

The Seven Sacraments

The Transformation of Reality

CHRISTIAN LIFE IS CENTERED in that act of God becoming man: *"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us"* (John 1:14). This union of the Divine and human nature in one person, the Incarnation of our Lord, has once and for all bridged the gap between God and Creation. By the Incarnation, the material world is redeemed.

Creation is brought back to the possibility of harmony with its Creator. Our redemption, however, is no one-time event, over and done with at the moment of the Passion or Ascension. God did not become man simply to provide for the inspiration of future generations; His saving acts have brought about in the world in which we live a permanent alteration. Prior to the Incarnation, man could only know God as if at a distance, even as a shadow. But now God Himself lives among us, as Jesus promised: *"I am with you always, even unto the end of the world"* (Matt. 28:20).

This enduring presence of Christ in Creation is not the vague and dilute divine presence that a muddled pantheism preaches. God is certainly present in all of His Creation. But He is more specifically and intensively present in particular and reliable ways that He Himself has established.

The Fathers most frequently call these particular forms of the Lord's enduring presence a "Mystery." The most familiar term in English is "Sacrament." For our purposes here, the two terms will be used interchangeably - for "mystery" conveys a truth about God's Grace which is lacking in the word "sacrament."

The Holy Mysteries are no mere signs or symbols; they are not just external indications of the presence of some invisible reality. A Sacrament is the Divine presence, just as the man Jesus Who walked among men 2,000 years ago was God Himself incarnate. When some portion of this created world (a cup of wine, a piece of bread, a vial of oil, a touch upon the head, etc.) becomes a Mystery, it becomes thereby "of God"; it is divinized; it becomes the real and present location of that continuing presence - of Christ, and in some sense it is Him.

Sacraments are indefinite in number, not restricted to an easily identified, categorizable few. Neither are they of uniform intensity; there are varying degrees of universality and sharpness of focus of His presence. Fundamentally, the *whole* of Creation is in some degree a sacrament, for He is everywhere present and fills all things. But we must not fall into the trap of assuming a bland universality of that presence which recedes into a pointless vagueness. The eternal Christ came and dwelt among us as a man in a particular place and time. He continues to dwell among us in quite specific and identifiable ways, radiating His presence throughout the world in specific and orderly forms. This is not to say that He may not also manifest His presence in other, less predictable manners... indeed, He does!

Even though the term is not often used in this context, the most fundamental form of this real presence of Christ is in the Church and the Scriptures: "*Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*" (Matt. 18:20). St. Paul instructs us: "*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God*" (2 Tim 3:16). The measure of the Divine presence in both Church and Scriptures is that of universality: Christ is fully present in the *whole* of Scripture, not some selected portion, and likewise in the *whole* Church.

We speak here, and throughout, of the Church as the living Body of Christ, constituted by all those in this world and the next who have truly united themselves to Christ by obedience to Him and by a pious life. The Church is no mere human association, nor is it a vaguely defined community of believers. It is that body constituted of individual members, living and departed, who do and have united themselves to Christ through obedience to His commands, most conspicuously in Holy Baptism and partaking of His Body and Blood, in adherence to the faith delivered to us through the Holy Apostles, and through love.

Beyond this universal presence of our Lord in the Church and in Scripture, Christ has provided through the Church certain specific and regular forms of His presence. These "channels of Grace," are what we specifically refer to as the Mysteries. Above all else, the term refers to the Mysteries of Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, Unction, Holy Orders, Marriage, and Confession. It is, however, by no means limited to these seven. Before we turn our attention to the individual Mysteries, let us consider in some greater detail the nature of "mystery" or "sacrament."

A Sacrament is something real - it *does* something. Through it, in it, and by it, a substantial change is made in some person or thing of the created order: bread is no longer *just bread*. The Mystery does not merely indicate some change which has occurred for some unrelated reason but rather is the effective cause of the alteration. Sacraments are, however, above all else *mysteries*, and this effective causality is not reducible to the level of ordinary technological causality. A Sacrament is not some form of magic or technique; it always operates only by and through Divine Grace and can in no way be manipulated by men for their own self-centered purposes.

