

THEOLOGIA PRIMA: The Liturgical Mystery and the Mystery of God

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The great tradition of the Church understands liturgy, Scripture, and theology in a way that is somewhat different from the way they are commonly understood today. I think it behooves us to figure out what that difference is. Toward that end, I would like here to think about the relationship of these three things within a larger context. How does the mystery of God encountered in the *liturgy* affect our understanding of *theology* and *Scripture*?

Entering this world of discourse requires of us a conversion of mind. As is well known, the Greek word for conversion was *metanoia*, coming from *meta*, meaning beyond or after, and *nous*, which is not so much “reason” as what Metropolitan Hierotheos calls “the eye of the heart.”¹ If we want to see liturgy, Scripture, and theology differently, we must see them with a *meta-nous*, and that will change our rational understanding of them. The thesis I would like to explore here is this: in order to see each one of them more clearly, we must see them all together. To see each one correctly, we must see all of them as connected and bound to one another holistically. Our task is not so much to replace the curricula of liturgy, Scripture, and theology with a new content (like opening three shoe boxes to replace shoes with sandals). Our task is to let the connection between liturgy, Scripture and theology be a path to a thickened understanding of each of them. That is what we have ceased doing because we no longer see these three in the light of the singular mystery of God.

Casting around for some metaphors to make my point, I have come up with two. The first one comes, as do so many of my mental images, from G. K. Chesterton. In *The Autobiography* he writes that he always understood there to be some truth in pagan philosophical systems, but says he became a Catholic because he believes these truths are also contained *and better coordinated* in Catholicism. “That almost any other theology or philosophy contains a truth, I do not at all deny. . . . [But] I have only found one creed that could not be satisfied with a truth, but only with the Truth, which is made of a million such truths and yet is one. . . . Flowers grow best in a garden, and even grow biggest in a garden; and in the

1 Metropolitan Hierotheos, *Orthodoxy Psychotherapy: The Science of the Fathers* (Levadia: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1994), and *St. Gregory Palamas as a Hagiorite* (Levadia: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1997).

wilderness they wither and die.”² Scriptural exegetes have some truths; liturgiologists also keep some truths in their back pocket; theologians keep their truths tidy in various systematic pigeon holes; but whatever truths they have will grow biggest when they are coordinated in the garden of Truth.

Chesterton remembers thinking it odd, even before his conversion, to remove one part of the Christian faith, namely Scripture, and isolate it from the rest, as if a part can be played off against the whole. It is absurd to take the Bible out of the Church, or to use the Bible to condemn the great tradition of the Church. He makes his point by condensing the sixteenth century exaltation of the Bible to a single episode of a single afternoon.

The ordinary sensible skeptic or pagan is standing in the street . . . and he sees a procession go by of the priests of some strange cult, carrying their object of worship under a canopy, some of them wearing high head-dresses and carrying symbolical staffs, others carrying scrolls and sacred records, others carrying sacred images and lighted candles before them, others sacred relics in caskets or cases, and so on. I can understand the spectator saying, “This is all hocus-pocus”; I can even understand him, in moments of irritation, breaking up the procession, throwing down the images, tearing up the scrolls, dancing on the priests and anything else that might express that general view. I can understand his saying, “Your croziers are bosh, your candles are bosh, your statues and scrolls and relics and all the rest of it are bosh.” But in what conceivable frame of mind does he rush in to select one particular scroll of the scriptures of this one particular group (a scroll which had always belonged to them and been a part of their hocus-pocus, if it was hocus-pocus); why in the world should the man in the street say that one particular scroll was *not* bosh, but was the one and only truth by which all the other things were to be condemned? Why should it not be as superstitious to worship the scrolls as the statues, of that one particular procession?³

Ever since this brawl in the streets of the sixteenth century, it is as if Protestants and Catholics have thought they must scuffle over the remaining debris. They have sounded like children choosing up teams for a game of kickball: “We’ll take Scripture, faith, and grace.” “Then we get the pope, Mary, and the other

2 G. K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography*, vol. 16 of *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 328–329.

