

## ABEL'S PLACE IN THE LITURGY

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WHILE the position of Old Testament saints in the dogmatical, exegetical, and even philosophical tradition offers many interesting aspects, the rise, development, and decline of Christian devotion to them is an important, though rather neglected, chapter in the history of the liturgy. St. Elias is perhaps the only saint of the Old Law, devotion to whom became generally popular outside the limits of strictly liturgical veneration.<sup>1</sup> The liturgical cultus of St. Eliseus is an offshoot of this devotion; it has always been confined to the Carmelite Order and never attained the same popularity as the devotion to St. Elias. The feast of St. Samuel the Prophet is still observed in some places.<sup>2</sup>

### MARTYROLOGY

Of the numerous Old Testament saints still commemorated in the present-day *Roman Martyrology*, Abraham (October 9) is the oldest.<sup>3</sup> In the Middle Ages, when the names of these saints made their appearance in local martyrologies, Noe also was commemorated, in connection with "the anniversary of the great flood."<sup>4</sup>

Abel is the oldest of the Old Testament saints ever to be liturgically venerated.<sup>5</sup> In the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, the eighth-century Irish festology compiled from the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* and amplified by lists of Irish saints, *Abel mac Adae* is entered among the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. N. G. Werling, "St. Elias and the Carmelite Calendar," *Eccl. Rev.*, CV (Sept. 1941), 218-24.

<sup>2</sup> The proper for the Mass of St. Samuel's feast is found in the Roman Missal published at Tournai in 1922 by the Society of St. John the Evangelist.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. "Abraham," *DACL*, I; this article contains important additions to the article on Abel.

<sup>4</sup> *Martyrology of Tallaght* (Publications of the Bradshaw Society, LXVIII), pp. 37, 151; also pp. 37, 169.

<sup>5</sup> The greater part of the article "Abel," *DACL* is iconographical. Valuable additions to this side of the tradition of Abel are to be found in Leonie Reyger's article in *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte* (ed. Otto Schmitt; Stuttgart, 1937), I, 18. The most modern interpretation in art of the tradition of Abel is Jack B. Yeats' painting, *The Blood of Abel*.

Irish saints for commemoration on both October 11 and April 22.<sup>6</sup> In the twelfth-century festology composed in Gaelic verses by Abbot Marianus Gorman, *Abel normac* (the great son) *Adaim* is mentioned only on April 22.<sup>7</sup>

“COMMENDATIO ANIMAE”

The only reference to *Saint* Abel in the present day Roman Liturgy is at the beginning of the Litany of the Saints in the Order of the *Commendatio Animae*,<sup>8</sup> where, between the invocation of the Blessed Virgin and the Holy Angels on the one hand, and of St. John the Baptist on the other, we find the invocations “Sancte Abel . . . Omnis chorus Justorum . . . Sancte Abraham”—invocations proper to this litany, which is otherwise shorter than the ordinary Litany of the Saints.

The invocations of SS. Abel and Abraham are not found in the medieval litanies of the *Commendatio Animae*.<sup>9</sup> In Martène's *Ordo* (xi) of extreme unction,<sup>10</sup> we find the collective invocations “Omnes SS. Patriarchae et Prophetae . . . Omnes SS. Justi et Perfecti”—the only groups not represented by individual saints in that litany. *Ordo* (xii) has only the collective invocation “Omnes SS. Justi et Electi Dei.” Dom Gougaud pointed out that the source for the invocation

<sup>6</sup> *Martyrology of Tallaght*, pp. 78, 35; also p. 231.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Publications of the Bradshaw Society, IX, 83 f. O'Hanlon, *Lives of Irish Saints*, IV, 257, regards this saint as an Irish St. Abel Mc Aedh. The name of Abel seems to have been quite common in the medieval Irish Church. St. Abel, an eighth-century bishop of Rheims, whose cult did not originate until the fifteenth century, is said to have been of Irish descent; cf. Holweck, *Biographical Dictionary of the Saints*. There was an anchorite named Abel in Armagh (died 1159), as Lynch states in *De Praesulibus Hiberniae* (ed. Doherty; 1944), I, 152.

As Marianus claims to have corrected errors in date made by the earlier Irish festologies, it would be interesting to know on what authority he accepted Abel's commemoration on Apr. 22 and rejected the commemoration on Oct. 11. None of the ancient manuscripts of the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* has the name of Abel (cf. the index to Quentin's edition, 1931); the same is true of the other Irish calendars (Oengus and Drummond). Holweck, *op. cit.*, says that the Coptic calendar commemorates St. Abel on Dec. 28, but he does not say whether there was any liturgical cult attached to Abel's tomb at Damascus. Holweck also lists two Eastern saints who bear the name of Abel.