In any attempt to define "Grace," we enter upon dangerous theological waters. Perhaps the less said the better. But we must at least understand that in using this term, we refer to the specific and effective action of God upon man's life and being, whereby man is enabled to approach the oneness with God for which he was created and to which he is called. Only in virtue of God's Grace is this possible - we cannot make our way to the Kingdom of Heaven by our own resources.

This Grace is most evident in our lives in the Holy Mysteries, 'which are the continuing, operative form of the act of Redemption. They are the means by which the restoration of communion made possible in the Incarnation is made effective and present in the lives of Christians of this and every age. In the Fall, it was the *whole* of man that fell (body and soul alike), entering into a state of alienation and separation from God. In the continuing sacramental life of the Body of Christ, it is the whole man who is brought back into communion with God - not just some spiritual part of him. In its fulfillment, this restoration to divine communion is life in the Kingdom of God. The Mysteries, by which we approach that restoration, provide the means by which we even now to some degree experience that Kingdom.

As it is not just our thinking or our willing, but our **whole being**, that is to be redeemed, it is in the nature of a Sacrament always to have **visible form**. There is no such thing as a "purely spiritual" Mystery; there is always a concrete, visible manifestation of sacramental Grace. Further, just as there were specific agents of the Fall (Adam) and the Redemption (the Lord Jesus), so also for any Sacrament there is a **proper agent or minister**. This minister is not just any person, but rather one appointed by Christ (through the Church) as His agent for the purpose.

It is further necessary that both minister and recipient approach the Mysteries with a proper intent; God does not impose His Grace upon us willy-nilly, in spite of ourselves. Rather, He grants us ordinary and reliable means in the Holy Mysteries whereby we may turn to Him for the Grace and energy needed for leading the life to which He calls us.

The application of these characteristics of the Holy Mysteries will become more apparent as we turn to specific manifestations of sacramental Grace. If we truly grasp the nature of the Sacraments, we shall see that the **whole of human life is transformed by His Grace**. Not the smallest niche of Creation escapes the possibility of divinization by the flow into it of sacramental Grace.

Holy Baptism: Rebirth into the Kingdom

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19). This command initiates the most fundamental of all the Mysteries, as it is the prerequisite for all the others. The Sacraments are the vehicles of participation in the Kingdom of God, and Baptism is the **path of entry** into that Kingdom.

Speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus says: *"I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God"* (John 3:5). There is no equivocation here, but simply a straightforward *"except . . . cannot."* Of *"born . . . of the Spirit,"* more in the next chapter. If we had only these two statements of our Lord to rely upon, we would know clearly that Baptism is a necessity for salvation and that it is the duty of Christians to lead others to it. But we would know nothing of *why* it is so important, or of the manner of doing it.

It is apparent from the New Testament that there are four primary dimensions to the event of Baptism:

1. In Baptism, we are made **partakers of the Divine nature**. Therein, we are incorporated into the death and resurrection of Christ and made one with Him in these events: *"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we should walk in newness of life"* (Rom. 6:3ff). This is no mere symbolism but rather something which happens to the believer in Baptism, as is clear from the language St. Paul uses.
2. In Baptism, we are **cleansed** of our sinfulness. We are brought into a new state of being with regard to God: *"Ye are washed, ye are sanctified, ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God"* (1 Cor. 6:11). This cleansing applies not just to the

individual believer but to the whole Church made up of those who have undergone it: "*Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word*" (Eph. 5:25ff).

3. Baptism is a **new birth**, making of us new men and women: "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*" (1 Pet. 1:3). The new birth comes through "*water and the Spirit.*" It is given "*according to His mercy . . . by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost*" (Titus 3:5).
4. Baptism is an **enlightenment**, an illumination, a movement from the darkness of fallen mankind into union with "*the true Light which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world*" (John 1:9). "*But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions*" (Heb. 10:32). The early Fathers of the Church often referred to Baptism as "illumination."

