

FR. HARRISON AYRE



MYSTERY  
ION

THE REVELATORY POWER OF  
THE SACRAMENTAL WORLDVIEW



## Praise for *Mysterion*

“The world is a gift: a sign and symbol of the Lord’s love, created to convey to us the meaning of our own lives and the depths of God’s goodness. In *Mysterion*, Fr. Ayre aims to point all Christians to that beautiful truth, and thus to invite us to a richer and more joyful relationship with Christ and his Church. Don’t miss this book!”

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“Fr. Ayre wishes to challenge preconceptions we have about Christian living and to encourage us in areas of weakness. He does this by inviting us to embrace what he describes as a wide-ranging sacramental worldview and sharing his own experiences and reading. He succeeds admirably; readers will be grateful.”

— Terrence Prendergast, S.J.,  
Emeritus Archbishop of Ottawa-Cornwall

“Sacramentality is . . . what the world is begging for. [This is] the reality that our culture wants us to forget—that God is real, and everything has more meaning because of him. We do not live in this reality by adjusting to the world’s standards, but by diving into the heart of the Church. Now is the time to bathe everything in our lives . . . in sacramentality. That’s what Fr. Harrison is doing with this book.”

— Luke Carey, Co-Host of *Catching Foxes* podcast

“Christ the Eternal Word expresses himself perfectly in the accessibility of human flesh. His accessibility loses nothing of his mystery; his mystery does not overwhelm his accessibil-

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— Bishop Daniel E. Flores, STD,  
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"The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord. From the gift of awe and wonder we can recover our love for the mystery of God celebrated in a liturgy that is true to the living tradition of the Church."

— Bishop Richard Umbers, Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney

"Fr. Ayre offers us a way of seeing. If we want to encounter God, he says, it cannot be as pure spirits: rather, it will be through the earthly and embodied world. The living God reveals himself in creation, and he reveals himself most profoundly in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. To exist 'in Christ,' therefore, is to share sacramentally in Christ as members of his body; and so the *way of seeing* is a *way of living*. Read this eye-opening book to discover the pathways of a truly Catholic life!"

— Matthew Levering, James N. and Mary D. Perry Jr.  
Chair of Theology, Mundelein Seminary

“Fr. Harrison’s gift is the ability to make accessible the large ideas that we grapple with. *Mysterion: The Revelatory Power of the Sacramental Worldview* is no exception. I found myself drawn into the world of mystery by a hand that wants to share the sacramental worldview with love and passion. It reaches out to guide us to the very thing all Christians seek: how we should live to draw ever closer to God.”

— Bonnie Landry, host of *Make Joy Normal* podcast

“This is a book of encounter. To read it is to rediscover oneself in a world alive to grace. We need theology like this: clear and deep, accessible and profound.”

— Terence Sweeney, Collegium Institute for  
Catholic Thought & Culture and  
Villanova University Philosophy Department

“In *Mysterion*, Fr. Harrison Ayre’s good pastoral sense and his theological aptitude come together in a tour de force that will open up new vistas in the faith life of any disciple. If the saints are those who have true vision, because they have seen the Lord, then Fr. Ayre’s book helps us to see more as they do. This book will not only attune us more fully to Christ as he makes himself known to us, but also renew our appreciation and fervor for our life in him.”

— Michael R. Heinlein, Editor of  
Our Sunday Visitor’s *Simply Catholic*

“What does it mean to live in Christ and to see the world for what it really is—loved into being and redeemed from the inside out? Fr. Harrison Ayre’s *Mysterion* is all encompassing, leaving no thing or thought outside of the scope of Christ’s

redeeming love. This is a mystagogical masterpiece that carries more force than a Chuck Norris roundhouse-kick.”

— Thomas V. Gourlay, Manager of Chaplaincy at  
The University of Notre Dame Australia

“What are our lives about? The sacraments help us answer the questions of our existence and live as fully human beings. Fr. Harrison Ayre’s *Mysterion* is a post-coronavirus gift for going deeper into the faith. Take and read, wherever you are on the journey of faith. Don’t delay—jump in with the Trinity and Mary.”

— Kathryn Jean Lopez, senior fellow,  
National Review Institute

“The term ‘sacramental worldview’ has often been invoked in theology and catechesis alike in the twentieth century. Generally, it means a generic understanding of God’s presence in the world. Fr. Ayre’s *Mysterion* provides a correction to this approach to sacramentality. A sacramental worldview is necessarily ecclesial, bringing us into communion with Christ and each other in the Church. I cannot recommend this book enough for readers seeking to understand Catholicism.”

— Timothy P. O’Malley, Ph.D., Director of Online  
Education, McGrath Institute for Church Life;  
Academic Director, Notre Dame Centre for Liturgy

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# MYS TER ION

The Revelatory Power  
of the Sacramental Worldview

FATHER HARRISON AYRE

  
Pauline  
BOOKS & MEDIA  
Boston



*Nihil Obstat:* Reverend Joseph Briody, S.S.L., S.T.D.