<sup>8</sup> *Rituale Romanum*, tit. v, c. vii.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Dom Gougaud's study on the *Commendatio Animae* in *Ephemerides Liturgicae*, XLIX (1935), 3 ff.

<sup>10</sup> *De Ant. Eccles. Ritibus* (Bassani, 1788), I, 312 ff.

of St. Abel in the litany prescribed by the Ritual of Pius V was a litanic *Oratio Sancti Gregorii Papae* which contains the petition: "Ora pro me, sancte Abel, qui primus coronatus es martyrio."

In the present-day litany of the *Commendatio Animae*, Abel is mentioned as "the first man to suffer death," while Abraham is mentioned because it is when relating his death that Holy Scripture refers for the first time to the belief in immortality (Gen. 25:8).<sup>11</sup> References to Old Testament saints are a characteristic of the *Commendatio Animae*. Already in the prayer *Post Obitum Hominis* in the *Gelasian Sacramentary*,<sup>12</sup> we find references to "our<sup>13</sup> patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," and to the return of the Israelites from Egypt. The prayer *Libera, Domine* in the present-day Order of the *Commendatio Animae* traces the history of holy souls delivered from death, starting with Henoch and Elias, then from Noe, Abraham, Lot, and Moses, right down to the delivery of St. Peter from prison. This prayer seems to be related to the list of references to Old Testament saints found in St. Clement of Rome,<sup>14</sup> which, in turn, has been often compared with the series of references to saints of the Old Law in the Anaphora of the Antiochian Liturgy, recorded in the *Apostolic Constitutions*.<sup>15</sup> One of the differences between the two lists is the insertion in the latter of the names of Abel and Melchisedech.

Similar lists of Old Testament saints have been found in the Western Church only in Irish sources. In fact, the special devotion to them seems to be another of the numerous links, especially in liturgical matters, between the Eastern and the Irish Churches. This devotion was promoted apparently by the predilection for lists of invocations of individual saints, which is a characteristic feature in early Irish religious literature.

The first group of invocations of saints in the ninth-century litany of *Harl. MS 7653* begins with "Abel justus" and ends with "Melchisedech."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Eisenhofer, *Handbuch der katholischen Liturgik* (Freiburg, 1933), II, 430.

<sup>12</sup> *Gelasian Sacramentary* (ed. Wilson; Oxford, 1894), p. 295 f.

<sup>13</sup> The word "our" is omitted in one manuscript; cf. *ibid.*, p. 300, n. 48.

<sup>14</sup> *Epist. I ad Cor.*, cc. 9-12 (*PG*, I, 227).

<sup>15</sup> Bk. VIII; cf. F. E. Brightman, *Liturgies Eastern and Western* (Oxford, 1896), I, 17.

<sup>16</sup> In *Antiphonary of Bangor* (ed. Warren; Publications of the Bradshaw Society, X), p. 91.

In a note to St. Columba's hymn *Altus Prosator*,<sup>17</sup> which apparently had a certain liturgical status, occur these words: "Abel per sacrificium gratia[m] obtinuit." They are followed by references to Noe, Abraham, Moses, and David. They seem to be related to the words *καὶ τοῦ μὲν Ἀβὲλ ὡς ὁσίου προσδεξάμενος [Θεὸς] τὴν θυσίαν* in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which have been studied so often in connection with the reference to Abel in the Canon of the Mass. In the *Apostolic Constitutions* these words are followed by references to Seth, Henoch, Noe, Lot, Abraham, Moses, *et al.* The list of thirty-nine Old Testament saints found in the *Commemoratio pro Defunctis* of the *Stowe Missal*<sup>18</sup> starts with the words "Ablis, zeth, enoc, noe, melchisedech, abraham. . . ."

The words *Abel mac Adaim*, which, as I mentioned before, are found in the Irish festology of Marianus Gorman, occur already in the hymn *Sén Dé* by St. Colman Mac Ui Clusaigh, where Elias, Henoch, Noe, Abraham, Lot, *et al.*, are subsequently referred to.<sup>19</sup> The reference to Abel in this connection is most remarkable when we compare this list of invocations with the petitions in the epilogue of *Féilire Oengusso*, the earliest of the rhymed Irish festologies.<sup>20</sup> These petitions start with the words: "The soul of every son of life through Thee has been sanctified: Adam's race [*síl nAdaim*] that is highest by Jesus has been saved"; then follow references to Elias, Henoch, Noe, Abraham, and Jonas. The parallelism between these petitions and the prayer *Suscipe, Domine* of the *Commendatio Animae* is obvious.

