

The Mystery of the Church

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I am impressed by the structure of your program. It clearly is designed to get you to thinking about your own experience of the Church, the models or frameworks within which you think about it, and the challenge posed to priests as they attempt to serve the Church today. There is only one topic which seems to call for some explanation: and that is the one assigned to me--"The Church as Mystery"--"mystery" here perhaps being somewhat mysterious to you too.

I can only offer you here some of the ways in which I, as a theologian and also, I hope, as a believer, have come to reflect on this Church in which in the creed we confess that we believe. I hope that they will be of some aid, and I believe we will have time at the end of my remarks for some communal reflections on the theme.

Before moving into a discussion of some particular dimensions of the mystery of the Church, I would like to make a few points that I think are crucial to any reflection on the Church. The last generation or so has seen an effort to restore to Catholic ecclesiology the spiritual, sacramental, and liturgical dimensions which characterized the view of the Church found in the Bible, the Fathers and the early medieval tradition. This restoration was designed to replace the primarily institutional consideration of the Church that characterized much official and textbook ecclesiology of the last two centuries. This view of the Church focused on the definition and distribution of authority in the Church: the Church was defined as a society of unequals, and much time and energy were spent on establishing its form of government and how authority was to be articulated within it.

This approach identifies an important feature of any adequate view of the Church, but one that is by no means the first or the most important aspect. In this respect, the development of richer notions of the Church over the last decades has meant a considerable enrichment of ecclesiology--and, of course, we see it reflected in many sections of the documents of Vatican II. We are by now accustomed to speaking of the Church as the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Spirit, the People of God, a pilgrim people, an Exodus community, etc. Through these metaphors and images, the bare bones of the institutional approach have had some living flesh put on them.

But it has often struck me that in our use of the splendid biblical and traditional images of the Church, we have also at times run the risk of falling into an error opposite to the one of which a purely institutional approach was guilty. James Gustafson has referred to this mistake as "theological reductionism," by which he means the exclusive use of biblical or doctrinal language to refer to the Church on the assumption that only thus can its transcendence and uniqueness be preserved. The similarities between the Church and other social bodies are not explored, and at times any effort to introduce sociological analyses of Church life are excluded *a priori* and in principle. Worse still, the transcendent and spiritual dimensions of the Church are sometimes used in order to prevent people from questioning certain decisions the Church has made--the Holy Spirit being

invoked, by both left and right, in order to excuse oneself from the necessity to supply reasons or justification for an action.

This, I believe, is to indulge in a false notion of the mystery of the Church. It keeps the mysterious spiritual reality of the Church off somewhere else, apart from the concrete reality of the people who comprise the Church's membership and the relationships which make them a distinct social reality. Meanwhile, the business of the day-to-day activities of the Church can be carried on "realistically" and "practically," on the basis of priorities and calculations which do not have much to do with the divine dimension, the spiritual aspects, as I said, being invoked only when we are confronted with embarrassing challenges to our calculations and priorities. I repeat, this is not a fault only of "conservatives."

The Mystery of God himself does not reside solely in his infinity and incomprehensibility, in that infinite distance that separates the Creator from the creature, in the presence by his absence of the Ever-transcendent One. Or rather, God's Mystery--his incomprehensibility, his height and depth of wisdom and knowledge--is revealed precisely in that he has chosen to bring into existence a world to share in the eternal light and joy of his being, in his having sent his Son so to enter into our existence that he has shared even its darkest moment, in his having chosen to give himself--in the mysterious depths of his triune life--in grace: Mystery, yes, but Mystery never as much mysterious as when giving himself, as when present. God's is not the Mystery of absence, but of presence, not of distance, but of nearness, transcendence revealed as immanence.

When St. Paul spoke of the Mystery of Christ, he was referring to the presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth: to the incarnation or embodiment of God's love for us in one of our own, God's saving plan given flesh and blood in a human existence. And he spoke of this mystery as also "Christ in you, our hope of glory." It is Christ as the communication of God's word and grace, to us individually and as a community, that is the Mystery of God hidden from the ages and now revealed through the prophets and apostles.