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*To Mom and Dad,  
thank you for everything.  
I love you both more than you can know.*

# *Contents*

Foreword . . . . .	<i>xv</i>
Preface . . . . .	<i>xix</i>
Acknowledgments . . . . .	<i>xxiii</i>
Introduction . . . . .	<i>1</i>

## PART ONE

### The Sacramental Worldview Explained

#### CHAPTER 1

Mystery and Sacrament . . . . .	<i>11</i>
Mystery . . . . .	<i>14</i>
Mystery as Concealment . . . . .	<i>15</i>
Mystery as a Saving Activity . . . . .	<i>17</i>
Mystery as Participation . . . . .	<i>19</i>
Mystery as Sacrament . . . . .	<i>20</i>

#### CHAPTER 2

Participation in Christ . . . . .	<i>23</i>
“In Christ” . . . . .	<i>24</i>
The Meeting of Time and Eternity . . . . .	<i>27</i>
What Is the Sacramental Worldview? . . . . .	<i>29</i>

CHAPTER 3

Modernism: The Obstacle to the Sacramental Worldview . . . . .	35
Background . . . . .	38
An Argument Against Modernism . . . . .	42
How Modernism Seeps into Our Lives . . . . .	47

PART TWO

The Sacramental Worldview and the Church

CHAPTER 4

The Church as the Place of Faith . . . . .	55
The Place of Faith . . . . .	60
What Is the Church? . . . . .	61
Why the Church? . . . . .	66

CHAPTER 5

The Church as Communion . . . . .	71
The Church as the Universal Sacrament of Salvation . . . . .	72
Apostolic Succession: Guarantee of Sacramentality . . . . .	75
The Sacraments: Ordinary Means of Participating in the Life of Christ . . . . .	77
The Church as the Place of Participation in Christ . . . . .	79

CHAPTER 6

The Marian Stance . . . . .	83
Archetype of the Church . . . . .	84
Marian Receptivity . . . . .	86
Marian Contemplation . . . . .	89

Marian Humility . . . . .	90
Mary and the Sacramental Worldview . . . . .	92

PART THREE

Living the Sacramental Worldview

CHAPTER 7

Liturgy as Living Out Christ's Life . . . . .	99
Entering Christ's Life . . . . .	102
Living Christ's Life throughout the Liturgical Year . . . . .	106

CHAPTER 8

The Holy Mass: Christ Glorifies the Father through the Church . . . . .	113
The Introductory Rites . . . . .	115
The Liturgy of the Word . . . . .	116
The Liturgy of the Eucharist . . . . .	118
Concluding Rites . . . . .	122
Mass: The Source of Mission . . . . .	123

CHAPTER 9

The Mystery of Christian Prayer . . . . .	127
What Is Christian Prayer? . . . . .	129
Spoken Prayer . . . . .	133
Praying with Scripture . . . . .	133
The Examen . . . . .	135
Contemplation . . . . .	137
Total Dependence on God . . . . .	139

CHAPTER 10

The Sacramentality of Discipleship . . . . .	141
Christ Living in You . . . . .	143
Christ Crucified in You . . . . .	145
Christ Suffering in You . . . . .	148
Christ Loving in You . . . . .	152
Conclusion: Where Do We Go from Here? . . . . .	157
Reader's Guide . . . . .	165
About the Cover Art . . . . .	177

## *Foreword*

THE SACRAMENTAL WORLDVIEW, THOUGH LARGELY forgotten, is not an inaccessible, esoteric vision only scholars can comprehend. Thankfully, you do not need to be a theologian to read this book. Anyone who desires to live from and understand this worldview can do so. In fact, without being explicitly aware of it, some of the simplest, most faith-filled people already see the world through the sacramental worldview because they see it through the eyes of faith.

I was not introduced to the sacramental worldview in a class or a book but through my conversion from atheism. I had struggled for many years with the philosophical problem of the existence of the soul and, after much wrestling, came to the conclusion that the human soul did indeed exist. However, I could not make the intellectual step to believe in God's existence. Then, one day, as I was walking on a rural country road in Costa Rica, I was filled with gratitude for the beauty around me. At the same moment a sudden gust of wind tore through the trees and I feared that a tree might fall on me. I trembled at the realization of the precariousness of

my being. It was in that moment that I realized that the fragile, beautiful, contingent being of the world, including my own self, had an absolute cause—a fearful, awesome cause—God.

In my conversion, I had what the French philosopher Jacques Maritain refers to as a “primordial intuition.” The existence of the natural, material world led me to perceive a spiritual reality, the existence of God. Of course, knowledge of the existence of God is something that my human intelligence could have come to on its own, but I believe my intellect was aided by grace because God saw my struggle and resistance and had mercy on me. The multitudes of intelligent nonbelievers in the world show that what can be for some natural intuitions of God’s existence do not come naturally to everyone. In fact, sometimes high intelligence can be an obstacle to intuiting the world’s deepest realities. And on some level, we all struggle to comprehend and live according to the sacramental worldview in the modern world.

Truthful perceptions and intuitions of reality rely on a contemplative gaze, something that has become incredibly difficult to maintain in our hurried, noisy world. It’s no coincidence that I became open to perceiving the existence of God through an experience in Costa Rica of slowing down, drinking in the beauty of nature, and dedicating myself to unhurried, patient manual labor. So many people are starved for these experiences in much of modern life. Additionally, many unwittingly live according to destructive modern ideologies and philosophies of the material world completely contrary to the sacramental worldview. As a result, many people reject Church teaching, especially in the areas of sexuality



and ecclesiology, because they fail to understand the material world in the light of our faith.