In summary then, Baptism does four things to the recipient: it incorporates him into the death and resurrection of Christ; it purifies him of his previous sinful state of being; it makes of him a new person, new-born in the faith; and it confers upon him illumination, the possibility of living in light rather than in darkness. All of these things *happen* to him in Baptism . . . but the choice is yet his whether he will live and grow in this new state of being. Just as a baby has only begun when he is born, so a Christian has **only begun** when he is baptized.

By these means, we are made members of the holy people of God, the Church. We are given in Baptism the ability to begin our struggle for salvation - and the Grace whereby we may so strive. We enter thereby upon the "spiritual combat" clothed with the armor of salvation.

We know something from this of what Baptism does, but little of how it is done. Clearly, four elements are necessary: one who does the baptizing, water, a verbal action, and the recipient. It is apparent from the Acts of the Apostles and from later Church documents that it was usual for **whole households** to be baptized - men, women, slaves, children, and infants alike. Belief was not just an individual affair but rather that of a **whole family**. So the answer to the question "Who can be baptized?" is "Any person who believes, either individually or as part of a believing household."

The New Testament does not clearly answer the question "Who can baptize?", as all baptisms there recorded are at the hands of the Apostles. But soon the Church did answer the question: any bishop in succession from the Apostles or a priest or deacon empowered by him to do so or, in an emergency, any Christian. At first it may seem that the New Testament is ambiguous as to what words are to be used in a Baptism, but the ambiguity disappears when we look at the universal practice of the Church in the early centuries, at a time in which even the specific contents of the New Testament were not yet generally agreed upon: Baptism is to be "*in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*"

Again, we have no clear evidence from the New Testament concerning the exact manner of Baptism except the important evidence that the Greek word itself means "to plunge" into water. Two invaluable early documents (the *Didache*, ca. A.D. 75 and the *Apostolic Traditions*, ca. A.D. 225) are specific: Baptism is to be in running water; that failing, in a lake or pond; in case

of critical illness, by pouring water over the head three times. It is apparent from these and other early documents that Baptism was most often (and later universally throughout Orthodox Christianity) by **triple total immersion**. In keeping with the transformative character of the Sacrament, it was common if not universal practice for Baptism to take place with the candidate stripped of clothing, preparatory to ceremonial reclothing in a clean white tunic, which was then worn for a week.

We have only just begun to enter into the character and manner of Holy Baptism, the wonders and depths and riches of which escape the scope of such a brief treatment. Hopefully, the exploration is sufficient to lay to rest some questions and arouse new ones. As Baptism cannot be properly understood apart from its completion in Holy Chrismation, we turn our attention to that Baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Chrismation: Baptism In the Spirit

THE MYSTERY OF CHRISMATION is usually performed immediately after the Mystery of Baptism, comprising with it a single church rite. The Mystery is also performed on those who are united to the Church from heretical communities as one of the means of their being united to the Church. The words by which this Mystery is performed, "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit," indicate its significance and effect. It is a culminating act of being united to the Church, the confirmation or seal of the union, and the seal of the Grace-given powers which are bestowed in it for strengthening and growth in spiritual life.

In this Sacrament, with the eightfold repetition of words "the seal of the gift . . ." the priest (or bishop) anoints the newly baptized Christian on brow, eyes, nostrils, lips, ears, breast, hands, and feet. Only in this anointing is the rebirth of Holy Baptism made complete, for *'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God'* (John 3:5). The Holy Chrism, also called Myrrh, used for this purpose is itself in continuity with the Apostles. When needed, additional Chrism, olive oil prepared with spices, is consecrated by the chief hierarchs of the Church for distribution to the parishes. Those familiar with the Orthodox Christian liturgy are immediately struck by the extreme brevity of the Chrismation rite. To all intents and purposes, the brief repetitive formula above and the imposition of the Chrism is all there is to it - this in a liturgical tradition where *nothing* is done quickly or hurriedly.

