Public space and private prayer: the church building as *locus* for personal devotion

John Morgan-Guy

Sir Francis Bacon famously recorded of Queen Elizabeth I that she had no 'liking to make windows into men's hearts and secret thoughts'.[1] The impulse to make just such an enquiry, however, lies behind my choice of subject for this short paper. 'Speaking to the God of heaven in prayer', as the seventeenth century divine Richard Baxter pointed out, 'is a weightier duty than most are aware of'.[2] It requires what Baxter calls 'reverence and affection'; the former inclusive of awe, veneration and that '*tapeinophros*, lowliness of mind' of which the apostle Paul spoke[3]: the latter that sense of being drawn towards and drawn into God and the things of God which is the hallmark of all true piety.

'The medieval Christian' B L Manning wrote in 1919, 'was a man of one event'.[4] For Manning, staunch Congregationalist that he was, that 'event' was the Passion of Christ. 'Over the whole medieval world lay the broad shadow of the cross'.[5] Up to a point he was right; much late medieval piety and devotion was crucicentric. But Manning's definition is too narrow; dare one say it, too 'protestant'. Medieval man was indeed the man of one event, but that event was the whole incarnate life of Christ, which continued and continues through His Passion, death, resurrection and ascension, and in the witness, worship and sacramental life of His church. Thus although the cross of Christ it is true to say most definitely loomed large in everyday consciousness – as Gordon Huelin pointed out 'every single ceremony and sacrament [of the church] was accompanied by the making of the sacred sign…'[6] (as was almost every act of personal devotion) – so did much else besides, not least the lives and legends of those exemplary Christians, the saints. Above all there towered

[1] The observation is very often – and incorrectly – attributed to the queen herself.
[2] Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (London, Fisher, Son, & Co.,1834) p.272.
[3] Acts 20: 19.
[4] B L Manning, *The People's Faith in the Time of Wycliffe* (Cambridge, CUP 1919) p.25.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Gordon Huelin, *The Cross in English Life and Devotion* (London, The Faith Press, 1972) p.16.

the figure of the great exemplar and mediator, the Virgin Mother, Mary, whose participation in the 'one event' was acknowledged as both central and essential.

And nowhere, for the Christian, was Mary's participation more vital than at the final judgement, so vividly represented in the image popularly known as 'The Doom'. As Francis Edwards pointed out, for the individual Christian that 'doom', that judgement 'represented the final commitment in a timeless universe. Once the Last Judgement had been delivered there was no appeal…Once the blow of the "Awful Striker" [Death] had fallen, the soul's conflict was at an end and its ultimate fate depended upon the mercy of the Divine Judge.'[7] The supplications and prayers of Mary – indeed, her intervention, which is so dramatically depicted in the (much-restored) 15th century panels at Llaneilian-yn-Rhos (Denbighshire) – in that judgement was eagerly sought and essential. For fallen man, as the late 15th century poet Tudur Aled put it, Jesus' 'Passion and Mary's rosary / Can forgive all his sins'.[8] We shall return to the place of the rosary later in this paper.

Perhaps even more vividly, Mary's intercessory role in the final judgement is depicted in the surviving portion of the great Doom painting in St Giles', Wrexham.[9] Here Mary, her breast bared, stands in supplication at her Son's right hand. Both Mary's position and depiction here are highly significant. She stands in the place of honour, a reserved and privileged place, beside, as Clarissa Atkinson noted, 'the God-man [who] saved all men and women through humanity derived from [her]…'[10] Mary's bared breast, the breast that had fed the Christ-child, is the potent reminder both to her Son and to the observer, of the necessity of mercy, compassion and love.[11]