Our modern way of living and thinking is so contrary to the sacramental worldview that apologetic arguments can only do so much in response to what is fundamentally a vision problem. For this reason, since my reversion to the faith, I have searched for effective ways to share the clarifying power of the sacramental worldview because I know how life-changing it can be. But I have struggled to find the words to explain something that came to me in a flash of grace. I have searched for a book on a popular level that explains the sacramental vision, but it's a sorely neglected topic in the Church. Many books have been written on the Mass and the seven sacraments, but few delve more deeply into the fundamental structure of the universe, which informs these basic aspects of our faith. Why? Based on my experience in ministry, I would venture to guess that, unfortunately, few people explicitly think about the faith in these terms.

I am delighted and honored to have worked with Father Harrison Ayre in the process of bringing this book to life. For so long, I have wanted to find a clear explanation of the revelatory power of the Catholic worldview to share with people. I am confident that his book will help many people to remove the blindfolds of tainted, injurious worldviews and put on the clear, defining prescription glasses of our faith. I pray that a deeper understanding of the sacramental worldview will change your life as it has changed mine, and that it enable you to participate more in Christ who lives and dwells within us through our Baptism.

SR. THERESA ALETHEIA NOBLE, FSP



## *Preface*

THIS BOOK IS MY ATTEMPT to bring together the different topics I've spoken about on my podcast *Clerically Speaking*, in my research and studies, and as the fruit of my prayer and pastoral experience. I will caution that this book attempts to enlighten rather than to offer practical tips. This is not to say that practical matters aren't important, but the Christian tradition—especially the Church's sacramental vision—begins in contemplation and prayer. By being enlightened through this life of prayer, we start to see life differently and to live it differently in practice. So much of what is written in this book doesn't only come from theological studies; it comes from pastoral experience as well. I am very keen on the idea that theology has to be rooted in both prayer and pastoral work. This book is meant to challenge some preconceptions we have about Christian living and encourage us in areas of weakness so that, both through reading this book and living our Christian life, we can attain a deeper communion with Christ and his Church.

A small grace occurred while I was writing this book. When I submitted my writing sample to Sr. Theresa, she told

me after the book was accepted that much of what I had to say was very Pauline. Over the years I've been attracted more and more to the Pauline charism. The Pauline charism encompasses the mission of evangelizing through the modern means of communication and is also deeply bound up in the theology of the letters of Saint Paul. The Pauline charism and spirituality are centered on the person of Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, inviting each of us to learn from Jesus and allowing the Holy Spirit to form Jesus *in us*. As I was writing this book, I was reading some of the writings of Blessed James Alberione, founder of the Pauline Family. I found in him a kindred spirit and an advocate for what I want to propose in this book: that to be a Christian means to really live and participate in the life of Christ. Blessed Alberione was inspired by the writings of Saint Paul, who teaches us that Christ is to be formed in each and every person. What is proposed in this book, then, is not some innovation, but is rooted deeply in the tradition and in the teachings of Saint Paul himself. I've come to recognize that the Pauline community sees how important the idea of participation is to the Christian life and how central it is to the teaching of the New Testament. Thanks to writing this book, I am eager to get to know Blessed Alberione all the more. I encourage you to discover his writings as well.

This book is an attempt to express the idea that the word "sacrament" has a broader and deeper meaning than we often give it. We are going to explore the idea that we always have access to the life of Christ *today*, principally through the Church and the life of discipleship, but also by looking to the whole of creation and seeing it as a sign that points us to God.

This book is meant, then, not so much to propose new tools and new habits of living, but to propose a new and deeper vision of reality based in the heart of the Church's tradition and teaching. This vision is none other than to share in Christ's own vision of creation, to share in his life, and to allow his life to live in us: the sacramental vision is meant to help us see that always and everywhere, in a mysterious way, we are participating in the life of Christ.



## *Acknowledgments*

A BOOK, I HAVE DISCOVERED, is not a solo project, especially when it's someone's first writing project. I must always begin by thanking my family, who helped nurture me to become the man I am today, especially my parents, Lindsay and Estelle. During the process of writing, they constantly cheered me on and encouraged me toward the goal of finishing this book.

A big thank you to Sr. Theresa Aletheia Noble, FSP. It was she who coaxed me into this adventure in the first place, helped me along as I began, cheered me on through the writing process, was an ear who would listen, and gave me great encouragement and advice going forward. I would often text her through the ups and downs, when new insights would hit, and she would patiently respond with an encouraging word. Her friendship and assistance in all this have made this book possible. I also had the privilege of working with Courtney Saponaro in this process. Her fresh look at the manuscript, her flexibility, and her helpful comments helped this book grow to be what it is.

My dear friends Shannon and Jonathan Last have also contributed much. Right when all this was starting, Jonathan gave me some helpful writing tips that I've been slowly, though imperfectly, attempting to internalize and implement. Shannon was my second pair of eyes throughout the writing process. Not only did she help me refine my style, but she would tell me if I was being too academic, or if something simply wasn't clear. She edited and was a friend I could bounce ideas off of, or simply ask for tips in the writing process. The friendship of both Jonathan and Shannon has proven invaluable.

