

THE MYSTERIES OF THE LIFE OF JESUS AS A PRISM OF FAITH

• Christian Schütz, O.S.B. •

“The singularity of the mysteries is not exhausted by their single occurrence, but instead transcends their historical context: they are a singular historical event whose singularity is manifested *in* its eternalization.”

A search for the place and meaning of the mysteries of the life of Jesus within faith and theology does not yield any easy unity. The trail of clues resembles a serpentine to-and-fro that stretches throughout the entire history of the faith. A glance in overview brings to mind the image of a river that springs from the ground only to trickle away under the surface, emerging later at a different point to repeat the cycle in new variations. Despite all attempts at evasion, faith and theology never completely let go of this theme. Why is this? Can it be that, throughout the course of history, it never received an adequate or exhaustive interest? Or is it conceivable that faith and theology must fear for their very identity if contemplation of the mysteries of the life of Jesus ceases? Why is it that, on the whole, the sole attempts in this direction have emerged only tentatively from widely varying angles and contexts?

Ignatius of Antioch provides a starting point with a statement that has remained enigmatic until today: “Now the virginity of Mary was hidden from the prince of this world, as was also her offspring, and the death of the Lord; three mysteries of renown, which were

wrought in silence by God.¹ A long, tortuous path leads from Ignatius to this statement of Karl Rahner:

A truly adequate theology of the mysteries of the life of Jesus does not yet really exist. For such a theology would have to bring together anew all the questions specific to a theology of history, of the saving significance of “historical truths,” of the *sequela Christi*, of the exemplary value (which is not that of a mere “case of”) of the concrete life of Jesus, of the logic of concrete decision (existential ethics), and so forth.²

This summary assessment gives an idea of how radically open the state of the question and the program still are in the matter of the mysteries of Christ. This openness presents a challenge. A reflection that would meet it may look for support from certain presuppositions that have developed over time in the course of dealing with the mysteries of the life of Jesus. But even if a normative role is assigned to the systematic proposal for a theological consideration of the mysteries of Christ laid out in Rahner’s *Mysterium Salutis. Grundriß heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*,³ the door is not shut to differing accents and perspectives. These can be ascribed to a certain paradigm shift. With this shift, new light is thrown not only on earlier evidence, but also on the entire plan to construct a theology of the mysteries of the life of Jesus.

1. The Mystery and its Mysteries

Scripture as well as tradition speak of the mysteries of the Lord both in the singular and in the plural. Certainly the Biblical origin of this form of expression is to be sought above all in the Pauline language about “the mystery of God” (Col 2:2) and the “mystery of Christ” (Col 4:3; Eph 3:4). This Mystery has as its object the work of the salvation, redemption, and fulfillment of man and through him, of all of creation. The Mystery includes, in addition to its historical staging and enactment, its announcement,

¹Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 19, 1.

²Karl Rahner, “Mysterien des Lebens Jesu,” *LThK* 7 (Freiburg, 1962), 722.

³Vol. 3, pt. 2 (Einsiedeln, 1969), 1–326.

proclamation and communication, which occur on various levels of existence and activity. It is decisively bound up with the name, person, life, mystery, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and their effective prolongation in the event of the Church. The connection of the Mystery with the Pneuma ensures that it loses neither its significance nor its presence. Thanks to its density, the Mystery has a modality of presentation and appearance that is not only cultic-sacramental, but also proclamatory, confessional and ethical-mimetic.

The most familiar context of the Mystery is probably salvation history. It is within this setting that the two components “salvation” and “history” encounter each other. Salvation is simultaneously immanent and transcendent vis-à-vis history. Similarly, the Mystery unfolds and differentiates itself in the mysteries; it needs them, but without exhausting itself in them. The mysteries lend the Mystery vividness, tangibility, concreteness, reality, and efficacy. On the other hand, the Mystery endows the mysteries with something of its presence, wholeness, fullness, and reality, so that in them one touches the Mystery itself. This also determines the character of the mysteries of the life of Jesus attested to in the Bible. Like the anecdote within a biography, they are so pervaded by the Mystery that they seem to disappear within it. This interpenetration of Mystery and the mysteries gives the latter a virtually inexhaustible density and depth. Thanks to the Mystery present in and behind them, the mysteries cannot be considered a “case closed.” So long as salvation and salvation history endure, they will never be “settled.” The mysteries are and remain the theme of the Mystery, just as the Mystery is the theme of the mysteries.