3 G. K. Chesterton, *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 73.

five sacraments.” There is a problem with allowing these fault lines to continue. It just may be that a particular scroll only blooms if it remains securely rooted in the whole Scripture; and the whole Scripture may only be intelligible if read as the marching orders for a liturgical procession; and the theology that comes from this liturgical life is about participation in the life of God. Liturgy, Scripture, and theology must be seen in light of the mystery of God.

I submit to the reader a second metaphor. This one entails some risk, because it comes from a world of science I have not dealt with since high school. As I remember it, when one hydrogen atom is bonded to another hydrogen atom, and those are bonded to an oxygen atom, the end molecule is substantially different from the atoms. The three atoms are gasses; the molecule H₂O is a liquid. To produce the liquid, one doesn’t change one of the atoms to look like a different box on the Periodical Table of the Elements. Instead, one brings these three atoms into conjunction with each other to make a compound. Let the three atoms lose contact with each other and there won’t be a liquid any more, only gasses. Let liturgy, Scripture, and theology lose contact with one another, and instead of something refreshing you have something rather gaseous. This sometimes happens in the academy, where associating Scripture study with the mystery of God is assumed to corrupt the objectivity of the examiner; and liturgy is disassociated from the mystery of God and turned into a history of sacramentaries or a phenomenology of rite; and theology puts the mystery of God under a slide for our controlled examination.

Gathering my metaphors together, I can say that I would like to replant our scattered truths about liturgy, Scripture, and theology in a single garden of Truth. I would like to pick up the scattered pieces of our stumbled liturgical procession and return the scroll of Scripture to the arms of liturgical theologians. I would like to first consider liturgy, Scripture, and theology on their atomic level, and then make some comments on the molecular level about their relationship to the mystery of God.

One Liturgy, On Earth and in Heaven

There are not two liturgies, one on earth and one in heaven. There is one liturgy, on earth and in heaven. The liturgy of the Church is the heavenly liturgy as it is practiced on earth, and it is crucial to restore this eschatological dimension to our practice of liturgy. In the liturgy we do what the angels do, namely, lose ourselves in a joy that erupts in praise. St. John Chrysostom said joy issues when the lover receives the beloved. In that case, the liturgy issues when the Church receives her beloved. The liturgy is our trysting place with God. According to the dictionary, a tryst is “an agreement, as between lovers, to meet at a certain time and place.” Exactly! God, our Divine Lover, has agreed to meet us on holy ground for com-

munion, and from that encounter with the Father through the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit creates “theologian souls.”⁴

In order to identify this reality, we call the liturgy “sacramental.” Paul Evdokimov speaks of sacraments as “an action of ‘punching holes’ in the closed world by powerful explosions from the Beyond.” By the sacraments we are taught “that everything is destined for a liturgical fulfillment.”⁵ So the Divine Liturgy, the liturgy of the hours, the sacraments, and sacramentals, and our personal liturgies of devotion, piety, and ministry to charity, are all points at which the reign of God presses through the partition that sin has constructed. The kingdom of God approaches us in liturgy in a way that is material, communal, and ritualistic, which is why the Church is a sacramental, political, and social entity.

“To swim” is a verb and “swimmer” is the noun. “To run” is a verb and “runner” is the noun. “Liturgy” is a verb and “Christian” is the noun. Liturgy is the activity of Christians, and Christians become what they do. My teacher, Aidan Kavanagh, also used to say “I don’t go to Mass because I’m Catholic, I’m Catholic because I go to Mass.”

Imagine liturgy in the Church as blood is in the body. Or, better still, imagine liturgy in the Church as soul is in the body—what the scholastics meant by *anima forma corporis*. Etienne Gilson clarifies the meaning of the term “forma.” For St. Thomas Aquinas, he writes, “the soul does not first make a body move, it first makes it a body. A corpse is not a body. The soul makes it exist as a body.”⁶ Applied to our case, the liturgy is the form of the Church. The liturgy makes the assembly exist as the body of Christ. An assembly by itself is not a body. The liturgy does not first make an assembly move, it first makes it the body of Christ. The Eucharist makes the Church, as Henri de Lubac has reminded this generation.