The same is true of the Church. The Church does not participate in the Mystery that is God by being somehow removed from the blood, sweat and tears of human history, by being a kind of *hypostasis*, half-way between us mere mortals and God. The Mystery of the Church resides in the fact that this community of men and women, very human, sinners all, has been brought together by Christ's word and the Spirit's grace to be something new in the world, a community which by its beliefs and values, by its language and rites, by its gestures and actions continues in the world and in human history the self-gift of God to the human race. Think of any eucharistic assembly of which you have been part: clearly a group of ordinary human beings, not perfect, not all in harmony, not all sweetness and light: and yet of this group it is true to say, as St. Paul said to that definitely imperfect group of Corinthians, "you are the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit." That should be enough Mystery for anyone! And yet I do not mean that facetiously: I am not talking about mere paradox: I am talking about how the Holy Mystery of God has chosen to act in this world--it is Mystery, genuine, divine Mystery, the same sort of Mystery that is the deepest truth of the existence of Jesus of Nazareth and the life-giving meaning of the agony of a man upon a cross.

Let me try to draw out some dimensions of this Mystery of the Church. I start from the obvious: that the Church is a human community. It stands on this side of the great gulf between Creator and creature: it is not God, it is not Christ, it is not the Spirit. And, if it is the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Spirit, it is so precisely as a concrete community of men and women. And we cannot understand what the Church is, even in its most transcendent dimensions, unless we understand that it is and remains a human community.

But community is one of those words in wide use which it is very difficult to catch hold of in a precise definition. Let me borrow a heuristic framework from Bernard Lonergan and speak of community as an achievement of common human meaning. Communities come to be and endure to the degree that there are among a number of men and women some common field of experience, some common interpretation of that experience, some agreement upon what is and what isn't, some common commitment to values and to means for realizing them. The common experience is necessary--we wouldn't have anything to talk about if there were none--but it is not sufficient. Community only takes form and substance when that experience is interpreted and judged in common or at least complementary ways, and when that interpretation gives rise to common commitments and actions. And communities are distinct from one another, either because it rests upon distinct types of experience, or because, even on the basis of common experiences, it interprets, judges and evaluates them in different ways.

To apply this schema to the Church is to ask what are the common experiences, common understandings and judgements, common commitments that make the Church a distinct community in the world. We have some measure of common experience, some of it, much of it, shared with other people not members of our community: the basic experience of human existence, birth and growth and death, failure and success, sin and recovery; the experience, underlying all others, of the search for meaning and value; the experience, thank God, of moments of comfort and courage. But these, while they are necessary, do not by themselves make that distinct community we call the Church--so that it is a mistake to use the Church in so broad a sense that all humanity falls under it. The distinctiveness of the Church lies less in its common experiences than in its interpretation and evaluation of the basic business of human living. And this interpretation and evaluation it draws from and centers upon the figure of Jesus Christ. Here is where the distinctiveness of the Church lies, for there is no other human community which gathers in his name and for his sake. This is a very traditional notion: St. Paul spoke of the *ekklesia*, of the assembly, of God which is in Christ Jesus; and a very old "definition" of the Church is that it is the *congregatio fidelium*, the assembly of those who believe.

I am speaking here of the Church as the effect of God's redemptive action. The Church is the social and historical result of God's gift of himself in the Word of Christ and in the grace of the Holy Spirit: it is the social and historical difference which Christ and the Spirit have made in the world. The Spirit's grace--thank God--is not confined to the Church; but only in the Church are the full dimensions of that divine favor known, for only in the Church is the interpretative and explicative Word of Christ received, celebrated and made the basis and standard of individual and communal action.

