

REVELATION IN ST. PAUL

PART II

THE MYSTERY OF THE REDEMPTION (continued)

The mystery is the divine plan of salvation through which God establishes Christ as the centre of salvation. By his death and resurrection he became the unique principle of salvation for pagans and Jews, angels and men. It is the divine plan – incarnation, redemption, election to glory – which ultimately goes back to Christ with all his riches and treasures of wisdom and knowledge (cf. Eph. iii, 8; Col. ii, 3). Concretely, the mystery is Christ (1 Tim. iii, 16). The world, created in harmony, returns to harmony in Christ, the Saviour and head. At the beginning Saint Paul gives importance to the vocation of the pagans, then the mystery becomes mainly Christ and participation in him.

DEVELOPMENT IN THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY

The mystery has different levels. There is the level of intention: the mystery of God; the level of realisation in and through Christ: the mystery of Christ; the level of a personal encounter: the mystery of the Gospel, of the word and of faith; and finally the level of its extension among men: the mystery of the Church. The mystery is revealed in its accomplishment in successive stages corresponding to these levels describing the history of salvation.

In its first stage the mystery is hidden in God. It is a secret full of wisdom (1 Cor. ii, 7), kept in silence from eternity (Rom. xvi, 25), hidden to the people of past generations (Eph. iii, 5; Col. i, 26), hidden even to the angelic choirs (Eph. iii, 9-10). It is inaccessible wisdom, reserved knowledge.

By the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the mystery passed to its level of realisation. In Jesus God's plan of salvation is accomplished and unveiled (Eph. i, 7-9); the mystery becomes a historical event (1 Tim. iii, 16). The Apostles and prophets in the Spirit are the privileged witnesses to whom the mystery is communicated first. They are the mediators and messengers of the mystery: 'The mystery that the now been revealed through the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets was unknown to any men in past generations' (Eph. iii, 5; cf. Col. i, 26). By their preaching they became the foundation of the Church, whose cornerstone is Christ.

Paul belongs to this group of privileged witnesses: he is 'the servant of the Church' (Col. i, 25); he has, moreover, been given a special charge in the revelation of the mystery. What concerns the pagans in the mystery has been particularly revealed to him: 'I, who am less than the least of all the saints, have been entrusted with this special grace, not only of proclaiming to the pagans the infinite treasure of Christ, but also of explaining how the mystery is to be dispensed. Through all the ages, this has been kept hidden in God, the creator of everything' (Eph. iii, 8-9). As we saw in the first section, Paul 'has been called to be an apostle, and specially chosen to preach the Good News' (Rom. i, 1). To Timothy he confides how 'I have been named a herald and apostle . . . a teacher of the faith and the truth to the pagans' (1 Tim. ii, 7). He has been appointed by God to be 'a priest of Jesus Christ, and I am to carry out my priestly duty by bringing the Good News from God to the pagans, and so make them acceptable as an offering, made holy by the Holy Spirit' (Rom. xv, 16). Because of this vocation, Paul was given an intimate revelation of the mystery: 'it was by a revelation that I was given the knowledge of the mystery, as I have just described it very shortly. If you read my words, you will have some idea of the depths that I see in the mystery of Christ' (Eph. iii, 3-4).

From its revelation to chosen witnesses, the mystery passes to its third phase. It is made known to all those who are called to the Church. The mission of the Apostles is to proclaim the mystery, the Gospel, the Good News. Saint Paul identifies the one with the other: 'the Good News I preach, and in which I proclaim Jesus Christ, the revelation of a mystery kept secret for endless ages' (Rom. xvi, 25; cf. Eph. i, 13; iii, 5-6). It is a secret revealed, manifested and communicated; it is a message proclaimed and announced. The mystery is made known if the Gospel is made known. We share in the mystery if we share in the Gospel. The Gospel and the mystery have the same content and object: they are the divine plan originally hidden but now revealed and proclaimed. Its object is soteriological; that is the divine history of salvation through Christ. It is also eschatological; the promise of glory with all the blessings as a result of the passion and death of Christ (Eph. i, 1-10; 1 Cor. ii, 7).

With the preaching of the Gospel, the mystery reaches the final stage in its development — personal event. In the section on language we saw how Saint Paul uses Gospel, or Good News, word or message synonymously. For him the Gospel of God is the same as the Gospel of the

glory of Christ. By means of the word on the mouth of the apostle, God invites man to faith. It is not a human word, but divine, active, salvific and reconciliatory.