Leitourgia originally meant a work done by a few on behalf of the many. “It denoted a work (*ergon*) undertaken on behalf of the people (*laos*). Public projects undertaken by an individual for the good of the community in such areas as education, entertainment or defense would be *leitourgia*.”⁷ Christ undertook a work on behalf of the vital interests of the clan to which he chose to belong—the family of Adam and Eve—and his liturgy continues in the activity of his body. We are the body of Christ because this activity continues in us. By baptismal grace, we

4 Archimandrite Vasileios, *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1984), 23.

5 Paul Evdokimov, *Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty* (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood, 1990), 117.

6 Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1956), 187.

7 Lawrence Madden, “Liturgy,” *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter Fink (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 740.

are incorporated into the sacred humanity of Christ, his Spirit is poured into our bodies, and we are made one of a new race. Baptism makes a new people called into existence for the very purpose of continuing the work of Christ. *Leitourgia* is Christ's work become ours.

Liturgy is not, then, a performance of *our* religion. Liturgy is the religion of Christ—the religion he enacted in the flesh before the Father—perpetuated. The religion that Jesus did in his humanity, he left to his Church to continue performing. We join Jesus in his liturgy to the Father and on behalf of the many. That would be why Pope Pius XII defined liturgy this way: “The sacred liturgy is . . . the public worship which our Redeemer as head of the Church renders to the Father, as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its founder, and through him to the heavenly Father. It is, in short, the worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its head and members.”⁸ It is not a thing that Jesus left to his Church, but himself. And he is, himself, the mediator of the Father's grace to us, and the mediator of our thanksgiving to the Father, all in the Holy Spirit. Liturgy is best understood as a relationship. Liturgy is participating in the relationship of love that flows between the persons of the Trinity.

Scripture, an Invitation to Enter Sacred History

I therefore consider Christ to be the premier liturgist, and baby liturgists are born in the baptismal font when they are grafted into his life. The entire economy of salvation, as it is recorded in Scripture, has had as its purpose to produce liturgists. Obviously this only makes sense with a thickened definition of “liturgist” because what need has the world for more cantors and thurifers? But if liturgy is, as defined above, the extension of the Father's love to the world through the body the Holy Spirit has knitted together in the waters of the font, then we can say the entire economy of salvation recorded in Scripture exists to bring mankind into liturgy.

This makes the Bible something more than a book of religious propositions. The Bible is neither a catechism nor a morals manual. It is a record of the self-disclosure of God, made in history because we are historical beings. Furthermore, it is an invitation to step into that history. The revelation of God is not in the words of the book, the revelation of God is in the history recorded by the inspired words of the book. When we approach the Scriptures, we search for a person, not for a proposition. Luther said the Bible is the manger in which the Christ-child is laid, and we should never confuse the straw with the baby.

Augustine famously said, “In the Old Testament the New lies hid; in the New Testament the meaning of the Old becomes clear.”⁹ Marcion tried to take a

8 Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, Encyclical Letter on the Sacred Liturgy (November 20, 1947), 20, in *Mediator Dei* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1948).

9 Augustine's “old saying” is quoted in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 129.

hatchet to this reciprocal correlation and divide the New Covenant from the first Covenant. If he had succeeded, we would not have been able to understand either covenant, because we cannot understand Christ apart from the Old Testament covenant, or what the Old Testament was driving at without seeing Jesus as its omega point.

It is crucial that Christians discover the relationship of the Church to the Old Testament. Remember that the top row of the Orthodox iconostasis contains icons of the "Church of the Old Testament." Charles Journet said "The Church made its appearance in time before Christ did. The frontier of the Church passes through each one of those who call themselves her members."¹⁰ The Church may have been born at Pentecost to become a public, visible thing, but its moment of conception was earlier.¹¹ Israel is the womb for the human race and the Church of the Old Testament is the Church *in utero*.

"Typology" is the name for this connection between the testaments. Jean Daniélou calls typology "the science of the similitudes between the two testaments."¹² When the yellow paint of Scripture meets the blue paint of Jesus, the green paint that results is called typology. Typology is the mystical art of finding Christ foreshadowed in the Hebrew Scriptures, and finding the Scriptures illuminated by the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit.

