

CHAPTER 1

CHRIST'S SAVING MYSTERIES: CREATION UNIFIED AND MADE NEW IN THE CHURCH

A. The Sacraments and Creation

It is not the view of the Orthodox Church that redemption reaches its fulfillment in the death of Christ on the cross, as if this death made up in some juridical way for the offense offered to God by the human race, but rather that redemption is fulfilled in the union of the crucified and risen Christ with those who believe in Him so that they may be able to die to sin and be raised to new life. Consistent with this, the Orthodox Church accords to the mysteries, the sacraments,¹ a place of great importance in the economy of the redemption as the very means through which this union of human beings with Christ is brought about. Here Orthodoxy distinguishes itself from Protestantism, where the word *about* Christ almost seems to be enough, a word that enables man to commit himself to the belief that Christ, through His death, has effected our redemption; and that through this belief, human beings may benefit personally from the redemption won by Christ. Protestant tradition has also inherited from Catholicism a lack of belief in the power of a union of Christ with mankind and hence also in the importance of the mysteries, for the Catholic tradition sees in the sacraments only the visible means whereby an equivalent of the merit won by Christ through His death is bestowed in the form of a created grace that is to be guarded and administered by the Church.

At the basis of the Orthodox Church's concept of the mysteries, there stands a trust in the power of Christ's divine Spirit to work through one man upon another, through the mediation of their bodies and of the material elements shared between them, all within the milieu of the Church as the mystical body of Christ. The Church trusts that the divine Spirit can operate through the medium of the human spirit on the matter of the cosmos in general, and also upon other persons. Spiritual powers flow out through the touch of the human hand upon others either directly through the body or through other material realities, for the human body is made up of senses, in which spirit and body are not divided from one another. The one who transmits this power that flows out through the hand is the subject who thinks and wills, that is, a subject with a spiritual basis. Moreover, the power that flows out through the body of someone who acts upon someone else reaches to the spirit of this other subject. The two, while meeting one another by means of the senses, encounter one another through the spirit. This power that a human being transmits through his body is, however, more than just a power belonging to his own body and spirit; there is also a much greater power that passes out through these: the power of the Spirit of God, with whom a man brings himself into concord and to whom he opens himself through faith within the milieu of the Church. Within a sacrament, no line can be drawn that divides the movement of the acting human being from the power of the Spirit of God, for inasmuch as the one who celebrates the mystery is, as priest, the representative of the Church, the Holy Spirit works through him, the Spirit whose breath is blowing throughout the entire milieu of the Church, understood as the mystical body in which Christ is at work. This, properly speaking, is the decisive fact. For the one who receives a sacrament opens himself through his faith to the full action of the power of God transmitted by the one who celebrates it within the faith milieu of the Church, the field of action of the Spirit of Christ.

Hence the mystery is celebrated in the encounter of two human subjects who through faith have opened themselves to the Holy Spirit, who is at work within the milieu of the Church, and this encounter is extended also in the direct touch of their bodies, or through the mediation of some material element. It is not the material elements, the words spoken, or the gestures realized, taken in themselves, that constitute the mystery. Rather, the mystery has its being in the faith-filled

encounter of the two persons within the midst of the Church, which is full of the Holy Spirit, and also in the bodily contact between the two persons, together with the testimony to their faith that they give through their words, both the faith of the one who celebrates the mystery and of the one who receives it.

The general basis of the mysteries of the Church is the faith that God can operate upon the creature in his visible reality. In this sense the general meaning of the mysteries is the union of God with the creature, and the most comprehensive mystery is the union of God with the whole of creation. This is a mystery that contains everything, and there is absolutely no part of reality not contained within it.² This union begins with the very act of creation and is destined to find its fulfillment through the movement of creation toward that state in which "God is all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).³ Is there anyone who can explain the meaning and the depth of this union, the way in which the Word of God is present within the reasons⁴ of created things and the way He is at work, sustaining and governing them toward their goal of complete union with Him?⁵

Within this all-encompassing mystery, each component has the character of mystery, for it is bound up with all the other components, and all of these together with God. Not a single one is confused with the others, but each is maintained in connection with all the rest by the divine Logos. In this great mystery the human being holds a place apart. He is the image and principal organ of that great and dynamic mystery that is the union of the Logos with the whole of creation, and this because his very being is the union of spirit with matter, and thus he unites the whole of creation in himself and creation with God. The human spirit transfigures the matter with which it has been united from the beginning, integrating it into a body, as the environment in which the spirit works. In the mystery of the human being, all his parts and functions are themselves mysteries as participants in the mystery that he constitutes as an integral whole.

The material eye that sees is a mystery, as is the word that a man speaks, being a combination of sound and sense, the filling of sound with sense. Also a mystery is the face of the human being, matter illuminated by thought and feeling. Man possesses in himself the elements of the entire creation, but in a special way he also unites within himself the whole of creation, for human consciousness tends toward the comprehension of all creation, and through the human eye, ex-

tended by technology, greater and greater distances can be spanned. If reason shines forth from within the human mind, in some fashion wherever it extends itself, there extends something of the energy of the very material of the brain. The human being is the bond of creation, the true “macrocosm”—in the language of St. Maximus the Confessor—because he is the conscious head of the rational and unitary fabric of the world. But man has this quality because he never comes to a stop, even at the limits of the created world; through his thought and his yearning, he goes beyond them, participating in God Himself and opening himself to God’s infinite light. Only in this way does the human being project into the world and upon the world a light beyond it, a never-ending light. Only thus does he deepen in an endless way the meaning of the world, or its wealth of meanings. More than any other single entity in this world, the human being realizes the paradoxical character of the mystery; he unites within himself the spirit (conscious reason) with matter (unconscious and malleable rationality), simplicity with composition, subjectivity with objectivity, the defined with the undefined, even the created with the uncreated.

