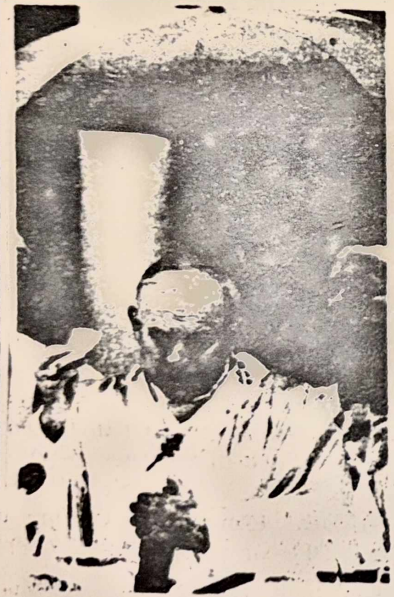
MUD, THE MASS, AND THE MASSES

The day the Pope came to Boston, God rained on the masses. As the darkness gathered, the Chief Pastor of the universal church approached the marble-white, elevated altar, positioned in the center of the elegantly covered platform on the Boston Common. He seemed luminous in the glow of dozens of freestanding spotlights. As this successor of St. Peter began to offer the ancient sacrifice of the Mass, he appeared to be lifted up, as if he were hovering in some heavenly world. Meanwhile, the rest of the faithful,



(RNS Photo)

except for a few fortunate bishops gathered with the Pope, felt the torrential rains running down their faces, soaking through their clothes, chilling their limbs, filling their shoes. The masses slowly began to realize that their feet were sinking deeper into the morass of mud that was Boston Common.

The authorities of the Boston archdiocese had planned it all differently. The processions, the chanting and the choral music, accompanied by trumpets and clouds of incense, were to have carried, as on angels' wings, a celestial sanctity to all who stood there, and beyond through televison to the whole nation. But the rain drowned out the celestial sanctity, and the cold mud that oozed unceremoniously around the people's feet made it clear to them, if not the TV onlookers, that this historic papal Mass was very much of this world, not only of some other. The three hundred richly robed priests, assembled to administer the Bread of Heaven to the masses, moved apprehensively into the dark soggy Common, where thousands huddled together under umbrellas and makeshift plastic covers.

Plato once took up the question whether there is an eternal idea for mud. Regarding the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, he had no doubts. Surely, too, in Platonic perspective, the philospher king could contemplate eternal tree-ness in every individual tree. But mud? Could there be such an eternal reality as mud-ness? Mud seemed too much of a trifle for the Platonic mind, too much of the stuff of this passing world, too much sheer material bondage, to be able to exemplify any heavenly light.

Notwithstanding its long flirtation with the seductive spiritualistic dualism of classical culture, Chrisitanity is essentially a religion of mud-ness. Nothwithstanding the soaring Gothic heights and the exalted scholastic speculators, Christianity was, as a matter of fact, born in a stable. Originally, at least, cleanliness was not next to godliness. Rather, hay and straw, manure and mud, were the divine milieu. Likewise, the Christian view of human dignity was originally and thoroughly Hebraic — "Adam" means "of the earth"— rather than classical. And its highest apirations have always accented the vision of a new earth as well as a new heaven, resurrection of the body as well as life eternal for the soul, justice in civic affairs, as well as justification before God, loving one's neighbors as well as loving God.

This, it would appear, is why God rained on the masses during the historic Mass of October 1, 1979, a dousing of unavoidable earthly humility for any who harbored spiritual pride in their hearts, befitting Yom Kippur, the Day of Attonement. The downpour was a heavenly reminder that, indeed, all flesh is grass and that the gospel which the Pope preached to the affluent citizens of America — calling for renewed commitment to Christ and a turning away from the glut of our materialism — was and is, in truth, a gospel for the dark muddy world in which we daily live, as well as for the consummated world of peace and light that is to come.

"Thy Kingdom come," we all joined the Pope in saying, "on earth as it is in heaven." Those of us who stood in those rains for two hours, ankle deep in the muck of this world, were being instructed from on high, with a touching divine irony, to heed the mundane words — not to be taken in by the ethereal heavenly image — of this powerfully simple, genuinely humble universal pastor, our bishop, John Paul II, in a way that we now can grasp, only in retrospect. Then, during the Mass itself, for all the masses on the Common, maybe for the bishops near the altar, and perhaps at moments even for the Holy Father himself, the whole deluge seemed to be a disaster, some kind of divine rejection, reminiscent of Noah. Now, upon reflection, we know, what then maybe just the Pope understood, if anyone did, that the mud and the Mass and the masses were all meant for each other.

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