A massive thank you to my *Clerically Speaking* co-host Father Anthony Sciarappa, who over the course of these last couple of years has had to put up with my intellectual rabbit holes. Many of the ideas in this book are the result of different podcast episodes that helped me see the central theme presented here. I am especially grateful to my theological mentor, Father Don MacDonald, OFM. I cherish the memories of the many theological discussions we had when I would visit him at the friary during my years in seminary, and his help especially as the advisor for my master's thesis. It is no understatement to say that a large chunk of this book is due to his influence and I'm immensely grateful for his friendship and mentorship over the years.

Thank you to Bishop Gary Gordon, who has been supportive of both my writing and intellectual endeavors as I've served as one of his priests in the diocese of Victoria. I also owe much of this book to Father John Laszczyk, without whom I would not be a priest today, and whose mentorship over the years has brought me to this point.



I want to thank Rachel and Jason Bulman, Peter Gubbels, Michael Heinlein, Timothy Troutner, Chris McCaffe, Hogan Herritage, Father Matt Fish, Father David Hogman, and anyone else with whom I've conversed about the various themes of this book. As all my friends know, I am an external processor and I need to talk things out, so I'm grateful for their patience and help when working out many of these ideas over the past years.

Finally, a word of thanks must always be given to God. It is God who inspires, strengthens, and guides. I've spent countless hours in prayer over what I've been writing, and God has often given me an inspiration—whether through Scripture, spiritual reading, or an idea suddenly popping into my head. He has shown his tender care and mercy to me along the way and continues to guide me. All of this is to his glory, so that it can hopefully help, in some small fashion, to bring about the glory of his kingdom. All praise and glory be to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.



## *Introduction*

WE ARE ALWAYS AND EVERYWHERE “in Christ.” Reflect on that statement for a minute, ponder the meaning of the word “in,” think of it in all its literalness: that is what our life is like as Christians. We are in the life of Christ, and he lives his life in us. In everything we do as Christians—from our prayer life to attempts to practice virtue and avoid sin—we are acting *in Christ*, and thereby, through his grace, becoming the saints he calls us to be.

To be a Christian means to really participate in the life of Christ and allow Christ and the mysteries of his life, death, and resurrection to work in us. But what do we mean by “mystery”? In Ephesians 5:32, Saint Paul writes, “This is a great mystery . . . I speak in reference to Christ and the church.” The word Paul uses for “mystery” is the Greek word *mysterion*. In a modern context, when we hear the word “mystery,” we often think of something that needs to be solved and completed, like a murder mystery or a crossword puzzle. When we don’t know how something is going to unfold, there’s mystery involved, a sense of the unknown. But eventually we come to some sort of resolution, and

there's no longer any mystery. However, Saint Paul and the other earliest Christian writers, commonly called the Church Fathers, did not use the word "mystery" in the same way.

When Saint Paul writes that the Church or Christ is a "mystery," he is not only referring to a sense of hiddenness or concealment. If this were the case, Christianity would fall into irrationality, for it would only deal with what is invisible. We as human beings come to knowledge through the senses of taste, touch, smell, hearing, and sight. If we could never come to know about the faith in this way, then the whole of Christianity would be undermined. The mystery of God is *revealed* in the incarnation of Jesus. God *shows* himself to us through the human nature of Jesus Christ.

In other words, through the revelation in Christ's Incarnation, God makes known what is hidden: he makes it visible in Christ. The fact that the mystery of God is revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ tells us that at the heart of the concept of mystery is the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Christ "has made known to us the mystery of his will" (Eph 1:9). In fact, Saint Paul calls Christ "the mystery of God" (Col 2:2). Jesus makes visible what is invisible in God. We could sum up the word "mystery" by simply saying: in the Christian tradition, mystery refers to something visible that was previously invisible, the pinnacle of which is Jesus Christ. But how is "mystery" related to "sacrament"? More closely than one might think.

The Greek word "mysterion" is translated into Latin as *sacramentum* or "sacrament." If we look at the basic definition of sacrament from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we

can begin to understand the connection between mystery and sacrament. A sacrament is “the visible sign of the hidden reality of salvation.”<sup>1</sup> A sacrament makes present and active something we cannot see directly. These invisible realities that the sacraments make present are nothing other than the works of Christ. Why does God work this way with the sacraments? It’s quite simple: our knowledge comes from our senses. We can only know something if we see, hear, taste, touch, or smell it. Since God created us to know through our senses, he uses them to communicate his life to us: through our senses, we come to know who God is.

Sacramentality is not simply a way God communicates himself to us in the Church; it is rooted in how he has structured all of creation. For example, on a fundamental level, the body makes our personhood visible and present to others: we are embodied persons who make ourselves present to others through our bodies. Words, too, are themselves a sacrament: the sound waves of our voice vibrating through the air into the ear drums of another communicate an idea we want to express. The physical—the voice—makes present the invisible—the idea or concept we want to communicate. If this is how creation is structured, then would God not build the Church upon this natural sacramental foundation? Hence, the Church also sees herself as a sacrament. *Lumen Gentium*, a document on the Church from the Second Vatican Council,

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1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (United States Catholic Conference, Inc., Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), no. 774.

calls the Church the “universal sacrament of salvation.”<sup>2</sup> By this, the council means to communicate that the Church really makes Jesus’ salvation visible to the world. Therefore, every baptized person shares in the Church’s mission to make Christ’s saving mystery known and present to everyone.