Hence the human being is created in order that, on behalf of creation, he may bring a decisive contribution to the maintenance and fulfillment of the all-encompassing mystery that is the union of God with creation, and that he may be the conscious and willing means through which God maintains and fulfills this union. Accordingly, the human being is brought forward as the last among the creatures, as a kind of natural bond or link (*syndesmos*) between the extremities of the whole, through its own members, and as one who within himself brings into unity the things that had been separated, according to nature, by great distances. The human being begins from his own state of separation and—through that union which brings all things together in God, their cause—advances step by step in his sublime ascent so that all things might reach their goal, with man uniting them in God, in whom there is no separation.⁶

B. The Christological and Ecclesiological Basis of the Mysteries

Even at the outset of creation, God works through the cosmos, and human beings work through the cosmos in a similar way, uniting their

work to that of God, sometimes more closely and at other times less closely. Through man, the activity that God exercises upon creation is cast into special relief in view of its transfiguration and pneumatization (spiritualization). This is the natural basis of the mysteries of the Church, the basis for the fact that, for example, one man can transmit to another the power of God through the medium of water. The Man who has become, however, the medium *par excellence* whereby God exercises power over matter and over other human beings is Christ. It is from Christ that in each of the sacraments, the power of God extends over all human beings through gestures and material elements.

Through his own will and through the connection that he has with all other created things, man has been capable of producing separation and alienation among all things; he has likewise produced division between all things and God, their ultimate and unifying principle. For by separating himself from any other human being, he has separated himself from the way in which the latter sees the whole of reality, and also from benefitting from that reality in a brotherly way. Thus each person has raised up the whole of reality as a barrier over against the other, or, through their feuds and struggles, the two have divided it up between themselves, seeking always to keep reality in a state of separation by such means. Human beings have in this way also experienced a division among themselves, and no longer does any single one among them live in harmony with the whole of reality as it truly is.

Because human beings had brought things to such a point, the Word of God—the unitary, personal bosom and source of all the “reasons” of the world—proceeded to bring about a new union of all things in Himself, a union that would be closer and more secure. With this in mind, the Word continued to make use of human nature, precisely for its capacity to be a means of bringing about the unity of all created things among themselves and between themselves and God. Accordingly, in order to effect this closer union, the Word Himself became man; He placed in the midst of human beings a center from among themselves that could no longer be separated from God and that no longer was inclined to seek separation from other human beings or to cause division within creation.

In this fashion *a new mystery comes into being, that of an even closer union between Creator and creature.* This is the mystery of Christ. The paradox of union between the uncreated and the created

that was brought into being through creation appears now in an even sharper way, cast into the highest possible relief. God Himself is also man. The Creator is also creature; the depth of incomprehensibility and the subject who made all things becomes a human reason with the consciousness of its own limitation and with a perceptible body; the infinite makes itself finite, filling the latter with what belongs to the former. Thus the infinite horizon of the knowledge belonging to the supreme reality becomes completely transparent for human beings.

But the Word of God assumed our human nature as a human nature that was made personal in Himself, so that by means of it He might unite Himself more closely with all the human subjects who bear that same nature and with the whole of creation, a creation with which these same subjects are all connected through their natures.

The Word has thus made actual the full human potentiality for being that link which binds together God and creation; He has made of man, who is His image, the most adequate means for the exercise of that unifying power that the Logos holds over creation. His divine properties, permeated with love, find in the human virtues and in man's capacity to love both God and his neighbor the most efficacious form by which human beings can be united with God and with one another. Through the human spirit the Word of God is able to exercise His activity not only of spiritualizing, but also of deifying, the senses of the body. By the very fact that it was not a human hypostasis with which He united Himself, but that He made Himself the hypostasis of human nature, accompanied by His divine openness toward the whole of created reality and by His supreme capacity for human communion, the Word has made the humanity that He assumed the means of union and deification for all humankind and for all of creation in God.

The actualization of this unity between the Word and human subjects, a unity that remains to some extent only potential, takes the form of the Church. The Church is thus *the third mystery*, in which God the Word restores and raises to an even higher degree His union with the world, a world brought into being through the act of creation but weakened through human sin. Creation itself can be said to be a Church,⁷ for the Church is creation restored and on the way toward renewal and fulfillment. If any mystery is the unity between opposites, then the Church is the ultimate mystery, for she is the form of the su-

preme unity of God with all created things. In the fullness of her development in the life to come, the Church will be the mode in which God is "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). Thus the notions of mystery and of Church coincide. The universe, become once again Church, has become the all-encompassing mystery, for mystery is the presence and the action of God in the whole of creation. Moreover, inasmuch as each element within this all-encompassing mystery is also a mystery, it can also be said that each of its components is a church.⁸

The mystery of the Church in the strict sense, as the third mystery, presupposes therefore the first mystery—the mystery that has its foundation in creation—but it could not have come into being except through the mystery of Christ. It is nothing more than the extension of the mystery of Christ; all of it is filled with the mystery of Christ.