Most interesting references to Abel are made in the early Irish litanies, which, like the festologies, were private devotions rather than definite liturgical prayers. In the Litany of Confession the invocation of Abel is followed by invocations of Noe, Abraham, Moses, Aaron, David, and even Solomon. Abel is invoked in this litany as

<sup>17</sup> *The Irish Liber Hymnorum* (ed. J. H. Bernhard and R. Atkinson; Publications of the Bradshaw Society, XIII-XIV), I, 82.

<sup>18</sup> *Stowe Missal* (ed. Warner; Publications of the Bradshaw Society, XXXII), p. 15 f. This is one of the rare instances where Abel's name is declined; cf. *infra*, footnote 33. The same list is found under the heading *Nomina justorum et prophetarum* in an eleventh-century psalter at Florence (Bibl. Laur. Plut., XVIII, cod. iii, fol. 144); in it, Seth, Melchisedech, and a few other names are omitted (Warren, *Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church* [Oxford, 1881], p. 262).

<sup>19</sup> *Irish Liber Hymnorum*, I, 26; *ibid.*, II, 14, 113 f.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Publications of the Bradshaw Society, XXIX, 283 f.

*cel-mairttr* (first martyr), an early reference to the idea expressed by the litanic *Oratio Sancti Gregorii Papae* and by the use in the Mass for the feast of St. Stephen of the only reference made to Abel in the Gospels.

In the Irish litany, "I entreat Thee, O Holy Jesus," the sixteenth invocation, "By all those who had intelligence in the law of nature," mentions "Aibel," Seth, Elias, Henoch, Noe, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>21</sup> When these invocations are compared with similar references to individual representatives of groups of saints in *Féilire Oengusso*, the absence of the name of Abel from the latter work is remarkable.

#### THE CANON OF THE MASS

The best known and, at the same time, the oldest reference to Abel in the Roman liturgy is found in the prayer *Supra quae* in the Canon of the Mass. The oldest Latin source for the words "sicuti accepta habere dignatus es munera pueri tui justii Abel" is the *Liber de Sacramentis*.<sup>22</sup> But in earlier Eastern records there are striking parallels to these words. An oblation prayer in the Jacobite Syrian Liturgy begins: "Deus, qui sacrificium Abel in campo suscepisti."<sup>23</sup> (This is followed by references to Noe, Abraham, David, and Elias.) The Anaphora of Nestorius says: "Suscipiatur et haec oblatio, ut ea Abel et Noe beati: Abrahamque et Job justii: Isaac filii promissionis." The most direct forerunner of the prayer found in the *Liber de Sacramentis*, however, seems to be in the Liturgy of St. Cyril of Alexandria, where we read: "Suscipe ea super altare tuum spirituale, caelesti cum odore thuris, ad majestatem tuam caelestem, per ministerium Angelorum et Archangelorum tuorum sanctorum, sicut ad te suscepisti munera justii Abel et sacrificium patris nostri Abrahami. . . ." While it is obvious that this passage contains the rudiments of the prayers *Supra quae* and the subsequent *Supplices*, it should also be noted that it seems to foreshadow the invocation of Old Testament saints in the litanies, notably the just—represented by Abel—and the patriarchs—

<sup>21</sup> *Irish Litanies* (ed. C. Plummer; Publications of the Bradshaw Society, LXII), 4 f., 32 f.

<sup>22</sup> IV, 6, 27; cf. A. Fortescue, *The Mass* (London, 1922), p. 131.

<sup>23</sup> The three quotations which follow are from "Abraham," *DACL*, I.

represented by Abraham—after the invocation of the holy angels and archangels.

The reference to “*summus sacerdos Melchisedech*” is found in the fifth-century *Quaestiones Veteris et Novi Testamenti*,<sup>24</sup> but, as I mentioned before, is foreshadowed in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, where the names of Abel, Abraham, and Melchisedech appear as closely linked as in our prayer *Supra quae*.

### *Justus*

The references in the Canon to the saints of the Old Law indicate that the faithful should make their sacrifice acceptable to God by offering it in the same spirit as those saints did. In the New Testament they are repeatedly referred to as examples of faith. The definition of faith as “the substance of things to be hoped for” (Heb. 11:1) is explained by the tradition from Abel to Henoah, Noe, and the three patriarchs. The words, “*Fide plurimam hostiam Abel, quam Cain, obtulit Deo, per quam testimonium consecutus est esse justus, testimonium perhibente muneribus ejus Deo*” (Heb. 11:4), are used in the liturgy only in the course of the reading of the Epistle to the Hebrews during the sixth week after the Epiphany. The expression “Abel justus” was hallowed through the use made of it by Christ Himself (Matt. 23:35; cf. Wis. 10:3) and eventually led to the invocation of Abel as leader of the *chorus Justorum*. The Ambrosian Liturgy has a Preface which speaks of “*hostia cujus figuram Abel Justus instituit.*”

