Victorian Appropriation of Medieval Eucharistic Symbolism:

A comparative analysis of St. Giles Cathedral and *Goblin Market.*

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This article considers the manner in which 'Goblin Market' by Christina Rossetti and St. Giles Cathedral by Augustus Pugin appropriate Medieval Eucharistic symbolism. It first considers the Medieval elements within 'Goblin Market' and the contemporary Anglo-Catholic discussions around those elements. It then considers the Catholic architecture of St. Giles Cathedral, noting the similarities and differences to their Medieval counterparts while positing an explanation. Despite their differences in both form and doctrine, both artefacts reveal parallel trends of Medieval adaptions and desired ends in Victorian England.

Many in nineteenth century England looked to the imagined past for a religious and artistic ideal. The destruction of Catholic practices, iconography, and architecture following the Protestant Reformation incited curiosity and mystery amongst those who grew up amidst the ruins. Artists, architects, poets, and preachers drew from the wealth of knowledge and mystery surrounding Medieval Catholic England to transform and engage contemporary issues. This article will explore two in particular who used Medieval theology to participate in contemporary debates: Augustus Pugin and Christina Rossetti. I will specifically focus on the treatment of Eucharistic symbolism in Pugin's St. Giles Cathedral and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* in order to identify the manner and end of their Medieval appropriations.

Interpretations of *Goblin Market* vary widely - some interpreting from solely a Christian mythological standpoint, and others from a purely secular or feminist perspective.[1] I am not attempting to prove one more valid than the next. I will rather consider solely those, which specifically deal with

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[1] Mary Arseneau, 'Symbol and Sacrament: The Incarnational Aesthetic of Christina Rossetti' (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1991), p.201.

the eating motif, and consider the manner in which this motif references a Medieval understanding of the Eucharist. I will consider how Rossetti's adoption of the Medieval symbol enlightens our understanding of her Victorian Anglo-Catholic context. *Goblin Market* includes various Medieval but increasingly Victorian elements: the Eucharistic sacrifice as feminine, the role of the Second Eve in redemption, the doctrine of the 'Real Presence' in the communion feast and a consequently sacramental view of the physical world, and unity of believers through the communal Eucharistic feast. In both form and content Rossetti utilizes Medieval tropes to explore these contemporary religious issues. Much like the Fairy Tales and Medieval folk tales which she emulates[2] she presents and transforms previously existing imagery. Like it's predecessors, *Goblin Market* contains monsters seeking to lure young children into evil, magical food which has the power to grant and take life, and innocent young maidens whose virtue is threatened.

One of the most discussed elements of this ambiguous poem is the feminine saviour, which appears particularly striking when paired with the erotic elements of her salvific act. After Laura has eaten the fruit of the goblin men she falls into such obsession and melancholy that her sister Lizzie braves the temptation of their fruits herself in order to bring the much-desired fruit home to Laura. Though she has never before allowed herself to be drawn toward the goblin's fruits, Lizzie walks amongst them and offers to pay for their tempting products. Despite the goblin's attempts to force food into her mouth, thereby smearing juice all over her face, Lizzie resists their affronts, and returns unbroken (although dirtied and bruised) to her sister. Her words upon returning clearly allude to Christ's words at the last supper, 'Eat me, drink me, love me, Laura, make much of me…'[3] to which Laura responds by covering her sister in kisses while consuming the juice. This narrative, both erotic and Eucharistic, places feminine sacrifice and receptivity at the center of both love and salvation, making this Christological type female.[4]

What is most unique about this salvific figure is her feminine nature as well as gender. As Hill argues, Lizzie saves her sister because of her receptivity and self sacrifice -- even her own metaphorical death.[5] After partaking in the saving juices Laura too falls into her own deathlike sleep. Rossetti writes, 'is this death or life? Life out of death'.[6] An entirely submissive act alone can save the lost sister; just as the sister fell through eating and submitting herself to the goblins, so too must the saviour submit. Yet, the latter must provide that saving fruit for her sister to again partake; it is not enough to take her

[2] B.I. Evans, 'The Sources of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *Modern Language Review*, 28 (1933), pp.156-165.