More precisely, the mystery of the Church is not separate from the mystery of Christ, nor that of Christ from the mystery of the Church, given that the Church is only the extension of the mystery of Christ and that the mystery of Christ, after Pentecost, does not stand on its own, apart from the mystery of the Church; and given, furthermore, that the mystery of Christ has only come into being in order to extend itself through the mystery of the Church. These two mysteries can be distinguished from one another in theory, but they are not separated in fact.⁹ Christ is the real head, the fundamental hypostasis of the Church who constitutes and sustains her while imprinting His own life continually upon her and upon her members, who are held together in unity among themselves and with Him.

Just as all the parts and movements of the created world have the character of mystery because they participate in the all-encompassing mystery, so all the members and acts of the Church have the character of mystery, for Christ is present and active in all of them through the Holy Spirit.

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Understood in a more particular way, the mysteries are invisible operations of Christ realized through visible acts by which the Church is constituted, acts that are officiated in the Church. It is only through the Church that Christ and the Holy Trinity come to be known in Their activity, yet They are known as mysteries because They are known within the tangible reality of the Church.

According to this more particular sense, therefore, certain visible actions of the Church have the character and name of mysteries. These have been instituted by Christ, and through them Christ unites with Himself—and therefore also with the Church—the individual persons who have faith in Him; through these sacraments Christ causes His union with them to grow. For by taking human nature to Himself, the Son of God has reconciled it and united it with the Father, and through His obedience, Crucifixion, and Resurrection He has deified it so that, by uniting us with Him as the firstfruits of our human nature, we may become like Him; we may constitute the Church and persist and grow within that unity with Him that is represented by the Church.

Through the mystery of baptism, each one becomes a member of the Church by means of an initial union of himself with Christ, whereas through the remaining mysteries this union of the members of the Church with Christ her head is either increased or restored, for the strengthening of the Church's unity; or else particular graces are given to certain persons: the grace of celebrating the sacraments, of preaching the word and maintaining its integrity, or the grace needed for other responsibilities, such as marriage, or for the restoration of health and well-being. Inasmuch, therefore, as the mysteries are tangible actions instituted by Christ through which He imparts His grace and brings those who believe in Him into union with Himself in order to constitute and preserve the Church, they must also be looked at according to their distinct individual aspects.

i. Visible and Invisible Operations: The Body, Soul, and Grace of Christ

From what precedes, we can see that the basis of the mysteries in their restricted sense is the Incarnation of the Word and His redemptive acts, namely, the fact that the Word took to Himself and preserves forever in His hypostasis not only a human soul but also a human body, and that through His redemptive acts He has raised these up to the state of deification. The concrete possibility, however, of a union between Him and ourselves through the mysteries, for the purpose of raising us up to the condition of His own humanity, has been posited by the Resurrection and Ascension, that is, by the pneumatization of His body, and to this condition His body was raised up in conse-

quence of His sacrifice on the cross.¹⁰ No sooner had the Spirit filled His own body, in which the malleable rational structure of its matter had become wholly transparent and pneumatized, than Christ was able—through the Spirit that radiates out from Him—to dwell within our bodies, imparting to them the different states through which He Himself had passed and the transcendent greatness to which He had attained, for the purpose of leading us to those same states and to that same transcendence.

Nevertheless, this reality is not achieved in a way that is purely invisible, or spiritual. There are two reasons for this: on one hand His body, even filled with the Spirit, has remained a real body, and on the other hand our body has to start from the visible, earthly image that the body of Christ possessed in order to advance through the various stages through which His body also passed, so that our bodies may attain to resurrection and spiritualization in the life eternal.

The mysteries, like the Incarnation of the Lord, highlight the great importance and eternal worth of the human body as the medium through which the divine riches and depths become transparent. It is in the body that the soul in its entirety exists, and in the body the soul can gain more and more influence, to the degree that the soul is filled with deification and the Godhead Itself increasingly reveals through the body Its riches and dimensions, which are infinite; for in Christ there “dwells bodily all the fullness of Godhead” (Col 2:9). To make the body holy means to make the soul holy too—indeed, to make of it an ever more transparent medium and an ever more adequate organ for the presence of the Godhead. Every gesture of the body has repercussions on the life of the soul, and every thought or sentiment of the soul has repercussions in the body. The more delicate, pure, and nuanced sentiments of the soul manifest themselves in the body, and the virtuous sensations of the body are imprinted on the soul. It is through the will of the soul, however, that the feelings of the body attain to a state of purity, for inasmuch as these bodily sensations are imprinted forever on the soul, when the latter raises up its body in the resurrection, it will also extend into the body the purity of its sensations. The roots of the body cannot be totally removed from the soul, just as it is impossible to see the body only as matter once it has been understood as a malleable rationality that is fully illuminated through the opening of its conscious reason to the infinite reason of God, or, conversely, as

a rationality darkened because the activity of God is absent from it. This malleable rationality in the flesh is influenced by each person's subjective reason, namely, by the consciousness and will of the soul. That explains why it is possible for the body to have roots within the soul and to be able to imprint its sensations upon the soul, and vice versa. Hence the soul can lead the body toward a state wherein it can function as the organ that fulfills the purest and most noble yearnings of the soul. It is through the body that the personal characteristics of a human being—that is, his distinguishing personal traits—become transparent, together with the whole course of his earthly life. In this way the objective, malleable rationality in the body bears within it the mark of the subjective rationality of the human person, and indeed imprints its own mark upon the spiritual human subject. Consequently, even after the decomposition of the body, its mark remains imprinted upon the subjectivity of the soul.