Since Jesus himself understood his identity in light of the Old Testament, what would it mean to us when he called himself the "bread of life" if we did not know Exodus 12? Or the "lamb of God," without Exodus 16? How could we understand sacrifice without the book of Leviticus, or the Son of Man without Isaiah and Daniel? Typology sees Christ in the light of Scripture and reads the spiritual meaning of the letter in light of the mystery made flesh. This is what the apostles did. The apostles' preaching is nothing but this. And when the apostolic faith was written down, it composed the New Testament.

So the New Testament is neither an addendum to nor a replacement of the Scriptures; there are not two Bibles. The New Testament is apostolic witness to the hour when the Word of God spoken in the Old Testament became flesh. The authority of the New Testament derives from the apostles' authority. They are the twelve pillars of the Church's Scripture and her tradition. The Church is Israel renewed (which is a better way of saying "a new Israel"). In the words of Alexander Golitzin, "The Church is nothing more nor less than Israel in the

10 Charles Journet, *The Church of the Word Incarnate* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), xxvii.

11 "Doubtless, the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified. Yet on the day of Pentecost, He came down upon the disciples to remain with them forever (cf. John 14:16). The Church was publicly displayed to the multitude . . ." Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (December 7, 1965), 4, in Austin Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1988), 816–817.

12 Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1956), 4.

altered circumstances of the Messiah's death, resurrection, and the eschatological outpouring of his Spirit."¹³ The Old Testament and the New Testament are like the two cherubim facing each other, sitting atop the ark of the covenant, God's throne, looking at the Lord seated between them.¹⁴

Pope Benedict XVI says, "apostolic succession is essentially the living presence of the Word in the person of the witnesses."¹⁵ And that is the same reason why Karl Rahner insists on understanding the apostolic succession as a living experience. "It is not only propositions about their experience that the apostles bequeath, but their Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, the very reality, then, of what they have experienced in Christ. Their own experience is preserved and present together with their Word."¹⁶

The First Letter of John provides a definition of apostolic tradition when it defines the aim of the apostles. "We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). The twelve pass on what they have seen and heard, not so we can know what they saw and know what they heard, but so that we too may participate in the Son. If the witness recorded in the New Testament does not lead to the spiritual fellowship the apostles had with the Father through his Son Jesus Christ, then we are misreading the whole Scripture. It becomes dead letter. It is not theological. It is not read liturgically.

The content of Christian tradition is proclaimed by the Church in the liturgy as the rule of faith. Such a tacit knowledge of the Church's rule of faith is called by Andrew Louth our participation in tradition, and it emerges, he writes, from the silence of prayer. "Prayer is seen in the fathers to be, as it were, the amniotic fluid in which our knowledge of God takes form."¹⁷ Liturgical prayer is the mother of theology.

13 Alexander Golitzin, "Scriptural Images of the Church: An Eastern Orthodox Reflection" (Unpublished paper, 2001), available at <http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/church>.

14 The thought is from a homily by St. Gregory the Great: "In the two angels [who appeared in Christ's tomb] we can recognize the two Testaments. . . . They have come together where the Lord's body is, because, by announcing in convergent fashion that the Lord took flesh, died, and rose again, the two Testaments are as it were seated, the Old at his head and the New at his feet. That is why the two cherubim who protect the mercy seat face each other. . . . Cherub indeed means fullness of knowledge. . . . When the Old Testament foretells what the New Testament declares accomplished in the Lord, they face each other like the two cherubim, their gaze fixed on the mercy seat, because they are looking at the Lord between them and they . . . are recounting in harmony the mystery of his loving purpose." Quoted in Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New York: New City, 1996), 98.

15 Joseph Ratzinger, "Primacy, Episcopate, and Apostolic Succession," in Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Episcopate and the Primacy* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1962), 54.

16 Karl Rahner, "The Development of Dogma," in *Theological Investigations*, 10 vols. (New York: Seabury, 1974), 10:68.

17 Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 65.

