19th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
12th August 2012
Jn 6, 41-51

MYSTERIUM FIDEI: THE MYSTERY OF FAITH

We are used to this phrase: proclaimed to us after the double consecration of the bread and wine in the Eucharist. Too often we pass it off, as a statement of what we already know – that no one can understand what has happened at the altar, it is just ‘a mystery’ beyond us. Mysterium Fidei means a whole lot more than that. Perhaps some people might think it refers to the change in the bread and wine, into the body and blood of Christ. It does, but again Mysterium Fidei means a whole lot more than that.

I would like to say something about three approaches, in theology, to it, and suggest their consequences for us now.

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The first is about the Mystery of Faith in the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

GERMAN MONASTICISM

Odo Casel (1886 – 1948) was a Benedictine monk of the monastery of Maria Laach in the Rhineland. He was a liturgist. He did not live to see Vatican 2. He died from a stroke as he had just finished singing the Lumen Christi on Holy Saturday, the Easter Vigil. Being consummated by the mysteries of Easter he had just announced and shared, he was taken into them.

His best known writing was Das Christliches Kultmysterium (The Christian Cult-Mystery). Mystery is present in liturgy. Humans are called to turn to Mystery, and to be immersed in it and contained by it. They will find it in the Liturgy, in the Eucharist (could I add, especially in the Liturgy of Easter).

The word Mystery comes from St. Paul. It is a deed done here and now by God, the working out, actually, of the divine plan in eternity and its realisation in time, a dynamic that takes us all into the eternity of God.

The mystery is the person of the Saviour and the mystical body, which is the church. The Mystery is more than Christ’s person, it is the great deeds he did for us: his incarnation, passion, death, resurrection, ascension and future coming. The mystery is the whole sum of the acts by which we are saved and sanctified. God reveals to us who God is, through this continuing mystery-act.

The deeds of Christ (self-abasement, death on cross) are mysteries, because they go beyond all human standards of measurement and so open something about God not otherwise knowable. The real glory of God shines through them in a way hidden from all human language. It is open only to those who believe in, and are embraced by, the Mystery. The Mystery is a sacred ritual action, in which a deed that looks
past is made present in the form of a specific rite. The worshipping community that does the rite participates in the redemptive act itself as actually going on now.

Leo the Great said in his sermon on the Ascension, that what was visible in the redeemer has passed over into the mysteries.

It isn’t ritualism, pageantry, folklore, or theatre, and is much more than rubrics and feel good. It is Christ still doing his job.

There is a real presence not just of the body and blood of Christ but of the whole saving deed of Christ. Casel used a German catch word to sum up his point – it is MysterienGegenwart – the actually-present character of the deeds of Christ as mysteries.

To be a Christian is to live these acts after Him and with Him. It is not just teaching, or even the simple application of grace, it is total identification with the person of Christ actually doing the acts and so continuing his actual life. When we do liturgy, this cannot not be – we need to be more aware of it.

The written word is secondary to what is spoken and realised in liturgical action

When we participate in the Eucharist, we are asked to become conscious of the Mysterium Fidei.

BYZANTINE LITURGY

Liturgical action is not a ceremony. It is an object of contemplation. It is an awesome vision. It is full of mystery. One prostrates before it.

When we begin it, we cross into another world. Icons are a window to that world. It is a distinct atmosphere. It is heaven, here. We lay aside all worldly care. We are in the heavenly sanctuary. We are caught up in the adoration of the redeemed cosmos. There are hymns of exulting praise. The visible is the symbol of the invisible. The incarnation is the icon-restorer of the reflection of divine beauty in humankind. We gaze at the Lord. Devotion is aroused by concealment as well as by exposition. We go behind the veil…. There is only one church above and below.

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The second approach is about the Mystery of Faith in the Resurrection of Jesus.

Francois-Xavier DURRWELL was one of the great Redemptorists of the last century. He taught us all about the resurrection of Jesus. For Durrwell, everything Jesus ever did is summed up in his Resurrection.

