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The Liturgical Celebration of Corpus Christi in Medieval York

Until at least the mid-fifteenth century, the city of York mounted a lavish ecclesiastical procession followed by a procession of plays on the feast of Corpus Christi. The proximity of these two processions has tended to blur the difference in function and constitution which separated them. A consideration of the circumstances under which Corpus Christi was celebrated liturgically in medieval York demonstrates that the presumed connection between the two processions did not exist.

The feast of Corpus Christi was one of the last additions to the liturgical year. Although ordered for the entire church by Urban IV in 1264, the observance did not appear in England until after 1317. Even in the later middle ages, a diversity of local rites prevailed within the English church, and the irregular growth of Corpus Christi reflects various diocesan traditions. Liturgical feasts entered the York calendar in various ways. Some feasts such as the Name of Jesus and the Transfiguration were imposed by provincial synod, whereas the cult of St. William of York was a local observance that did not receive official recognition until 1384.

NOTES


3 York City Archives, CC 3 (1), p. 159.


5 York City Archives, A/Y Memorandum Book, ff. 257-257v.

6 York City Archives, House Book 1, f. 20v.

7 York City Archives, House Book 2-4, f. 163. From a record of 1486 it is clear that they contributed 5s. to the pageant owning crafts (Chamberlains' Roll 4:1).

8 York Plays, p. xv.

9 York City Archives, C 5:1; and above, note 2.
The cathedral church of York — York Minster — initiated many of the liturgical innovations. Corpus Christi first appears in the cathedral statutes of 1325 when it was inserted in the calendar: 'Statuerunt etiam ad honorem dei quod festum corporis cristi sub officio duplici in choro et mensa de cetero celebratur.'

Corpus Christi was observed on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday and as a moveable feast fell between May 23 and June 24. The liturgical celebration began about 3.00 p.m. on Wednesday afternoon with the singing of the first Vespers of the feast. On the Thursday of the feast proper, Matins and Lauds were sung shortly after dawn and concluded about 6.30 a.m. The numerous chantry masses filled the interval until Prime at 9.00 a.m. The principal capitular mass of Corpus Christi followed Terce and ended before noon. As in other cathedrals, the high mass was preceded by a procession. The York Processional provides an order for Corpus Christi.

Two questions arise regarding this procession: did the procession pass outside the church, and did it carry a Host? Outdoor processions were common at the Minster. The thirteenth-century statutes of the cathedral refer to processions 'within and without' the church, and in Rogationtide it was traditional to go in procession with the relics of St. William to the nearby Abbey of St. Mary. Most of these processions probably remained within the precincts of the Minster — the so-called Liberty of St. Peter's — which were outside civic jurisdiction and a source of continual dispute with the city. The Host was carried in procession on two other occasions. The procession on Palm Sunday was met outside the Minster by a second procession bearing the Host under a canopy and carrying torches. The cup used to carry the Host in this quasi-dramatic ceremony is listed in the Fabric Rolls of the Minster as a cup 'pro corpore Christi portando.' The same vessel was used in the Burial of the Host in the sepulchre on Good Friday. At its 'resurrection' on Easter Day, the cup was carried around the font. The sacrament was habitually reserved in a pyx suspended over the high altar. All of these ceremonies presume that the Host will be drawn from the reserved sacrament. The similarities between the Palm Sunday and Corpus Christi processions in other rites are striking. In English churches it seems that the normal procession before mass of Corpus Christi was supplemented by appropriate ceremonial drawn from Palm Sunday.

York Minster celebrated Corpus Christi with a full procession before mass, and this procession may have carried the Host on an outdoor route through the cathedral precincts.

Although the York Use was generally imposed on the northern province, many ecclesiastical foundations observed their own rites. This was common in monastic houses where the customs of the order theoretically took precedence. In the city of York itself, the important Benedictine Abbey of St. Mary maintained its own liturgy. Like the Minster, the Abbey's precincts were outside civic jurisdiction, and conflicts coloured relations between the city and both the Minster and the Abbey.

An early fifteenth-century ordinal from St. Mary's describes its rite in detail. Before the principal mass of Corpus Christi, the Abbey held an outdoor procession with the Host. This procession carried the Host enshrined in a cup around the Abbey if weather permitted; if not, around the cloisters. The rubrics make special
reference to the Palm Sunday procession as the model for the Corpus Christi process-

Thus, at the same time that the Minster held its procession on Corpus Christi morning, a similar procession was passing through the precincts of St. Mary's Abbey.

Given the fact that there were at least two other Corpus Christi processions in York, the nature of the civic procession should be examined. Two central features must be kept in mind: (i) at all times the procession was regulated by statute of the corporation of the city; and (ii) the procession was almost exclusively parochial in constitution. The city council regulated processions in the city, particularly on Corpus Christi. The civic records show that the city fathers determined the route of the Corpus Christi procession, ordering the craft guilds to carry torches, and fining those who did not obey. The carrying of torches in the liturgical procession was not connected with the guilds' responsibility to produce pageants in the dramatic procession. Most important, however, was the council's power to change the day of the procession. In the late fifteenth century the liturgical procession was transferred to the Friday, leaving the plays alone on the Thursday. By this action, the council demonstrated its legal control over the liturgical function. However, the decision also meant conflicts with the Minster which in numerous years would be celebrating a saint's day on the Friday. Thus, in a year such as 1509 when Corpus Christi fell on June 7, the Friday would see the civic procession of Corpus Christi and the Minster procession of St. William.