The sensibility of the body passes through this same process. It becomes a sensibility specific to one person and as such reveals itself not only in the body but also in the soul. But the reverse also occurs: upon the subjective reason and conscious sensibility of the soul, there is imprinted either that purity or that defilement in which the life and sensibility of the body was played out, and this quality will remain in the soul until, at the resurrection, the soul in turn imprints it upon the risen body.

In general, the life of the soul cannot be pure within a body that is defiled. Hence a spirituality that comes down to only ideas, however refined it may be, cannot be the spirituality or integral spiritual state of the human person in a Christian sense.

Upon the objective rationality and sensibility of the body of Christ there has been stamped not only the mark of that subjective reason and sensibility that belongs to the pure human soul of Christ, but through these also the spiritual imprint of the highest light, purity, and power of the Godhead. Similarly, these same qualities are communicated, through visible actions that come into contact with our bodies, to our own bodies and souls.

A reciprocity between soul and body thus comes into being. All that touches the senses of the body is imprinted on the soul, and all the sensations of the body bear within themselves the stamp of the soul's specific sentiment and find their place within the light provided

by the soul's understanding, whether this be more superficial or more profound. One cannot have an influence on the soul without acting on the body, and any influence on the body bears the mark of the soul. At the same time, it is through the body that the soul realizes every specific mode of its own being and every quality of purity or defilement that it has acquired, and, consequently, also those particular states of purity, received from Christ through the mysteries, that make contact with our bodies.

ii. Christ, the Unseen Celebrant of the Mysteries

Because grace is nothing other than the activity of Christ, the invisible celebrant of the mysteries is Christ. The sacraments take into account the bond between soul and body and the fact that the soul is open to God, for in Christ this openness of humanity toward God has reached its highest level. Through His activity Christ comes into contact with our bodies, and these contacts grow deeper and deeper within our souls. Through His body, which is full of power, Christ Himself is at work on our bodies, but through His body there is communicated to us not only the purity of His human sensibility but also the clear sensibility of His own soul and the power of the Godhead inherent in Him.

The Word of God has taken flesh so that He can gather in Himself, in the mystery of the unity of God and creation, not only souls but also bodies. In the same way that the body of Christ is not merely an intuitive symbol of a Godhead that is separated from Christ Himself but instead is fitted within the framework of His soul and divinity, so our flesh can be united in a real way with the Godhead of Christ through the agency of that physical contact that His body has with ours. There is something analogous here to that outpouring of power from the body of Christ that occurred through the medium of His garments when the sick would touch these. Inasmuch, however, as the body of Christ has become invisible and Spirit-filled through His Ascension, although always remaining a body with its own shape, the "touching" of His body and ours is no longer something visible; rather, He makes use of the matter with which our body is connected.¹¹ Christ wishes to sanctify our bodies by making use of matter, not through some other mode detached from the world of matter. This material world is the one with which our human body is literally in touch, which feeds it and gives it drink, which penetrates it and imprints itself upon the soul through

the material sensations it produces—it is the world that Christ fills with His own power. Hence from among all the different forms that matter has assumed, Christ chooses those which are most basic to what is needed to sustain the human body: bread, water, wine, oil.

Some representatives of Western Christianity also feel the need to return to the understanding that primitive Christians had of nature, namely, as the medium through which Christ brings His activity to bear upon human beings.¹² In order to achieve this return, however, they must first return to an understanding of Christ as the Logos of created things and as the subject of that action whereby they are sanctified through the Holy Spirit. The medium through which Christ acts upon man cannot be nature as it exists in the wake of sin; it can only be a nature sanctified through the Holy Spirit, transfigured, a nature that in the essence of its energies (just as modern physics has revealed) is filled with the energy of the Holy Spirit and freed from the activity of the evil spirits.¹³

However, the Holy Spirit works this hallowing of nature principally for the benefit of human beings, transmitting to them that same purity that belongs to the now spiritual body of Christ and that seeks appropriation within the human body. But is it possible for Western man to return to such a life of holiness, which implies asceticism? The power of Christ shines forth from His sanctified body upon our bodies—and hence upon our souls too—through the agency of a nature that He makes holy through His own body, either in the moment when the mystery is being celebrated or beforehand, as, for example, in the sacrament of chrismation when the holy chrism is sanctified by prayers that precede the sacrament.

Christ penetrates our body with His own body, or at least with the energy from His pure body, making use of the material elements of the sacraments or the gestures of the priest for the purpose of placing within our bodies as well the beginning of this process of sanctification. Yet no such sanctification takes place without also some effort on the part of the one who receives the sacrament. We must underline here, with the greatest degree of seriousness, the Christological realism of the mysteries—that is, the activity of Christ, through the agency of His body, that is accomplished upon human persons, through the transfigured matter and priestly gestures of the sacraments. If the Person of the Logos is present within all created things, which are the

malleable images of His own reasons (*logoi*), how much more is He able to be present in the material elements of the mysteries, hallowed as these are by special prayers of the Church, with His body already present within the milieu of the Church, a body made wholly spiritual and thus invisibly—but nonetheless really and efficaciously—present.

Yet although the material reality through which the Spirit of Christ acts in the mysteries is made holy by Him, there is no need to envisage any kind of separation between the matter of the sacrament and the grace or power of Christ that is imparted through it. Such a dualistic conception came into Western theology after Scholasticism had separated it from the theology of the Fathers and of the New Testament and after it had lost sight of the intimate bond that linked the Logos (the incarnate Word) and His activity to the natural world.¹⁴ Matter is not merely a symbol, separate from grace, that occasions and intuitively interprets the unseen activity of grace; matter itself is filled with the power of God. It is only by failing to understand this ontological connection—by failing to link matter with the divine Word and with Christ's human body and our own—that Protestantism has come to a total separation between the activity of God in the soul and the matter used as the medium of this activity, hence its elimination of the sacraments.