It was in 1937, towards the end of his time as a seminarian, that Durrwell had his first insights into the resurrection. His first, and major book, The Resurrection of Jesus, mystery of salvation, was published in French in 1950. His last book, Christ our Passover, was published in French in 2001. [A posthumous volume, The Death of the
Son, the mystery of Jesus and humanity, appeared in 2007.] He died in 2005, at the age of 93 years and 8 months.

His initial endeavour was to move theology away from juridic and apologetic and narrowly individual thinking about redemption, and insist that it find the place of the resurrection in the mystery of salvation. He demanded the integration of death and resurrection, and the unity of both in the person of Jesus.

But he saw much more than that. He saw that resurrection meant **being engendered by the Father.** It made Jesus the Son (of God). Jesus becomes Son (of God) in resurrection. He always was, but in the act of rising from the dead he becomes fully what he always was. From the beginning he is Son born of the Father in the Spirit. In his whole life, and in his filial acceptance of his destiny, he becomes that more and more every day: he is always being engendered, he is always in the process of resurrection that will include and reverse and transcend death. His self-consciousness is always filial, always resurrectional, and always increasing.

The Father delivered him to death, but not as the other actors in the passion drama did – such as Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate. The Father delivered him, to engender him, to make him his son, to place him at the heart of everything. Death was ‘necessary’ as the scriptures say, so that Jesus could be filial in his whole being and – by sharing it with us - accomplish his saving mission. He had to die to his servile condition, and **let increase in him an unlimited space where the fullness of divinity could be engendered and received.** That is why the fullness of humanity could be engendered there too. What is called kenosis is only the effect of the engendering of the Son in the world. There is a **certain eternalisation of this death-entered-into-resurrection.**

He is always becoming Son in us…

The Father engenders him in the Spirit. The Son lets himself be engendered in the Spirit. The Spirit is the one love between the two.

Redemption occurs, not in some act done by Jesus, but in his very person in this relation to God. He makes himself at one not with sin but with (sinful) humans. This is not because any logic of sin demanded it. It is because of his divine filiation, by the paternal act that engenders him in the world and creates the world in the mystery of this engendering.

It is like the process of a human birth. It is the experience of leaving a maternal womb and **entering into an absolute otherness.** It is accomplished in a very new kind of prayer.

The parousia (the coming of Christ in glory) is often left out of theologies of redemption. But the parousia and the resurrection are two aspects of the same mystery. The resurrection places Christ at and as the end of history, so that he is the **one who comes – who appears - at each moment of history.** The eucharist is the sacrament of his real presence as someone who is everywhere and everywhen – and who is here, now.

The principal idea is: the Spirit is the divine power of engendering, and it is given to us now.
The third approach is about the Mystery of Faith in everything.

I have a suggestion. Could we integrate Casel’s vision with Durrwell’s insight? And so take both of them a step further?

Does the mysterium fidei include especially the Resurrection of Jesus, as a continuing Act in our midst? Surely. Is God raising us up in and with Jesus every time we participate in a Eucharistic Liturgy? Surely.

Can we go further? Is it just in the Eucharistic Liturgy? I wonder, if today, given the benefit of a theology more appreciative of daily secular life than it has ever been, we might extend the core of this appreciation of Resurrection-Actually into each and every thing we do? Is it in all our lives? I know we don’t have a consciousness of it, but that is our problem – is it still there? Do we need to become more aware of it?

I do not mean to take away from the Eucharistic Liturgy its rightful eminence. It is the supreme sign/symbol/sacrament of that eternal Actuality of Resurrection, that in fact is in everything everywhere every moment….. If it were not so cosmic, it would seem too much like magic if it were just in the Eucharist. But the whole of reality changed one Easter morning, and it is Mysterium Fidei in the Spirit of Resurrection ever since. The Eucharist can teach us that, and teach us to find it in every place.

It is a pity a lot of believers haven’t realised this. It is a pity they don’t have an awareness of it, all the time, and especially in the Eucharist.