

Motion is a Sacred Thing

By Toni' Intravaia

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Combining the words “dance” and “religion” may strike a strange note to some ears, a joyful one to others, and to some may even suggest the sacrilegious. However, the joining of these words is becoming increasingly frequent.

The art of the sacred choir is not an art for its own sake, but, as true Christian art, it humbly and joyously offers itself as a way to worship and glorify God.

Even as simple a matter as posture has psychological and spiritual implications. As Martha Graham says, “Posture is dynamic, not static.” It is a self-portrait of being. It is psychological as well as physiological. There is only one law of posture. I have been able to discover—the perpendicular line connecting heaven and earth.

The spiritual use of this universal language of rhythm is one of the religious arts which finds response in all who witness it, from the oldest to the youngest; the most spiritually sensitive to the seemingly insensitive.

Religious feeling has been expressed through rhythmic patterns through the ages. The Psalms summoned people to “praise” the Lord with the dance.” (Psalm 150) Early Christian leaders used the term “dance” to refer to religious pageants and dramatic services of worship from the first centuries of the Christian Church through Renaissance.

Religion and dance were at first often the same activity – the form was the dance and the content was religion. The dance may well have been the first of all the arts because it required no materials and so became an early and direct outlet for religious emotion. Among primitive peoples, religion is such a large part of their existence and the dance is so bound with it that the religious dance is of supreme importance.

At all times and with all peoples, religion has tended to assume some form of the dance as symbolic expression. Ancient civilizations of Egypt and India created intricate religious dances to reveal astronomical designs, to celebrate seasonal festivals, to lament at the time of death, to express worship in the temples and to enact dance-dramas of religious legends.

The Greeks believed that the dance was the one art which influenced the soul most, and that it provided to expression for that overflow of awareness for which man has no words.

During the first five centuries of the Christian era, we see that dance was recognized by the Church as a natural way of expressing joy, a way of salvation and a way of adoration, as shown by the reference to the dances of holy ones, the martyrs, and angels.

During the early middle ages, the Church preserved and fostered the religious arts. It was at this time that the Mass developed with its definite, prescribed, symbolic movements to the Gregorian Chant accompaniment.

The Planctus appears as a part of the Mass early in the twelfth century. This is a religious play concerned with the sorrows of the Three Mary's.

Monastic orders, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, seemed to find the dance of religious value when used in their groups. The monks of the Cistercian Order "danced and prayed for the salvation of the universe." In early form of the dance was recorded by Cambrensis of the twelfth century. This "dance of death" often started with a sermon on the certainty of death, delivered by a monk, usually in the cemetery of churchyard. Then from the charnel house would come a figure, or in some cases a group of figures, in the traditional costume of death which was a close-fitting yellowish suit painted to resemble a skeleton. Victims were then invited or coerced into accompanying Death beyond the grave. Death, although grotesque, appeared not as a destroyer, but as a messenger summoning men to world beyond.

The term "choir" meant an enclosed, elevated area in the church where symbolic movements were often portrayed. In 1682, Lenestriene, a Jesuit in Paris, described the use of the word "choir:" "The divine office made up of psalms, hymns, and canticles for the praises of God were recited, sung and danced... The place where these religious acts were performed in divine worship was called the choir, just with the choir of the Greeks,"

Hugh Benson, a Roman Catholic priest, has written, "We have no more right to condemn the language of the hands and arms than the language of the tongue. We are furnished by our Creator with all these members." The whole body is the tool and expression of the soul, writes Guarlini in his *Sacred Signs*. "The soul does not merely dwell in the body as if it dwelt in a house, but it lives and works in every member and every fibre. It speaks in every line and form and movement of the body." The Christian, through the years, has used the term "body" in a most sacred way by calling the Church the Body of Christ. Thus, we can surely accept the body-spirit mixture of Christianity and re-discover a religious art using a fusion of body, mind and spirit.

Rene Foatelli, who has created liturgical dances in France, urges the use of the dance in pageants which interpret the Mass. She writes, "I envision the beautiful order of rhythmical processions. If we could learn to interpret the liturgical texts, sacred chants and hymns, by choral speaking, mimes and dances, we should be able to direct the people in rejoicing more wholesome, pure and naively fresh than those to which they are accustomed to today."

Because the Mass has definite movements and gestures for the participants and especially for those who have the active service of transferring candles, books, censers, and other ritual articles, there is an effort of symbolic movement that is close to a discipline, sacred dance. In fact, Hugh Benson, wrote of the Mass: "It is no less than a sacred dance. Jacques Maritain, sensitive to the beauty of the disciplined movement in the Mass, write: "There is nothing more beautiful than a High Mass, a dance before the

Ark in slow motion.” The Catholic Encyclopedic Dictionary has this statement concerning “Dancing.”
“Some of the movements of ministers in sacred ceremonies are in the nature of a forman dance.”

The Roman Catholic Church is encouraging the Christian arts in the United States, in Europe and in the mission field. Rhythmic interpretation is being taught in certain convents and schools. At Grailville, a School of the Apostolate for Catholic young ins Loveland, Ohio, the students study the symbolic interpretation of chants. In the *Catholic Quarterly* (Vol. 7, Nos 1 and 4) there are condensations of Renee Foatelli’s book *The Place of Religious Dances In Christianity*” translated from the French. Following the historical presentation, Renee Foatelli urges that mystery plays be “enriched with group movements in the manner of a ballet in order to emphasize certain parts of the play or to give them a new value. It would be interesting also to be given a better understanding of the drama of the Mass by means of pageants which combine drama and dancing. These would be true visual aid for both spectator and participants.

Dance is the one art where the physical, emotional and intellectual aspects of the self are employed completely and simultaneously. It is only fitting, therefore, that the high aims of religion come again to be expressed in the art of dance which is a natural symbol of an integrated life. It would appear that the United States is regaining some of the lost Hellenic respect for the body as a beautiful source of creative power, and veneration of the dance as a great sacrament of harmonious living – an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

We have prayed with the heart and the soul. Let us pray with the body until the strength and purity of our prayer becomes part of the very circulation of our blood. Let us know learn to meditate in that inward stillness and with that inner blood. Let us know learn to meditate in that inward stillness and with that inner control which commands the body to be servant to the soul. Let us praise with dance.

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