Consequently, the scholastic distinction between *the external parts and the internal parts* of the sacraments is no more than the product of abstraction, and it need not be understood in the sense that the external part can be conceived separately from the grace or activity of Christ. What is seen is not only what can be seen, and grace, which is unseen, works through matter and through the visible gesture.

iii. The Christological and Ecclesial Character of the Mysteries

The mysteries are celebrated by the Church, or by Christ within the Church, for the sake of those persons who want to enter the Church and to remain within her, uniting themselves in this way to Christ Himself, who is the one who also instituted the sacraments. The sacraments clearly have as their focus particular persons, rather than either the community of the Church as a whole or groups of persons within the Church. This does not mean, however, that the sacraments are given to particular persons taken in isolation from the Church. It

is through the mysteries that the Church—or, more exactly, Christ at work in the Church—carries out His activity of uniting particular persons to Himself and to the other members of the Church already in union with Him. The sacraments are the acts whereby Christ recapitulates, in Himself as Church, human beings—on condition that they believe in Him—who have become divided from God and from one another. The sacraments thus have a unifying function. As such they belong to the Church, which is the unity realized in Christ of those who have put their faith in Him, for the purpose of extending that same unity, or of attracting others within it and strengthening their unity in Christ, that is, the unity of the Church as the mystical body of Christ. No sacrament is celebrated for the sake of a person who is outside the Church in order to leave him outside the Church. No recognition is given to anyone for a sacrament received outside the Church so long as that person remains outside the Church. Baptism is celebrated in the narthex of the church but facing toward its interior once the person receiving baptism has renounced, facing the exterior, the one who holds sway outside the Church.

Although the mysteries are celebrated for the sake of persons who are considered in a distinct manner, they are always administered for the benefit of persons who are entering into the Church and, after their entrance, the sacraments are fitted to the needs of the persons who constitute the Church. Through them Christ exercises His activity upon persons at the moment of their entry into the Church, or persons who find themselves already within the Church, in order to strengthen the unity they have in Him and the unity of the entire Church. Thus through the mysteries the Church grows in unity with Christ and also within herself, and so does each of her members. “In [Him] the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21). “And He Himself gave some to be . . . evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11–13).

Based on the fact that it is through the sacraments that the Church expands and maintains herself and grows spiritually, later Catholic theology stressed as the principal role of the sacraments their function of unifying believers within the Church. At times this role was given

so much prominence that the union with Christ was relegated to a secondary position; according to the Fathers, this union was the union of the human subject with the body of Christ and consequently produced in human subjects a sensibility shared with Christ, with Christ Himself becoming the content of the person's feeling.

Karl Rahner goes so far as to consider that the Church, not Christ, instituted the sacraments. Christ established a single sacrament, the Church, and the Church has the power of activating her own sacramental nature in the distinct sacraments:

Now the Church is in continuance, the contemporary presence, of that real, eschatologically triumphant and irrevocably established presence in the world, in Christ, of God's salvific will . . . By the very fact of being in that way the enduring presence of Christ in the world, the Church is truly the fundamental sacrament [*Das Ursakrament*], the well-spring of the sacraments in the strict sense.¹⁵

The actualization or accomplishment of the eschatologically victorious redemptive grace established in the Church for the world and offered to all men, takes place, therefore . . . in an act of the Church in the individual's regard, whereby the gratuitous character of redemptive grace is proclaimed. This act of the Church in regard to man necessarily bears within it the structure of the Church's own nature. It is sacramental in accordance with the Church's character as the primal sacrament of grace.¹⁶

From the principle that the Church is the primal sacrament it would be possible to see that the existence of true sacraments in the strictest traditional sense is not necessarily and always based on a definite statement . . . in which the historical Jesus Christ explicitly spoke about a certain definite sacrament . . . The institution of a sacrament can . . . follow simply from the fact that Christ founded the Church with its sacramental nature.¹⁷

Rahner does nothing more than draw the logical conclusion from the Catholic teaching on grace as the created "graced effect" flowing from the death of Christ and placed at the disposition of the Church,¹⁸ and hence detachable from Christ.

Because grace, according to biblical and patristic thought, is the actual activity of Christ, it is Christ Himself, encountered within the Church, who is at work in any of the mysteries. Christ Himself extends

and develops the life of the Church by means of all the sacraments. It is only visibly that these are celebrated by the priest as the representative of the Church; invisibly, Christ Himself is their celebrant. Whereas for Rahner,¹⁹ baptism, for example, is the sacrament of entrance into the Church and all its other effects are implied in this, or in the sacrament of penance it is the Church that forgives the penitent, in biblical and patristic thought the one who is baptized unites himself directly with Christ (“Do you join yourself to Christ?” “I do join myself to Christ”),²⁰ and through this he becomes a member of the Church; likewise, the penitent is forgiven by “our Lord and God Jesus Christ through His grace and love for mankind,” and the visible celebrant is just the one who, in his role as “unworthy priest and spiritual father,” seconds what Christ does in this act of forgiveness.²¹