Theology, the Science of the Scriptures

The western Church, straight up to Thomas Aquinas, called theology “the science of the Scriptures.” Theology is not necessarily constructed by a lone Ph.D. in an office lined with academic books because academic theology is only one species in the genus of theology. The kind of theology meant here consists of the ability to find Christ in the Scriptures, and to read the ecclesiological, moral, and eschatological meanings contained in the letter (these were the three “spiritual meanings” in tradition, called the typological, tropological, and anagogical). According to Yves Congar, the medieval Church understood theology to be “an extension of faith, which is a certain communication and a certain sharing of God’s knowledge.” Theology includes “the construction of God in us, or rather the construction of Christ in us.”¹⁸

Theology’s more relevant practitioner is Mrs. Murphy who has been capacitated by the mystery of God in the liturgy to see the world in the light of Mount Tabor. She may not be able to say something about other theologians, but she can do something more important: she can say something theological about everything else in the world. The person who has been capacitated by liturgy to read the Scriptures in the light of Christ sees all things with the eye of the dove, which is how St. Gregory Nyssa spoke of “spiritual sight”: it is seeing by means of the Holy Spirit. Becoming a theologian is therefore the calling and the responsibility of every baptized Christian.

The content of Christian tradition is tracked in the pages of Scripture. Being a tracker means knowing how to read trails; being a theologian means knowing how to read Scripture. And who are we tracking? The *Logos*. And where does he lead us? To *Theos*, to God the Father. And by what power can we do this? Not our own; the Holy Spirit must illuminate the process. Thomas Spidlik’s work on spirituality notes that the Church fathers “understood the practice of theology only as a personal communion with *Theos*, the Father, through the *Logos*, Christ, in the Holy Spirit—an experience lived in a state of prayer.”¹⁹ That is why prayer is the amniotic fluid for theological knowledge.

Being a theologian means being able to use the grammar learned in liturgy to speak about God. Even more, it means speaking of God. Yet even more, it means speaking with God. That is why Evagrius of Pontus calls prayer theology: “If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian.”¹⁴ And before there were universities with theology faculties, it was possible to learn and to use this theological grammar. *Theologia* stood at the end of a process of asceticism that conformed a life to Christ. The starting point of theology was not the library card catalogue, but the Eucharist, the grammar of faith learned in the *lex orandi* (“law of prayer”) of liturgical life.

18 Yves Congar, *A History of Theology* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 261.

19 Thomas Spidlik, *The Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1986), 1.

For the fathers, theology meant a knowledge of God which comes from an illumination of the soul by the Holy Spirit, and this is the very substance of the soul's deification. Theology is not only knowledge about God, it is the supernatural communication of God's very life. Irenaeus called the Son and the Holy Spirit the two hands of the Father. What does the Father want to do with his two outstretched hands? I picture God, who once formed man by crouching over the clay of the earth and sculpting it into a human form (see Gen. 2:7), now wanting to finish his handiwork. The Father reaches out through the Son and the Holy Spirit to bring us to completion. The image grows further into the likeness of God. Within this context, theology is less the fruit of a graduate program at university, and more the fruit of a rightly-ordered existence. Theology is as much a practice as a cognition.

The Mystery of God's Will

Now we want to find some water. We must turn from the atomic level to do molecular theology. We want to find out what bonds these atomic elements of the Church. How are liturgy, Scripture, and theology unified, and what prevents them from drifting apart? We want to avoid loss of harmony lest we lose the mystery itself. Why is there a salvation history recorded in Scripture, and a Church which performs liturgy, and theologians formed for Mount Tabor?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* suggests the following reason for the inauguration of the economy of salvation: "Disfigured by sin and death, man remains 'in the image of God,' in the image of the Son, but is deprived 'of the glory of God,' of his 'likeness.' The promise made to Abraham inaugurates the economy of salvation, at the culmination of which the Son himself will assume that 'image' and restore it in the Father's 'likeness' by giving it again its glory, the Spirit who is 'the giver of life.'"²⁰ Man and woman, the image of God, are to grow into the likeness of God, and this is the reason for all of salvation history, this is our liturgical life, and this is theology in motion. But what is the mysterious charge that bonds these three together?

Let me suggest an answer by means of an imaginary illustration. Suppose with me that you had a friend to whom you lent a copy of the Bible. He was curious about the Christian Bible, so you invited him to examine one. A week or so later you ask "What did you think of it?" and suppose he soberly answers, "It is a great book. I've never seen such sturdy binding, and I thought the typography elegant, and the paper is certainly top quality." If your friend said something like that, I should suppose that he was not attending to the book as a Bible, but attending to the book as a book. Maybe he was a bookbinder by profession; maybe he sold paper and ink and covers for books; maybe he was a Bible collector and knew all about

20 *Catechism*, no. 705.

rare Bibles. Whatever the case, he would not be attending to the Bible as a believer, but as a bibliophile.