Through such an approach I hope that it is possible to overcome the fatal disjunction between the divine and the human dimensions of the Church. For here, on this view, there is a Church which is drawn together only because its members share certain experiences, meanings and values together, and in this the Church is one human community among many others. But the fundamental experiences which unite these people are the work of the Spirit's grace, and the meanings and values which make them one are drawn from the Word of Christ, and in these the Church differs from all other human communities. And in this simultaneity of the divine and the human does the Mystery of the Church lie: that here God continues to be present and active for the world's salvation, only it is now in us, gathered in faith, hope and love (the theological names for our common meanings and values), is the God present who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

This approach needs to be filled in, of course, by attention to all of the signs and instruments of the community that results from the word of Christ and the gift of the Spirit: our common language and rites, our gestures and actions, our sacraments, our institutions and roles, our associations, etc. To discuss all of these would take forever and depart somewhat from my topic. But I hope at least that what I have said does provide a way for understanding that the everyday things that we do, as priests and as members of the Church, go to make up the Mystery of the Church as the sacrament of God's salvation in Christ.

I wish rather to turn now to speak of the Church as the sign and instrument of the mystery of redemption. The tradition has handed down to us a distinction between the *ecclesia congregata* and the *ecclesia congregans*, between the Church as an effect of God's word and grace and the Church as their instrument. These are not, of course, two Churches, but the one Church which is, like the individual Christian, at once the effect and the instrument of grace in the world.

As the effect of God's grace and word, the Church comes to be only because the Spirit enables men and women to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. When this happens, there now are in the world men and women, there now is a community, which have been given to know the world as it really is, to know the God who is their origin, center and goal, to know what they should be like as creatures and children of such a God living in such a world. An element of autobiographical spiritual reflection would here help make this concrete: some effort to reflect on how much of what makes us the persons we are, how much of our view of the world, how much of what we have grasped of God, we owe to God's word in Christ and to the gift of his love in the Spirit. The words we have with which to order the world and our own lives, the individual and common memories by which we locate ourselves today, the hopes towards which we orient our lives, the values that inspire our use of our freedom, the personal relationships that perhaps have originated and in any case always sustain our personal commitments--all of this we have received in the Church from God, and as these are what have made us the persons we are, so also they make the Church what it is. We are the persons we are because of God; and we are the community we are because of him.

And this community which has come to be because of Christ and the Spirit is simultaneously also the instrument of God's salvation to one another and to those outside the Church. By its mere

existence in the world, alongside other communities of meanings and values, it represents an opportunity for other people to take seriously the possibility of interpreting, evaluating and living their lives in the light of Christ. In the faith that guides the lives of the Church's members, others can be confronted with a vision of the world that does not shrink from such harsh words as sin and death, but admits their reality while not allowing them to be the last word. In the hope that sustains its members, others can be encouraged not to believe themselves bound by the individual and social addictions that abound today. In the love that binds its members and leads them into active service in the world, others can believe that the human race is not doomed to an endless succession of violent power plays. In all these ways, the Church by its existence and activity represents the concrete probability that anyone will be moved to consider centering his life on the one whom Christians acknowledge as Lord, Jesus Christ.

In such ways the Church is an instrument of redemption in the world. But this is not an individualistic or privatized notion of religion or of redemption. The Church comes to be by the day-to-day communication, reception and appropriation of the word of Christ through the grace of the Spirit. But neither this communication nor its reception and appropriation are carried out in some sacred corner of the world. The persons to whom we preach on Sundays are persons living in the world. The questions about the meaning and value of life which they bring and which we must address in our preaching are questions that arise out of their daily existence, where meaning and value questions are raised and fought out. We never preach some pure Word of God; we preach a Word that is meant to address the concrete challenges our people face, whether they are living in city or suburb, in slum or at ease. (Even if we do not preach that way, we can be sure that we are being heard in that way.) The people we address are people who are faced with all sorts of temptations to succumb to the powers and principalities of this world, and it is to that situation that we must address our word of hope. The people we call to love and to reconciliation are people who have been hurt and who have hurt others, and their experience of sin is what we address when we speak of the message of cross and resurrection.

The socially and historically redemptive dimension of the Church's central meanings and values, thus, is not some extra-dimension that we add on to the basic essence of Christianity. It is Christianity made concretely relevant, an effort to make Christ and his powerful Spirit active wherever sin is active, and that means everywhere in human life. We do not first make the Church come to be in some imaginary pure form and then look around at the world to see what we have to say to it. The Gospel has always been a message to the world, for the healing of the world's problems, and not to some imaginary "world in general," but to the world as it is experienced, both for good and for bad, by our people in their everyday lives.