This intertwining of the Mystery and the mysteries cannot remain at the level of salvation history. When reading the Pauline texts on this Mystery of God and of Christ, we notice the tendency to remove the Mystery itself as far as possible from all worldly, historical limitation and dependency, into the region beyond time and creation. The origin, source, content, and meaning of the Mystery clearly surpass all created imaginings, desires and expectations that come from below. The beginning of the Mystery is *a priori* “hidden for ages” (Eph 3:9), “hidden for ages and generations” (Col 1:26). Its single foundation is to be found solely in the “will” (Eph 1:5, 9), “purpose” (Eph 1:5, 9, 11), “plan,” and “counsel” (Eph 1:9,11; 3:11) of God himself. The Mystery is

entirely his will, his plan, his vision, and his idea. The repeated reference to its “hiddenness” (Eph 3:9; Col 1:26) emphasizes how clearly the Mystery bears the unique and unmistakable signature of God. In this there is an allusion not only to the transcendence of the Mystery with regard to our reception and recognition of it, but also to the incomprehensibility and unimaginable inscrutability that prove it, at the deepest level, to be a property and mystery of God himself. The content of the Mystery can be defined variously as God’s saving plan, revealed and come to completion in Christ (Eph 3:5, 6:19; Col 4:3), as the grafting of the Gentiles into the Body of Christ and their call to be participants in, and joint heirs of, the promise through Christ (Eph 3:6, Col 1:27), as the gathering of all together under Christ as the Head (Eph 1:9), as grace and glory (Eph 1:5), and so on. Perhaps the simplest, as well as the most compact, term for the content of the Mystery is love, which begins with God, constitutes the existence and life of God, and extends concretely as a movement into Creation (Eph 1:5, 9, 11).

The transcendent character of the Pauline Mystery leads to the immanent Trinity, the mystery, wonder, and event of love as such. The “beginning” or *arché* is in the Father as the unconditioned active lover *tout court*. The Son exists vis-à-vis the Father, first as Beloved, and, flowing from this, as Lover in his own right. In its originality, purity and depth, the love between the two is immune to any “objectification,” and exists personalized in the Spirit. That God exists as love is precisely the heart of the Mystery. Love, in its Trinitarian existence and meaning, signifies the truth of the Mystery. In this sense, love and Mystery are, in the end, identical and interchangeable. If, in God, the Mystery coincides with love and love with Mystery, the central content of the mysteries of the life of Jesus must reflect this as well. In them, the Mystery reflects itself back as love. This insight both governs, and results from, how the mysteries are perceived.

2. The Meditatio of the Mysteries

Contemporary theology has rediscovered an interest in the mysteries of the Lord as an instance of concrete Christology. As welcome as this development may be in view of the deficit of this *topos* in the program of classical theology, the question arises, in

regard to “the Mystery and its mysteries,” whether it really does justice to the true value of the mysteries of the life of Jesus. The relevant literature of the Fathers and medieval authors gives us the term *meditatio*, which enjoys an unmistakable preference in this domain. *Meditatio* indicates a certain integrated mode of relating to the mysteries that involves body and soul, heart and intellect, reason and senses, mood and affectivity, and so forth. We cannot trace the unfolding of *meditatio* in detail; it must suffice to highlight a few particular accents.

The true cradle of the *meditatio* of the *mysteria Christi* is certainly the events narrated in the Gospel. The question of their origin and meaning is tied up with the clarification of how the Gospels themselves developed. The narrative material presents these events, usually in units or groups, as a prelude to the testimony of the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord. Their presentation creates the impression of being arranged “historically,” though with an eye toward more than merely historical interests. From this arrangement a battery of questions arises, whose answer is far from obvious or definite. There is agreement that the “Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1:2) needs the “mysteries of Christ.” From the beginning, they were everywhere present with the Gospel.