The activity of Christ Himself, who is at work in the mysteries, has to be considered in strict connection with the fact that it was He Himself who instituted them. However, He has instituted them because He practiced them from the beginning and continues to be their invisible celebrant, and hence also the one who sustains the Church. He Himself passed through baptism and thereby commanded that all should be baptized, declaring at the same time that He Himself would be present in the practice of this sacrament: “And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). He Himself received the Holy Spirit as man after His baptism, so that all who follow after Him may receive the Spirit from Him in the sacrament of chrismation. He forgave sins and continues to forgive sins through priests, having empowered the apostles by breathing the Holy Spirit upon them, as a way for His activity to remain permanently within the celebration of this sacrament: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them,²² if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23). He founds the Eucharist on the basis of His death on the cross and His Resurrection, and He celebrates the first Eucharist, commanding the apostles and their successors to celebrate it, while He Himself remains permanently within it as both the sacrifice and the one who sacrifices. It is He who, having become the High Priest *par excellence*, remains invisibly active as such through the visible bishops and priests to whom He imparts the character of being the visible organs by which He, invisibly, celebrates the mysteries. He blessed marriage and healed the sick, and so the Church celebrates all these seven sacraments because Christ

celebrated them visibly during His time on earth, and, after His Ascension into Heaven—or after His entry with the body within that plane of being where all is filled completely with the Spirit—He continues to be their invisible celebrant within His Church.

The relationship between the Church and Christ cannot be expressed merely by the idea that in the sacraments the Church represents an absent Christ, that the Church is the judicial vicar of a Christ who is absent; the relationship has to be understood as a dialectical one: on one hand the Church is filled with Christ, inasmuch as He is at work within it, but on the other hand the Church stands always in the position of one who prays to Christ and serves Him, and therefore is not identical with Him. The Church is the body, not the head, although there can be no union with the head that does not also mean union with the body. The consciousness of the believer lays the principal stress, however, not on union with the body but with the head. Here again, between the Catholic and Protestant understandings, Orthodoxy holds to a position that is more complex and balanced, more in harmony with a nuanced reality.

The light of that same ocean of grace, of brilliance and power that shines forth from Christ, penetrates into all those who receive the sacraments, and within this light and its penetrating energy, the same Sun of Righteousness is present and active. Just as the look of a father, filled with an identical affection and penetrating love, will concurrently light upon all his children, so Christ enters through the energy of His own love within all those who receive the sacraments, bringing them into union with Himself and with one another and in this way expanding the Church and strengthening her unity.

But in order for Christ to direct His activity, through the mysteries, toward each person, each person must believe in Him and in the decisive importance of the actions that Christ has chosen to be the means of His saving grace. In this way human beings will know the exact moments in which Christ principally acts upon them. Through this faith each such person envelops with faith the decisive dimension of the sacramental act celebrated invisibly by Christ Himself, or opens himself to Christ's saving activity. Hence in each mystery the recipient is addressed by name and makes a confession of faith (baptism, Eucharist, repentance, ordination) or of commitment (marriage, repentance, ordination). For Christ to address His saving activity toward each per-

son through the sacraments, that person must by his own intentional act manifest the desire to accept a decisive personal relationship with Christ, who makes Himself available to all by His love and saving grace. There must be a total personal opening to Christ, a complete surrendering of one's destiny to Him, so that the redemptive wave from the ocean of Christ's grace and personal love can enter into the person with a special and salvific attention to his reality. All who believe enter through baptism, and make progress through the remaining sacraments, in this total personal relationship with Christ, but with the self-same Christ who is also found in relationship with all other believers. Hence the person also enters into relation and makes progress within his relationship with these others as well, adding himself to the Church as the mystical body of Christ. This is one of the meanings of baptism as dying with Christ to the old life and being born with Him into a new life that comes exclusively from Him. This same decision is asked of the believer in the other sacraments too.

Christ alone, not the Church, was able to establish the forms and stages of His relationship to believers through the mysteries. It is true that Christ commanded that baptism was to be accorded "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," but the phrase "in the name of" does not denote an activity of the Church in the name of a distant Trinity but in Its power. Christ is giving us assurance that in the visible act of the Church, each Person of the Holy Trinity, in keeping with His own position, is both present and certainly active.²³ For the Lord goes on to say, "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20), and He speaks in a number of different places of the activity of the Spirit (e.g., John 20:22-23).

The presence and activity of Christ Himself in the mysteries is implied by the fact that the grace of the sacraments is the uncreated energy, or activity, of Christ. Through each sacrament He relives and instills in each believer the experience and power of certain exalted states by which He has raised up His human nature to its full height and deification. This alone explains the gradation within the sacraments, for otherwise this question would arise: Why is grace not given to us completely through a single sacrament? Nicholas Cabasilas says, "Let us now explain how each sacred rite unites to Christ those who have undergone it. Union with Christ, then, belongs to those who have undergone all that the Savior has undergone, and have experienced

and become all that He has.”²⁴ Just as the Savior received baptism first, so we too receive this sacrament first.²⁵ We grow in our human nature from a spiritual point of view just as He too deigned to grow in His human nature. We cannot skip over the different stages of growth that belong to this nature.

iv. The Priest as Visible Celebrant of the Mysteries

After these explanations concerning the external aspect and the invisible grace of the mysteries and of the role that they play, through Christ's own saving activity, in uniting the recipients of the sacraments to Christ and hence also to the Church, certain further clarifications must also be given regarding the bishop and priest as celebrants of the mysteries.

The priest is the visible organ through whom Christ, who is present in the Church, exercises His activity invisibly within the mysteries, imparting grace to those to whom these are administered.

