

Rural Piety (1905)

Abstract

In the rituals of piety in a Silesian Catholic village, one glimpses the hierarchies of village life as they were reflected in the church service and the binding power of communal rituals. This excerpt stems from the memoirs of the writer August Scholtis (1901-1969), who grew up in Bolatitz (Bolaticze) in today's Czech Republic.

Source

When my mother decided that I should go to church for the first time, I must have been barely four years old. My older cousin Rudolf had to supervise this first, unforgettable passage to piety. At that time our church was still very small; only after its rebuilding was it spacious, having doubled in size. Only the onion dome, a landmark far and wide, remained unchanged. The rebuilding took place in 1912. Right now, however, I am talking about the year 1905. In the old church, people were almost forced to kneel on top of each other, the children right in front of the altar, on bare tiles. That was very painful on the knees. This kneeling was especially unpleasant in the winter when it was bitter cold, but one was not allowed to get up.

In the two pews of the notables, right in front of the high altar, sat the distillery manager and the estate bailiff [*Gutsinspektor*] with their wives. The rest of the Christian community had to remain on their knees, except for a few farmer families who had inherited ownership of the few church pews. It is from that time that I know the Latin mass by heart, as well as other prayers recited by the priest in front of the high altar. All that entered into me mechanically, and this mechanism of the subconscious has remained with me, at times overwhelming me.

[...]

The magnetic force [...] of village and homeland continues to hold me in its spell. In the village, masses are read for the most diverse purposes, especially for departed souls, at least once a year for decades. It is possible that people are still kissing the priest's hand. A very powerful picture of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, with an omnipresent gaze, always prevented me in my childhood from stealing as much as a pfennig from my parents in this room. Before going to bed and after waking up, I recited there on my knees the Lord's Prayer, along with a Hail Mary, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, at the end another Lord's Prayer for departed relatives. When the morning, noon, and night time bell sounded, I had to say a Hail Mary as a matter of course. It was a compelling law, born of religious reverence, to step out of the house and bend the knee if the priest passed by with the sacrament for the dying, announced by the soft bell of the altar boy or the sexton. Although I have been completely removed from these practices for decades, I would probably still bend my knee reverentially in the middle of the traffic of the metropolis of Berlin and satisfy a mystical urge if I happened to meet a priest on his way to a dying person.

Source of original German text: August Scholtis, *Ein Herr aus Bolatitz: Lebenserinnerungen*. Munich, 1959, pp. 26 and 56; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, pp. 79–80.

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