This is not altered in the least by the fact that explicit mention of the individual mysteries was at first tentative. References to them emerge in symbols, baptismal catecheses, and homilies. The framework is to a great extent salvation history; within this framework, the enumeration of the mysteries of the Lord is more occasional than professional. At the center of interest is the soteriological significance of the mysteries, their pedagogical value, their significance for revelation and soteriology, their exemplary and sacramental character. In the context of the Christological controversies, recourse to the individual mysteries of the life of Jesus serves as an argument for the mystery of the Person of the Logos, for his divine as well as his human nature. These references cannot be separated from the liturgy, above all the celebration of the Paschal Mystery, of the Incarnation of the Son of God, and of certain memorials in the developing liturgical year. All of these elements offer invaluable building blocks for a reflective theological contemplation of the mysteries of the Lord, building blocks that the Fathers prepared and that are readily taken up and completed by the Middle Ages.

This patristic canonization gave these motifs a fixed place within the monastic literature of the Middle Ages. We encounter them as a recurring *topos*, for example, in the *Elucidarium* of Honorius Augustodunensis,⁴ in Rupert of Deutz,⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux,⁶ Aelred of Rievaulx⁷ or Egbert of Schönau. In different ways these themes live on in Franciscan and Dominican devotion to Jesus and in the *devotio moderna*.

It is repeatedly asserted that the theme of the mysteries of Christ has increasingly disappeared with the gradual ascendancy of a rationalistic theology wherein the events of the history of salvation and revelation play at best a peripheral role, if at all. The result is an abstract presentation of the person and mystery of Jesus Christ.

It would be too little merely to note this state of affairs; the situation provokes us to ponder its cause. The underlying issue here is theology’s own self-understanding. A look at history shows that the *topos* of the mysteries of the Lord was quite at home in patristic and medieval theology, while it failed to find a place in the predominantly rationalist classical theology of the modern era. In short, in the question of, and approach to, the mysteries of the life of Jesus, there emerge two differing types of theology.

Now, it is no accident that the *meditatio* of the mysteries of Jesus was cultivated precisely within the sphere of monastic theology. This kind of theology was bound in a particular manner to the witness of Scripture and tradition, above all in the figure of the Fathers. The starting-point and goal of all its efforts were determined by living faith. The practice of theologizing was much more embedded in a knowledge integrated with life, wisdom, experience, love, liturgy and prayer, the desire for God, and spirituality. At bottom, sapiential theology revolved around the mystery of love, which lent it an incredible unity, wholeness and coherence. This theology read and “meditated” salvation history as the revelation of the love of God for us; as “anthropology,” it included the realization of this love of God in us.

⁴Cf. PL 172, 1122A 1128C.

⁵Cf. PL 170, 11C 12D.

⁶Cf. *Sermo* 70, 7; *Opera* 11, 212.

⁷Cf. *Sources chrétiennes*, vol. 60 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1958), 1-132.

The foregoing discussion is enough, I hope, to convey at least an inkling of the revolutionary power hidden behind the seemingly banal theme of the mysteries of the life of Jesus. What is at stake here is more than just a chapter of Christology or theology: it is theology's recovery, or new discovery, of its unity and its basic form, which is sapiential or "meditative" in a way that does not exclude, but includes and integrates *ratio*.

3. The Mysteries as a Spiritual Path

The more reason and experience have diverged, the more concern with the mysteries of Christ has been relegated to the region, considered marginal, of piety, asceticism, and mysticism. Despite this displacement of emphasis, the starting point and foundation of the *meditatio* of the mysteries of Jesus remain present and in a sense indicate the way forward. Spiritual interest concentrates on the mystery of the Incarnation, of the humanity of Jesus Christ. The focus is not an abstract or general human nature, but rather an utterly individual one, enacted in history and reflected in the events of Jesus' life. Decisive in this context are certain "I am" words of Jesus, particularly those proclaiming Jesus as the light (cf. Jn 8:12; 12:46), the way, the truth and the life (cf. Jn 14:6). The combination of the "I" and the content of these images is taken quite seriously. This means that, for example, the term "way" has a highly existential meaning, which exceeds the merely moral or exemplary. The way and its stations, as they emerge in the mysteries of the life of Jesus, are salvific. Traditionally, this is connected with the purifying, enlightening, and unifying dimensions of the way of faith, knowledge, and prayer.