St. Cyprian writes, "Those baptized in the Church are sealed by the *seal of the Lord* after the example of the baptized Samaritans who were received by the Apostles Peter and John through laying of hands and prayer (Acts 8:14-17) . . . That which was lacking in them, Peter and John accomplished . . . Thus is it also with us . . . They are made perfect by the seal of the Lord."

This observation does not, however, permit us to shrug our shoulders, say "It's a mystery," and pass on. It is apparent from the evidence of Holy Scripture, as well as our own experience, that the relationship between Holy Chrismation and a truly Spirit-filled life is not one of simple cause and effect. Again, the workings of divine Grace cannot be reduced to mere technology. We read in the Acts of the Apostles of instances in which the Holy Spirit was received even before Baptism, but we also read of others in which converts had been baptized but had never even heard of the Holy Spirit - a state of affairs the Apostles promptly corrected by teaching and the

imposition of hands (Acts 19:1-6), which was equivalent to Chrismation in later apostolic practice. In the Epistle of the Apostle John we read: *"You have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things . . . The anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him"* (1 John 2:20-27). The term "anointing" indicates that by the end of the first century, at least in Asia Minor, this Mystery was performed by using a specially blessed oil.

God gives but does not compel. In the Sacrament of Chrismation, the gift of the Holy Spirit is conferred and sealed as an indelible mark upon the newly baptized Christian. That gift must be received, accepted, and allowed to **grow** in its recipient, and it grows in him as a **seed**. Someone may be offered the seed of a very precious plant. He may or may not joyfully accept it and continue to value it. If he does, we may presume that he will plant it, water and nurture it with the best care and food he can give it, and finally live with it in loving care. On the other hand, he may refuse the gift, or, having once accepted it, he may keep it hidden in a dark closet. Too often, perhaps, the seed of the Spirit suffers this last fate in those who receive it.

Baptism and Chrismation together constitute the manner of entry into the Kingdom, of initiation into the Mystery of the Church. They put an end to the state of separation between God and the individual Christian, instituting a new reality in a human life. Sadly, for most of us this new state of sinless freedom does not last long . . . We have soon fallen into denial in our actions of the new state of being with which we have been gifted. We are overcome by temptation and by the continuing sinful inclinations of our human nature - which, although cleansed and redeemed, is not altogether abolished. For this most dangerous of all human ailments, our Lord in His mercy provides a specific remedy - for He is the physician of our souls and bodies.

Confession: The Mystery of Purification

"Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19). "To bind" and "to loose" are opposite technical terms used by the Jewish rabbis with reference to the Law in matters of discipline/behavior and also of faith and opinion. We may safely assume that it is in that sense that our Lord uses them here. Jesus gave the authority of the Church to loose and to bind human consciences when He said to the Apostles: *"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"* (John 20:22-23). This authority is so general that it extends not only to the here-and-now life of the Church on earth but also is considered effective even in heaven.

Why is such authority needed and given? While Baptism washes away the stain of prebaptismal sins, it is unfortunately obvious that we continue even after Baptism to fall into sin and separation from God and His Body (*"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves . . ."* (1 John 1:8)). So then what do we do about sin *after* Baptism? The Church soon confronted this problem. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she found an answer in what is now known as the Mystery of Confession. This Sacrament is no late-date novelty; it is clearly intimated in the Epistle of James (5:13-18). While the Father alone actually forgives sins, on condition of our

acknowledgment and repentance, it is the function of the Church to declare that forgiveness to the sinner, to make it effective in his life, to recognize his repentance, to absolve (loose) him from the earthly bondage created by the separation from God. Such a state of separation may arise either from moral (behavioral) sin or from error or inadequacy of faith. Most often, the one is reflected in or even caused by the other: faith and life are intricately related.