This mystery is the re-union of Jew and pagan in Christ in one living organism of salvation. The Church is this organism in which is realised the divine economy of which it is a visible expression. The Church achieves salvation as the revelation and proclamation of the Gospel. The establishment of the Church is the manifestation of the mystery. It reveals the infinite wisdom in God's plan (Eph. iii, 10) and proclaims that the time has come for the universal submission to Christ. The Church is the mystery of Christ made visible, just as Christ is the revelation of the mystery of God.

MAN'S REPLY

Reception of the mystery, of the Gospel, is possible only through faith. By means of faith man perceives the history of salvation achieved by God in the death and resurrection of Christ, and though it baffles human wisdom, yet through faith he clings to it perseveringly. Faith is man's special answer to the word of the apostle. Preaching leads 'to the obedience of faith' (Rom. xvi, 26). Only through faith can Christians have access to salvation.

Faith is possible only to those who want to hear the word of truth and are prepared to obey it (Rom. x, 16-8). Faith, for saint Paul, is hearing the word and obeying the Gospel (Gal. iii, 5; Rom. i, 5). Nevertheless, this cannot be achieved merely by natural means. There must be given the gift of grace. As in the case of Paul on the road to Damascus, there must be an 'illumination' from God, an 'anointing' (2 Cor. i, 21-2), which stirs up faith in the heart of him who hears the word of God.

This word is not only what concerns truth; it is chiefly about the life and person of Christ as Lord and Saviour, with what he implies to all men. Hence, the preaching of the Gospel is the occasion of a choice for or against Christ. For some, the Gospel is a scandal or an obstacle, for others it is folly: 'here are we preaching a crucified Christ; to the Jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans madness' (1 Cor. i, 23). Those who do not believe in and accept the word will be condemned (2 Thess. ii, 11). The Gospel is a vivific and salvific power only for those who believe (Rom. i, 16-7; 1 Cor. i, 18; 2 Tim. i, 10).

THE MYSTERY IN HISTORY AND AFTER THE PAROUSIA

Full knowledge of the mystery can never be attained. It is dynamic and continues ever to be perfected. The Christian grows in the knowledge of the mystery in accordance with his growth in religious maturity. The imperfect and unspiritual, like the Corinthians, cannot understand the mysterious wisdom of God (1 Cor. iii, 1-3). Knowledge of the mystery is given only to those who strive after perfection (Phil. iii, 15; iv, 12-3). Those who are docile to the Spirit live their faith. The Spirit steepens them in charity (1 Cor. xiii, 1), and makes them understand some of the dimensions of the mystery and of its manifestation of Christ's love: 'to bind you together in love and to stir your minds, so that your understanding may come to full development, until you really know God's secret in which all the jewels of wisdom and knowledge are hidden' (Col. ii, 2-3; cf. 1 Cor. ii, 6-7, 10, 15; Eph. iii, 14-9).

Though this knowledge is of a mystical nature, yet all Christians are called to such a knowledge. St. Paul reveals to the Ephesians that he prays the Omniscient to 'give you a spirit of wisdom and perception of what is revealed, to bring you to full knowledge of him. May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see what hope this call holds for you, what rich glories he has promised the saints will inherit' (Eph. i, 17-8). He similarly begins his letter to the Philipians telling them that he prays that their charity will increase and that their knowledge and discernment of the economy of salvation will improve accordingly (Phil. i, 9-10).

This will of necessity lead them on the road to perfection, thus preparing them for 'the Day of Christ when you will reach the perfect goodness which Jesus Christ produces in us for the glory and praise of God' (*ibid.* 11). In history the mystery is dimly perceived by faith, hope and charity, but with the Parousia, or the return of Christ, charity will take the place of the other two: 'then we shall be seeing face to face. The knowledge that I have now is imperfect; but then I shall know as fully as I am known' (1 Cor. xiii, 12). No doubt St. Paul strongly yearns for this final apocalypse or revelation. For him, perhaps more than for the ordinary Christian, it will be his second revelation.

As we saw in the introductory section, the first revelation on the road to Damascus was to him as a dawn in which he was captured by Christ Jesus (Phil. iii, 12). It was a decisive experience. He understood that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, is now in heaven glorified on the right hand of the Father. The vision of the risen and glorified Christ converted him once and for all.

This revelation on the road to Damascus was a veiled foreshadowing of the glorious revelation which begins with the Parousia. St. Paul often drew the contrast between these two revelations: the historical and the eschatological. The mystery is now revealed in history, and it was first revealed by Christ in history. The manifestation of God's justice now becomes apparent. The preaching of the Gospel is accomplished in history too. The revelation, the object of our faith, does not altogether depend on the future, it is accomplished now in and through Christ.

