

THE CORONATION

The custom of marking the beginning of a monarch's reign with a special rite is a very ancient one and has come down to us since the time of the Jewish kings. Traces of the coronation of English kings are quite clear even before the Conquest, but, as in the case of the Jewish kings, reference is made more to their anointing than to their crowning. This is so because the anointing and consecration were regarded as the factors making the king. These set him apart from other men as one consecrated and inviolable; as one whom the ancients used to regard as "half-priest". Not all kings were anointed, but those who were claimed greater dignity and were looked upon with greater reverence by their subjects.

Although the present coronation ceremony of the British sovereign contains elements from the Bible, Imperial Rome, Visigothic Spain, Papal Rome and other sources, it stems from the Anglo-Saxon, which with the German rite, influenced all others in Europe. The oldest existing ritual for a coronation is contained in the Pontifical of Egbert, Archbishop of York in the 8th. century, in which we find the title: "*Missa pro regibus in die benedictionis ejus*". Being as the title says, a Mass, it had an Introit, Collect, Lesson and Gospel. Here the ceremony began with the main functions being the anointing of the new king with oil by a bishop, his investiture with a sceptre and staff signifying his power, and the crowning with a "helmet" emblematic of his sovereignty. After the enthronement and kisses of peace, the Mass was resumed. There were many prayers said during these functions, and some are believed to have been adapted from one of the popes, occurring in the Gregorian Sacramentary. From the triple oath that was also taken in this ancient ceremony, there still survives the custom of carrying three naked swords before the monarch. Two of these are pointed and represent the king's former promise to defend the Church (not to suppress it, as some writers would have us believe), and to punish evil-doers. The third which is blunt, signifies the mercy which shall temper his justice.

At the end of the 10th. century, we find a very important change, embodying most of the former, but adding new matter in imitation of coronations on the Continent. Our patron, St. Dunstan, is credited with its compilation for the crowning of King Edgar at Bath in 973,

and most of it is contained in the later Norman-influenced "Liber Regalis" introduced in 1307. The ceremonies of this rite began the day previous to the coronation, with the king remaining that night in the Abbey of Westminster to be instructed by the Abbot on his kingly duties. Next day, after a procession to the main altar where he offered gifts, the monarch was acclaimed by those present and questioned by the archbishop as to his willingness to imitate the just and liberal policy of St. Edward. After this oath, he was anointed on the hands, breast, between the shoulders, on the elbows and on the head to signify the power he was receiving and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which was to be his guide. Thus anointed he was vested with regal robes and the crown of St. Edward was placed on his head. The ceremony and prayers of coronation over, Mass was said at which the newly-crowned monarch Communicated. Of significance is the fact that these ceremonies traditionally took place in the church of Westminster built by St. Edward the Confessor, and that they always took place either during Mass, or (as in the "Liber Regalis" and after), before the Mass. These customs were followed because Westminster successfully contested over other churches for the honor, and in the second instance, the ceremony was always considered essentially religious because of the anointing with the sacred oils, the taking of the oath (in many instances) on the Sacred Host and the Communion of the monarch.

This coronation rite, even though substantially modified at and after the accession of James II, may be considered to form the basis of the present ritual in Great Britain. Today (and since the time of Elizabeth I, for she was the last to use the Latin rite), the ceremony is in English and all Roman features have been carefully suppressed. At the communion service which displaces the Mass of Catholic times, both Her Majesty the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh will partake after the Queen has made the Oblations. The rest of the near three-hour service is well known to all because of the ample coverage it has received in all media of communication, so it will not be described here. But as the purpose of this article is to trace the development of the ceremony and to suggest what it and the institution of monarchy should mean to us, I would recall a few thoughts expressed some time ago by His Eminence James Cardinal McGuigan.

To some the vast preparations of the past months

and the present enthusiasm and joy will have some meaning and justification. To others not reared in the tradition of monarchy, nor appreciative of its significance, it will seem as a waste of time and money as the idea of royalty is to them a lagging vestige of an institution tolerated in the Dark Ages, but which has long since outlived its usefulness. But regardless of opinion, in these days of political, notional and world strife, the British Throne stands as a symbol of peace, unity and devotion to the cause of right. In Britain, although there may be party differences, yet all look to her who is above party; in her the country is always one. Viewing the Commonwealth as almost one-sixth of the peoples of the world bound together in close bonds of loyalty to the British monarch, we have a solid block of nations and a leader to combat the political evils of Communism.

Nor must we ever forget the great respect Christ had for civil authority. If He, the Giver of authority, respected it in the hands of men, how much more should we have regard for a God-given rule that is both just and benign? Our reverence for our Queen is for more than her human qualities, for these she shares with others, but it is rather for the authority of our land which she symbolizes and which God has given her. How much better it is to honor and revere a person rather than a flag or inanimate object which cannot acknowledge our love nor lead us through the trials of life.

Also there is a great deal of emotion necessary for the existence of any nation, for as Pascal says, "The heart has reasons about which the mind knows nothing." In monarchy then, there is something which we cannot fully or logically explain, yet which seems to realize a basic necessity of our human nature, a desire for something great beyond ourselves in which it is nevertheless possible to share.

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"All ambitions are lawful except those which climb upward on the miseries or credulities of mankind."—Joseph Conrad

"If you get simple beauty and naught else,
You get about the best thing God invents."—

—R. Browning