There are those who would have us believe that after Baptism no sin is possible. As we have seen, the Apostle John replies to this outright heresy with the affirmation that such thought is self-deception (1 John 1:8). There are others who would say that sin is indeed possible but that if it occurs, all is lost and damnation is certain. Were this so, Jesus' words concerning binding and loosing would be meaningless, as would all His teaching concerning our loving, merciful and forgiving Father. There are others yet who say that sin is inevitable, that we all do it, and that since God is merciful it cannot be all that serious so long as we feel sorry for it.

To all these falsehoods (and to their disastrous consequences in guilt, separation, hopelessness, or perhaps worst of all, superficiality and complacency) Orthodox Christianity replies with the Sacrament of Confession. It affirms that we can and do sin after Baptism, that this failure is serious, even unto death, that separation from God and His Church does occur both through ungodly behavior and inadequacy of faith - and that God in His mercy has provided **a means of healing, of reconciliation, of restoration** to cleanness and oneness.

If we would be healed, reconciled, reunited to God and His Church, then we must first "*confess our sins*" (1 John 1:9) - the first step toward absolution. We come before a priest, who is the designated representative of the Church, and openly acknowledge our sinfulness. It is not sufficient that we simply admit our sinfulness to ourselves and in prayer to our Lord - the Apostle James directs us to "*confess your faults one to another*" (Jas. 5:16). Human experience tells us that it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to become adequately aware of the deepest realms of our misdeeds and guilt unless we **verbalize** them to another.

Neither is it adequate that we only generally admit that we are sinful. We must search our lives and our faith deeply, examine ourselves as might the most critical judge, and seek to discover in what ways we may have offended God and our brethren. It is for *healing* that we come to this Mystery. Our sinful behavior and inadequate faith are symptoms of our sickness. Insofar as we refuse to acknowledge those symptoms to ourselves, our brethren in the faith, and to Christ Himself, we impede our healing. In the Orthodox rite of Confession, the priests charge to the penitent before his self-examination concludes, "Take heed, therefore, lest having come to the Physician, thou depart unhealed."

Mere self-awareness, however, is insufficient. Were it adequate, the lives of many "self-aware" people would be dramatically different. In the Mystery, we are called upon to give up our sinfulness, to let go of it, in humility to allow it to be borne by our Lord.

We must submit it to Him, to the Church, that it may be taken from us, just as a cancerous growth might be taken from us. All too often, there are depths of our being in which we identify with that sinfulness, cling to it, and are quite unwilling to be parted from it - even as we consciously reject it.

Confession might well be termed the "sacrament of liberation" - from the bondage to sin which we impose on ourselves in the depths of our being. Consciously, I may identify my sinfulness; I may be "sorry" for my behavior - but I am unable to loose myself from its tentacles with which I ensnare myself and to dissolve the muck with which my being is contaminated. In this Mystery, our Physician provides a means of healing surgery which can free us from bondage to our false, sinful selves. He offers us the healing touch of His Hand in the ministration of His Body and in the hand of His priest laid upon the penitent's head as he at once prays for and declares forgiveness and absolution: "May our Lord Jesus Christ by the grace and bounties of His love toward mankind, forgive thee, my child, all thy transgressions. And I, an unworthy priest, through the power given unto me by Him, do forgive and absolve thee from all thy sins, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

The Mystery of Confession is the specific remedy for our sicknesses; it **restores** us to a state of health in which we can participate fully in the life of the Kingdom. So it is that it is part of the normal preparation for the reception of the Holy Communion which is the food and drink of that life in the Kingdom.

The Divine Liturgy: The Bread of Life

KNOWN BY MANY NAMES throughout Christian history - the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Mystery, the Mass, the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion - this is the heart and soul of the Christian sacramental life. It is here that we partake of bread and wine beyond all mere earthly food, the Body and Blood of Christ our Lord, the Food which is for salvation. It is here that the Body of Christ, the Church, truly finds its oneness, becoming one even as our Lord and the Father are one (cf. John 17:20-21). So central is this Mystery to the life of the Church that in the early centuries of Christian history only baptized believers in good standing were permitted to be present at its celebration.