---

[7] Francis Edwards, *Ritual and Drama. The Medieval Theatre* (Guildford, Lutterworth Press, 1976) p.98.
[8] T Gwynn Jones (ed), *Gwaith Tudur Aled* (Cardiff, 2 vols.1926), 1, pp.323-4, quoted by Peter Lord & John Morgan-Guy, *The Visual Culture of Wales. Medieval Vision* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2003) p.192, on which page the panels are illustrated.
[9] Illustrated in Lord & Morgan-Guy, p.193.
[10] Clarissa W Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation. Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 1991) p.143.
[11] The image of Mary suckling her son derives ultimately not from the New Testament infancy narratives in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, where the action is not mentioned, but from the apocryphal *Protevangelion of James* (14: 12) and *The first Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ* (1: 11). It was widely depicted in medieval Christian art, eg. Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Pal.lat.537, fol.53 and the personal monogram of Richard Pynson, the King's Printer from c.1496. Reproduced in Ronald B McKerrow, *Printers' and Publishers' Devices in England and Scotland 1485-1640* (London, Bibliographical Society, 1949) Plate 9b. The image seems to have first developed in the art of the Coptic church *circa* 9th century. Marie-France Boyer, *The Cult of the Virgin. Offerings, Ornaments and Festivals* (London, Thames & Hudson, 2000) p.26. For the background, see Larissa Bonfante, 'Nursing Mothers in Classical Art' in Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow & Claire L Lyons (eds), *Naked Truths. Women, sexuality and gender in classical art & archaeology* (London, Routledge, 1997) pp.174-96.

It is but a short step from Mary in this role to Mary as, in Eamon Duffy's words, 'a mirror reflecting qualities found in God'.[12] Mary's gentleness and pity, Mary the Mother of Mercy ('one of [her] most resonant medieval titles'[13]) Mary 'extending her sheltering cloak over the suppliant faithful'[14] – an understanding of her deriving ultimately from the Orthodox east – it is not at all surprising that devotion to her was intense in the late Middle Ages, shared by clergy and laity of all stations in society alike.[15]

How, then, was that devotion expressed? We are not, I would suggest, concerned with what Duffy called 'the devotions of the Primers'[16], the prayers of the Books of Hours, Latin poems such as the 'Gaude Virgo' or even the 'Stabat Mater'. (Though, as Duffy rightly points out, devotion to the Sorrows of the Virgin was intense, and 'every parish church contained an image of [the] Mater Dolorosa, for all were dominated by the Rood…invariably flanked by the mourning figures of Mary and the Beloved Disciple', and, from the mid-15th century onwards most churches also contained an image of Our Lady of Pity.)[17] The devotions of the *Horae* are those of literate households.[18] In small and simple churches, such as Llandeilo Talybont, the expression of devotion to the Virgin would have also been small and simple; the repeated recitation of the *Ave Maria* and, perhaps, the chanting of the *Salve Regina*.[19] This latter, originally a breviary anthem of the 10th century, attained widespread popularity as an evening devotion for all from the 13th century onwards, and was frequently sung by a fraternity or group of laypeople before a statue in their parish church daily at the hour of Compline.

To turn back for a moment to the 17th century divine, Richard Baxter. 'Our speaking to ourselves in meditation should go before our speaking to God in prayer', he

---

[12] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992) p.264.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] The devotion to the Protecting Veil derives from an appearance of Mary in the church of the Blachernae Palace in Constantinople in the 10th century, a church in which relics of her robe, veil and belt were preserved. At the time the city was threatened by a barbarian invasion, but after the vision of Mary kneeling in the church and spreading her veil over the people as a sign of protection, the city was spared.
[16] Duffy, op.cit. pp.256-65.
[17] Ibid. p.260.
[18] Ibid. p.265.
[19] The *Ave Maria* was originally a short and scriptural prayer, 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb', which had emerged as a devotion by the 12th century, and is, in effect, a conflation of the Angelic Salutation of Luke 1: 28 with the greeting of Elisabeth in Luke 1: 42. Later, probably in the 13th or 14th centuries, the holy name of Jesus was added, and, by the early 16th century, the petition 'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death' – though some forms of this can be traced earlier. Anne Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose. The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages* (PA.The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) p.2.

