

Spiritual Word

By Father David M. Petras

Liturgy and mystery

A common saying is, "everybody loves a mystery," because mysteries challenge us, amuse us, and even scare us. However, we must all confess to occasionally turning to the end to see how it turns out. A mystery that remains unsolved is not very satisfying. Mystery in our faith is also very fascinating and fearful. People want to attend church where there is "mystery," but sometimes one wonders why does our church, which has the quality of mystery, still lose people? Perhaps it is because while mystery fascinates and challenges, it also makes us very uncomfortable, especially today when we can understand the mysteries better.

Before Communion we pray: "Accept me as a partaker of your mystical supper, O Son of God: for I will not reveal your mystery to your enemies." If we will not reveal the mystery, this implies that we know the solution. This is true, as St. Paul wrote, "I am a minister in accordance with God's stewardship given to me to bring to completion for you the word of God, the mystery hidden from ages and from generations past. But now it has been manifested to his holy ones, to whom God chose to make known the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; it is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:24-27).

It is clear that St. Paul is not talking here about the Liturgy, but about everything that God has done for us, all his love for us, from the day he freed his people Israel from the Egyptian tyranny to today when he gives us the future kingdom in our Communion.

On the other hand, the Liturgy is certainly part of this puzzle, and part of this mosaic. It is a very important piece, for in Communion Christ is in us. He is our hope of glory. Christ is the mystery. St. Paul also writes, "This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32).

One problem is that mystery has become a buzzword. It means too

many things to people, and because we make it mean whatever we want, it can end up meaning nothing. Worst of all, if we apply humanist eyes to the idea of mystery, we think we have to put mystery into the Liturgy, that we need inscrutable ceremonies and incomprehensible language to make the Liturgy mysterious. St. Paul corrects us. The mystery has been revealed! The puzzle has been solved!

Looking for the clues

In the Old Testament we see all the clues: how Adam and Eve were driven from the tree of life, but the tree of life is the cross, the wood on which Christ died. Eating of his body and blood we eat of the tree of life, "for God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

We have seen Abraham take his only son, Isaac to be sacrificed on the mountain, but also how God accepted his faith and replaced Isaac with a lamb. Now the Father has sacrificed his only Son on the cross; and, like Isaac, he carried the wood for the sacrifice, and his death was accepted by the Father as faith that brings life. Christ is the "Lamb of God." We partake of this Lamb, this *ahneq* (Slavonic for lamb) in holy Communion.

We have seen how Moses freed the people of Israel in the Passover, when the angel of the Lord passed over the first-born children of Israel and struck down the first-born of Egypt, because the blood of the paschal lamb had been spread on the lintels of the doors of the Hebrew people. The wood of the door is the wood of the cross, now smeared by the blood of Jesus, the only Son of the Father. Jesus is the paschal lamb who, at the Passover supper, gave us his body as food, and who was sacrificed on the cross when the Passover lambs were being slain in the temple.

We have all the clues. We could

mention the clues to baptism – the ark of Noah, the dividing of the Red Sea, the crossing of the Jordan, or the figures of the resurrection – the raising of the son of the Shunammite women by Eliseus or the story of Jonah.

The mystery has been solved. We know it, and receive it in every Divine Liturgy, and we must not reveal this mystery to the enemies, that is, to the forces of sin. We must not sin, and fear sin alone. Yet we need not fear, because we receive of the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. What a tremendous and fascinating mystery!

There is mystery in the Liturgy, but now it emerges through our understanding! Mystery is vision, the gift of seeing, as Chrysostom told us, "It is called mystery when we do not consider what we see [with our bodily eyes], but see one set of things and consider another ... here the judgment of the believer is one thing, while that of the unbe-

destroyed by Adam's sin was restored.

Humanity again has access to the tree of life in paradise, which now is the cross and by Christ's blood we are all saved. Jesus did this by way of example at the Last Supper. St. John tells the story:

"He washed his disciple's feet, telling them, 'I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do'" (Jn 13:15). The Liturgy, therefore, is a memorial and model that we also should be ready to lay down our lives for others. "What greater love has anyone than to lay down his life for a friend?" (Jn 15:13); and "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34).

Of course, in this we see that there is still a mystery. While Christ's message is crystal clear, it is still a paradox! Life is found through death, only by loving our enemies and by losing our lives, can

Worst of all, if we apply humanist eyes to the idea of mystery, we think we have to put mystery into the Liturgy, that we need inscrutable ceremonies and incomprehensible language to make the Liturgy mysterious. St. Paul corrects us. The mystery has been revealed! The puzzle has been solved!

liever is another. For myself, I hear that Christ has been crucified, and I at once marvel at his love for us; he who does not believe hears the same thing said and thinks that it is folly. The unbeliever, hearing of a bath (of baptism), thinks it is only water; I, on the other hand, consider not only what is seen, but the purification of the soul by the Holy Spirit" (*In ep. I Cor. hom. 1, n. 7*).

Here again we see that our faith is a new way of seeing the world, and the Liturgy leads us into new light. This is called the paschal, or Passover mystery. It is not obscure, but perfectly clear. By his death for others, Christ has led us into new life. He has done this absolutely, because in him obedience to God

we find life! The mystery is that we understand clearly that this must be so, but still wonder on how it is so. Any doubts that it might not be so are demolished by the glorious resurrection of our lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ. No one expressed this paradox better than St. Paul, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God ... for Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:18, 22-24).