

THE BLESSING AND USE OF PALMS.

It would be superfluous to begin by stating that the blessing of palms and carrying them in procession derives its origin from the action of the people in Jerusalem in going out to meet our Saviour on the Sunday before He died, and conducting Him in triumph into the city; spreading their garments, and strewing branches of trees on the way for the humble animal which He rode to tread upon. But this very action prompts the reflection that this must have been a customary manner of showing respect to a person of distinction, else why did the people resort to it so naturally on this occasion? Turning to the Sacred Scriptures, we find the bearing of palm branches to have been one of the principal ways of manifesting joy; and one not only approved but commanded by God, at the time of the foundation of the Jewish religion. When the people assembled in the fall of the year, after the gathering in of the harvest, to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, God said to them, as we read in Leviticus (xxiii, 40): "You shall take to you on the first day the fruits of the fairest tree, and branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God." This custom was observed among the Jews as long as they existed as a nation. In the Second Book of Machabees (x, 7) it is recorded that, after the temple was purified from the defilements to which it had been subjected by the enemies of God's people, the Jews rejoiced, as they had formerly been accustomed to do on the Feast of Tabernacles; and "therefore they now carried boughs and green branches and palms for Him that had given them good success in cleansing His place." The martyrs too, those who have secured the only real triumph, are represented among the blessed carrying palms in their hands (Apocalypse, vii, 9).

Nor was the bearing of palms confined to religious triumph. The palm is the recognized symbol of victory throughout the world, as the olive-branch is of peace. Philo relates that the Agrippa carried palms and flowers on his entry into Jerusalem; and Josephus tells us the same of Alexander the Great.

The palm is admirably adapted to symbolize. It is one of the most useful of Oriental trees. Its foliage forms a delightful shade in those hot countries; it supplies dates, a delicious and useful fruit; and a species of wine exudes from its bark. It is thus emblematic of the overshadowing protection of Divine Providence, the strength of supernatural grace, and the nourishment which our Saviour gives us in the Holy Eucharist.

Great variety of opinion exists with regard to the date of the introduction of the blessing of palms into the ceremonial of the Church; and it is impossible to fix it with precision. The custom is admitted, however, to be of ancient origin. Among the works of St. John Chrysostom there is a sermon on Palm-Sunday; but it is held by some writers that it is not genuine, and has been interpolated. Martene, a reliable authority on such matters, asserts that no vestige of the ceremony of blessing palms can be found before the eighth or ninth century; and a Roman Ordo of the eighth century, edited by Protone, would appear to confirm this opinion, for, treating of the ceremonies of Palm Sunday, it makes no mention of the blessing of palms. But this is only negative testimony, while there is much that is positive on the other side. Meratus, a consulter of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, produces a number of solid arguments which go to prove the antiquity of this rite. Among these is a calendar of the close of the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century, edited by Martene himself, in which occur the words: "Palm-Sunday at St. John Lateran—*Dominica ad Palmas ad S. Joannem in Lateranis*." Reference is also made to Palm-Sunday in the Sacramentary of Pope St. Gelasius, who ruled the Church at the close of the fifth century, where occur the words: "Palm-Sunday of the Passion of Our Lord—*Dominica in Palmis de Passione Domini*." Also in the Sacramentary of St. Gregory the Great, who occupied the Chair of Peter at the end of the sixth century mention is made of the faithful who were present at Mass with leaves and palm branches in their hands. Other authorities of the same early date are not wanting, but these are deemed sufficient. Venerable Bede, born in 672, is the first writer in the West to speak of palms; but he is immediately followed by Aldhelm, Bishop of West Saxony (d 709), who also makes mention of them.

The custom of blessing and carrying palms in procession appears to have had its origin in the East. And this is but natural: for, in the Old Law, it was to the East, as we have seen, that God commanded them to be carried; it was in the same region that they were borne before Our Lord; and it was to be expected that those with whom these traditions were local should be the first to imitate them. Most probably the idea of the procession preceded that of the blessing; and the latter was introduced on the general principle that whatever is used by the people of God should first be sanctified by the blessing of the Church. The importance of the event which the procession commemorated would naturally lead to a solemn form for the blessing of the palms to be carried in it.