writes.[20] And meditation is 'pleading the case with thyself', 'a preaching to one's self' and maintaining 'a lively sense of heavenly things upon our hearts'.[21] Although Baxter, sincere protestant as he was, would have rejected the intercessory role of Mary and of the saints, his concept of meditation as a form of inward soliloquising is nonetheless helpful in understanding the nature of the kind of praying of the *Ave* we are considering. Although its recitation can be a communal activity, for example in the public recitation of the Angelus or of the rosary, meditation on the joys and sorrows of the Virgin before her image, with the repeated recitation *sotto voce* – silent prayer was not a medieval characteristic - was a personal devotion, very much the maintenance of 'a lively sense of heavenly things' in the heart. It was personal, but never unconscious of communion with and within the wider fellowship of the church catholic. Such meditation may indeed have been accompanied by the 'telling of the beads', those early forms of the rosary which, as Anne Winston-Allen has shown, developed from prayer-ropes or strands of beads which are almost ubiquitous in the major world religions, and were certainly in use in Christendom by the third century.[22] It is possible that among the parishioners of Llandeilo Talybont, for example, by the late Middle Ages there were informal groups of laypeople who had bound themselves by a simple rule of life, and who came daily to St Teilo's as their work and duties permitted to recite the rosary or a form of it before an image of the Blessed Virgin, or at eventide to sing the *Salve Regina* before retiring to rest. These were simple and straightforward devotions, which required neither the presence nor the participation of the parish priest. Such were also the groups who maintained the lights before the various images and the Rood, and who kept the church in good order within and without. Work, communal worship and personal devotion were integrated, just as prayer and meditation, although distinct duties incumbent on every Christian, were both regarded as necessary and integrated, keeping 'the soul sensible of the divine presence...'[23]

So far we have concentrated upon personal prayer and devotion as related to the Blessed Virgin Mary, but both were extended to the whole company of heaven, the angels and the saints. In his classic evocation of the life of a rural parish church before, during and after the Protestant Reformation, *The Voices of Morebath*, Eamon Duffy says 'the little church of Morebath in 1520 was…densely peopled with saints, whose images filled the building'.[24] His imaginative reconstruction can stand for any English or Welsh parish church at that date; the principal statue of the Virgin and that of the patron saint flanking the High Altar; the image of the *Salvator Mundi* at the

[20] Baxter, op.cit. p.272.
[21] Ibid. pp.271, 273.
[22] Winston-Allen, op.cit. p.14.
[23] Baxter, op.cit. p.272.
[24] Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath. Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001) p.72.

Jesus altar; and, 'against pillars and walls round the church…were half a dozen other niched and tabernacled figures' – all representing 'devotional choices by the parishioners…They were located in the body of the small church close to the people who maintained lights before them, and to whose anxieties and hopes they held up a devotional mirror.'[25] Duffy openly acknowledges that his reconstruction is largely inferential, especially in regard to the images of those he terms 'Holy Helpers, embodiments of religion harnessed as much to the everyday material needs as to the spiritual longings of labouring and suffering men and women'.[26] Thus he suggests St Eligius, patron of smiths and carters[27], St Antony, healer of men and of farm animals[28], and St Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary and a devotional favourite of the married. The lives, legends and cults of saints such as these would indeed have resonated with the daily lives of Morebath's parishioners. So what, perhaps, may we infer for Llandeilo Talybont, a rural church adjacent to an important river crossing-point, close to the treacherous waters of the Bristol Channel, and on a pilgrim road which could be said to link two of the principal shrines of Wales, that of David at St Davids and Teilo at Llandaff. All three of Duffy's candidates would be strong contenders, as 'relevant', to use modern jargon, to the needs of the people of Llandeilo Talybont as they were to those of the parishioners of Morebath. They were 'universal saints, venerated not only in Devon but throughout England and indeed the whole of western Europe'.[29] So are other saints whose images I might suggest as contenders for the brackets and corbels of the nave of St Teilo's; St Nicholas, widely popular but particularly so in churches close to the coast, as the protector of those whose livelihood depended on the navigation of the seas.[30] His protection of children would also have had a lasting appeal. Another protector of seafarers, particularly in stormy weather, was St Erasmus, or, more popularly, St Elmo, whose name has long been associated with 'St Elmo's Fire', the electrical discharges sometimes seen at the masthead of ships. By tradition Elmo was martyred by having his intestines wound out of his body on a windlass. By association, the windlass became a capstan, and