[3] Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market, and Other Poems* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1862), ll 472-473.

[4] Julie Melnyk, "'Mighty Victims': Women Writers and the Feminization of Christ', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (2003), 131-157.

[5] Marylu Hill, "'Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me": Eucharist and the Erotic Body in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *Victorian Poetry* (West Virginia University Press), 43 (2005) 455-572, (p.462).

[6] Rossetti, ll 524-525.

place. This trope closely alludes to the common Medieval teaching of the Second Eve,[7] in which Mary is thought to have redeemed the sins of her predecessor, the first woman Eve, by providing Christ through her act of submission in carrying him in her womb.

In addition to placing femininity in the center of the Eucharistic feast, Rossetti's use of the Eucharist also exhibits a Medieval understanding of sacrament. According to early church doctrine, the sacraments contained the grace of God regardless of the faith of the recipient. Christians in Victorian England argued at length about the extent to which the Eucharist was effectively salvific or symbolic.[8] In *Goblin Market*, Laura's act of disobedience in eating the fruit enslaved her through obsessive desire to the goblins. She could not be liberated without again eating of the same fruit, but in a new form: spilt on the wounds of her loving sister. It is not Lizzie or Laura's faith which saved Laura but her consumption of the fruit, which Rossetti describes in erotic and deeply physical language, 'she kissed and kissed and kissed her with hungry mouth'.[9]

Rossetti's language praises the sweetness of the fruits, the body which bore them, and the love expressed. This glorification of the physical posits a sacramental view of nature, wherein the physical world can both lead one to God and allow one to experience Him. Hill says of this sacramental philosophy, 'Rossetti is using the body not as a symbol or metaphor but rather as the concrete conduit through which humans understand God. In other words, for Rossetti, humans do not so much transcend the body as they experience the transcendent through it'.[10] This glorification of the physical appears in both the saving power of the fruit and the erotic language in the moment of salvation.[11] The form is also in keeping with the Medieval piety narrative which shocked with physical grotesque realism. In these stories, the Host,[12] symbolically portrayed, not only cleanses the individual of his or her own sins, but also unites the whole community.[13] Most follow a basic form: a sinner has been ostracized from the community and can be restored to unity only through a miracle resulting from the sacred nature of a physical object. Most frequently this sacred object seemed repulsive to the sinner and delightful to the faithful.[14] All of these elements appear in *Goblin Market*, revealing the iconographic vocabulary from which she drew to express her Eucharistic beliefs. In her attempt to express the physical and

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[7] John Singleton 'The Virgin Mary and Religious Conflict in Victorian Britain', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 43 (1992), 16-34, (p.29).

[8] Carol M. Engelhardt, 'Victorians and the Virgin Mary: Religion, National Identity, and the Woman Question in England, 1830-1880' (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1997).

[9] Rossetti, l 494.

[10] Hill, p.456.

[11] Hill, p.462.

[12] The consecrated bread turned into the body of Christ in Catholic doctrine.

[13] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press (2005), pp.113-117.

[14] Duffy, pp.120-131.

sacramental qualities of the Eucharist she keeps with the same Medieval tradition which had expressed it earlier.

Christiana Rossetti's use of these Medieval tropes — the Eucharistic sacrifice as feminine, the role of the Second Eve in redemption, the doctrine of the 'Real Presence' in the communion feast and a consequently sacramental view of the physical world, and unity of believers through the communal Eucharistic feast — reflects contemporary religious dialogues. Many amidst Rossetti's Oxfordian milieu actively sought to return the arts and the church to an imagined Medieval ideal, particularly two groups Rossetti participated in: the Tractarians and the Pre-Raphaelites.[15]