Suppose with me further that the Bible was lent to another person who, after careful examination, looked up with a furrowed brow and pointed out a chronological discrepancy in Second Kings, or an error about the Hittites which more recent archeology has now corrected. That person would be attending to the Bible as a historian. Or suppose a reader mused about Abraham's conflicted mind during his trip up Mount Moriah with Isaac, or opined about whether it was sexual insecurity which caused Solomon to aspire to a greater harem than the King of the Euphrates had; then we would think this person was attending to the book as a psychiatrist. A scientist could attend to the cosmological descriptions in Genesis, a sociologist to the kinship structure of Israel's patriarchal era, a Hellenist to the parallels between Jesus and a wandering cynic, a comparative religionist to the subtle similarities between Israel's temple cult and Hindu sacrifice—in any of a hundred ways a person could attend to the book in a different way from what we might have expected.²¹

Now we can see the question I want to ask: to what would one have to be attending in order to experience the Bible as Scripture? This same question should have two other echoes. To what would one have to be attending in order to experience the ritual as liturgy, and the words as theology? How do we approach liturgy, Scripture, and theology in order to receive them from God?

In each case, I submit, we have to attend to the mystery of God. And we experience the mystery of God as our deification, our growth in holiness, our increased union with God. What we have been talking about throughout is the Church as she manifests herself in liturgy, Scripture, and theology. The Church is the mystery of God coming to fruition. Paul unpacks it this way in Ephesians 3.

With all wisdom and insight [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him. . . . He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two. . . . In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:

21 David Fagerberg, "On the Reform of Liturgists," *Antiphon*, 5 (June 2000), 5–7.

that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.²²

The mystery is the Father's will. The mystery is the Father's will to join humankind into the perichoresis, the dynamic interpenetration and mutual reciprocity that flows between himself and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The mystery is Christ, who enacts that will. And the Church is where Christ (the mystery of God) and the Holy Spirit (the breath of God) are accomplishing God's will. All this the Church has included in its understanding of "tradition." Louis Bouyer identifies four strands of meaning in the way the Church has used the term: First of all, tradition is the rule of faith, the synthetic statement of what every Christian and the whole Church, at all times must believe. It is also the Scripture, the Old Testament first of all, but also what the apostles had expressed, together with the Gospel of Christ which he himself proclaimed. It is further the organized and organic life of the Church in her hierarchical structure and her liturgical structure. Finally, tradition is the incarnate life of charity, the life of the Spirit, the Spirit of God which is the Body of Christ.²³

Jean Daniélou's lovely little book on the angels cites St. John Chrysostom when the latter describes the angels' reaction when the mystery was revealed to heaven, that is, when the incarnated one ascended into heaven. Chrysostom writes:

St. Paul speaks here [in Ephesians 3] of a mystery, because not even the angels knew it. The angels only knew that the Lord had chosen His people as His portion (Deut. 32:8) . . . That is why we need not be surprised that they did not know this [mystery], since, properly speaking, it is the gospel. God had said he would save his people Israel, but had said nothing about the nations. The angels knew that the nations were called, but could not imagine that they would be called to the same end and would be seated upon the throne of God.²⁴

The same thought was expressed in the west by St. Paschasius who likened Jesus to a needle, whose eye was pierced by his passion, but who now "draws all after him, so repairing the tunic rent by Adam, stitching together the two peoples of

22 Eph. 1:8–9; 2:15; 3:5–6.

23 Louis Bouyer, *The Church of God* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1982), 10–11. See also, Jean Daniélou, *God and the Ways of Knowing* (New York: Meridian Books, 1967), esp. chapter 5.

24 Jean Daniélou, *The Angels and Their Mission* (Westminster: Newman, 1957), 33.

Jew and Gentile, making them one for always.”²⁵ To Chrysostom, this completely explains the behavior of the angels at the Ascension.

