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## THEOLOGY OF THE LITURGY MYSTERY-PRESENCE THEORY

By HIS redemptive work Christ reconciled man with God, so that man's sin could be forgiven, and the way to Heaven was opened. The question is: How does all this profit each one of us? What view of the christian life results from the work of Christ?

I find it very difficult now, after years of viewing things from a liturgical standpoint, to recall the outlook on our faith in which I was brought up and which, I am sure, was not dispelled by what I was taught in Theology, but only made more detailed. But so far as I can remember, it was something like this:

By original sin, man was estranged from God, deprived of grace and preternatural gifts, excluded from heaven. Christ, by his sufferings and death, placated God's outraged majesty and won pardon; He also won a vast ocean of grace which He was now in a position to distribute to men of subsequent generations, and He founded a Church, equipped to distribute this grace through the sacraments, guaranteed to teach truth, and give sure guidance in moral conduct.

So now a baby is brought to the font and baptized, original sin is washed away and that baby is in the state of grace. His task for the rest of his life is to stay in the state of grace by avoiding sin; he must keep the commandments, which are explained to him as he grows up. For this he needs help which he gets from the sacraments, and from the Mass and the intercession of Our Lady and the Saints. If he loses grace he can get it back by confession. He must win merits by good deeds, gain all the indulgence he can, and increase his store of grace by the sacraments and prayer. He has to believe all sorts of truths explained from the catechism, for to deny or to doubt them would be a sin. All through his life he needs lots of grace; but Christ won an infinite sea of grace which is, as it were, stored up in a divine system of plumbing fitted with seven taps – the sacraments – through which grace can be drawn off in every appropriate need. If he goes through life believing all the truths

he has been taught and keeping all the commandments which bind him, and is in the state of grace when he dies, then he will go to heaven. And the more graces and merits he possesses at the moment of death the higher will be his place in heaven. But if he dies at the moment when he has lost grace, then he will go to hell. And that, with a few bits amplified and specified in further detail, is a summary of the Catholic Faith and of the economy of salvation as it is grasped by many – including myself when young.

Such a view is completely homocentric, concerned primarily with the individual and his fate. Grace is a mere aid to moral conduct; the sacraments are mere fountains of grace; the Church is just the organization which administers sacraments, teaches truth and gives moral guidance; Christ was only the one who, long ago, started the Church and gave it power to teach doctrine and morals and administer sacraments. It reduces the faith to a complexus of doctrinal statements and moral obligations, and the sacraments to a set of mechanical instruments.

And it was substantially the same outlook, though in a more detailed and sophisticated form, which was enshrined in the theology course current in my student days as far as I can remember.

Since then, thank God, there has been a wonderful advance in biblical studies, in catechetics and in liturgical scholarship, all of which have had an influence on recent presentations of theology. In particular, there has emerged a theology of the liturgy which is acting like a ferment in practically every sphere in Scripture, dogma, ecclesiology, and all the rest; it is making them all react upon each other and is, in turn, receiving new impulses from them. I refer to the *Mysteriengegenwartstheorie*, alias the *Theology of Mysteries* which has developed from the work of the late Dom Odo Casel, Monk of Maria Laach Abbey in Germany.

Casel died in 1948; for years he had been a figure of controversy, and the literature which attacks or defends, which discusses and amends his basic position never ceases to pour forth in profusion. His work by any estimation must rank among the most significant influences in modern theology, for it is characterized by great richness and breadth of vision, and a depth and beauty which delight the mind even if it does not always compel intellectual assent. It is a theology of the redemptive life of Christ, a theology of liturgy, a theology of the sacraments, a theology of the Mass – in fact, a complete synthesis of Christianity and the Christian life.

As Father Charles Davis says in his admirable little book *Liturgy and Doctrine* (which I most heartily recommend to all of you): 'We must

distinguish between Casel's fundamental insights and his attempts to formulate and defend them. The former have won increasing acknowledgment; the latter were open to criticism. His great merit is to have clung tenaciously to his basic intuitions despite all resistance. For that, he has earned our respect as a pioneer and will be remembered as the one who inaugurated what is the most truthful doctrinal movement of our times. What has happened since, is that more and more theologians have put themselves under the banner of the Theology of Mysteries, and were engaged in developing and modifying Casel's ideas, and in investigating more thoroughly their basis in tradition'.

In other words, that means that Casel's main ideas have now a large and influential following among European theologians, though the line of thought which led Casel to his conclusions and also many of the arguments by which he supported them must now be modified in the light of more recent researches into Scripture and Patrology. It is Casel's position – with slight modifications – that I shall now try to explain in outline.