It is no mere symbolic act which is celebrated in the Holy Mystery, but a **real presence** of and participation in the actual substance of our Lord. This is a Mystery far beyond human understanding, something which must be experienced to be accepted - but which, paradoxically, can only be experienced by those who accept it. It is one of the supreme ironies of history that the very "fundamentalists" who most adamantly insist upon the literal acceptance of every word of Scripture suddenly wax figurative when confronted with the teaching of our Lord on this matter.

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is meat indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He that eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, dwelleth in Me, and I in him" (John 6:53-56). Lest we suppose that in some way we misunderstand, let us be aware that "from that time many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him" (John 6:66) - they understood how radical and terrifying was the reality of which Jesus spoke! To leave no doubt as to His intent, on the eve of His Passion Jesus "took bread and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is My body which is given for you: do this in remembrance of Me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:19ff).

It is apparent that the infant Church at once understood that this was to be a frequently repeated action, for St. Paul writes: "*For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till He come*" (1 Cor. 11:26).

This Mystery is no "mere remembrance." The history of the western schisms from the Orthodox faith has seen two opposing errors (and numerous shades in between), both equally alien to the Scripture and the universal Tradition of the Church from the time of the Apostles. At the one extreme this profound Mystery is reduced to a technical "transubstantiation" effected by the proper person over the proper matter. This mentality has often shown itself in the effort to determine how *little* could be done (of the full Liturgy) and still have it "work." At the opposite extreme is the heretical teaching that nothing really occurs at all - that the event is a mere commemoration - although so it becomes for those who so teach and thus set themselves apart from the one Church. Equally alien to the Apostolic teaching is the doctrine that Christ becomes present in this act only in the mind of the believer and that in no way do bread and wine become His Body and Blood.

It is obvious that not just any bread and wine constitute the Body and Blood of Christ. There were certainly some ambiguities and even difficulties in the life of the early Church concerning the form and manner of the celebration of this Mystery (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-34), but it was not too long before there was general agreement as to the form in which the celebration was to take place and the manner of participation of the members of the Body. For the bread and wine brought to the celebration truly to become the Body and Blood, it was necessary that they be offered, that thanks be given for them- and for this thanksgiving to be quite specifically for That which this ordinary bread and wine was about to become. In our earliest documents concerning the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ is in every case preceded by a prayer of thanksgiving in which are present: the offering of the gifts of bread and wine; the specific mention of Jesus' institution of this Mystery at the Last Supper; a recitation of the acts of His life by which salvation came to us; an invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the Gifts and the assembled Body, for their transformation; and prayers of intercession for those present, those absent for due cause, the saints, and all the departed. This prayer is followed by the "*Our Father*."

In both ancient and modern practice, this prayer is preceded by the physical preparation of the bread and the chalice, by the singing of hymns, reading from Holy Scripture, and the proclamation of the Gospel. In Orthodox Tradition, the preparation of the Gifts is recognized as so important as to warrant a distinct service of its own, in which commemorations are made in detail concerning our Lord's Nativity, life, and sacrifice on Calvary; further, of all the saints, the hierarchs of the Church, and of the living and those who have died in the faith (for all are alive in Christ) for whom prayers are requested.

Just as it was soon apparent to the early Church that this Mystery was not to be celebrated in just any way, so also was it seen that not just anyone was to preside over it. This function was reserved to the lineal descendants by ordination of the Apostles; that is, by bishops and those ordained by them for this service - the presbyters/priests (the words are identical in their early Christian context).

Neither was participation in the Holy Mysteries permitted without preparation. To this day, Orthodox practice allows participation in the Mysteries only to those who are baptized and chrismated Orthodox Christians; are in unity of faith with the Apostolic Tradition, as expressed in Holy Scripture, Holy Tradition, and the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils of the Church, and the Symbol of Faith (the Creed); have prepared themselves for such participation as the Church provides; and are not canonically restrained from participation on account of some unabsolved grave sin or other impediment. The Church is concerned that her children not fall into receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord **unworthily** (1 Cor. 11:27). In this Mystery we are called upon to become one with Him and one another - truly to be united in the one Body of Christ.