The word *justus* has in this connection the original objective meaning attached to it in virtue of its relationship with the verb *jungere*. *Justus* is literally “one who is joined, connected, or linked up”; it applies both to God’s union with man and to man’s union with God. The same idea of connection underlies all the other fundamental expressions of our relations with God, such as *amor* (linguistically related with our word “same”), *pax*, and *religio*. On the other hand, both the Epistle to the Hebrews and the liturgy<sup>25</sup> propose the Old

<sup>24</sup> Fortescue, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>25</sup> Collect for the feast of the Holy Machabees, Blessing of the Palms, Prayer after the Second Prophecy on the Vigil of Pentecost, Prayer after the Tenth Prophecy on Holy Saturday, and also the Collect for the Nativity of St. John the Baptist.

Testament saints to us as examples of subjective<sup>26</sup> rather than of objective faith.

### *Accipere*

Instead of the words, "sicuti accepta habere dignatus es," the *Liber de Sacramentis* actually has: "Sicut suscipere dignatus es." *Suscipere* is used also in the Latin translations of the references to Abel's sacrifice in the Greek (for *προσδέχομαι*) and Syriac Liturgies. It seems to emphasize the objective interpretation of Abel's justice—an interpretation which was revived in the late medieval prayer of the Blessing of Gold, Incense, and Myrrh on the feast of the Epiphany: "Suscipe haec munera, sicut suscepisti sacrificium Abel justi (et sicut munera a tribus Magis suscepisti)."<sup>27</sup> Abel's justice was not so much his subjective virtue as the objective union established with him by God when taking "up" his offerings. However, the early interpretations of the fourth chapter of Genesis<sup>28</sup> see Abel's justice rather in his symbolizing Christ and Christians (in contrast to Cain's symbolizing the Jews). Hugh of St. Victor seems to have been the first to state expressly that Abel's offerings pleased God, not of themselves, but because of the merit of him who offered them.<sup>28b</sup> Similarly, the Roman Canon, like the Epistle to the Hebrews, suggests that Abel's gifts were accepted, or rather, acceptable, because they were offered in the right spirit of faith.

*Suscipere* implies a strictly vertical order, but *accipere* (*προσδέχομαι*) suggests a horizontal order, an exchange of gifts rather than an imputation of justice as a free and undeserved grace. In the Vulgate, *accipere* is more often applied to man, and *suscipere* to God. The expression "accepta habere" occurs also in the prayer *Te igitur*, which

<sup>26</sup> The *Regula S. Columbani*, § 8 (cf. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, I, 45) applies to Abel another very appropriate adjective: "Abel pius bona elegit, Cain vero mala incoepit [or: Cain vero impius in mala incidit]." "Pius" implies here the idea of obedience to the father and love for the brother (Gen. 4:9). Compare the invocation "pie Jesu," which occurs twice in the *Dies Irae*. Compare "bona" with "melius" in Heb. 12:24 and in the Secret for the feast of the Most Precious Blood.

<sup>27</sup> *Rituale Romanum*, "Benedictiones non reservatae," n. 4; cf. Franz, *Geschichte der kirchlichen Benediktionen* (Freiburg, 1909), I, 430.

<sup>28</sup> Ambrosius, *De Cain et Abel*, I, 7, 26 (*PL*, XVI, 1215); also Isidore of Seville, *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum*, VI, 28 (*PL*, LXXXIII, 228).

<sup>28b</sup> *PL*, CLXXV, 44.

shows that at an early stage *accipere* had lost the meaning of "gracious acceptance," so that the petition "uti accepta habeas" had to be reinforced by the subsequent petition "et benedicas." Similarly, in the Gregorian Secret Prayer for the seventh Sunday after Pentecost, the petition made in the prayer *Supra quae* of the Canon is amplified as follows: "Accipe sacrificium a devotis tibi famulis, et pari benedictione, sicut munera Abel, sanctifica."<sup>29</sup> *Accipere* (and *suscipere*), *benedicere*, and *sanctificare* are more definite interpretations of *respicere*,<sup>30</sup> which is used in Gen. 4; for this word also tended to become "neutral" in its meaning.

