Tridentine Catholicism which placed God out of reach. They retained the full panoply of secondary rituals, such as the rosary and the Stations of the Cross, and yet they could reach their God at any hour, in any place, and he was a friendly, loving God. The particular legitimation of authority in this congregation was through the unique relationship of its founder, Saint Francis, with God and with the Church. The Mass, for these Franciscan sisters, was still a great sacrificial banquet held in a chapel loaded with sensuous imagery, colours and sacred icons. Saint Francis was a mystic who claimed direct contact with the supernatural through 'visitations'. His message was simple: reform through individual example by love and virtue. The Church, well aware that it could not afford a rival who threatened to bypass its channels of communication with the supernatural, had two choices, to outlaw or to institutionalize. By recognising the special qualities of the saint, the rebel could operate within the legal bounds of Church authority. The Testament which Saint Francis left as the ideal blueprint for his followers was a powerful document 'divinely inspired' on the occasion of his vigil on Mount Verna when he was imprinted with the 'stigmata'. The stigmata was an impressive symbol; with it he became the living image of Christ crucified. Canonisation brought this highly dangerous man within the orbit of Church authority. The personal qualities of the saint became organizational values for the Church and for the religious orders based on this Rule and Testament. To become a friar, a man should give up everything. His path through life would be one of poverty, healing and preaching to the poor.

For the Franciscan sisters three closely woven themes—self-sacrifice, the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifices of St Francis—dominated their interpretation of the Mass. The Mother-General said, 'We have now many girls coming forward for formation. You know young people really want to give up everything to be a nun or priest. They really have to make a sacrifice and to feel that they are giving up their all. They can do so many things these days—be lay missionaries, work in slums, teach, nurse—without being a nun. The religious life has to have something different about it.' She actually found the idea of 'God in humanity' absurd. She said that God is to be loved for himself. In giving themselves wholly for the love of God, they are making up for all the people who do not believe he exists. In these Franciscan convents, as in the conservative teaching convent first described, from their liminal position the nuns offer themselves for the guilt and sins of mankind.

Evans-Pritchard (1956: 281), writing about Nuer cattle sacrifice, said:

> When the Nuer give their cattle in sacrifice they are very much, and in a very intimate way, giving part of themselves. What they surrender are living creatures, gifts more expressive of the self and with closer resemblance to it than inanimate things, and these living creatures are the most precious of their possessions, so much so that they can be said to participate in them to the point of identification.

The Mass is seen as a sacrifice because it re-affirms the nuns' own total self-offering. The Novice Mistress explained:

> The Mass is a sacrifice. Christ is sacrificed, offering his sacrifice to his heavenly Father, pleading for us, for our needs. When we go to the Blessed Sacrament we are coming into the presence of Christ in the form of bread. The priest in valid orders has made that possible. It is an enormous mystery . . . With faith it is the most marvellous miracle that God could make himself present all the time since Christ's own coming on earth through his death and resurrection. So we are nearer to God when we are in the chapel and actually in prayer. When we visit the Blessed Sacrament it is actually to visit Christ. God is everywhere—we have Him in our hearts—but in a special way He is in the chapel.

This religious sister claimed that the more your religious vocation developed, the more humble you became and the more dependent on God. She was a witness to the goodness and love of God and his sacrifice. The daily participation of the nuns in the Mass and their frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament—the consecrated bread in the tabernacle—testify to these beliefs.

The Novice Mistress is a key functionary in the religious organization, for it is she more than any other who forms and tutors the young novices in the ways of religious life. She perpetuates the myth of foundation in her instruction. The Franciscan congregation have a particular strength in following St Francis. They hold dear the values of brotherly love and universal fellowship which other congregations had lost and searched to regain in the *aggiornamento* following the Second Vatican Council in 1965. The Novice Mistress explains, 'St Francis for his time was trying to be as Christ-like as possible. He was the most perfect man—love incarnate. When we say God is love we mean that everything he did was love, he talked to people with love and understanding.' The Franciscan message was, 'Go out and love your neighbour.' St Francis, like Jesus Christ, gathered a body of disciples about

him who shared a communistic ideology and economy. In Weberian terms he was a 'charismatic' leader and his authority was legitimated by charismatic as well as by legal and traditional means. Just as the priest retains special powers through the pedigree of St Peter's relationship with Christ, so the authority figures in a Franciscan congregation carry a 'charismatic' quality in their leadership. The history of the Franciscan order is rich with mystical and magical confirmations of decisions taken and new organizations instituted.

In the chapel of the congregation I visited, there was a sacred symbol, a relic of St Francis. In the grounds of the convent there was a holy well. Franciscan spirituality which emphasizes spirit, ecstasy, inner will, not only enables the leader, the Mother General, to exercise a freedom of spirit and personality not given to organizations founded on more pragmatic and utilitarian grounds, but also provides a powerful aid in gaining the commitment of every member of the congregation to goals and values. The Franciscan congregation could be successful today because it had the means to avoid the more stereotyped devotional expressions of religious life common to other congregations, and it has been able to modify secondary goals according to the needs of the apostolate of the times. The Mass is still interpreted as a sacrificial feast because that interpretation is in complete accordance with the organization of daily life and ultimate goals. The Franciscan nun is part of a hierarchial organization with a charismatic leader at the top, a leader who embodies the mystical qualities of goodness and love. The nun devoted herself wholeheartedly to her organization, she mortifies her body with fasting and discipline. When she enters the convent chapel, in her pure white habit, sympol of her consecrated virginity, she enters a bright arena decorated with mystical scenes from the life of St Francis, his relic visible under a glass dome, a powerful protection against the evils and chaos of the world. The connection between her sacrifice, her founder/leader's sacrifice and God's sacrifice is complete. The god is indeed at the time sacrificer and victim, at one with the people for whom the sacrifice is offered.