---

[25] Ibid
[26] Ibid. p.73.
[27] St Eligius, perhaps more familiarly known as St Eloi (c.588-660). Served as Master of the Mint at Marseilles to Kings Chlotar II & Dagobert I, developing a great talent for engraving and smithing. In 640 his patron King Dagobert chose him to be bishop of Noyon and Tournai, where he became a notable founder of monasteries and convents.
[28] Antony of Egypt (c.251-356), widely regarded as the founder of monasticism, as he gathered hermits together into loosely-knot communities in the desert. Notable among the 'Desert Fathers' for his spiritual wisdom and austerity of life. St Athanasius wrote a celebrated 'Life' of Antony.
[29] Ibid. p.73.
[30] Richard Marks, *Image and Devotion in Late Medieval England* (Stroud, Sutton Publishing, 2004) p.113. Marks draws attention to the nautical metaphors of the sequence in the Sarum Missal (which would have been used at Llandeilo Talybont) for his feast day on 6th December. St Nicholas (4th century) was bishop of Myra in Lycia, and by the tenth century had become one of the most popular saints in Christendom, East and West. There were many legends and stories associated with his life. His relics were removed to Bari in Italy in the 11th century, which helped the spread of his cult in the west. He is, of course, the origin of 'Father Christmas'.

thus the saint became a favourite of sailors. He was also a favourite of their wives, as his windlass also became a distaff or spinning wheel, and thus he was as much the patron of domestic spinners and weavers as he was of those 'that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters'.[31] As our concern is with personal devotion in this paper, what we might describe as an extension of domestic piety into the sacred space of the church, so, along with Nicholas and Elmo we should think of Zita or Sitha, a 'popular canonization' as she was not formally declared a saint until 1696, but whose cult had become widespread in the 14th and 15th centuries. Sitha was a domestic servant in 13th century Lucca, famed for her chastity, piety and charity. She was a favourite of wives and widows, of all those who 'kept house', whose virtues were biblical, in the sense that they closely resembled those of the 'virtuous woman' in Proverbs, chapter 31, and of such figures as Dorcas and Lydia in the New Testament Acts of the Apostles. It is worth remembering in this context, as Richard Marks has pointed out, that 'in late medieval England young people of both sexes and spanning the social spectrum spent time in service away from home, in rural as well as urban contexts'.[32] In a largely illiterate society, contact with absent loved ones was at best intermittent and perhaps largely non-existent. The intercession of Sitha would have been a comfort sought by both the family at home and the family member or members serving elsewhere[33].

Time does not permit the exploration of devotion to saints such as Christopher[34] and Roche[35], both of whom were widely revered and whose protection was eagerly

---

[31] Psalm 107: 23. St Erasmus, believed to have been a bishop in Syria, was reputedly martyred c.303 in the persecution of Christians instigated by the Emperor Diocletian. The masthead 'light' of St Elmo's Fire was taken as a sign of the saint's protection of the ship's crew.

[32] Marks, op.cit. p.103.