### *Respicere*

Both the Vulgate and the liturgy use *respicere* chiefly in the general sense of "look upon" or "take into consideration."<sup>31</sup> But with regard to God, to whom this verb is most often applied, the implication is that His attention and consideration are, *per se*, grace. Still, the beginning of the prayer *Supra quae* suggests the possibility that *respicere* may not be the same as *accipere*, or rather, *suscipere*: "Offerimus praeclaræ majestati tuæ de tuis donis ac datis, hostiam<sup>32</sup> . . . Panem . . . et Calicem. . . . *Supra quae* propitio ac sereno vultu respicere [*aspicere* in the *Stowe Missal*] digneris: et accepta habere. . . ." The *Liber de Sacramentis* has here: "Petimus et precamur ut hanc oblationem suscipias in sublimi altari tuo per manus angelorum tuorum, sicut suscipere dignatus es. . . ." The first part of the latter passage, "petimus . . . tuorum," is obviously related to the prayer "Supplices te rogamus, omnipotens Deus: jube hæc perferri per manus sancti Angeli tui in sublime altare tuum," which in the Canon follows upon the *Supra quae*. The *Liber de Sacramentis*, like the Latin version of

<sup>29</sup> Dom Cabrol, "Abel," *DACL*, quotes a parallel text from *Auctuarium Solesmense*, I, 96.

<sup>30</sup> Another equivalent word, sc., *exaudire*, is understood when Moses speaks of the "vox sanguinis [Abel] clamantis" (Gen. 4:9), and when the Secret for the feast of the Most Precious Blood (= Heb. 3:14) speaks of Abel's sacrifice as "loquens."

<sup>31</sup> E.g., "Infirmitatem nostram respice"; this is the Collect for the feast of a bishop and martyr outside Paschal time (Gregorian).

<sup>32</sup> The *Liber de Sacramentis* has here: "Offerimus tibi hanc immaculatam hostiam"; but the Eastern liturgies refer to "Thy gifts" (*ἐκ τῶν ὁσίων δώρων*: Alexandria) or even to "Thy property" (*τὰ σὰ ἐκ τῶν ὁσίων*: Byzantine and Armenian). Cf. Fortescue, *op. cit.*, pp. 131, 364 f.

the Liturgy of St. Cyril of Alexandria, here again prefers the verb *suscipere*. The words, "propitio ac sereno vultu respicere digneris," may be compared with "siquidem benigno vultu quemadmodum sacrificium Abelis aspexit sacrificium Filii" in the works of Procop of Gaza.<sup>33</sup> Similar expressions have been traced in the fourth-century Syrian Liturgy and in the Alexandrian Liturgy.<sup>34</sup> Is there a deliberate contrast between this expression and the reference to Cain's "vultus concisus" (Gen. 4:5)? In the Vulgate, the word *vultus*, when applied to God, never occurs in conjunction with an adjective; nor does the imperative *respice*, when addressed to God, take an adverb. The qualification of these expressions by attributes is peculiar to the liturgy. The petition "respice propitius" is found already in the Leonine Secret prayer for the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost. These qualifications sometimes become still more emphatic: the *Benedictio Cinerum* has, in its second prayer, "benignissime respice." The ancient meaning of *respicere* appears to be almost reversed in the petition "ne respicias peccata mea," which, since the thirteenth century, is made in the prayer after the *Agnus Dei*.

### *Munera*

Though Genesis does not say that the offering of sacrifices was instituted or suggested by God, but rather describes it as a spontaneous and free act of man, the liturgy preserves the ancient idea that our offerings are "dues." There is obviously a reference to Gen. 4:3 f. when the prayer of the *Benedictio super Fruges et Vineas*<sup>35</sup> speaks of "has primitias creaturae tuae" and of our thanksgiving "de tuis muneribus." Gen. 4:4 says that Abel offered of the *firstlings* of his flock; that Cain offered *primitiae* of the fruits of the earth is not said. St. Ambrose<sup>36</sup> establishes a "double fault" of Cain: first, he did not offer at once, but "post multos dies"; secondly, he made his offerings simply of the fruits, not "ex primis fructibus." The word *primitiae* occurs in the Bible first in Exod. 22; yet the tradition of first-fruit offerings may be traced back to Abel.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> PL, LXXXVII, 689 f.

<sup>34</sup> Fortescue, *op. cit.*, p. 349.

<sup>35</sup> This blessing dates from the seventh century. It is found in the *Gelasian Sacramentary* and was among the few blessings inserted in the first edition of the *Rituale Romanum* (tit. viii, c. x.).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *supra*, footnote 28.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *infra*, footnote 44.