We see quite quickly, based on the above, that sacramentality is at the heart of the Christian life because it’s structured into our very existence. God communicates to us in this fashion, and makes himself present in this fashion, because this is how we know and experience life: it’s how he has created us. But sacramentality is not just about seeing God through his creation; it also means “participation”: God uses the material world to draw us into his very life. Saint Paul speaks of this idea of participation in one of the most consequential phrases of the New Testament: we are “in Christ.” To be “in Christ” is to live in him with his life living in us. To live as a Christian is to understand that we are “in Christ” more than we are in our house, our office building, our car, or anywhere else. For the Christian, Baptism establishes a real communion between us and God whereby he is always actively living his life in us.

The sacramental worldview, then, means seeing everything created and physical as pointing us to God and lifting us into his life. As the psalmist writes, “The heavens declare

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2. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 48, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

the glory of God” (Ps 19:2). In other words, God’s creation both points to and participates in God’s glory, in his very life. Saint Paul also points to the centrality of this view in his Letter to the Romans: “What can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made” (1:19–20). Everything created points us toward God because the physical can make us aware of the invisible and even make it present, thereby allowing us to participate in God’s life.

God’s presence in the world and in the Christian life is always active, drawing us deeper into the mystery of Christ. This means that our lives are always being touched by the mystery of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Everything either points us toward greater communion or tends to draw us away from God toward sin. The goal of this book is to draw you in the right direction—into relationship with Jesus. A real, personal, and living relationship with Jesus. But a personal relationship always occurs through Jesus’ body, the Church, and is built up through the reading of Scripture, the life of the sacraments, and interactions with other members of Christ’s body. In other words, a personal relationship with Jesus is always rooted in the communion of the Church and built up *through* the Church.

The goal of this book is to help you see that this life in Christ is alive and active in all aspects of Christian living. The sacramental worldview, as it’s proposed in this book, helps us to see that Christ is always drawing us really and truly to the Father. Thus, this book’s ultimate goal is to help

you grow in your life with Christ. The book is structured around the central theses we are going to explore in Chapters 1 and 2, where we will discover just how the Church understands the word sacrament and how the concept is broader, deeper, and more active than you may have known. We want to move away from a reductive sense of seeing sacramentality as just the seven sacraments—as important as they are!—toward an understanding that sacrament is really one of the key themes of the Christian life. The themes brought out in Chapter 1 are furthered in Chapter 2 by looking at what it means to be “in Christ.” The fact is, we are always “in Christ” by virtue of our Baptism. This fact opens up for us avenues of seeing God as really and truly living in us: our whole life is “in Christ.”

Yet, despite hearing about all the wonderful truths of sacramentality, we often struggle to see it as something we can really embrace as a way to live. Chapter 3 will address some of our obstacles by discussing the heresy of modernism. That chapter attempts to provide a balanced understanding of what modernism is and how it has created an obstacle to seeing the world sacramentally; it will briefly present a sort of apologetics or argument against modernism to help create a rational basis for the sacramental vision. The fact is, we are inundated with a worldview that undermines our ability to see how we live in Christ. By clearing away the brush of modernism, we will have smoother footing for moving forward.

To really embrace a sacramental vision of the Christian faith, we cannot ignore the Church. As we will come to see, faith is given to us through the Church, and it is precisely faith that makes us able to see God through the stuff of this world and to participate in the life of the Trinity. Chapters 4



and 5 will explore the nature of the Church, its centrality and importance. This will help us discover how the Church herself is a sacrament. This is central to moving forward, because so often aspects of the Church—her structures and rituals—are seen as obstacles to faith when, in fact, they are the very means by which we come to faith.

Our journey into sacramentality will take a brief excursus in Chapter 6 by looking at the figure of Mary. Mary is the archetype—the perfect image—of the Church. In Mary, we see what Christ’s Church ought to look like and, moreover, we see how we ought to approach Christian living. In Mary we discover the attitudes that are essential for building up our sacramental vision. We will, therefore, look to her so as to see Christ as she sees him and thus begin to cultivate the attitude of heart necessary for embracing the sacramental and participatory worldview.

These chapters lead us to the final part of the book where, having considered what the sacramental worldview is, and why the Church is essential to it, we can discover how the sacramental worldview is lived. Chapters 7 and 8 will explore liturgy on a broader level and look more particularly at the Mass to see, in a cursory fashion, how the Church’s whole liturgical life is one of the central places where we encounter God and are lifted up into his life.