Christ, become invisible to us through His Ascension, now makes use of a visible, personal instrument to exercise His activity upon those who are to be united with Him and who are to grow in Him by entering into the Church and pursuing their spiritual development within her. The need for certain material means or certain visible gestures also implies the need for visible persons through whom Christ can be at work invisibly upon those who seek union and growth within Him. The most effective kind of such work or activity is, however, always interpersonal. As a Person, Christ exercises His activity upon human persons in the most effective manner through the instrumentality of other human persons. It is only a human person who can perform actions that are expressive, that is, intentional and distinct from the unintentional movements that belong to the natural world. It is only a human person who can speak words that explain the meaning of what is being done and of what Christ intends through the sacraments. The gestures of the priest that make physical contact with the recipient of the sacrament, or to which the recipient responds through his own gestures of acceptance, cause the mystery to have a deeper impact within the very being of the one who receives it. This same impact also applies both to the words spoken by the celebrant of the sacraments and heard by the recipient and to the words spoken as a response and commitment by the latter.

These gestures, however, touch the entire being of the recipient; they do not merely enter through his hearing. Moreover, the words used in the sacraments are many, and their frequent repetition does not necessarily create a situation that is always accompanied by a particular solemnity; hence it is not easy for a single word to create in the recipient a decisive and unique significance of the kind created by a gesture, or a series of gestures, that is not repeated and that makes physical contact with the very body of the one who receives the sacrament. Finally, such gestures are not the property of the individual celebrant in his character as a man, nor does he choose them on the spur of the moment, but they are gestures that belong in common to the Church in which Christ Himself is at work. Not by words alone does the mystery prompt human beings to make their own the dying and rising with Christ to new life; in some measure it also causes them to imitate these acts and, through certain gestures, to make real this dying with Christ to the old life and the rising with Him to the new life, because it is not merely a question of words but of an entire series of acts that, throughout the whole Church, are unique and have been established on the basis of Christ's command. Through prayers, gestures, and declarations, the mystery does not merely give expression to but in a certain way also makes real what it expresses through words.

As such, *the mystery is a unique and decisive event in the life of the one who comes to faith and who continues to believe*: it is not simply a matter of words. The sacramental gestures of the priest or bishop, performed in the name of the Church and with her authority—that is, with the authority of Christ at work within the Church—really fulfill the purposeful activity of Christ, for it is Christ Himself who is fulfilling it invisibly, while the Church herself is fulfilling it visibly through these physical gestures.

The priest makes present to the eyes of the believer the authority of Christ and the Church. He does this as representative of both and in a manner corresponding to the relation between Christ and the Church: he represents Christ, who has designated him as the visible instrument through whose gestures and declarations Christ Himself celebrates the mysteries invisibly; he represents the Church inasmuch as he pronounces the invocation of the Holy Spirit in the name of the Church, and, consequently, the Spirit of Christ descends with His own

activity upon the one who receives the sacrament, using the material elements and the gestures, prayers, and declarations of the priest.

This twofold but nonetheless indissoluble quality of the priest or bishop as representative is seen in his ordination, for this is celebrated by the bishop (or many bishops, in the case of an episcopal ordination), but Christ Himself is the one who ordains invisibly, that is, who transmits to a person the quality of being bishop or priest and visible celebrant of the mysteries, who empowers that person with His grace to serve as His own visible instrument in the celebration of the sacraments. However, the ordaining bishop or bishops invoke the Holy Spirit simultaneously in the name of the Church during the sacrament of ordination, and indeed the very community of the Church itself joins its own prayer to that which the bishop or bishops raise on high in celebrating an ordination, or which the priest or bishop offers up in the celebration of the other sacraments.

The Church's teaching that the validity of the mysteries celebrated by priest or bishop does not depend upon his own personal worthiness is based on the fact that the prayer and invocation of the Holy Spirit made by the celebrant is the prayer and invocation of the whole Church. Likewise, his sacramental gestures and his declaration of the grace that descends are accompanied by the faith of the Church that Christ Himself works invisibly through these instruments and that He Himself fulfills each time the promise He gave at the institution of the mysteries: that when they were being celebrated, His grace would descend upon those who received them.

Clearly, it is desirable that the priest or bishop give evidence of his own personal worthiness in his priestly or episcopal service, but in the case where this worthiness is lacking, its absence is supplied by the faith and worthiness of the Church. Karl Rahner says that if some priests are not worthy, the lack of their worthiness is made up for by the worthiness of other priests. And if all were to be unworthy, then this general unworthiness could not be covered over by anything else. In such a case, the holiness of the members would no longer depend upon a liturgical hierarchy, because this hierarchy would in fact no longer exist. An analogy can be drawn here with the sinfulness of the members of the Church. Although some members may be sinful, the Church remains holy through its other members, but were all its members to be sinful, then the Church herself would cease to be holy, for in

the long run the Church is made up of human beings who believe in Christ and in whom Christ has come to dwell for this reason.²⁶ But it is more correct to say that the worthiness itself of some of the faithful, because it is the worthiness of the Church, makes up for the unworthiness of the priests. And believers of this kind will never be lacking.

Just as it was necessary to recognize the authority of Christ in the choice of certain material elements and in the establishment of certain gestures for the celebration of the sacraments, the same authority must be recognized behind the selection of certain persons to be the visible instruments for their celebration.

