



Catechesis For the Masses

Basic Teachings on Liturgy and Participation in the Mass in Both Forms.

Part 4: Encountering the “Mystery” of God

In an earlier column, we were confronted with plain but often forgotten truths in regard to our relationship with God: that God is perfect and without limits and that we in our limitations can only share in His perfection both insofar as He wills to offer Himself to us and that we are rightly receptive to His gifts. These observations placed before us a more significant understanding of what makes for true worship - that true worship of God must be founded upon what He Himself has instituted - as any attempt to worship through our own efforts alone, even if they are heartfelt and sincere, will not attain life with God due to our limited nature. Consequently, any attempts to worship strictly from our own initiative and effort may be fully conscious of God, but can lead to the reducing of God to our own concept of Him, leading to a celebration of self-affirmation or a grasping for God that never can be completed. Today, we return to these fundamental points about true worship being founded upon God as it invites us to go to a deeper level of the meaning of worship: “mystery.”

When the Church uses the word “mystery,” we refer to a truth that is both beyond our ability to comprehend fully and one of which *something* of its fullness can be known. In earliest times, this word mystery (which comes from Greek) indicated a perceived reality that inspired “awe,” as such “mysterious” realities are both perceivable with the senses and containing of something more that is beyond perception and description. In fact, before the Church adopted the word “sacrament” to describe the visible ways through which God communicates His divine life to His people, the root of the word mystery was used to describe

these sacred gifts that were both perceivable and awe-inspiring, through their giving of God’s life to those who received them.

In considering “mystery,” it is important to note as a primary example that the central mystery of our faith is the mystery of God Himself as a Trinity of persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Certainly we can know God; but to know His interior life and essence comes by way of what He Himself reveals to us. His revelation to us is complete insofar as God does not withhold anything of His life and love from us, particularly in taking on our human nature; and yet we in our limitation cannot fully know His nature. Likewise, as God is infinite, His giving of self is never exhausted. Indeed, it is a great mystery! And yet we are able to partake of this mystery onto our receiving of His life and love for our eternal salvation.

It is the very mystery of God which is present at every celebration of any sacrament that we are invited to encounter and receive. God is always faithful and therefore true to His promise to be with us. The real question for us is whether or not we have openness to such an encounter with what is a mystery. As we are particularly considering the Mass, might we reflect briefly on our participation at Mass from this point of view of encountering the mystery of God, especially in contrast to the idea of whether or not it is necessary to “understand everything.”

To set the stage, might we use another image of a relationship of love that includes openness to what is not fully known: the life of marriage. When a man and a woman exchange their wedding vows, do they fully know and understand one another? If we

are being honest the answer is “of course not.” Yet, such lack of perfect knowledge and understanding of one another usually does not cause any doubt about entering the marriage - or at least it should not cause doubt when they exchange their vows (which is why each party is asked in marriage prep whether or not they have “any doubts” in entering the marriage, as any real doubts are deemed as reasons to not get married.) Likewise, on the wedding day the couple is unaware of what may become of their love - in terms of its fruitfulness. Such fruitfulness encompasses far more than simply having children - as the couple will hopefully over time be drawn “mysteriously” into a deeper bond and a greater expression of mutual love, even if they do not understand each other all the time, nor understand “how” this bond grows stronger.

Such growth in knowledge, love, and true intimacy in a married relationships are all the more possible in our relationship with God in an encounter with the mystery of God in the liturgy. Once more, God is always faithful: God always wills to reveal himself to His children - even if they are not always properly open to it. We can therefore confidently enter into every Mass without any doubts, *even if we do not understand everything* that is happening in the Mass, as He is always faithful in offering Himself to us and for us. The reception of God’s love does not require that we understand everything - as such is truly impossible for us in our limited nature. Likewise, *for us to think the we must understand everything can cause us to reduce the Mass to becoming our own work - done for our affirmation or relevance, rather than allowing the Mass to remain as God’s work for us, where He is able to give us that which is for our true good.*

When we approach the Mass with openness to mystery, great fruit can be borne in us that we otherwise may not expect. While it is important to acknowledge our human desire to want to know and understand, so much of the worship of the Church is contained within symbols and signs that at times this desire to know will prevent us from fully receiving all



Seen here is the elevation of the Body of Christ at the moment of the consecration during the Solemn High Mass of the Extraordinary Form. In both forms of the Holy Mass, the consecration is the ultimate moment of heaven and earth uniting as Jesus becomes really present in the Eucharist. The consecration is a moment of encounter with the mystery of God, perceptible only through faith and with trust in God’s love for us.

that which God has in store for us. How do we overcome such a “need to know and understand?” In practice, our approach to the Mass invites us first to approach with faith in Jesus Christ who desires to share His life with us and accomplish salvation in us. This way of faith both acknowledges that we cannot know or understand everything of God and it helps us to let go of our need for such full understanding. Next is the most important part of openness to mystery: the learning to be “present” to the moment. In other words (and to appeal to yet another image) to be present to the moment is to simply “be in the moment,” as you would when viewing a beautiful sunset or another marvel of God’s creation. Do not be afraid to use your imagination while remaining aware of what you do know is happening before you: the offering of Jesus Christ to God the Father on behalf of our salvation. Simply seek to “take it all in,” so to speak, allowing the symbols and signs to lift your heart to God. Such is a way to approach the Mass (and any sacrament) with openness to mystery, that God Himself may draw you into a deeper encounter with His love that is beyond what is perceptible, leading you to a glimpse of heaven - the ultimate mystery.