

# 45. MYSTERY

## Summary:

1. The word mystery refers to something that is hidden or difficult to understand, but also manifest in some external way. In Christian theological writing, mystery refers to the principal truths to be accepted in faith as revealed by God. In Christian devotional writing, the term mystery refers to the events in the life of Christ incarnate as objects for contemplation and as motivation for the Christian life. – 2. In his catechetical writings De La Salle refers often to the importance of instruction in the principal Christian mysteries and also to the mysteries being celebrated on the Church's feasts. – 3. In his meditations, De La Salle reminds the Brothers that they are the dispensers of God's mysteries and so must themselves be penetrated with the mystery of Christ. – 4. Consequently, Lasallian spirituality has both a mystical dimension, focused on the contemplation of the mystery of Christ, and an historical dimension, manifest in zeal for the catechetical ministry to the poor.

## 1. MEANING OF THE WORD

1.1. The dictionaries define a mystery as something hidden and difficult to understand. The word can refer to a religious mystery that requires faith or to human nature and its capabilities, e.g. human love. The dictionary of Richelet notes that seventeenth century authors such as Molière, would describe some individual persons as "mysterious" or as "a total mystery." In all the various uses of the word, there appear to be two elements, one visible and one invisible, i.e., a hidden reality discerned or suspected in something externally manifest.

1.2. The religious meaning of mystery in the 17th century evolved out of the history of the concept and the word in Christian tradition.

1.2.1. The Christian use of the term mystery is derived from Saint Paul. For him, the fundamental mystery is the self-communication of God to humans and the initiation of humans into the

mysterious designs of God, God's action, and God's very being. The mystery is the accomplishment of God's design in Jesus Christ, hidden at first and then manifest in human history. Thus the Christian mystery contains both a hidden and a manifest aspect.

The effect and the wonder of the mystery, in the Pauline literature, is that human beings, especially the Gentiles, are brought into relationship with God by incorporation into Christ and into his body, which is the Church. For Paul, Christian marriage is an expressive sign of this mystical union.

1.2.2. In addressing their pagan audience, the early Fathers of the Church compared the Christian mystery to the popular pagan mystery religions, which featured identification with the divine through initiation into the life-cycle of a particular god or combination of gods. The Fathers explained the Christian mystery as something similar, but morally superior and more efficacious, based on the incarnation and revelation of the one true God in Jesus Christ. Increasingly, the Latin

Fathers began to translate the Greek *mysterion* as *sacramentum* and apply it to sacramental rites of the Christian religion.

1.2.3. In the middle ages, two parallel developments provided two distinct but complementary approaches to mystery. The theological tradition, culminating in Saint Thomas Aquinas, in probing the nature of faith and its exercise, stressed the mysteries as truths, inaccessible to reason but not contrary to it, to be believed on the authority of God revealing.

The medieval devotional tradition, stemming from Saint Bernard and Saint Francis of Assisi, introduced a new element in spirituality with emphasis on the humanity of Christ. This spirituality fostered contemplation and mystical identification with certain isolated events in the life of Jesus Christ. These events came to be called mysteries. At first the devotion focused on the "mysteries" surrounding the birth of Christ, his suffering and death. As the number of identifiable mysteries began to multiply, they eventually encompassed the entire life of Christ from his virginal conception to the ascension. The use of the term mystery for these events found its theological justification in the fundamental mystery of the incarnation in virtue of which the events in the life of Jesus contain a human, historical and visible element, as well as a hidden and divine element accomplished in the divine person of the God made man.

1.3. In the manuals of dogmatic theology that began to multiply in the century after the Council of Trent (1545-1563), a mystery is defined as a truth that cannot be known by reason or experience but that must be believed on the authority of God who reveals it. Based on a tradition going back to the Athanasian Creed (DS 75-76), the principal Christian mysteries are identified as the Trinity, the incarnation and the redemption. An explicit act of faith in these mysteries is necessary for the salvation of all those who have reached the use of reason.