It may be remarked, in passing, that Palm-Sunday corresponds to the tenth day of the moon, on which the Israelites were commanded to select and set apart the lamb without blemish, that was to be eaten on the Feast of the Passover. It was also customary in the early ages

of the Church to baptize the catechumens either on Holy Saturday or on the eve of Pentecost; and those who were to be received into the Church on the former occasion were examined some days beforehand, and on Palm-Sunday were declared competent to receive the Sacrament of Regeneration. Hence it is sometimes called the "Sunday of the Competent."

According to the rubrics of the Missal the palms presented to be blessed must be the branches of the palm or olive, or other trees. And although it is not expressly stated, it seems proper that the "other trees" taken in place of the palm or olive, where it can not be had, should be some sort of evergreens; at least this is the interpretation put upon the words by the universal practice of the faithful. The spruce or hemlock, being the most common species of evergreen tree, is frequently used; but it is hardly to be recommended, as its leaves soon drop off, and leave nothing but the bare twigs.

According to the directions of the ceremonial, the palms should be distributed to the people at the Communion rail, those receiving them kissing first the palm and then the hand of the celebrant; but this ceremony is not carried out in most of our churches. The palms are more commonly carried through the aisles by the altar boys or others, and given to the people in their pews. There is some excuse for this departure from the ceremonial, but what its precise value is I shall not pretend to say. The church in many places in this country is yet in process of organization, and in most others it is but just organized; and this, like many other ceremonies, it was impossible at first to carry out. A departure from the rubrics took place from sheer necessity; and it has since, it may be said, been generally tolerated. After the distribution of the palms, certain verses of Scripture are read, which, with another prayer, close the blessing, and preparations are made for the procession.

The procession is frequently dispensed with for the same reason as the strict rubrical form of distributing the palms, and it can hardly be said to take place except in the larger churches and cathedrals. Speaking of the hymn "*Gloria, laus et honor*," etc., which is sung during the procession, Cardinal Wiseman remarks: "It is said to have been composed by Abbot Theodulf, when in prison at Angers for a conspiracy against Louis the Pious, and sung by him in a moving strain, as the Emperor in procession, on that Sunday passed, under the prison wall. The words and music touched the offended monarch's heart, and procured the prisoner's liberation. This is said to have taken place in the year 818; and even if the legend be inaccurate, as some have thought, it proves the character and power which the public voice attributed to the composition."

The palms are held in the hand during the reading of the Passion and the Gospel.

Reference might here be made to certain local customs connected with the blessing and procession of the palms, and more especially to those which belong to the Eastern Church. The writer just mentioned informs us that "in the East they have from the earliest ages practised the ceremony of carrying palm and olive branches to the church on Lazarus Sunday, as the eve of Palm-Sunday used to be called, and having them blessed the next day. At Constantinople it was customary for the Emperor to distribute the palms with great solemnity to all his courtiers."

A concluding remark, is however, to be made. The palm is the symbol of victory; but our Divine Redeemer, who gained the greatest of all victories, did so by humbling Himself to death, even the death of the cross, to teach us that all true victories are those won by triumphing over self, with our unruly passions and evil inclinations. The palm is made to teach us this salutary lesson among others; for whatever remains after the distribution is laid aside to be burned for the ashes used on Ash-Wednesday. These ashes, after having been blessed with solemn prayers, are used to mark the Sign of the Cross on our foreheads, the seat of that pride infused into our nature by the arch-enemy of mankind at the time of the fall of our first parents. This solemn ceremony is accompanied with the words, which enhance its solemnity: "Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return." It is only by returning to dust, the doom of all the children of Adam, that we can hope to rise to a new life like our divine Model, to die no more, but to bear to His eternal home and ours the palm of our final victory.—*Ave Maria*.

AN OLD SONG AND ITS ORIGIN EXPLAINED.

"I know a valley fair,
Eileen Aroon.
I know a cottage there,
Eileen Aroon.
Deep in that valley shade,
I know a gentle maid,
Flower of hazel glade,
Eileen Aroon."

CARROLL O'DALY, a Wicklow chieftain of the sixteenth century, was the author of "Eileen Aroon." Apart from the exquisite beauty of the melody and the touching pathos of the words, it possesses an intrinsic interest from the romantic interest attached to its composition.

O'Daly was a man of much culture, a poet and musician. but also