The Tractarians, lead by Edward Pusey, John Henry Newman, and Robert Isaac Wilberforce, began disseminating pamphlets arguing for a Catholic understanding of the 39 articles in 1833 while trying to remain independent of Catholic worship.[16] Into the 40's and 50's the teaching began to alter as Newman converted to Catholicism and many young Anglo-Catholics felt drawn to more Catholic devotional practices.[17] This led to passionate debates around the doctrine of the Real Presence and Mary. In the 1850's Pusey both preached and wrote a defense of the Real of Presence of Christ in the Eucharist;[18] Rossetti frequently attended Christ Church where Pusey regularly preached and certainly heard his views. Newman also argued as early as 1832 for the late Gothic trope of Mary as the Second Eve.[19] By the 1860's Marian devotion had become common-place in Anglo-Catholic practices, although never in a homogeneous form; dissension around the manner and degree of Marian devotion only deepened as the century continued.[20] The Tractarians insisted on the validity of Marian devotion as a fundamental element of the Holy Catholic Church.[21]

Also, like their Catholic precursors, the Tractarians began sisterhoods which all other Anglicans rejected.[22] This celebration of sisterhood, one we know Rossetti admired, allowed women a place to encourage and support each other in a religious context.[23] This glorification of sisterhood appears all throughout *Goblin Market*, from the bond between Laura and Lizzie to the antagonistic qualities of the men. As sisterhoods, both religious and secular, were forming in the Victorian period many women

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[15] M.A. Hanson, 'Eve and the Creation Cycle: Christina Rossetti's Reaction to John Milton's "Paradise Lost"' (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1998), pp.1-174 (pp.25-30).

[16] Hill, p.457; Singleton, p.29.

[17] Engelhardt, pp.8-10.

[18] Edward B. Pusey, *The Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. A sermon, preached before the university, in the Cathedral church of Christ, in Oxford, on the second Sunday after Epiphany, 1853* (England, 1853); Pusey. *The Doctrine of the Real Presence* (Oxford: Parker, 1855).

[19] Singleton, p.29.

[20] Singleton, p.33.

[21] Engelhardt, p.11.

[22] Engelhardt, p.36.

[23] Hanson, p.29.

looked to these communities as a means of independence.[24] The movement combined the femininity of sacrifice, the role of women in redemption, and the communal end of Eucharist; and it lay at the heart of both the Tractarian movement, the Victorian Era, and *Goblin Market*. *Goblin Market* subtly combines both the Eucharistic and Marian controversies, both participating in the conversation and standing as a product of it. The Medieval doctrines and imagery surrounding the Eucharist and Mary provided Rossetti the flexibility to create her own sacramental narrative of the body and feminine salvific tropes.

Also expressing a desire to return to the Medieval,[25] *St. Giles Cathedral* (1846) mimics the Medieval Cathedrals of England while simultaneously exposing its Victorian origins. The following section will explore the Medieval Eucharistic symbolism which Pugin incorporated in his Neo-Gothic Cathedral, St. Giles. To that end, I will consider only the major elements dealing directly with the Eucharist: the High Altar,[26] chancel,[27] and rood screen.[28] In order to understand Augustus Pugin's use of Medieval symbolism we must first briefly explore Medieval High altars themselves, focusing on the three afore-mentioned elements. During the Protestant Reformation in England, the old Catholic liturgical elements and iconography were systematically removed from churches and desecrated, effectively making the Catholic Mass, or celebration of the Eucharist, impossible. Due to the resulting absence of extant complete Medieval High Altars, one must attempt to discern the essential elements from pre-Reformation written descriptions, remaining altars and rood screens, and Victorian illustrations.[29] Most of these sources are from the 14th-15th centuries, hardly making them authoritative. One of the most reliable, Robert Martin, set out in the mid 16th century to describe his church pre-Reformation in an attempt to save that which was lost.[30] He describes in detail the altar of his church, Holy Trinity, and the liturgical practices. Like most Medieval churches, a rood screen separated the high altar from the nave.[31] Most importantly, behind the High Altar a grand retable depicted the scene of Calvary.[32] In his text, Martin frequently lamented the loss of the Crucifix, revealing the impact it had made on him as a child, and the importance of it in the liturgical order.[33]

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[24] Janet G. Casey, 'The Potential of Sisterhood: Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market', *Victorian Poetry*, 29 (1991), 63-78.

[25] Specifically, the Gothic ranging from the 12th-15th centuries.

[26] The location of the consecration of the Eucharist.

[27] The space surrounding the high altar and not accessible to the congregants.