1.4. In the Christological spirituality derived from the Bérullian School in 17th century France, the word mystery characteristically refers to the mystery of the incarnation as it is manifest in the

various states and actions of God made man in Jesus Christ. The principal object of contemplation is the kenotic act, celebrated in the Letter to the Philippians, whereby Jesus humbled himself and took the form of a servant, becoming obedient unto death (Ph 2:5 seq.). For Bérulle, contemplation of this mystery should evoke in the Christian an attitude of humility, simplicity, adoration, admiration and affection: "The desire of the soul in contemplating this mystery will be a desire to do homage, to participate, and to relate to the Holy Trinity, to Mary, and to Saint Gabriel." (Cited in Deville, p. 106). Other authors stress the notion of self-annihilation (*anéantissement*) before this mystery, its manifestation in the "states" of Jesus during the course of his historical life, and its extension and continuation in the life of Christians and in the Church as a whole.

## 2. THE MYSTERIES IN DE LA SALLE'S WRITINGS FOR THE SCHOOLS

2.1. In the *Common Rules* and in the *Conduct of Schools*, there is frequent reference to the "principal mysteries," which are to be the subject matter of catechetical instruction. In the same context there is also reference to the particular mystery or mysteries being celebrated on a given Sunday or feast.

2.1.1. These two different but complementary meanings of mystery are developed in the three sections of the *Duties of a Christian* and other catechetical works intended for the schools. The obligation to believe (*croire*) the mysteries is among the principal duties of a Christian to God (e.g. Da 4 D; Db 14 D, E). Parents are obliged by the fourth commandment to teach (*apprendre*), either themselves or through others, the principal mysteries to their children (Da 125 A). Instruction in the principal mysteries is a necessary preparation for the baptism of adults (Da 225 A), first communion (Da 156 D), for confirmation (Da 240 B), and for marriage (Da 388 D). It is a sin against the first commandment, and a matter for confession (Da 310 B), to be ignorant of the principal mysteries of the Christian religion and at the same time be unwilling to be instructed (*instruire*) in them

(Da 156 D); inexcusable ignorance of the principal mysteries is a motive for the refusal of absolution (Da 319 B). Those who do not believe one or another of the mysteries are guilty of heresy (Db 12 D, E; 13 D).

2.1.2. The use of the term mysteries to refer to specific events in the life of Christ occurs most often in third section of the *Duties* dealing with external and public worship. Thus the Church has consecrated certain times of the year to honor certain mysteries or prepare for them (Dc 4 D). From Christmas to Purification the Church celebrates the mysteries which took place (*se passer*) during the birth of Christ; Holy week is called holy because of the mysteries which were wrought (*s'opérer*) and which the Church celebrates and honors during that week (Dc 70 B). The twelve feasts (in English, "holy days of obligation") were established to honor the twelve holy mysteries of Our Lord (Dc 133 C). Epiphany means manifestation and is celebrated because three mysteries (the birth of Christ, his baptism, and the miracle of Cana) were accomplished (*s'opérer*) on that day (Dc 145 D). *In like manner, the Church celebrates seven feasts and mysteries in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Dc 195 A, B). The principal "mysteries" most often mentioned, in addition to the birth of Jesus, are the presentation in the temple, the transfiguration, the entry into Jerusalem, the passion, the resurrection and the ascension (Dc passim).*

2.1.3. In the book of *Instructions* the students are encouraged during Mass to think about one of the mysteries (I 15 C), or to unite themselves to the mystery that is being celebrated (I 20 D). The introduction to the Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer is interpreted as an invitation to avoid distractions and think only of God and his mysteries (I 30 A). Model prayers are provided for the students to ask for understanding of the mysteries being celebrated (I 76 D) and for the gift of grace as the fruit of the mysteries (I 94 C).

### 3. MYSTERY AND MYSTERIES IN DE LA SALLE'S WRITINGS FOR THE BROTHERS

3.1. The opportunity and the obligation that the Brothers have to instruct children in the mysteries of the faith is emphasized in the *Meditations for the Time of retreat*. The Brothers are "the ministers of God and the dispensers of his mysteries" (MR 193.1). God has given the Brothers this ministry since, as Saint Paul says, persons cannot be instructed in the mysteries of the Christian religion unless they first hear about them (MR 193.1). God has providentially provided as substitutes for parents persons (like the Brothers) with sufficient knowledge and zeal to introduce the children to the awareness (*connaissance*) of God and his mysteries (MR 193.2). It is not enough, however, to instruct the children in the mysteries if the Brother does not also make his disciples aware of the principal Christian virtues and lead them to put these virtues into practice (MR 203.3).