Holy Orders: Sacramental Continuity

TO SPEAK OF "holy orders" in the Church is of necessity to speak of the Church herself. The Church is a living body, perpetuated through time and space. No living organic being is formless and orderless - and no more so is the Church. It is not within our scope here to provide a detailed history of the growth of order in the Church - a magnificent story of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the first century of the Church's life. Neither can we here enter into an extended apologetic, citing the extensive writings of the early Fathers of the Church concerning her order and the place of orders within the Body. But it is necessary that we attempt to sketch the form which became quite clear in the Church before the first hundred years of her life had passed, and the place within that order of sacramental ordination.

It was the Apostles' mission to go forth into the world to preach the Good News, to *'teach all nations... to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you'* (Matt. 28:20). As this mission was carried out, there came into being many local assemblies of the Church - the faithful in a given place who came together in oneness of spirit with the whole Church to worship and live. The Apostles did not leave these local congregations formless but rather appointed over them elders to lead, teach, serve and preside at the celebrations of the Mysteries - both "episcopos" (bishop) and "presbyteros" (elder/priest) were used to designate these persons. These successors to the Apostles, consecrated by them, clearly stood at the center of life of the local congregations as **living links** with the Apostles and the other congregations and thereby with Christ Himself. As they neared the ends of their lives and as **bishops** were needed in other newly established congregations, they in turn consecrated successors to carry on this living, vital tradition. "Tradition" means "that which is handed on."

The bishops, as they came to be called, were the teachers of the faith, the carriers of Tradition, and the living vessels of the Grace which enables the true celebration of the Holy Mysteries. Wherever true Orthodox Christianity continues to be lived and taught, they continue to fulfil the same function today. While our Lord alone is the head of His Body the Church, the bishop is the head - the center of life and direction - of each local congregation of the Church, usually called a diocese.

It soon became apparent that bishops alone were inadequate to the task of the celebration of the Mysteries and teaching the faith in all the places where these were needed, and there came into being a distinct second order, that of **priests**, extensions of the bishop, to do his work with and

for him. Priests were and are ordained by the bishop. They are given, by laying-on-of-hands, Grace to function as the bishops' right-hand-men, doing his work (with the exception of ordinations and some blessings reserved to the bishop) in places and at times when the bishop cannot personally serve.

The third principal order of the Church is that of **deacons** - those appointed to serve. The ordination of the first deacons is recorded in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Their function then and now is to attend to the material works of mercy of the Church and to assist the bishop or priest in the celebration of the Mysteries.

Each of the orders (bishops, priests, deacons) exists for service to the Church - to provide for the whole Church the Holy Mysteries and to serve as a bearer of the Holy Tradition. This function, which is performed on behalf of and as part of the whole people of God, the Church, is one which cannot be arrogantly claimed by an individual but rather must be bestowed upon him by the action of the Church. For any ordination, Orthodox Tradition clearly insists upon the common action of the bishop, who as the vessel of the sacramental Grace must actually perform the ordination, and of the people as a whole, who must either actually elect the candidate, or during the ordination itself ratify his selection by proclaiming him "Axios" - Worthy!

All ordinations have essentially the same form: the laying of the bishop's hands upon the candidate's head with an invocation of Divine Grace, the bestowal upon the candidate of the instruments of his office (both the particular vestments to be used and appropriate books), and the proclamation by the bishop, attending clergy, and the people present of his worthiness. The consecration of a bishop is initiated by his election by the whole hierarchy of his Church, continues with his declaration before his fellow bishops of the faith he proclaims, and is confirmed by all the consecrating bishops (at least two or three, as he is consecrated for the whole Church and not just for a single diocese), each of whom places one hand on the new bishop's head and the other on the open book of the Gospels.