[28] The wall dividing the chancel from the congregation with Christ Crucified depicted on the top.

[29] Justin E. A. Kroesen, 'The Altar and its Decorations in Medieval Churches: A Functionalist Approach', *Medievalia: Revista d'Estudis Medievals*, 17 (2014), 153-183, (p.166).

[30] Duffy, pp.56-70.

[31] The principle section of the church.

[32] Susan Guinn-Chipman, *Religious Space in Reformation England: Contesting the Past* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), p.92.

[33] Duffy, p.70.

Figure 1. Augustus Pugin, *Contrasts or a parallel between the noble edifices of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and similar buildings of the present day; shewing the present decay of taste, accompanied by appropriate text* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1836, Lawrence OP, NewLiturgicalMovement.org), plate 1, p. 100.
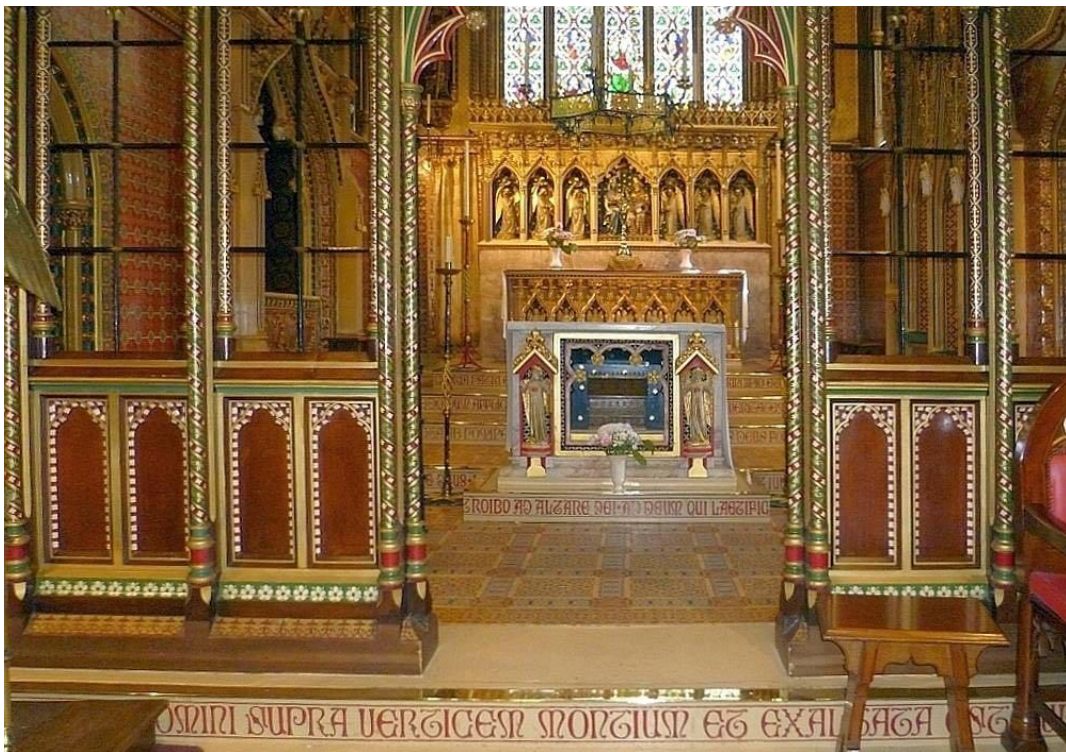

Figure 2. Augustus W. N. Pugin, *High Altar at St. Giles' Roman Catholic Church,* (Cheadle, West Midlands, UK: 1845, Jacqueline Banerjee, The Victorian Web).

Various other Medieval sources relay a similar topos. In a village church in Suffolk from 1340, a similar Calvary scene decorated the wall behind the High Altar, while the churches of St. Andreas and St Albans incorporated Medieval scenes of saints topped with the same imagery.[34] A few other shrines from Belgium and France also incorporate saints in the High Altar, all crowned with the scene from Calvary. One exception from Sweden has been reconstructed, which depicts the Coronation of the Virgin holding the Christ child.[35]

From these sources, it seems most likely that the majority of Medieval High Altars included the Calvary scene, various other saints, and Christ as a focal point. Pugin's own written work reveals his belief that these motifs were indeed central to the Medieval Church. Pugin drew Figure 1 to compare a typical Medieval high altar to contemporary counterparts. Note the centrality of the Calvary scene and Christ's suffering, presence of angels above and below, and the Marian narratives to the right and left.