Since modern times, the mysteries of Christ have been included in the program of spiritual exercises and contemplation. The most well-known example is Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. The mysteries of the Lord are not merely the object of pious reflection. Rather, they are an essential element of a spiritual program. This path pursues "knowledge of" the "mystery of God, that is, Jesus Christ" (Col 2:2), and it aims at an inner gaze into the depths of the life of Jesus and its events. Intercourse with the mysteries of Christ involves a certain way of seeing, knowing, and experiencing that seeks to penetrate to the depths of the individual

events. The result is an intense contact between the beholder and the incarnate Logos, a deep contact with the heart of his hypostatic union, his sonship, and his bearing and attitude as a Son. The beholder's gaze does not stop at an individual mystery of Jesus, but rather broadens to the Trinitarian depths of divine love.

The impulses that emerged from this *meditatio* on the mysteries live on in the "Golden Age" of mysticism, especially in Spain and France. Pierre de Bérulle ensured a place in spirituality for the mysteries of the life of Jesus. His distinction between *acte* [act] and *état* [state] transcends superficial contemplation of the mysteries of the Lord and attains their foundation: the state of adoration and loving obedience grounded in the hypostatic union of the humanity of Christ with his timeless filial relation to the Father.⁸ The context in which these reflections on the mysteries of the life of Jesus are situated is anything but individualistic, pseudo-mystical or psychologizing. It presupposes the Scriptural and Patristic view of the redemption, salvation, and divinization of all humanity and the world through the Incarnation, life, and death of Jesus. As he penetrates more and more deeply into the mysteries of Christ and their filial-Trinitarian basis in the man Jesus, the believer comes into contact with a new foundation of existence and creation established in the Son as the new Adam. In the encounter with the mysteries man is so to speak re-transplanted into a new, salutary soil. It is in the mysteries that the mystery of rebirth, of the new creation, comes to light. While the mysteries of the life of Jesus have been narrowly conceived in modern piety and asceticism, the same cannot be said of their original entrée into Christian spirituality, where reflection on the mysteries was consciously tied to a renewal of faith, the Church, religious life, piety, and theology as a whole.

In the history of spirituality, the theme of the mysteries of the *vita Jesu* never totally disappeared. In addition to its survival in certain forms and exercises of piety (e.g., the Way of the Cross and the Rosary, among others), it also surfaced in literary incarnations, e.g., in Columba Marmion's 1919 *Christ in His Mysteries*, Romano Guardini's *The Lord* (1937), or Giovanni Papini's *History of Christ* (1921), books that have spawned an endless stream of mediations on the life of the Lord and its mysteries. This phenomenon is an at least

⁸Cf. Pierre de Bérulle, *Leben im Mysterium des Lebens Jesu* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1984).

indirect proof that the Mystery and mysteries of Christ, despite all objections and contradictions, are still alive and capable of fascinating people even today.

4. *Mystery and Mysteries in Cult*

In the Pauline understanding, an essential element of the Mystery of God, and thus of Christ, is its cultic celebration. It is, in a very significant sense, a “mystery of cult.” The Mystery almost automatically gives birth to cult; the cultic dimension in its turn continually points back to the foundation and content of the Mystery. The celebration of the Mystery unfolds in rites and symbols. At its core, the celebration revolves around the mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord, whose remembrance is observed each week as well as annually at Easter. That the Christian cultic mystery is “paschal” expresses the core of the mystery as such. Additional feast days, originally independent of each other, were also united to form a Christmas cycle in correspondence to the Easter cycle. The historical origin of the celebration of individual mysteries of the life of Jesus is intertwined with many complex factors. In addition to the attention given to certain holy places and the traditions attached to them, we can mention the significance of the natural year and the sequence of the seasons, the dependence upon, and connection with, Jewish and pagan festivals, events in the history of the faith and of the Church, the Christological controversies, piety, and theological reflection, but, above all, the decisive formative power of salvation history itself, which culminates in the event of salvation in Christ. Finally, the original cultic mystery, centered on the death and resurrection of the Lord, has a dynamism of its own which transcends any narrow focus. The progress of the Gospel in space and time, the hallowing of “places” and “times,” also opened an entryway to the individual mysteries of Christ. This expansion of the one Mystery applies as well to all the symbols and actions, such as Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, Confirmation, and so forth, which were decisive for membership in the Church and for her identity.