Do you want to know how they rejoiced in the Ascension? Listen to the account in the Bible, “They rise and descend continuously.” That is the behavior of those who want to contemplate a very special sight. They want to see the unheard-of spectacle of man appearing in heaven. That is why the angels are constantly showing themselves: when He is born, when He dies, when He rises into heaven.²⁶

The angels were startled by the mystery because the mystery is, in Bouyer’s words, “the secret plan of salvation which only God can reveal and which he reveals by carrying it out.”²⁷ They rose up on tiptoes to see such a thing. Christ, our brother, brings human nature into heaven where we who cling to his ascension by faith, having clung to his death and resurrection by faith, can join the divine dance of love. The angels didn’t want to miss it.

Jean Daniélou summarily says: “The Christian faith has only one object, the mystery of Christ dead and risen. But this unique mystery subsists under different modes: it is prefigured in the Old Testament, it is accomplished historically in the earthly life of Christ, it is contained in mystery in the sacraments, it is lived mystically in souls, it is accomplished socially in the Church, it is consummated eschatologically in the heavenly kingdom.”²⁸

The Auto-graph of God

If you will understand my use of the term, I could propose that there is a difference between the way liturgy, Scripture, and theology are commonly understood today, and the way they are understood by the great tradition. The great tradition saw them as more *mystical* than we do. By “mystical” I do not mean baffling, bewildering, confusing. In the Christian tradition, *mysterion* means the Father’s love for humankind revealed in and shared by Christ, and for something to be more mystical would mean something is drawn deeper into full, active, and conscious participation in salvation history.

If *Scripture* is read mystically, it will bring us before the mystery of God. That, claims Louth, was the real reason for typology or allegory, though few introductions to typology written today give this impression. “The traditional doctrine of the multiple senses of Scripture, with its use of allegory, is essentially an attempt to respond to the *mira profunditas* of Scripture, seen as the indispensable witness

25 Quoted in Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 35.

26 Daniélou, *Angels*, 35.

27 Louis Bouyer, *The Christian Mystery: From Pagan Myth to Christian Mysticism* (Edinburgh T & T Clark, 1990), 133.

28 Jean Daniélou, quoted in Robert Taft, “Toward a Theology of the Christian Feast,” *Beyond East and West* (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1997), 29.

to the mystery of Christ. This is the heart of the use of allegory.”²⁹ Bouyer adds that the mystical cannot be had outside the liturgy because “the mystical is the experience of what the Scriptures reveal to us in the Spirit who has given them to us and of what this Spirit communicates to us in the sacraments, in the Eucharist first and foremost.”³⁰

If *liturgy* is celebrated mystically, it will bring us before the mystery of God. “In the beginning was the *Logos*,” John’s Gospel tells us, “and he pitched his tent among us.” The *Logos* is the Word in the sense of reason, principle, standard, or logic. He is the wisdom of the Father, the Father’s thought. By the *Logos* the cosmos was made, and by the *Logos* all things hold together, from electrons to galaxies. The *Logos* is the reason of things, and the reason for things—their *telos*, their end, that toward which providence aims. What we have every eighth day, then, is a liturgy of the *Logos* and a liturgy of the Eucharist. Mystical liturgy would be a way into God’s *Logos*, who is the mystery that invites the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve home to the Father’s covenantal love.

If *theology* were to become more mystical, then we would understand it not as a rational science by us, but as the Father’s *Logos* shared with us. Blessed Columba Marmion asked, “What in fact is faith?” And he answered, “It is a mysterious participation in the knowledge that God has of himself. God knows himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”³¹ When we acknowledge Christ as divine, then our confession is an echo of the very knowledge that God has of himself.

The Church fathers thought of theology as knowledge of the Trinity. But this is more than information. Theology is the art of life—spiritual life, to be exact. Becoming a theologian-soul means being further conformed to the God-man. We are to become an image of Christ, who was the image of the Father. We are to become an icon of the icon of God. To say that this process takes place all by grace is only to say that God is writing each of us as an image of his Son by his own hand. We are the Father’s auto-graph: Christ the mystery is inscribed in us by the Holy Spirit.

29 Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 112.

30 Bouyer, *The Christian Mystery*, 183.

31 Columba Marmion, *Christ in His Mysteries* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1931), 237.