In Pugin's high altar one sees obvious medieval allusions and diversions. The scene centers around Christ and Mary crowned Queen of Heaven by the worshipping angels. In both the sculpted reredos and bas relief scene before the altar angels alone surround Christ and his mother.[36] Each figure rests inside lancet windows composed of trefold foils, effectively replacing the mullion: all of which are common, Gothic, architectural elements. Between the arches, richly decorated spandrels lead to an increasingly decorated triforium and clearstorey. This causes the figures to appear placed within a Gothic church of their own, which the viewer has the privilege to glimpse. Surrounding this Heavenly scene, ornate consecutive patterns and bright tones fill the chancel - all guarded by a semipermeable rood screen. Continuing the Gothic trends, the clothing realistically flows as their three-dimensional figures take up actual space.

Despite these Medieval elements, Pugin's high altar diverges in fundamental ways from the typical Gothic high altar as seen in his own illustration above. In place of Marian narratives Pugin depicts adoring angels, in place of Christ crucified he depicts Mary crowned, and in place of surrounding saints he depicts yet more angels. Considering Pugin's intense examination of extant Medieval churches one might assume intentionality in these elements.[37] His publications, particularly the image above, reveal his knowledge of the Medieval reredos and the differences between his variation and the antiquated forms.

The Coronation of the Virgin had become popular in the 13th century, but usually filled a side altar rather than a High Altar. After the Reformation and consequent rejection of Marian iconography in England, the scene became too controversial and mostly obsolete.[38] It is notable both that the

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[34] Kroesen, p.165.

[35] Kroesen, p.165.

[36] The reredos is the art panel placed behind the high altar.

[37] Narasingha P. Sil, 'Augustus W. N. Pugin: Restless Genius', *Studies in History*, 29 (2013), 207-228.

[38] Singleton, p.19.

Coronation scene replaces the Calvary scene, and that Pugin chose this specific scene rather than another from the Marian archive. Why did Pugin select this particular scene, and why place it in such a central and traditionally reserved context?

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England, religious legal reforms and demographic changes led to a tempestuous and fluctuating religious landscape with the Virgin Mary at the center.[39] Around the religious landscape, the majority of the Catholics who had remained in England through the Reformation had largely neglected Marian devotional practices in attempts to keep the peace with the Protestant majority. By the mid nineteenth century, even devout Catholics had rejected Marian devotion, not to avoid conflict but because their beliefs had begun to appear far more Protestant
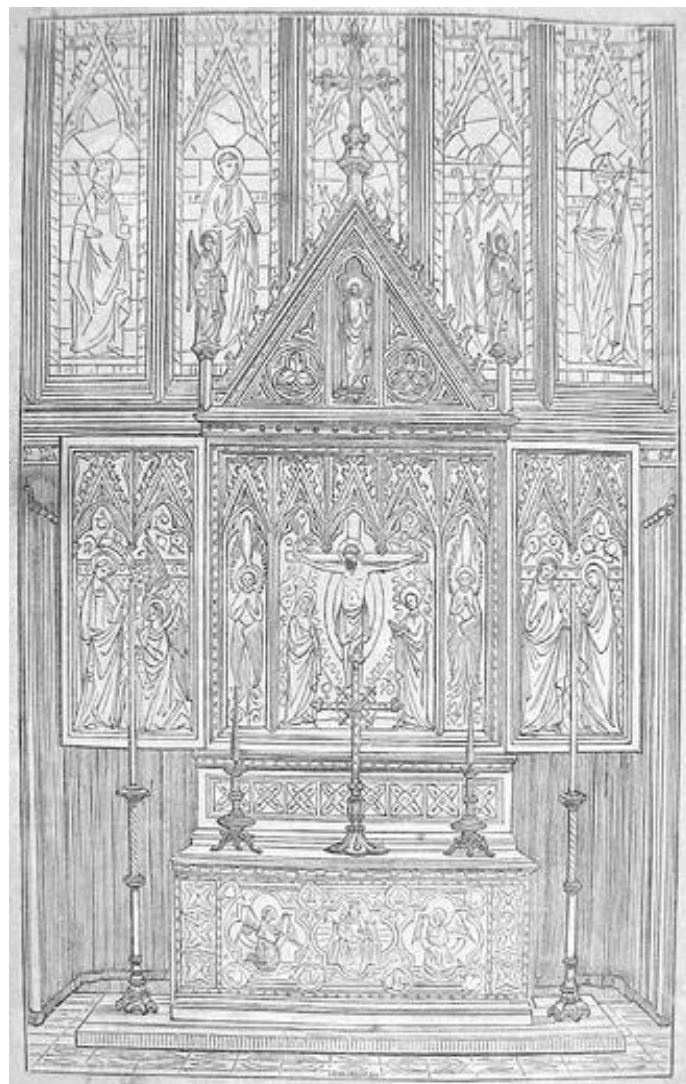