There is no fundamental difference between the subjective and the objective interpretation of Abel's justice. That our gifts are not only accepted by God, but also acceptable to Him, is the corner-stone of Catholic teaching, in contrast to that of Luther and Calvin. On the one hand, both justice and offerings are gifts from God. All that we offer, either spiritually or materially, is nothing but the due return we give to our Creator. Whenever we offer the divine majesty of His gifts and blessings, we recall the words used in Gen. 4. On the other hand, *munera* applies both to God's gifts to man and to man's gifts to God. In fact, the very dignity of our gifts is established by the application to them of the same word, *munera*, that is applied to the gifts made to us by God.<sup>38</sup> Thus, we may say that the important position held by Abel in the liturgy is based on the fact that whenever offerings and gifts are mentioned, there is allusion, in a certain historical sense, to his sacrifice.

The reference to the sacrifices of Abel, Abraham, and Melchisedech in the post-Consecration prayer asking for acceptance of the Sacrifice is "almost universal."<sup>39</sup> The Anaphora of the Antiochian Liturgy significantly changed "Ἀβελ ὁ δίκαιος (*justus*: Matt. 23:35) into "Ἀβελ ὁ ὁσιος, thus foreshadowing the invocation of St. Abel as leader of all the just. In the Anaphora of Nestorius, as we saw, Abel and Noe are called "beati," and Abraham and Job "justi." It is not clear, though, whether in this passage these adjectives do not apply to the second name of the two pairs only, and whether they have a definite meaning.

#### OFFICE

The story of Abel's offering (Gen. 4:1-7) is the first lesson of the first nocturn of Thursday after Septuagesima Sunday; almost a week before, Heb. 11 is read.<sup>40</sup> The second lesson of the first nocturn is the account of Cain's murder (vv. 8-12); the third lesson, of God's curse on Cain (vv. 13-16). These lessons are an excellent illustration

<sup>38</sup> Compare "Ejus . . . Abel . . . munera" (Heb. 11:4) with "tua munera" (*Benedictio super Fruges*).

<sup>39</sup> Fortescue, *loc. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> The reading of Genesis at the beginning of Lent was an established custom in the time of St. Augustine; cf. my forthcoming article, "Genesis Chapter I in the Liturgy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.

of the superiority of liturgical pericopes over the subdivision of Holy Scripture into chapters.

The only other section of the early part of Genesis read in the liturgy is Gen. 1:1–2:1, the first of the prophecies of Holy Saturday. Neither the story of the fall nor that of Cain and Abel is read in the prophecies, the final doctrinal instruction received by the catechumens; the second prophecy is Gen. 5–8, the story of Noe. Yet the prayer after the first prophecy thus alludes to the stories of the fall, and of Cain and Abel: “Da nobis, quaesumus, contra oblectamenta peccati, mentis ratione persistere.” Cain’s *de-mentia* is clearly referred to in Gen. 4:5: “Iratu est Cain vehementer, et concidit vultus eius.”<sup>41</sup> Does the memory of Cain’s *ira* still survive in the petition “ab ira et odio et omni mala voluntate, libera nos, Domine”?

In the Office at the beginning of Lent, the story of the fall is given great prominence. Consisting as it does of Gen. 4:9 f., the responsory after the third lesson for Wednesday after Septuagesima Sunday anticipates the special aspect under which the whole of Gen. 4 is to be read on the following day. This responsory was already read after the ninth lesson on Septuagesima Sunday, for which the nineteenth homily of Pope Gregory was fittingly chosen and perhaps actually designed; for it refers both to the Gospel of the day (Matt. 20:1–16) and to the book of Genesis, the reading of which starts on this Sunday. God, the householder of the vineyard, says St. Gregory, “it is that hath the Church for a vineyard that ceaseth not to bring forth branches of the true vine, from Abel the just to the last of the elect that shall be born in the world.” Thus the objective basis of Abel’s justice, namely, his election by God, is emphasized. Then follow references to Adam, Noe, Abraham, and Moses. While thus outlining, at the beginning of the year (March 25), the whole tradition of sacred history, this lesson calls Abel the firstborn of all the saints. There is a clear ascent from Abel’s maculate conception (Gen. 3:16 and 4:1) to St. John the Baptist’s sanctification in the womb,<sup>42</sup> to

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Wis. 10:3. The Syrian Anaphora clearly refers to this passage; after the reference to Abel, it continues with a reference to Cain (*ἀδελφοκτόνος*), whom God turned away as *ἐναγής*. *Iustus* (Matt. 23:35): *δαίος* (Anaphora) = *Injustus* (Wis. 10:3): *ἐναγής* (Anaphora).

<sup>42</sup> The Preface of the Consecration of an Altar calls Abel “precursor.”

the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin; each of these instances is representative of a distinct state of nature.

