

THE MYSTERY OF THE EVERYDAY

• Peter Henrici •

“The thirty hidden years . . . may be understood as a *mysterium* of the whole history of the world . . . as a ‘sacrament’ that sanctifies and gives meaning to our age and to every age.”

If we follow the traditional chronology, Jesus spent thirty of his thirty-three years with his family, and dedicated only three years to his mission as Messiah. He went about Galilee and Judea, proclaimed the coming of the reign of God, and gathered disciples for only three years. The biblical exegetes claim that it was an even shorter period. Ten to one: we might be able to understand this lopsided proportion in the case of a person who received his calling late in life, and then died relatively young—but how are we to understand such disproportionality in the Son of God? The only Gospel episode from the “hidden” years of Jesus raises precisely this question: the twelve-year-old Jesus knows that he is the Son of God; he knows that he has a mission that obliges him to be “in what belongs to his Father”; and yet, he returns with his parents to Nazareth “and was obedient to them.”

The thirty-year waiting period was thus neither a mere coincidence nor a disposition of fate; rather, Jesus chose it consciously. The hidden years, too, belong to his revelation; they, too, are a *mysterium*, a revelation of God’s being in veiled form. What, then, does this mystery reveal?

First, and most clearly, the hidden life reveals that the Son of God genuinely becomes man. After all, to be a human being does not mean merely to possess a human body and a human soul; above

all, it means to be subject to all the conditions of a human life, subject to the “*condition humaine*.” The process of growing up and the necessity of learning are the first of these conditions, and precisely they are explicitly attributed to Jesus, and are even underlined twice: “And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him . . . And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man” (Lk 2:40, 52). The evangelist’s statements can hardly be construed as mere filler, especially since he is asserting the utterly shocking idea that God’s Son “progressed” (*proékopton*) and had to grow into his “full maturity” (*helikia*).

Every instance of human maturation and learning comes to fruition in a family and in a given environment. This was also true of Jesus, we are told. His family was not some kind of romanticized, cozy home in Nazareth, but an open, extended family—otherwise the disappearance of the twelve-year-old would have been noticed sooner, and we would not hear repeated references to Jesus’ “brothers” and “sisters” (Mk 3:31–35; 6:3; Jn 2:12; 7:3–10; Acts 1:14), as if the extended family context were the most obvious thing in the world.

The religious environment that shaped Jesus’ life in this family was that of believing Judaism. Thus the Son of God learned from human beings, who taught him to recognize the way of salvation by which his Father had led his people, and to know the Law that he had given to them; and so Jesus grew up quite naturally in Jewish forms of prayer and ways of life (Lk 4:16).

A third characteristic of the “*condition humaine*” is the necessity of work. “By the sweat of his brow” man must earn his bread (Gn 3:19), and the “carpenter” (*tékton*) Jesus (Mk 6:3) was surely not an exception. Pope Paul VI’s call, already as Archbishop Montini, for devotion to Jesus the worker takes this consideration as its starting point.

A last, though hardly least important, characteristic of the “*condition humaine*” is patience, the necessity of waiting, and the boredom of a monotonous everyday existence. The mystery of Nazareth lies perhaps most profoundly in the act of waiting, in the delay of a most urgent commission. It teaches us that God has patience and can wait until “his hour is come” (Jn 2:4; 7:6).

It is not surprising, then, that the mystery of the hidden life itself had to wait for its hour to come. With the exception of the moving apocryphal legends about the childhood of Jesus and the

devotions to the Child Jesus, the hidden life was covered by centuries of oblivion in Christian art, in pious practice, and especially in theology. Only in the last two or three generations have the hidden years once more entered our awareness and assumed an important place in Christian spirituality. Significantly, the attempt to work out a theology of the “hidden life” must also begin with this spirituality. Charles de Foucauld is perhaps the most important, but hardly the only, exponent of a “spirituality of Nazareth.”

Upon reflection, the discovery or rediscovery of the hidden life of Jesus in the last hundred years can hardly be a coincidence. True, at almost the same time, secular thinkers such as Heidegger uncovered the anthropological meaning of the everyday. But the spirituality of Nazareth implies something more. Every age has its spirituality, and it is less an outgrowth of the *Zeitgeist* than a reaction to it, willed by God to temper the one-sidedness of a culture. The question thus arises for us: what does the rediscovery of the hidden life of Jesus mean for our age?

The double mystery—the purely human hiddenness, that is, our ignorance about the greater part of Jesus’ life, and, on the other hand, the mystery in the theological sense, that is, the revelation of God in hidden form—surely has something to say to us, something important and fundamental, beyond what has already been indicated above.

The mystery of Nazareth reminds us that God reveals himself also where he seems not to reveal himself at all, that is, in hiddenness. This paradox touches on the true nature of God. The point here is not the sanctification of the everyday, of work, and of the human family; rather, the point is to understand that God also works and shows himself precisely where we do not perceive him—in the “silence of God,” as Karl Rahner said. God thus reveals to us that he is a “hidden God” (Is 45:15), who can be near to us precisely where we do not see him.

There has been plenty of discussion of the “eclipse of God” in our time—without any sense that the secret of Nazareth might perhaps shed light on this darkness, as did the “empty time” in “Nazareth” before the coming of Jesus Christ.¹ For us, too, there is

¹Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Empty Time,” in *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 6: *Theology: The Old Covenant* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 365–374.

only one possibility: to wait in faith, practicing patience as Jesus himself patiently waited until “his hour had come.” Christians of every century, indeed all of humanity, is called to this waiting for the return of Christ in his glory.

Considered in this way, the thirty hidden years Jesus spent in Egypt, in foreign parts, and in the dull daily grind of Nazareth may be understood as a *mysterium* of the whole history of the world, as a revelation of the presence of God in this apparently empty time, and thereby also as a “sacrament” that sanctifies and gives meaning to our age and to every age.—*Translated by Lesley Rice.* □

PETER HENRICI, S.J., is an auxiliary bishop of the diocese of Chur, Switzerland. He is also an editor of the German edition of *Communio*.