What is at stake, in other words, in the activities which make the Church the Church is the basic question of who are to be the makers of history and of what are the basic meanings and values which are to guide their future. The Church-world relation, in other words, is not basically the question about the institutional relations between Church and State; it is rather the question about what we, individually and collectively, today are going to do with our freedom, what kind of future we, individually and collectively, will bring about, even, as the US bishops reminded us last year,

whether there shall be a human future at all. And on the Church rests the responsibility of determining whether Jesus Christ, his example, his teaching, his death and resurrection, will be among the options among which humanity can choose today--whether the mystery of iniquity, as St. Paul called it, will be met by the Mystery of Christ.

The difficulty in all this, of course, is that the Church itself is so often so much less than what the Church might and ought to be. I distinguished above the *ecclesia congregata* and the *ecclesia congregans*, and I insisted that these cannot be separated as if they refer to two different Churches. There is only one Church, which is at once the Church gathered around Christ's word and in his Spirit and the Church which calls others to confess Christ in the Spirit's power. Need I say that the success of the Church which calls is always some function of the integrity and authenticity of the Church which receives? When the Church grows cold or confused in its faith, it cannot give convincing witness. When the Church becomes a slave of the reigning ideologies of power, it cannot hold out much distinctive hope. When the Church ceases to be a community of love and reconciliation, it only adds to the mass and power of hate and death in the world.

It is thus clear that part of the mystery of the Church is that God makes use of such a frail and imperfect instrument to accomplish his purpose in the world. St. Paul spoke of himself as having received a "treasure" but in "an earthen vessel." That image supplied James Gustafson with the title of his book about the Church: *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*. We are, individually and communally, clay pots, made of base material and very easily broken. But we hold a treasure in ourselves and in our midst. And among the greatest of these riches is the knowledge of the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation, that we can admit our sinfulness and yet not despair, that we can believe in the possibility of forgiveness and of a new creation, before God and with one another, that is is possible to advance in the ways of the Spirit, that we are not, individually, as a Church, or as a race, doomed always to be as mediocre as we are. It is not the least of the contributions which the Church can make to the world and to the shape of human history that it begins its celebration of Christ's redemptive victory with a confession of its own sins. We are, as this mixed body of saints and sinners, as this Church which is at once "holy and always in need of purification," a community which unfortunately all too often reflects the reign of sin, but which, even then, maybe even precisely then, because of its faith in Christ's redeeming, healing word and grace, remains a source of hope and courage for the world.

I have in this talk tried to explore with you some of the dimensions of the Mystery of the Church. If there is one thing I would like to impress upon you in concluding, it is that the grand and wonderful things that can be said about this Church primarily refer to the local Church--to the Church of God which is at Baltimore, and to the hundreds of individual worshipping communities which make up that Church. The Church is not some vague and abstract entity--some kind of universal Church some how above and beyond its individual realizations. The Church of Christ, one and universal, is the communion of local Churches. It is built up from below, in this place and that, yesterday, today and tomorrow. It is one Church because here there and everywhere, yesterday, today and tomorrow, one word of Christ, one reconciling spirit, one apostolic ministry gather men and

women together before the one God. But those men and women are confronted by the word of Christ and healed by his Holy Spirit precisely where they are and as who they are.

As you continue your reflections on the Church in the days ahead, I ask that you always keep in mind, as you think about your "experience of the Church," about "various models of the Church," about naming the Church, and about "selling the Church in a competitive marketplace," that "the Church" in all these phrases does not mean something outside yourself, something called the "institutional Church," or "Rome," or the hierarchy. It means something in which you have been and are involved. It means the Church in which you grew up and which has been the matrix of your deepest and most private religious experiences. It means the Church to which you have committed yourselves as priests. It means those concrete communities which you are now serving. It means that community of men and women of which you are a member, one sinner among the many, one among the many whom God has forgiven in Christ, one among the many the mystery of whose life has been illumined by the Mystery of Christ known and gratefully received through the Mystery of the Church.