[33] St.Sitha (c.1218-1278) was a servant in a well-to-do household in Lucca, and remained there all her life. She is a good example of 'popular acclamation' as a saint, whose cult was widespread long before the date of her papal canonisation in the 17th century. Another, more local, example from the Middle Ages would be St Margaret Marloes, whose tomb can be seen in Llandawke Church, Carmarthenshire. The daughter of a local landowning family, she seems to have gathered an informal community of women vowed to a religious life around her, in the manner of the Beguines. The sisterhood belonged to no religious order, nor was their home a convent in a formal sense. Margaret Marloes has never been formally canonised and has no feast day in the liturgical calendar. However, what she undertook at Llandawke is perhaps indicative of a kind of local initiative which was more widespread in Welsh rural parishes than has hitherto been recognised.

[34] St Christopher. Possibly a martyr in Asia Minor in the 3rd century. A church was erected at Chalcedon in the mid-5th century in his honour. His cult was widespread in both eastern and western Christendom, though the stories and legends associated with him differed widely from place to place. Throughout the Middle Ages there was a widespread belief that whoever looked on the image of the saint would either suffer no harm that day or would die a good death shriven and prepared. His image was often among the largest in the church (Christopher was reputed a man of gigantic stature) usually painted on the wall opposite the principal entrance. He was – and remains – the patron saint of travellers.

[35] St Roche (14th century), believed to have been a native of Montpellier, who nursed the sick during an outbreak of plague, to which he himself fell victim, though he recovered, being initially succoured by a dog. (Depictions of the saint usually show him accompanied by the animal, and pointing to a plague

sought. Both, as the mural paintings in St Teilo's tell us, featured in the personal devotion of the people of Llandeilo Talybont. Christopher was the protector of all who travelled, who journeyed even the shortest of distances, and a visit to his image was an unquestioned necessity before setting out. A *Pater*, an *Ave*, an *ora pro nobis* would have sufficed. And, in a society always vulnerable to sudden and unexplained epidemic disease, and where other conditions were endemic, the protection of St Roche was just as highly valued and sought.

In short, from dawn to dusk, setting aside the serving of the liturgy and formal acts of worship, churches like St Teilo's would have sheltered an on-going offering of repeated prayer, from individuals and groups, parishioners and travellers, those seeking the intercession, protection and favour of a particular saint for a particular purpose or need, and those fulfilling a personal vow. The images before which they stood or knelt were not religious decorations. The prayerful supplicant saw himself or herself in the presence of the saint. Not that the image was the saint, but served as a sacramental through which they were drawn into the presence of the holy one depicted. Barriers of time and space fall away in prayer.[36] As I have written elsewhere, the images are 'kerygmatic…proclamatory, requiring our attention and response. [They] compel us not to speech but to silence, the silence of awe and worship. In and through that silence God speaks and we listen. We listen and, because God's word thus mediated is prescriptive, we respond'.[37] Thus silence in the presence of the Blessed Virgin, or St Elmo, or St Sitha or St Christopher, or at most a quietly uttered 'ora pro nobis' was all that was necessary. The interceding saint brought the need, aspiration or longing of the petitioner into the presence of God. The 'full assurance of faith'[38] was that that prayer would be answered. The parish church, great or small, was the place of meeting. The psalmist spoke of going 'to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday'.[39] That the people of St Teilo's would indeed have done, Sunday by Sunday and in some cases day by day. But the multitude included not just their friends and neighbours, with whom they conversed freely and familiarly. It included the saints and the company of heaven, who, like the angel with Tobit[40], walked with them and protected them on the journeying of life.

---

buboe or sore on his thigh.) His assistance was widely invoked not just in cases of plague, but as a protection against many forms of epidemic and endemic disease.

[36] For a discussion of this, and related ideas, see my *What did the poets see? A theological and philosophical reflection* (Aberystwyth, University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 2002).

[37] Ibid. p.15.

[38] Hebrews 10: 22.

[39] Psalm 42: 4.

[40] The story of Tobit and the Angel appears in the apocryphal Book of Tobit, particularly chapters 5-12.