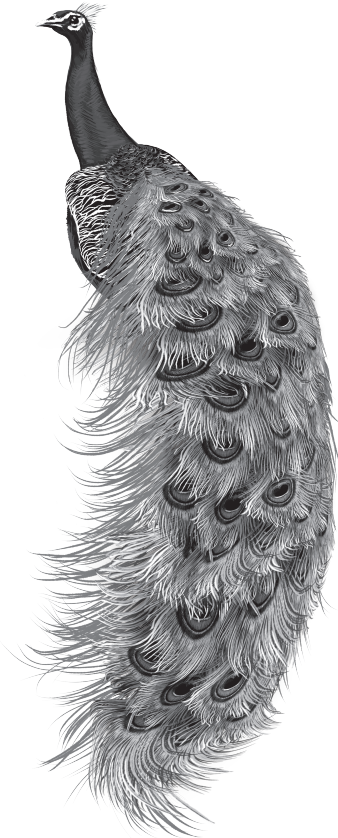
But the Christian life is not solely liturgical, as important as liturgy is. Christian life is also rooted in prayer and discipleship. Chapter 9 is going to help us see that personal prayer is a privileged place where we encounter and are lifted up into Christ’s life. The life of prayer is one of the hidden jewels of the Catholic faith, so Chapter 9 will offer some examples of prayer and how they help us participate in the life of Christ.

Chapter 10 will look at how our life as Christians, in actions, sufferings, and our pursuit of virtue, is itself a living out in us of the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. In other words, Christian discipleship is a daily living out in our lives of the mystery of Christ's love for us and for the world.

I have always been struck by the principle that one of my favorite theologians lived by: "theology is always done on one's knees." This is a principle that Hans Urs von Balthasar believed and promoted through his theological work. What he means by this phrase is that holiness and theology are not opposed to each other, but rather depend on each other. We must dwell upon our encounters with the Lord and allow what we study to impact and imbue our life of prayer and discipleship. Really, Balthasar's principle can be called the soul of this book: it's the uniting principle around the endeavor we are about to embark on together. The life of the Christian is not bifurcated into separate compartments, but rather, sees the whole as encompassing the mind, heart, and soul. In many ways, the unity of theology and spirituality—of truth and holiness—is immersed in the sacramental worldview. When we are pursuing truth, we are not pursuing an idea, but rather a Person, Jesus Christ. We participate in Christ: his life in ours, our life in his. Everything that constitutes our being human, not just our soul, but our mind too, participates in his life and helps us draw close to him. Thus, the truth we discover is nothing more than the Christ in whose life we live. My hope is that the theology you encounter in this book will enrich your spiritual life, and that the spiritual principles we explore will be reflected on and pondered, so that Christ can be all in all in you.

PART ONE

The Sacramental Worldview  
Explained





## CHAPTER 1

### *Mystery and Sacrament*

NO TRIP TO SPAIN IS complete without a visit to Barcelona to see the basilica designed by Antoni Gaudi, the *Sagrada Familia*. Though consecrated by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010 and hailed as a shining example of what modern Christian architecture can accomplish, Gaudi's masterpiece remains unfinished. Despite its being perpetually under construction, thousands of tourists and pilgrims visit daily, drawn by its beauty. As one enters the basilica through the Holy Family façade, it's impossible not to feel awe and reverence. Both traditional yet intensely earthly, the façade seems to be almost rising straight out of mud. The pillars are like giant tree trunks in a rainforest, supporting the immense, colorful ceiling. All of Gaudi's architecture is similarly imbued with a strong naturalism that reflects the belief that the created world is inherently good. His major architectural insight was that nature has no straight lines. If this is the case with nature, he reasoned, why does architecture depend upon straight lines? Yet at the same time Gaudi was also a man of

tradition, embracing classical Gothic design, seen particularly in the basilica's majestic steeples that point the eye toward heaven. From the more earthy tones of the lower levels of the basilica to the celestial feeling of the upper portions, the structure moves the eye from the realm of the physical and natural to the realm of the spiritual and supernatural. The *Sagrada Familia* is a testament to beauty, and like all beauty, it leaves us in a state of wonder.

Ponder, for a moment, a time you experienced something truly beautiful. Think of the feelings that washed over you, the indescribable joy you felt in every pore. Remember how distractions ceased. Perhaps you simply wanted time to stop so you could gaze forever at this beautiful object. Beauty is not something simply external to us. It captures all our senses. It enraptures us, captivates us, draws us into its very life, and points us to the deeper meanings it attempts to convey.

True beauty gives meaning to a core observation of philosophy: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This is difficult for us to see because we are overwhelmed by the worldview of scientism. Scientism is very much a fruit of the Enlightenment, and at its heart it wants to see the world only according to its mechanics—how it works and functions. It says that the only real knowledge, the only real way to interpret and see the world, is through the scientific method. Scientism proposes life without beauty. It measures, dissects, gauges, and analyzes without appreciating the object itself. Presented with a flower, scientism would note its color and how it achieves said color, measure the stem, and expound on the mechanics of floral biology. Scientism can only see the parts; it can never see the whole.

In no way does this mean that science is unnecessary or bad. Science has its rightful place within the Catholic worldview, which values both faith and reason. Scientism, however, only examines the world scientifically without appreciating other, fuller, more essential ways of seeing and experiencing it. Beauty, therefore, cannot be measured by science. We may note the perfect coloring of a particular flower, but this observation merely helps us appreciate the totality of the flower's beauty. This truth aligns with the way we naturally speak about things. How dull life would be if our conversations involved, for instance, the mechanisms of floral biology rather than exuberant descriptions of the exquisite flowers we saw during a walk through a field!