The pastoral problems raised by civic control can be explained by the nature of the procession and the schedule of celebrations in Corpus Christi tide. Although the corporation maintained jurisdiction over the procession, as laymen they could not exercise the liturgical function: the council could walk in the procession but they could not carry the Host. In 1408 the Gild of Corpus Christi was founded, receiving royal incorporation in 1478. Both sets of statutes stipulated that the chaplains were to walk in the civic Corpus Christi procession. It is clear that these chaplains were the parochial clergy of York, and that the civic procession was the Corpus Christi celebration for the secular clergy and the laity of the city's parish churches. With only one exception, all of the sixty-eight masters named in the records of the Gild are vicars of parishes or chantry priests in the churches. The membership and obit lists of the Gild contain over 16,000 names of the people of York and elsewhere. Although most of the episcopal and monastic hierarchy of the North joined the Gild and identified themselves with its work, there is nothing to suggest that they ever took part in the Corpus Christi celebration. Indeed, such figures as the abbot of St. Mary's and the dean of the Minster were constitutionally bound to be in their own churches on the feast. The statutes of the Gild presume that the Master of the Gild would officiate at the procession as senior cleric. Thus, the parochial clergy and laity celebrated Corpus Christi with the city fathers independent of the monastic and cathedral foundations.

The schedule of the Corpus Christi celebrations was minutely timed by the statutes of the city and the Gild. In the years before the separation, the procession was marshalled at Holy Trinity between 4 and 5 on the morning of Corpus Christi. None of the statutes suggests that any liturgical function took place before the pro-
cession. Unless Matins and Lauds were said, by custom and statute, mass would not have been celebrated. At the time of the York procession, Matins was just beginning. It should be noted that Corpus Christi processions in England presume that the Host would be drawn from the reserved sacrament and not consecrated at a special mass before the procession. Such was probably the case at York.

From Holy Trinity Priory in the south end of the city, the procession passed through the streets to the gates of the Minster. There is no indication that the procession stopped at any point, and it certainly did not halt at the various play stations in order to display the sacrament, as the Host was continually exposed in its shrine. We cannot over-emphasize the fact that the liturgical procession and the pageant procession were separate entities. Although the pageants followed the procession, they took their own pace and turned to the right at the Minster gates on a different route.

What occurred when the liturgical procession reached the Minster is unclear. If the civic procession began between 4 and 5, it would have arrived at the Minster in the middle of Matins. The chapter is unlikely to have interrupted the office when they looked forward to their own Corpus Christi procession later in the morning. The records speak of no mass at the Minster. The procession probably entered the Liberty of St. Peter's at the end of Stonegate, passed through the precincts of the cathedral and departed through the southeast gates near the west door of the Minster. There is no indication that the procession entered the Minster proper or that the cathedral chapter interrupted their own Corpus Christi celebrations. Leaving the Minster Close, the procession passed along Lop Lane to St. Leonard's Hospital. The chapel of the hospital seems to have been a convenient concluding point for outdoor processions: St. Mary's Abbey ended its procession there on Rogation Tuesday. Again, the statutes require no liturgical function at the conclusion.

Before the separation of the procession and plays, the only liturgical celebration in which the Gild was involved on Corpus Christi Day was the procession. However, the statutes of the Gild show that the commemoration of the feast continued on the succeeding days of the octave. On Friday there was no observance, probably because of the danger of a saint's day occurring simultaneously. On Saturday, Vespers of Corpus Christi followed by Vespers of the Dead were solemnly sung. The church used for these offices was designated by the Master and was probably his own parish church. On Sunday the Gild finally met for mass. The Statute is quite clear: '... in die Dominica, missa de Corpore Christi solemniter in eodem loco celebretur.' The Corpus Christi celebrations ended on Monday with a solemn requiem mass for the departed of the Gild.

One cannot underestimate the importance of the Corpus Christi celebration to the devotional life of the lay people. Reception of the sacrament had declined drastically in the later middle ages and growing emphasis was placed on seeing the eucharistic wafer. In the civic procession, the Host was exposed inside a crystal monstrance so that it was constantly visible to the crowds of people. Indeed, the lavish liturgical and dramatic celebrations on Corpus Christi are proof of the enduring popularity of the eucharistic cult. These celebrations remained parochial and civic in constitution and were completely independent of those in the cathedral and
monastic foundations. The civic liturgical procession and the pageant procession were two separate functions, functions which were eventually divided on two days. Both processions honoured Corpus Christi, but neither was dependent on the other. With these distinctions in mind, we may have a clearer position from which to study the liturgical setting of the York Cycle.

NOTES

6 Henderson, Manuale, pp. 164, 170-1.
7 The widespread Sarum Use had comparable ceremonies.
10 R. H. Skaife, ed., The Register of the Guild of Corpus Christi in the City of York, Surtees Society 57 (1872), pp. 6, 263.
11 Skaife, Register, p. 263.
12 Skaife, Register, p. 265.

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York Notes

Yule

As part of the procedures for checking that all known and relevant material will be included in all REED volumes, we continued to check for York material after my article on the Yule broadside had been published in the first Newsletter. We dis-