The same responsory (Gen. 4:9 f.) is once more read after the third lesson of Saturday after Septuagesima Sunday, which consists of Gen. 5:28-31. The first lesson of the following day begins with the second part of Gen. 5:31, "Noe vero . . .," which also begins the second prophecy of Holy Saturday. Thus the responsory Gen. 4:9 f. forms the frame for the reading of Gen. 2-5, the chapters omitted between the first and the second prophecy. This responsory is the summary of the story of the fall, and, indeed, the record of the climax of human corruption, the very opposite of the "greatest commandment," in which Christ summed up "the law and the prophets." (Matt.22:37-39).<sup>43</sup>

#### ABEL MARTYR

The account of the truly abysmal corruption of human nature (Gen. 4:9 ff.) is not referred to in the administration of sacraments or in any liturgical function except the consecration of an altar. It is on the altar that the offering is made which atones even for the sin of Cain and his followers, "sanguinis aspersio melius loquens quam Abel" (Heb. 12:24). The Preface of the Consecration of an Altar<sup>44</sup> prays, "ut tibi sit altare hoc ut illud, quo Abel, salutaris mysterii in passione praecursor, jugulatus a fratre novo sanguine imbuit et sacrauit."<sup>45</sup> This is an interesting illustration of the free use made by

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the invocation of patriarchs and prophets in the Litanies, following upon or virtually comprising the invocation of St. Abel. It may be mentioned that the most important modern reference made to Gen. 4:9 f. is found in the Encyclical *Casti Connubii* when the Pope speaks of murder for "eugenic reasons."

<sup>44</sup> *Pontificale Romanum*, "De altaris consecratione quae fit sine Ecclesiae dedicatione," pars 2. There follow references to Abraham, Melchisedech, and Moses. The preface for the consecration of a portable altar, which is much shorter, says: "Qui post offendicula lapsus primi hominis, instituisti tibi offerri propitiatorii delibamenta libaminis [the word *libamen* seems to have here the original meaning of drink-offering with regard to the *aspersio sanguinis*]; ut culpa, quae praecesserat per superbiam, futuris temporibus expiaretur per munera, quibus honorarentur altaria, honorificarentur et altaria [the original identity of offerings laid down on the altar for God and those made for the sustenance of the priesthood and the temple]." There follow references to Noe, Abraham, Jacob, and, later, Melchisedech; the absence of the name of Abel is remarkable.

<sup>45</sup> "Consurrexit Cain adversus fratrem suum Abel et interfecit eum" (Gen. 4:8). The Douay version translates: ". . . and slew him"; cf. "homicidium" (Wis. 10:3). The word

the liturgy of biblical texts. The biblical account expressly says that Abel was murdered, not on the altar, but "abroad . . . in the field" (Gen. 4:8). The idea that he was slain on the altar was probably suggested by the only passage where Christ Himself referred to Abel: "Ut veniat super vos omnis sanguis justus, qui effusus est super terram, a sanguine Abel justi usque ad sanguinem Zachariae, quem occidistis inter templum et altare" (Matt. 23:35).<sup>46</sup>

The only instance where this latter passage is used liturgically is the Gospel for the feast of St. Stephen. Abel is thus made the Old Testament counterpart of the Protomartyr, and, as we have seen, the Irish Litany of Confession actually calls him "first martyr." The whole conception of martyrdom, so fundamental for the constitution of the Church and for her devotional and liturgical life, is here referred to the contemplation of the fact that the first human being to die was murdered because of his election by God. Perhaps the beginning of the Gregorian Secret Prayer for the feast of St. Stephen—"Suscipe, Domine, munera pro tuorum commemoratione Sanctorum"—is another link with the commemoration of St. Abel; the relationship between this prayer and the version in the *Liber de Sacramentis* of what is now the prayer *Supra quae* in the Canon seems to be obvious.

The murder of his brother caused Cain to make the first confession related in Holy Scripture: "Major est iniquitas mea, quam ut veniam merear" (Gen. 4:13). The initial word, "major," may remind us of the "mea maxima culpa" in the *Confiteor*—a phrase which has not been traced back further than the eleventh century. Another liturgical association with this passage is the profession of our faith in God as "non aestimator meriti, sed veniae largitor," in the still later prayer *Nobis quoque peccatoribus*. The decisive significance which the passage Gen. 4:1-16 has with regard to scriptural teaching on our redemption is stressed by the fact that during the first nocturn on both Septuagesima Sunday and the following Thursday the same responses are read after the three sections of this passage. The consequences of the fall manifested in Cain's anger and hardheartedness

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*jugulare* (literally: to cut the throat) would appear anachronistic. In the Vulgate, it occurs only in Old Testament passages. In the tradition it is used also of the death of Christ.