Experiencing beauty involves perceiving the parts in concert with the whole, and this helps us perceive things that lie beyond our senses. When we allow ourselves to be arrested in front of something beautiful, we allow ourselves to experience something mysterious. We can't observe beauty quickly and move on. We need to contemplate it, allow it to seep into us so that we can understand, know, and appreciate it in countless indescribable ways. Imperceptibly, beauty changes us. Behind every appreciation of beauty is an experience of mystery, and mystery is the vehicle by which beauty is manifested. "How is this related to the sacramental worldview?" you might ask. Beauty is at the heart of the sacramental worldview because it draws us to perceive our participation in the life of Christ in a deeper way.

Beauty draws us to see the "something more" of the world. The sacramental worldview is, at its heart, the recognition of the power of the beautiful to open us up to God's grace. When

we encounter beauty, either in nature or in the life of the Church, the experience of seeing the whole also draws out of us a profound experience of mystery and awe. Think of anything beautiful you've seen, anything truly breathtaking: don't we often experience awe and wonder in those moments? Think about the joy that comes in these moments. All of this leaves us with an ability to see that there is "something more." Wonder, awe, joy: these reactions of ours to the beautiful help us understand that there is a "something more" to all things, something we can see but not grasp. At the heart of beauty, then, is mystery, because what is mystery but an awe toward the "something more"?

## Mystery

As we discussed in the introduction, the word *mystery* can have all sorts of associations for us. Often the phrase "it's a mystery" is used to mean that the answer is unknown. When it comes to faith, probably all of us have heard the word *mystery* used dismissively: "Oh, the Trinity is a mystery, I can't bother to try to understand it." While it's true that the Trinity is a mystery, the mysterious aspect of God can be used as an excuse to repress inquisitiveness and attempts to understand. Perhaps we do this when we see the mystery as too insurmountable, too difficult to attempt to penetrate.

However, the Christian notion of mystery is vastly different. In this chapter we will discuss its rich tradition and precise meaning in the Scriptures. Mystery can be categorized into four essential elements:

- 1) concealment;



- 2) revelation of God's saving activity;
- 3) ritual participation in God's saving deeds, and
- 4) connection to *sacrament*.

## Mystery as Concealment

The word “concealment” finds its roots in two Latin words: *con*, which means “with,” and *celare*, which means “to hide.” To conceal, then, is “to hide with.” Veiled and hidden, the mystery of God exists in the heart of God alone: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?’” (Rom 11:33–34). These words from Saint Paul present a longstanding biblical truth: the human mind cannot grasp the mind of God. The depths of God are concealed from us and cannot be exhausted, nor can we force God to be known according to our terms. Therefore, we must respect God's transcendence, or, to put it differently, God's otherness.

But why is it necessary for God to conceal himself and his plans? Why must God put a veil between himself and his creation? It's normal to sometimes find God's concealment frustrating. It can even tempt us to doubt his existence. This doubt is partially due to how we see the world: often we are unable to let the world point to something beyond what's before our eyes. Yet, this is a legitimate question: if God is who he says he is, why can't he show himself more clearly?

Often such a question leaves out a central aspect of our humanity that affects every moment of our lives—we are

creatures born into a fallen world. The Fall had an impact not just on us individually, but on all creation. Adam and Eve were created to offer all of creation back to God. Instead, they took creation into their own hands. Consequently, we live in a creation that rebels against God. Our fallen nature finds its roots in the taking of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in attempting to become like God on our own terms. Because our first parents didn't offer creation back to God, taking the fruit was their way of alienating creation from God. Thus, all of creation became affected by the sin of our first parents. All of creation is now oriented away from God.

At this point, it's important to note that God still loves us, but *he does not love sin*. For this reason, he changed how he related to the world—not for his sake, but for our sake, so that we would return to him with true self-giving love instead of selfishly attempting to manipulate him for our own ends and goals. God mysteriously hid himself so as to bring us and all of creation back into right order.

Let's face an uncomfortable truth: If God dwelt with us now in the way he did prior to the Fall, we, too, would try to bring him down to our own level. We, too, would attempt to manipulate and use him to achieve our own goals. We, too, would make an idol out of God! This is the heart of idolatry: it's not only an attempt to worship false gods, but also an attempt to worship God falsely. Once we begin to understand that we are fallen creatures who need to reorient our lives and all of creation in the direction of self-giving love, then it becomes clearer why God is concealed from us. He is concealed so that we will not use him wrongly, so that he can begin to draw us into the life of love.

Yet, this concealment isn't only for God's sake, but for our sake as well. Parents do not tell their two-year-old all the moral and life lessons the toddler will need to know later; rather, as the child grows older, the parents slowly teach more lessons to him or her, helping the young person grow into greater maturity. It's the same with God. God does not reveal his whole plan and purpose for us immediately. But throughout salvation history, slowly, with the patience of a loving parent, he reveals his plans and purposes to us until we come to full maturity when he sends his Son into the world. Throughout the whole Old Testament, God increasingly reveals his nature and mercy to Israel. To Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets he slowly reveals his heart so as to prepare Israel and all humanity for his final revelation: his Son. God reveals these plans to us in a very particular way: his plans, his desires for us, are always revealed through his saving actions.