The basis on which it stands is the Paschal Mystery, the *Transitus* of Christ. This is the Mystery of Christ, namely, Christ himself active in saving us. In Casel's own words: 'The notion of the Mystery of Christ embraces at one and the same time the Person of the God-man and also his redemptive work'. We might say that the saving work of Christ is incarnate in himself, its end-product being human nature glorified and immortal caught up into the love-life of the Blessed Trinity in the Person of Christ.

But though the present end-product of the Mystery of Christ is his own glorified Humanity, that was not its final purpose. He achieved his *Transitus* not for his own sake but for ours. He did it *propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem*. Our humanity also is to be transformed and glorified and caught up into the love-life of the Trinity. Hence there must be some way in which we, living at various times throughout history, can make the same *Transitus* as He did; or, to speak more precisely, can make His *Transitus* our *transitus*. And that possibility is what Christ has provided for us by founding his Church and giving her a sacramental life.

For, by founding the Church as a living organism, Christ still lives on, and continues his saving activities amongst us; perhaps that would be better expressed: 'makes us agents in his saving activities'. The Church is *the* sacrament of Christ – the great sign which makes present what it signifies. Christ himself is the *Primordial Sacrament* in the

sense that he signified – and thereby made present – God to the men of His time. And now the Church signifies – and thereby makes present – Christ to the men of our time. The Council in article five of the Constitution on the Liturgy speaks of the ‘wondrous sacrament of the whole Church’.

This ‘sacrament of Christ which *is* the Church’ makes Christ present and active by means of her sacramental activity – her sacred mysteries, the liturgy. In the Liturgy the Mystery of Christ, i.e. his *Transitus* becomes present and active in sacramental form. The Liturgy is a new mode of existence of that which formerly had a historical existence, namely, Christ’s *Transitus*.

And so, according to Dom Casel, the Mysteries of Christ once took place historically by actions of His physical body in dying, rising and ascending; and now those same mysteries take place by actions of His Mystical Body in those activities of the Church which we call liturgy. These same mysteries of Christ exist in a new form – in the forms of efficacious symbols i.e. in sacramental form. They are the cult-mysteries of the Church, her liturgy.

The liturgical mysteries are, then, the mystery of Christ existing and active in a different plane of being – the sacramental plane. They are an extension of the historic mysteries of Christ throughout time and space until the Parousia. Christ and his saving acts are here and now present under the veil of signs and symbols. The acts of salvation which took place in Palestine under the appearance of historical events are made present in the sacraments under the appearance of sacramental signs. The cult-mystery is nothing more nor less than the God-man himself continuing his saving action here on earth. As St. Leo the Great declared: ‘What was visible in Christ our Redeemer has now passed into the sacraments’. St. Ambrose too addresses these words in prayer to his Saviour: ‘It is in your mysteries that I find You’. The liturgical mysteries, therefore, are simply the sacramental mode of existence of Christ and his work of redemption. The difference between the mystery of Christ and cult-mystery lies in the mode of being, not in the essence.

It is the sacramental mode of being which places the historical mysteries of Christ at our disposal and enables us to plunge ourselves into the salvific work of Christ so that what happened to Him in history can now happen to us in mystery. For the cult-mysteries, the liturgy, as acts of the Church are the acts of Christ. But it is we who, as members of the Church – clerical and lay according to the powers given to us in Baptism and Holy Orders – are actually doing the cult-mysteries here

and now. We are agents also; they are Christ's acts and yet they are our acts. Christ's death and resurrection thereby become our death and resurrection; the *Transitus* of Christ is our own *Transitus*.

The theology of mysteries holds tenaciously to the idea that men do not become Christians as they might become members, say, of a political party. A man is a member of a political party by adhering to the doctrine of that party and professing the name of that party. But a man is not a Christian just by adhering to the doctrines of Christ and professing the name of Christian. Nor is he a Christian just by receiving graces won by Christ. He is a Christian in the full sense only if he is *in* Christ, only when that which was done in Christ is also done in him, only when Christ's redemptive acts are also his redemptive acts. To be a Christian demands a real participation in the saving acts of Christ. The Christian life is not just a matter of believing in Christ and receiving grace from Christ; it involves also sharing in the redemptive work of Christ. Christians have to come into contact with Christ's mysteries; they must enter into these mysteries and live by them. And this they do by entering into the Liturgy and living by the Liturgy, since the Liturgy is none other than the Mystery of Christ existing in sacramental form. He who participates in the Liturgy participates in the Christian mysteries; that which happened historically in Christ happens mystically or sacramentally in him.