<sup>46</sup> For Zacharias, cf. the eighth lesson of the Office of Dec. 26.

are contrasted with the glory and goodness of God manifested in the creation as related in the lessons of the first nocturn of Septuagesima Sunday.

Christ Himself entrusted His Church with the teaching that at the very bottom of human corruption the innocent death of *Abel justus* was the first stepping-stone towards the restoration of holiness which remained in itself uncorrupted, though ineffective, during the dark ages between the fall of our first parents and the death of Christ. Celebrating the "festa paschalia, in quibus verus ille Agnus occiditur, qui pro nobis Adae peccatum solvit," the *Exultet* points in a certain measure to the prefiguration of the true Lamb in the sacrifice offered by Abel the shepherd (Gen. 4:2). Even Cain's guilt was "felix," as it was the occasion for the first manifestation of the divine election and forgiveness of fallen mankind. Abel, rejected by his brother, became the corner-stone of natural justice.<sup>47</sup>

This relationship between the lamb offered by Abel and the true Lamb offering Himself on the cross and on the altar is emphasized by the use of Heb. 12:24 in the latest liturgical reference to Abel: in the Secret Prayer for the feast of the Most Precious Blood, dating from the early nineteenth century, the repetition of the sacrifice offered by Christ is called "aspersio super altaria sanguinis melius loquens quam Abel." Thus the tradition of blood-offerings is traced right back to the first sacrifice offered by man. Abel's offering of a lamb was raised to a dignity which permits its comparison with the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, because of the martyrdom he suffered for its gracious acceptance by God. The fulfilment of Abel's sacrifice in the mingling of his blood with the blood of his lamb shows us not only that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is connected with the commemoration of martyrs, but also that it implies in those who offer it preparedness for actual martyrdom.<sup>48</sup> The word *loquens* (λαλοῦντι) may be regarded as an expression uniting the subjective and objective aspects of Abel's sacrifice: "Vox sanguinis fratris tui clamat ad me." The word *melius* (κρείττον)<sup>49</sup> points to the significance of scriptural and liturgical

<sup>47</sup> Cf. I Pet. 2:7, one of the favorite passages in the rite for the consecration of an altar.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Salomon Gessner, *Der Tod Abels* (1758). This influential work, one of the few in world literature exclusively to treat the story of Abel, was frequently translated into English.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *supra*, footnote 26.

teaching on St. Abel with regard to the Catholic doctrine on the state of fallen nature. According to classical Protestant teaching, the blood of Abel did not speak "less well" than the Blood of Christ, but could not speak at all. In view of the revival in recent years of Calvinist "orthodoxy" through the teaching of Karl Barth and his followers,<sup>50</sup> the specifically Catholic character of the tradition of St. Abel attains topical significance.

#### CONCLUSION

Based on the interpretation through Christ and the Apostles of the account in Genesis of Abel's sacrifice and death, the early stages of this tradition furnish an illustration, hitherto unnoticed, of the much discussed connection between the Eastern and the Celtic Churches. This connection is apparently the basis for the cultus of Old Testament saints in general, a subject of particular interest to doctrinal and liturgical studies.

The references made to Abel in present-day textbooks of the Roman liturgy date from various periods between the fourth and the nineteenth centuries. The liturgical tradition of Old Testament saints is a significant link between the Eastern and the Western Church. While it has actually never been popular, the cultus of St. Abel manifests itself on the most solemn occasions, as in the prayers for the dying—which, like the prayers for the dead, enshrine some of the most ancient parts of the liturgy; in the Canon of the Mass, the Order of the Consecration of an Altar, the Office for the beginning of Lent, and the Proper for the only feast of our Lord which the nineteenth century added to the calendar of the Universal Church.

This tradition embodies the authoritative interpretation through the whole Church of the teaching of the *peccatum per originem ex Adam inductum* and of the first manifestation of original or natural justice. The invocation of Abel as a saint is based on the facts that Christ Himself calls him "justus"; that, with the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Church applies the same words to the sacrifice of the son of Adam and to that of the Son of God; and that the Church repeatedly enforces her petition for the acceptance of her sacrifice

<sup>50</sup> Cf., e.g., Barth's controversies with Emil Brunner especially regarding the latter's *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen* (1931).

by reference to the acceptance of Abel's, the first offering ever made by a human being.

The liturgical tradition of St. Abel is also an interesting illustration of the close relationship between two sources of our faith represented by the interweaving in the liturgy of scriptural texts with texts specially composed by the Church for liturgical purposes. Thus, this teaching touches not only on the point from which the Reformation took its origin—the teaching on grace—but also on what in modern times has more and more become the distinguishing point between Catholics and non-Catholics—the teaching on tradition.