## **Mystery as a Saving Activity**

In the Old Testament, from the moment of the Fall, God tells us that plans are in motion to bring about our redemption. He promises a victory over the serpent, that is, the devil (see Gn 3:14–15). God's plans continue with Noah, through whom he saves the human race with a small and faithful remnant. After the flood, God chooses Abraham, through whom he establishes Israel. These saving plans continue as God rescues the Israelites from Egypt and guides them through a time of purification in the desert, then places Israel in its chosen land, and eventually establishes a

kingdom in David. When Israel goes astray, God allows the Israelites to be purified through suffering and exile so they can be drawn back to their mission of being a light to the nations. Then God sends prophets within Israel to help the people to remember Israel's mission. These prophets also foreshadow a time when God will act in a definitive manner. Through symbols, images, and prophetic words, God enacts the foretelling of the coming of a new Moses, who will finally save his people Israel.

God does not reveal his plan all at once. In all of this, God reveals himself only through saving actions: every action is tied to a salvation and thereby reveals to us something of who God is. Sometimes this involves revealing in a more direct manner, as with Noah, Abraham, and the Israelites in their escape from Egypt; other times, in a more indirect fashion, as through the invasion of Babylon or the words of the prophets. Regardless of the form that God's intervention takes, an overarching theme emerges as, slowly, God begins to unveil himself and his plans. This is why the entire Old Testament is so important to Christians. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe" (1:1–2). The entirety of God's plan points in a hidden way to the definitive revelation that happens in Jesus Christ.

In fact, Saint Paul refers to Jesus a few times as the "mystery of God" (see Col 1:27; 2:2; 4:3). For Paul, this mystery of God—the activity of God in the past—now comes unexpectedly to fulfillment in the saving activity of Jesus Christ.

Thus *mystery*, in Paul's use of the term, implies both a saving action and a revelation. God reveals himself to us *through* his saving actions, and the most perfect saving action is the cross and resurrection where God is revealed as the Trinity. It is on the cross that the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, offers himself to the Father and in the resurrection that the Father raises the Son from the dead by the Holy Spirit. The paschal mystery, then, reveals who God is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, Jesus is not only the Savior of the world; he is also the revealer of God to us: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). Mystery, then, is God saving us and at the same time revealing who he is.

## Mystery as Participation

Now, you might be thinking, "This is all well and good, but Jesus saved us two thousand years ago and I can't go back in time. How can these saving and revealing mysteries of God be accessible to me today?" This brings us to the third aspect of mystery: participation. As we've discussed, God's plans are hidden in himself. But he reveals them through his saving actions. And these saving actions aren't fossilized in history; they are alive and accessible to us today through liturgy, through the Mass. Every time we go to Mass anywhere in the world, the priest proclaims these words after the consecration of the Eucharist: "The mystery of faith." Basically, he's saying, "The secrets of God's heart, that are made known to us and save us in Jesus Christ, have been sacramentally represented on the altar." By proclaiming this to the faithful at Mass, the priest reminds everyone that God is here, that he is

saving his people, and that he is showing himself—not only two thousand years ago but now.

Moreover, God asks us to participate in his plans right now. He's not asking us to participate in a sort of activism, whereby liturgy becomes merely an expression of community togetherness. He's declaring that the Church is present in a particular place and time—this time!—and that we, the Church, are being drawn into the universal saving and revealing mystery of Jesus' cross and resurrection. Liturgy, instituted by Christ and developed by the Church, is a ritualized way for us to access his salvation. We will unpack this amazing mystery more later in Chapter 7 when we talk about the liturgical life.

## Mystery as Sacrament

This brings us to the fourth and final understanding of mystery. When Saint Jerome was translating the Bible into Latin in the fourth and fifth centuries, he used a peculiar word to translate the Greek word for mystery—*mysterion*—into Latin. He chose the word *sacramentum*, or sacrament. For example, in his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes how marriage images Christ's love for the Church: "This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the Church" (5:32). Where Paul uses the word *mysterion*, Jerome translates it as *sacramentum*. In other words, the great nuptial analogy Paul has just used to describe the meaning of Christ's relationship with the Church means that marriage is a *sacrament* of this relationship. Marriage on earth is something visible that makes present and efficacious something that is invisible.

What's invisible? The relationship between Christ and his Church. What's visible? The marital love between husband and wife. The Christ-centered love of husband for wife and wife for husband is meant to be a sign that makes visible the invisible and spiritual reality of Christ's love for his Church.

This fourth sense of the word *mystery*, then, brings together everything we have said thus far. Sacramentality, as we are going to discover, moves beyond just the seven sacraments. It means that God is using everything in his Church and in creation to bring about the redemption of humanity. God communicates himself, his plans, his saving actions *through* creation. God holds his plans in secret, in his heart, from all eternity, but he slowly unveils them in history in various times and places. God's plans and revelation culminate in the ultimate saving and revealing action of Jesus in the paschal mystery. This action of God is now something we all have a chance to be present at and to participate in through the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. God makes his actions present and effective to us through tangible signs—sacraments—and allows us to receive our salvation. And we can only receive salvation by participation in Christ, the ultimate mystery of God made flesh.