Thus in Baptism he dies in Christ and rises in Christ sacramentally; he is plunged into Christ's death and resurrection. 'You know well', wrote St. Paul to the Romans (ch. 6), 'that we who are taken up into Christ by Baptism were taken up, all of us, into his death. In our Baptism we have been buried with him, died like Him, that so, just as Christ was raised up by His Father's power from the dead, we too might live and move in a new kind of existence. We have to be closely fitted into the pattern of His resurrection, as we have been into the pattern of His death. We have to be sure of this, that our former nature has been crucified with Him, and the living power of our guilt annihilated, so that we are the slaves of guilt no longer. . . the death of Christ was a death, once for all, to sin; and the life He now lives is a life which looks towards God. And you, too, must think of yourselves as dead to sin, and alive with a life that looks towards God, through Christ Jesus Our Lord'.

The Christian, therefore, is by Baptism inserted into the *Transitus* of Christ. It is not just that his soul is washed from the guilt of sin and adorned with the garment of grace — he really and truly (though in the sacramental order of existence) dies in Adam and rises in Christ; he no

longer belongs to that body of mankind which has Adam for its head; he belongs henceforth – is a member of – that body of mankind which has Christ for its head. So real is this resurrection in Christ that nothing can ever displace Christ from his position as head over this particular member – not even mortal sin. For his conformation to Christ – the Baptismal Character – is indelible. Even if through personal infidelity, he ends up in Hell, he still has Christ for his head. He has been reborn into Christ who, having risen, dies now no more.

After Baptism the Christian's *Transitus* is not yet complete. His soul has died in Adam and risen in Christ. Someday, when his earthly life decays, his body also will die in Adam; and at the *Parousia* his body will rise in Christ. His bodily death and resurrection are the fulfillment of his Baptism; they have already happened to him in mystery; now they happen to him in history. His *Transitus*, because it was Christ's *Transitus*, is now complete; full salvation has come to him.

The Theology of Mysteries, as I have applied it here to the basic cult-mystery or liturgical act of Baptism, opens up a wonderful conspectus of the Christian life, from birth to death, from Baptism to Glory. For if the baptized man is really a member of the living Christ, then Christ is living in him and working through him. When a baptized man offers worship to the Father in the Mass, it is Christ's worship that he is offering. If he works to improve the conditions of the world about him, it is Christ who is at work. This is the special vocation of the layman, especially when his conformity with Christ has been deepened by Confirmation and strengthened by the Eucharist. He has a share in the priesthood of Christ, which means in Christ's Mediatorship; and so it is through him that God's grace reaches his fellow men. The baptized and confirmed person who eats of the Eucharist – the fully integrated Christian – is the one through whom Christ vitally acts from within upon the secular life of society. Herein lies the force and dignity of the lay apostolate.

What is the use of missionary work, of conversion work, – some may ask – if people of good will can be saved merely by Baptism of desire? Here is the answer. It is only Baptism of water and the Holy Spirit, only participation in the mysteries of Christ, which can so join a man to Christ that he even shares in the very work of redemption. Once realized, the fullness of this life in Christ is immensely satisfying to the mind and heart. And if the Theology of Mysteries is true, then all this is true.

Now let us look at how Casel's theory works out as applied to the

Mass. It is particularly rich and beautiful.

On the night before He suffered Christ instituted a mystery which was to be celebrated by his Church throughout the rest of time 'until He comes'. *Tradidit discipulis corporis et sanguinis sui mysteria celebranda*, as the *Hanc Igitur* of Maundy Thursday reminds us. The Eucharist is the mystery of Christ's Body and Blood. But the Eucharistic Mystery implies far more than the real presence; for in it the Mystery of His Passion is celebrated. *Recolitur memoria passionis eius*. His Body is present, but it is the Body given for us; His Blood is present, but it is the Blood shed for many unto the remission of sins. The Mass, then, is a commemoration of the sacrifice offered by Christ on Calvary; of that sacrifice which was the new Pasch, when Christ passed from this world to the Father, when He redeemed us from the world of darkness and transferred us to His marvellous kingdom of light.

The Mass, then, is a memorial of a historical event, the saving sacrifice of Calvary. 'In the Eucharist', says Pius XII in *Mediator Dei*, 'the species under which Christ is present symbolize the violent separation of His Body and Blood, and a commemorative showing forth of the death which took place on Calvary is repeated in each Mass. Because by the distinct representations Christ Jesus is signified and shown forth in the state of victim'. And the Mass is a sacramental sacrifice, and *sacramenta id efficiunt quod figurant*. The Passion and death of Christ, the sacrificial act of Golgotha, has been delivered to the Church in a Mystery, in a sacrament. The Church can now participate in this sacrifice offered by Christ, offering it now as her own sacrifice.