The selection of these personal instruments and their empowerment with a special grace also points to the fact that every sacrament is also an entry into personal communion with Christ and a foundation for a general communion with Him and with the other members of the Church who are united with Him. Moreover, every human person within the community of the Church fulfills the role of a link in the chain of communion with the incarnate Christ and with all other human beings who believe in Him. Through the mysteries Christ gives us the gift of Himself in order to create more exalted forms and higher degrees of communion with Him and between ourselves. As such, a human being must experience the fact that he enters, in the sacramental moment, into union with Christ, who is a supreme "Thou" and who raises him up to the level of communion with Himself, but who is also, simultaneously, a man who has descended to the level of communion with us through the agency of another man. For the believer, the experience of this entry into communion with Christ is occasioned necessarily by another person and, in the most appropriate of all ways, by a person empowered permanently by Christ and by the Church to bring about that communion with Him and to sustain and promote the communion of all believers with Christ and with one another. This mission that he possesses is made known objectively as something that he has from Christ and the Church. It is not a mere subjective presumption, nor a claim made by a particular person who would arrogate to himself such a mission and empowerment from within his own being. Only the Church, as the body of Christ, can give this kind of objective assurance; only through the Church can Christ objectively authorize someone to act as His visible instrument in the celebration of the sacraments, as the occasion whereby He Himself in an invisible way acts as their cel-

eb rant. Only thus can Christ make use of the mysteries in an objective way as a means of bringing believing human beings into union with Himself, because He unites them within a visible unity around certain persons who represent this same visible unity.

In the relationship with the priest, the believer possesses on one hand a visible, human "thou" as the central intermediary for communion with the community of all those who believe in Christ. On the other hand he encounters a "thou" who is the occasion for his own experience of relating to Christ as the Person who is simultaneously divine and human, supreme and yet intimate in the highest degree, a Person toward whom the priest himself points the way, for the priest is a human being among the rest, yet is himself sent with a mission from above. He has the palpable warmth of a human being but also the responsibility of bringing Christ into intimacy and union with his brothers and sisters. The more the priest's responsibility toward the Lord causes him to give himself to Christ within this mission, to humble himself even more, the more transparent he makes Christ to others.

By choosing a person and sending him with His own authority into the Church as celebrant of the mysteries, Christ is able to communicate, as a means of unity, both His own word and also that word concerning Him that has been preserved without change in the Church as a whole. Through this word, which makes up the content of the prayers of the Church, the very meaning of the sacraments is explained to the faithful, as are also the duties incumbent upon the faithful to use the power of the sacraments in order to imprint the image of Christ more deeply upon themselves in a real way. The priests and bishops chosen in this manner by Christ receive the authority they need to provide pastoral care for the faithful whom they are leading toward salvation.

By way of summary, *the constitutive elements of the mysteries are the material means* by which Christ Himself imparts the grace of salvation through the hand of the priest, through the prayer and affirmation of fact that the priest makes, and through the confession of faith and commitment on the part of the believer (at the baptism [of a child], this is usually made on the believer's behalf by the godparent). The sacrament comes about through *the action of the priest* accompanied by the affirmation of Christ's saving activity at work. It is celebrated by the touch of the priest's hand, either directly or indirectly via some material element, upon the body of the one receiving the sacrament,

and is based on the latter's confession of faith accompanied by the priest's declaration of what is happening, itself a confession of faith in what is being celebrated. The mystery is a single whole that unites the recipient—through the hand of the priest or the sacramental matter used by him and through the declaration he makes—with Christ, and hence with the Church, after the preliminary *confession of faith by the recipient* and the prayer of the priest.

On some occasions, the one who receives the mystery is placed in contact with the hand of the priest through the intermediary of a material element, and on other occasions, without any such element. The personal contact in faith between the recipient of the sacrament and the priest as celebrant is necessary, however, for the celebration of the mystery. Yet it is always through this contact that the one who receives the sacrament enters into a direct connection, whether initially or as part of a process of growth, with Christ and with the community of the Church as His body. For this reason the recipient of the sacrament confesses his faith in Christ directly, and the priest/celebrant of the sacrament makes Christ present as the one who is Himself imparting His grace. Christ did indeed make use of mud in His cure of the man born blind, but on other occasions He healed the sick directly through the touch of His hand. The direct connection with Christ in which the recipient of the mystery is placed is shown with distinct clarity by the confession of faith made by the believer at the reception of the Eucharist. The believer speaks directly to Christ in this confession and makes plain his conviction that it is Christ who is communicating Himself with His body. When the priest says, "The servant of God *N.* partakes of the body and blood of Christ," he is affirming only this fact; he does not place himself between Christ and the believer but provides the occasion for them to meet. This same affirmation, that it is Christ who is acting directly in imparting His grace, is made by the bishop when he celebrates an ordination and by the priest in the sacrament of penance, although to this he also adds his own pardon. The same can be seen in baptism ("The servant of God *N.* is baptized . . .") and in marriage ("The servant of God *N.* is crowned . . ."), in both of which the priest is declaring not the accomplishment of some impersonal happening but the direct activity of Christ upon the recipient of the sacrament and the personal encounter of the recipient with Christ.

From all this it follows that, properly speaking, the celebrant of each mystery is Christ Himself, acting invisibly.

As far as the number of the mysteries is concerned, three of them are mysteries of complete union with Christ and of full entry into the Church (baptism, anointing with holy chrism, Eucharist); two are mysteries that bring renewed strength in Christ to those who have become weak in spirit or body (penance, holy unction); and two are means through which the recipient receives the power of fulfilling one of two things: either the special mission to celebrate the sacraments, to preach the word, and to exercise pastoral care within the Church (ordination), or the special duties connected with the married life (marriage). The question of the relations between all these mysteries will be dealt with in what follows.