

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 sacrificing, 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 cuen,
ilk mon aftur he has done,
That same es he thou lokes opon.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 = *LFB*) 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", *Allegoria*, 1, 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 Eucharisticae: 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 Ehor*) 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 addressed 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 charch you heylly 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 Tying 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 rights."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 lyverc, clothyd in love and charyte", not "the fendys lyverc, clothyd in envy and dedly

⁹ *Festial*, pp. 130–1; for a very similar form 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 droppying 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 resceve 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 sacrificing (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 windows surviving in East Anglian churches, or the related Seven-Sacrament windows in churches such as Doddscombsleigh 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 herdsman 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 = *Bed's 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 sacring 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 sacrings 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, "bisunge 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 sacrings (as they called it) to sacrings, 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 guilds 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 have 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 William 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 primer of Selyshury 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 veniall synnes do up wynd,
Shall be forgeven, & pardon fynd . . .
Thy grevous 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 [housell] yf thou hap to dissease,
It shall stond therfore; & beleve thou this skyll,
Than to here messe thou maste have will,
Thes prophitable benefits 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 Sapience*, 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 robbery." 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 "prayed 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 tyllle anothyr pryste went to masse and helpyd the same pryste to masse, and say howe the oste lay upon 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 nothyng 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 wichche 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 Syme*, 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 before."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 Mirror 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 founding 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 Hailes", *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,
Therefore 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 Judgment. 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 "bodily with bloody 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 bloody". 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 swetnesse". 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 pictatis". 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. Nicholls, "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 any of them, so ofte it is to be byleved they are sprended 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 bread⁵⁶ 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 bledying" and with "a little pixe for the sacrament 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 leuyng, yef he say dewly tho wordys over the bred that owr Lord Ihesu Criste seyde when 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 seyde.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 Flanagan.

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 Matthew 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 "Orae 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 Sobam, 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 sacrificing.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 paxbread, 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 oftymes 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

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, *Roodcreens and Roodlofts*, 1909.

clerkes by whom the other ought to be governed and taken ensample of.⁶⁶

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 parlosing 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 Arleburgh.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 “annualler”, 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 guilds 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.

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 devocoyon 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 guild of ten wealthy men and their wives. The guild 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 towards the pulpit”.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 Pfall, *New Feasts*, chapter 4.

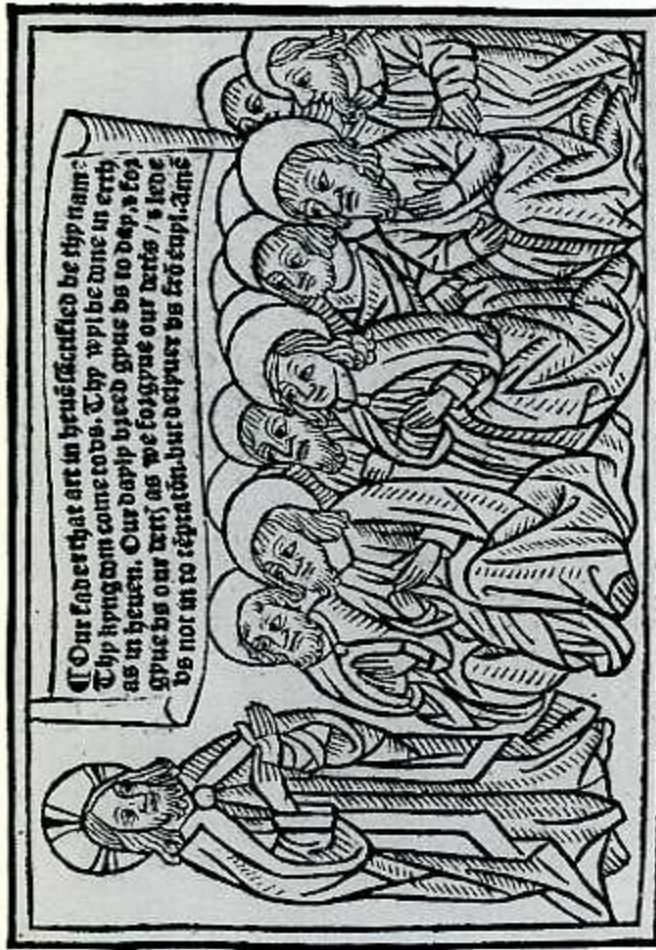
⁷⁴ Reading, St Lawrence CWA, pp. 28–32.

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

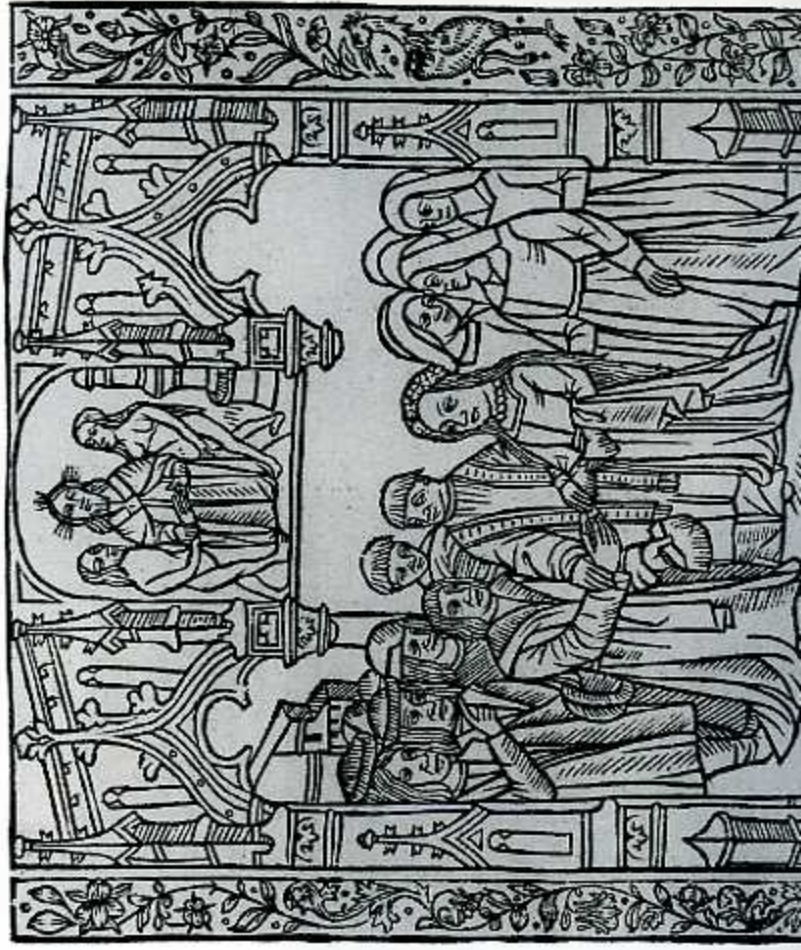
and early sixteenth century called the Jesus altar) in what was effectively the private chantry chapel of Thomas Halleway, a former mayor of Bristol, who had installed fixed pews with doors for himself and his family directly in front of the Jesus altar.⁷⁵ On the other side of England, the Jesus Mass 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.



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



38. Marritomy, from the *Arte or Craftie to Lyve Well*.

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.