The closeness between the participants in the Franciscan convent comprises one difference between it and the conservative teaching convent, but a more profound difference lies in the nature of personal sacrifice as understood in the two convents. Unlike the old teaching congregation, the Franciscans tried to develop and consecrate the talents of the nuns, rather than bury talent in total self-abnegation and mortification. The Franciscan emphasis is positive, rather than negative, egalitarian rather than differentiated by class and status. For them, the principal sacrificial symbol is the consecration of the victim.

V

One question that arises from these three interpretations of the Mass is why, in the teaching congregation, there occurred a shift from 'sacrifice' to 'communion'. One reason lies in the historical context. New ideas in the Catholic Church involve reinterpretations of the sacraments; traditional religious beliefs are widely questioned; authority—especially religious authority—no longer receives unquestioned recognition, and changes in the wider world give women more freedom, making more difficult to accept the total submission required in the old order. These changes in the wider world resulted in a dissatisfaction with the old rigid hierarchical structure of the congregation, which in turn resulted in a new understanding of its central rituals. The Franciscan congregation, however, which was relatively unaffected by changes in the wider world, provides a warning against too ready a satisfaction with the historical explanation. The context of the Mass in the lives of the nuns is also relevant.

The dramatic representation of the life of Christ in the words and symbols of the Mass has a sociological significance, relating to the execution of power and status in the various congregations. In the traditional teaching convent, the substitution of objects for real or imagined people constitutes a symbolic exchange confirming man's dependence on divine action to ward off evil and chaos, the anti-social forces of anomie. Such is the danger of this action that intermediaries are set up in strictly defined spatial zones. In the course of the sacrifice, there is destruction, real and symbolic. But the participants come away from the ceremony strengthened, both by the ingestion of sacred matter and by close comminication with the potent world of the gods. The priest is the key figure in this process: it is he who alone holds the power of consecration, the ability to unlock the channels of grace. It is he alone who drank the wine in the traditional scheme.

It is only when the relationships between Church authority and congregation changed, and the status of the priest was modified with respect to his audience, that the congregation could share fully in the communion. As the priest loses power and authority, the doctrine of transubstantiation falls into question, and the Mass reverts to a communion meal—a commemorative rite rather than a sacrifice. In the radicalism of the 1960s, when small groups took the significance of the Mass to be a celebration of their discrete membership, both convents Church lost members. People no longer needed the services of intermediaries. A rejection of self-abnegation in a rigidly hierarchical society

led some to withdraw from the society, and others to restructure the society on egalitarian lines, expressed in a central rite of commensality.

The Franciscan congregation had a more flexible structure, which was hierarchical, but which respected the talents and traits of individuals. Their emphasis was on consecration of individuals rather than on the suppression of individuality. They had a corresponding interpretation of the Mass, which incorporated both the idea of death when this becomes necessary, and the commensal meal of a consecrated community.

Raymond Firth (1973: 425) commented that 'assertions about the bread and wine are assertions in defence of established positions or claims to such positions, on a pragmatic social level as well as on a conceptual level'. By treating religious ideas as social facts, I have come some way towards showing how, in the Mass, the articulation of ideas about this world and the next relate to the ordering of the social life of the convents.

NOTES

1. The identity of both congregations is disguised and the names of the nuns must have been changed, in an attempt to protect the privacy of all those who made the research possible. For a fuller account of the convents, see Campbell-Jones 1979. Strictly speaking, women who live in religious congregations under a simple vow are called 'religious sisters' or 'religious' (used as a noun). I have adopted the colloquialism 'nuns' for simplicity.
2. There is some correspondence between the three types of interpretation presented here and the 'root forms' of sacrifice which van Baaren (1964) puts forward. Van Baaren lists four such forms: a gift offering, either expecting reciprocity or offered in homage; parting with something of one's own for the benefit of another, emphasizing renunciation; repetition of a primordial event, often related to a ritual meal of renewal; and symbolic sanctification of the world, which often includes renunciation to a different end, and which is often linked to a ritual meal and a primordial event.
3. For a more detailed discussion of these points, see Campbell-Jones 1979: 102.
4. This fits in well with Robertson Smith's (cf. 1927: 312—3) 'communion theory' of sacrifice according to which sacrifice originally involved the killing of a sacred totemic animal, in some sense identified both with the deity and with the group which subsequently consumes it. The connection between symbolic killing and the sacrificial meal was examined by Leach (1972: 266) in his analysis of the Tongan *kava* ritual and myth: 'The eating of the meat of the sacrifice is deemed an

essential element in the rite; the congregation shares a collective guilt in participating in god murder and ritual cannibalism; this collective guilt is an 'atonement'; it makes the members of the congregation aware of themselves as a collectivity that has jointly sinned yet assimilated itself to God.' We should notice the intercessionary role of the nuns, also their adopted role of making reparation for the sins of mankind—in particular for the killing of the Son of God.

5. For a definition and explanation of 'plausibility' of religious beliefs, see Berger 1969: 26.
6. For a fuller exposition of this point, see Campbell-Jones 1979: 149—61.
7. The ambiguous nature of symbols is well exposed in Douglas 1970.