3.2. In his *Meditations for Feasts*, written for the use of the Brothers, De La Salle consistently refers to the event being celebrated as a mystery. Thus, the circumcision is a mystery (MF 93.1), as is the purification of Mary (MF 104.1) and the offering of Jesus of himself in the presentation (MF 104.3). God's goodness is seen in the mystery of the annunciation (MF 112.2), St. Peter was present and reported the mystery of the transfiguration (MF 152.2-3). Saint Francis had special devotion to the mysteries of the birth of Christ, to his suffering and death (MF 173.2), the Brothers are encouraged to enter into the spirit of the immaculate conception of Mary (MF 82.2).

3.2.1. In some of his meditations, De La Salle reverts to the doctrinal use of the term mystery. Thus, Saint Cassian in his school was occupied in teaching the mysteries to the children (MF 155.2); Saint Luke learned the mysteries of the Christian

religion from the apostles (MF 178.1).

3.2.2. The various senses of the word mystery come together in De La Salle's meditation for the feast of the Holy Trinity, for him the "mystery above all mysteries" (MD 46.1). It is also the most difficult, he says, since in all other mysteries there is some sensibly perceptible element. The Trinity is a mystery that only faith can attain (MD 46.2). In his meditation for the feast, the Founder invites the Brothers to annihilate (*s'anéantir*) themselves before this mystery (MD 46.1). Even though this mystery is so sublime, the Brothers are obliged to teach it (*enseigner*) to their students and to make it known (*faire connaître*) to them (MD 136 E).

3.3. In both the external worship section of the *Duties* and in the *Meditations for Feasts*, De La Salle employs the word mystery in a more profound and mystical sense. Thus he says that Saint Paul saw (*voir*) and learned (*apprendre*) mysteries and secrets permitted to no other mortal (Dc 242 D); Jesus Christ revealed to Saint John the highest mysteries of his divinity (MF 88.1 and Dc 253 D); Saint Joseph was privileged to contemplate the mysteries which took place (*se passer*) in Jesus Christ. As with the Bérullian school, the fundamental mystery is Christological and kenotic, whereby the Brothers are encouraged to grow into the spirit and mind of Christ. The Brothers do this as they contemplate the mysteries of his birth, life, death, and resurrection and as they participate as his ambassadors in their ministry.

#### 4. THE MYSTERY ELEMENT IN LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY

4.1. The most extensive development of the

importance of the mysteries for the prayer and the spiritual life of the Brothers can be found in De La Salle's *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*. The recent publication of a critical edition with commentary of this work, which is dealt with in detail in a separate article, makes it possible to identify the principal characteristics of what might be called a Lasallian spirituality.

4.2. The mystical element in Lasallian spirituality derives from the emphasis that De La Salle places on the ministry of instruction in the principal mysteries, on the one hand, and the contemplation of the mysteries in mental prayer [*oraison*] on the other. In the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, De La Salle compares the Brothers to the angels ascending and descending Jacob's ladder. He writes, "You must do the same for the children entrusted to your care. It is your duty to go up to God every day by mental prayer to learn from Him all that you must teach your children, and then come down to them by adapting to their level and so to teach them what God has communicated to you for them..." (MR 198.1). This new twofold understanding of mystery results in a spirituality that is both mystical and historical at the same time. The mystical element comes from the contemplation in faith of the presence of God, openness to the action of the Spirit of God, identification with the mind of Christ as reflected in the kenotic prayer in Philippians. The historical element comes from a zeal to spread the knowledge of the mysteries, above all the mystery of salvation, to discern and to participate actively in the mysterious unfolding of the history of salvation in providential events and, especially in response to the cry of the uneducated poor.

#### **Complementary themes:**

Consecration; Faith; Instruction; Mental prayer; Ministry; Salvation; Zeal.

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