When the mystery-concept is applied to the Eucharist, the sacrificial nature of the Mass stands out in brilliant clarity. For the re-presentation of Calvary which takes place within it is understood by Casel as a making present of the redemptive sacrifice in all its fullness as a saving act. The people of the New Testament have but one sacrifice to offer – the sacrifice of the Cross. That very sacrifice which took place in history in a visible manner is now taking place in mystery in an invisible manner. The perfect numerical unity between Calvary and the Mass is thus absolutely safeguarded and avoids all those difficulties which were discussed *sine fine* by the post-Tridentine theologians. And in this way the Mass is also and essentially a relative sacrifice, for it is the real, objective commemoration of the one sacrifice of the Cross.

But the mystery theory takes us yet further, because the sacrifice of Calvary is but the central element in the one indivisible great mystery

of Christ, His Transitus. It was not only the Cross which had redemptive power; the Incarnation was also redemptive, and so was the resurrection and the ascension; even the Parousia belongs in the mystery as its conclusion. To quote Casel himself: 'If the Mass is the real commemoration of the sacrifice of Christ offered for the redemption of man, then, in essential logic, it must also be a commemoration of all the phases of the saving work of the Lord. Everything is there, though indeed under the aspect of sacrifice; that is why the passion is present at the centre. But if the Mass signifies and realizes the passion, then the other acts are also signified and realized in it together with the redemptive sacrifice.'

His reasoning is based on the undoubted fact that the mystery of redemption commenced with the Incarnation, continued throughout Christ's life, was achieved on the Cross and reached its apogee in the resurrection and ascension. All these things together constitute the Mystery of Christ – His passage from this world to eternity. The resurrection and ascension indeed are of prime importance for without them the Transitus would not have taken place. If Christ had died, but not risen, we would not have been redeemed. The whole life of Christ is a gigantic itinerary of salvation which goes from the womb of the Virgin Mary to the throne of the Divine Majesty, from the first coming to the second coming. Our redemption rests on the fact that the second Person of the Blessed Trinity took our human nature, that he suffered and died, then rose as the Kyrios, the Lord, to be exalted forever in glory at the right hand of the Father. The Mystery of salvation is an indivisible whole, a single design, a single economy of eternal salvation.

While she lives in the joyful expectancy of the Parousia, the Church celebrated the Mysteries of her cult. 'In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem towards which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the Holies and of the true Tabernacle; we sing a hymn to the Lord's glory with all the warriors of the heavenly army; venerating the memory of the Saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await our Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ, until he, our life, shall appear and we too will appear with him in glory'. (Constitution, Par. 8).

The liturgical mysteries are the continuation and application of the mysteries of Christ. In particular the Eucharist is the sacred cultual action or mystery which commemorates the entire economy of salvation and makes it present again for all generations until the end of the world.



Immediately and directly it signifies the Passion of Christ, but through this and with it the entire work of redemption is signified and made present under the aspect of sacrifice.

Dom Casel is convinced that the objective presence of the entire work of our redemption is demanded by the liturgical texts of the Anamnesis. Christ did not say 'Do this in commemoration of my passion' but 'in commemoration of Me'. And when we commemorate Christ, we commemorate Him as Our Saviour. In the *Unde et memores* the Latin Church explicitly presents the Eucharistic celebration as a commemoration of the Passion, and also of the resurrection and ascension: '*Tam beatæ passionis, necnon ab inferis resurrectionis, sed et in caelos gloriosæ ascensionis*'. The word *mores* must not be understood in a mere psychological sense or mental recollection – that is a Protestant view. The memory has an objective reality – it is realized in and by the liturgical action. It is a commemorative action, envisaged by the liturgy as a real, objective memorial, as a commemoration full of reality, which makes present the Passion and also the Resurrection and Ascension of Our Lord. The corresponding prayer in the Byzantine liturgy of St. John Chrysostom presents the mass as a commemorative celebration of the Cross, Resurrection and Ascension, and also of Christ's sitting at the right hand of the Father and of His second coming in glory – the Parousia. And we may add that the presence of the total mystery of salvation is perfectly summarized in the *Oratio super oblata* of the ninth Sunday after Pentecost: '*Quoties huius commemoratio celebratur, opus nostræ redemptionis exercetur* – as often as we celebrate the memory of this victim, the work of our redemption is enacted'.

That is only a summary of Casel's *Theology of Mysteries* – the only complete theology of the liturgy worked out so far. As I said at the beginning it has not found universal acceptance for it does raise quite a number of difficulties, mostly of the metaphysical order, which are still under discussion. Yet these are constantly being discussed, and by modifications of the basic theory they may well, in time, find some solution generally acceptable.

It is to Casel's credit that he has constructed a truly wonderful synthesis of the mystery of Christ, and has stimulated a train of thought and enquiry which promised great fruit – the deepening and enrichment of Sacramental Theology and of the Christian Life.

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