Figure 3. Augustus W. N. Pugin, *Chancel at St. Giles' Roman Catholic Church,* (Cheadle, West Midlands, UK: 1845, Jacqueline Banerjee, The Victorian Web).

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[39] Engelhardt, p.3.

than their continental counterparts. However, as the population of Catholics began to surge in the nineteenth century, the influx of zealous converts began to alter the practices and appearances of English Catholicism; [40] the new converts argued over the role of Mary and Marian devotion.[41] Pugin's incorporation of Mary placed her within the church once again, and refocused Catholic emphasis on the Mother of Christ as mother to all. As the century progressed, Marian devotion became central to the Catholic life, and icons, rosaries, and Marian literature became increasingly popular.[42]

As one might expect, the Protestant church responded to this resurgence with derision and mockery. However, congregants of the Church of England practiced varying degrees of Marian devotion throughout the Victorian period, originating largely in John Keble's *Christian Year,* which included Mary as the Queen of Heaven.[43] The Anglo-Catholic movement in particular agreed with Catholic Mariology as the century and conflicts progressed.[44] Amidst this turbulent religious environ, Pugin depicted the Coronation of Mary atop the high altar of this Neo-Gothic Cathedral, thereby aggressively asserting the validity of this Medieval trope and her essential role in the Eucharist. Mary is not only central to the liturgy and visual focus, but she is central to the enactment of the Eucharistic feast, for here alone can the bread and wine be turned into the actual body and blood of Christ through the prayers of the Priest. The faithful would likely have only clearly seen this altar piece when they drew near for the Eucharist as the rood screen intentionally hindered the congregants' view. The congregant, one might easily imagine, drew near to receive Christ in the Eucharist and saw Mary, Queen of Heaven, ruling with Christ amidst angels; one must have felt that he or she were communing with both Mary and her son.

In many ways *St. Giles Cathedral* appears more Victorian than Medieval. Although Pugin intentionally and accurately incorporated many Medieval elements, it is his choice of elements which is the most telling, revealing more about Victorian values and conflicts than Medieval. Reflecting upon the complex Marian types in the nineteenth century, Engelhardt states, 'More than any other figure in Victorian England, she captured, mediated, and exemplified the dominant debates, anxieties, and beliefs in Victorian England.'[45] Although from Anglo-Catholic and Catholic churches respectively, Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* and Augustus Pugin's St. Giles Cathedral both participate in the contemporary discussions around Mary, the Eucharist, and the Sacraments while celebrating the elements of late Medieval culture and thought which many Victorians were romanticizing. They do so through the symbolically, culturally, and theologically rich vehicle of the Eucharist.

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[40] The number of Catholics in Britain increased approximately tenfold through the course of the 1900s: Engelhardt, p.40.
[41] Engelhardt, p.47.
[42] Singleton, pp.18-22.
[43] John Keble, *The Christian Year* (London: Peacock, Mansfield and Britton, 1866).
[44] Engelhardt, p.27.
[45] Engelhardt, p.19.

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