The multifaceted development of the celebration of the Paschal Mystery and of individual mysteries of the life of the Lord shows that the cult or liturgy, with its center in the celebration of

the Eucharist, is the central “place” and living “remembrance,” or rather, the enduring “present” of the Mystery and the mysteries of Jesus Christ. This insight finds its theologically most adequate expression in Odo Casel’s work, and its most complete realization in the Eastern Liturgy. The Byzantine liturgy, which culminates in the celebration of the “Divine Liturgy,” understands itself as the appearance and making present of the Risen Lord, as the anticipation of His return in glory, as the continuation, in the midst of the community, of the messianic wedding feast begun by Christ himself. In its encounter with the Risen One, the Church on earth simultaneously meets the entire heavenly community. This is significant precisely because the heavenly liturgy is (also) the eternalization of the Paschal Mystery and, recapitulated therein, of all the mysteries of the life of Jesus. The liturgy, creative source of the Church’s life, unites the Mystery—realized once for all in the Paschal Mystery—and the mysteries, which are henceforth inseparable.

This conception orients everything, either directly or indirectly, towards the center of the liturgy. This becomes especially obvious in the understanding of the icon and of dogma. The icon, as a cultic image, is based on the idea that man, created in the image of God, carries the icon of God within himself. This understanding of the image is affirmed by the doctrine of the Trinity, by Christology, and by ecclesiology. The saving work of Christ as the image of the Father consists in restoring the image of God disfigured by sin. Icons, as representations of the Mystery and the mysteries of Christ, participate in this act of salvation and serve the ascent from likeness to archetype. The same is true for dogma, which finds its true voice or expression in the liturgy as the mystical presentation of the fullness of the divine acts of salvation and of the truths God reveals. The liturgy, as faith celebrated and enacted, is the soil of dogma. Dogma is, at the same time, an essential element of the liturgy, of living worship. Dogma and *doxa*, dogma and liturgy, profession and worship, theology and prayer, are inseparable.

It is this cultic anchoring of the Mystery and its mysteries that explains why the mysteries are saving events. The mysteries transcend what are conventionally taken to be “purely” historical facts or events. The singularity of the mysteries is not exhausted by their single occurrence, but instead transcends their historical context: they are a singular historical event whose singularity is

manifested *in* its eternalization. They have their “salvific quality,” first, because they were effected and accomplished in and by Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, secondly, because the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead includes them in the Risen One as his works and deeds, lending them an eternal existence in the Spirit such that they never pass away and can be present to every time. Thanks to the imperishability and superiority given and guaranteed by the Spirit, there is an inexhaustible and unfathomable “presence of the mysteries” in cult and liturgy. The celebration and repetition of the mysteries in cult live from their imperishable and inexhaustible foundation, which allows and causes them to be truly present and effective.

At the end of this very skeletal overview, we must ask once more what is the place of the mysteries of the life of Jesus in faith and theology. Conventionally, they are relegated to the periphery. This image, however, is ambiguous. If it means the periphery of a circle, one might easily concur, because the circle points to its center, which in turn cannot exist without its circumference. The reality and truth of Jesus Christ includes both: the Mystery and the mysteries. The full or complete Jesus Christ includes, implies, and requires both: a Christology of the Mystery in the singular, but also of the mysteries in the plural, and this not in a juxtaposition of the two, but in the living, dialogical interplay of the center and periphery of the circle.—*Translated by Emily Rielley* □

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LITURGY AS THE PRESENCE OF THE MYSTERIES OF THE LIFE OF JESUS ACCORDING TO ODO CASEL

• Arno Schilson •

“Casel sought ever anew to emphasize the presence of the saving act itself within the sacraments and their liturgical enactment.”

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The foundation and center of Christian worship lies in the act of making Jesus Christ present in his life, his death, and his resurrection. This “making present” comes about by means of a living memory, more precisely, a “remembrance” (Lat. *memoria*, Grk. *anamnesis*), whose essential and proper setting is within cult. The continually renewed gathering of the Christian community for the celebration of the Paschal Mystery, every Christian act of worship, and all forms of liturgy become the medium through which the saving presence of Jesus Christ occurs in an ever new and creative way.¹

1. Important Texts from Article 7 of Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*

The different ways in which this “saving presence” occurs within liturgy are expressly set forth in Article 7 of Vatican II's

¹Cf. Arno Schilson, “Gegenwart Christi,” in *LthK*, V, 3d edition, (1995): 352f. (Lit.); Franziskus Eisenbach, *Die Gegenwart Jesu Christi im Gottesdienst. Systematische Studien zur Liturgiekonstitution des II Vatikanischen Konzils* (Mainz, 1982).