As we saw, with the revelation, Paul of Tarsus was given the mission to preach the contents of the revelation. Yet St. Paul was not fully satisfied with that revelation: he was constantly yearning for the second revelation, in which he will be irrevocably assumed by God's glory. In this eschatological revelation will be realised in its entirety the glory of Christ when he 'appears from heaven with the angels of his power' (2 Thess. i, 7).

FAITH AND HOPE

The immediate end of the revelation of the mystery and the preaching of the Gospel is to believe. 'Every act of faith is a "submission", an "obedience", as St. Paul repeats three times in the epistle to the Romans': i, 5; x, 16; xvi, 26.⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas sees this as the consent that we give to the work God does in us: 'in believing God who justifies, man submits himself to this justifying activity and thus receives the effect' (Commentary on Rom. iv, 5).

In the same letter (iv, 18-21) Paul recalls how it was Abraham's merit to believe — in whatever circumstances he was — in God's fidelity to his pact. Abraham never doubted that God will be true to his word. Earlier in the same letter (iii, 2-7) Paul shows the importance he gives to God's fidelity.

However, there is a paradox. How can God forget the judgment due to man's sin in order to show fidelity to the promises He made? The reconciliatory means is Christ's passion and death. For this reason in this letter Paul gives us one of the lengthiest treatments of the significance of Christ's death. By His death Christians have been freed from bondage to Sin, Death and Law. 'God dealt with sin by sending his own Son in a body as physical as any sinful body, and in that body God condemned sin' (viii, 3).

⁵ Stanislas Lyonnet, S.J., *Initiation à la Doctrine Spirituelle de Saint Paul*, p. 45.

It is in Christ's action, not man's, that Christians are justified. God took the initiative. But on our side it is necessary that we accept. Our acceptance is faith. Throughout the letter to the Romans Paul emphasises the contrast between the futile attempt of man to save himself by his own works and the right way of salvation as shown by Abraham. Abraham was justified not for his achievement but for his faith: his acceptance of God's promises (iv, 2). Faith is certainly not self-reliance. "To believe in him" is equivalent to acknowledging one's own insufficiency by asking God for help."⁶

The participation in Christ's life by faith is best seen in baptism. By baptism Christians become 'sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus' (Gal. iii, 26). They have 'put on Christ', perhaps alluding to the robes worn during the baptismal ceremony.

CONCLUSION

The immediate end of the revelation of the mystery and the announcing of the Gospel is to invite men to believe and to obey. St. Paul states this at the end of his letter to the Romans: 'the revelation of a mystery kept secret for endless ages, but now so clear that it must be broadcast to pagans everywhere to bring them to the obedience of faith.' (Rom. xvi, 25-6) This will 'make them all perfect in Christ' (Col. i, 28), 'all grow into one holy temple in the Lord... a house where God lives, in the Spirit' (Eph. ii, 21-2). This is the formation of Christ's mystical body, the Church (cf. Eph. i, 23; v, 23, 30). But the final end of the revelation of the mystery is the glory of God, as the letter to the Ephesians repeatedly indicates (cf. Eph. i, 6; Phil. ii, 11).

The riches of the mystery are election, filiation and redemption. St. Paul is dazzled by the magnificence of this plan of salvation, and the revelation of the infinite wisdom of God. It reveals God's boundless charity towards man. The mystery manifests infinite wisdom and love:

God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy: when we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ — it is through grace that you have been saved — and raised us up with him and gave us a place with him in heaven, in Christ Jesus.

This was to show for all ages to come, through his goodness towards us in Christ Jesus, how infinitely rich he is in grace.

(Eph. ii, 4-7; cf. i, 1-14)

⁶ Henry Wansbrough, O.S.B., *Theology in St. Paul*, p. 50.

Man's response to this great wisdom and love will be in adhering by love to this plan, and, in thinking God perpetually by praise. Revelation for St. Paul is the free and generous activity by which God, through Christ, reveals to the world His plan of salvation. The eternal plan or economy intends the re-unification of everything in Christ, Head of the new creation. This plan is communicated by the Gospel and its heralds are the apostles and the prophets of the New Testament. Obedience and faith are man's response to this proclamation, through the activity of the Holy Ghost. Faith commences a process of knowledge of this mystery of God's wisdom and charity. This is a process of constant growing which will never be complete until the revelation of the beatific vision.

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