The Holy Spirit is not subject to human constraint, but it is apparent to anyone who has experienced the life of Orthodox Christianity that this very Holy Spirit has provided an **orderly manner** for the continuation in their midst of the Grace of Pentecost for the people of God. This Grace in the Mysteries provides for true spiritual food and drink, forgiveness of sins, healing, and life for the members of the living Body of Christ. We deceive ourselves if we suppose that apart from this Grace, apart from membership in the Body of Christ, we are assured of life as followers of Christ Jesus and inheritors of the Kingdom of God.

Holy Matrimony: Icon of Christ and the Church

OF THE PRINCIPAL MYSTERIES, two are experienced only by individuals called into special states within the Body of Christ. The previous chapter discussed Holy Orders; the other is Holy Matrimony. It is sometimes erroneously assumed that all Christians are called to be married unless (if this is even considered) they perceive some specific call to monastic celibacy - the state of consecrated sexual abstinence. It may be more legitimately supposed that the contrary is true - for indeed we all enter life as virgins, and are expected by the Tradition of the Church to remain

in that state unless and until we are clearly called into marriage and that call is blessed. In general, the Church blesses two paths, both of which find their primary purpose in the struggle for salvation: marriage and monasticism or celibacy.

A legitimate choice for marriage does not come in the form of succumbing to the forces of our sensual nature. Rather, it is something to be perceived in **prayer** and **counsel**. It may well be accompanied by no overwhelming romantic feelings whatever - indeed, the presence of such feelings can only serve to cloud our ability to discern the genuineness of the call. It is precisely because of this emotional clouding that it is almost always best to seek and hear prayerfully the counsel of hearts wiser and more mature than our own.

The state of marriage is something so central to the life of the Church that her members are normally permitted to marry only other committed believers. It is equally apparent from the Apostolic teaching and the Tradition of the Church that in a Christian context "marriage" has not the same meaning as it does for the world. First and foremost, Christian marriage is an embodiment, an icon of the relationship between Christ and the Church. At the same time and in the same way, it is the simplest, most basic unit of the Church: that fundamental congregation in which *"two or three are gathered together in My name."* It exists, neither for the procreation of the human race nor for the well-being and good order of "society," but rather for the living of the life of the faith, for mutual support and encouragement in that life and the growth toward salvation - and for the nurturing of *Christian* children.

The bond formed by sacramental marriage is by nature timeless, one which admits of no conditions in either time or behavior. The Church knows of no such thing as a *contract* in which are specified the rights and obligations of each partner. The Christian *charter* for marriage is given us clearly in the Holy Scriptures and in the rite of marriage itself. The Scriptures are perhaps more exhaustive in this area than in any other area of human behavior. We are told at quite some length how husbands and wives are to behave toward one another and their children.

Despite the timeless character of marriage, Orthodox Tradition has long recognized that there are circumstances in which there is no hope whatever for a marriage to fulfil even a semblance of its true character. In such cases, the Church permits the victims of such "dead" marriages to remarry if, in the prayerful judgement of the bishop, the remarriage is justified and likely to be a truly Christian union.

The Church's celebration of marriage, of the creation of a new icon of her life in Christ, is lavish. A complete description of the service is out of place here, but let us at least note that the rites prescribed for this celebration are amongst the most elaborate of the Church's festivities. The union of man and woman is celebrated with the placing of rings on both, the crowning of both, and the sharing of a cup of blessed wine.

The bestowal of the Church's blessing upon a marriage, with the use of the material tokens mentioned above, is the function of the priest. The full meaning of this Mystery suggests that both parties to the marriage are truly "members of Christ." Nevertheless the Church has permitted the celebration of marriages of Orthodox Christians with non-Orthodox Christians.

Like any of the Mysteries, Christian marriage is more than just a celebration of something which already exists. It is also the **creation** of something - the imparting to the couple of that Grace which transforms them from a couple into **husband-and-wife**, into the image and reflection of the love between our Lord and His Church. The two individual lives are bound together *in the Church* as part of the Body of Christ. The two are no longer two, but **one**, created a single member of the Body of our Lord, to live a unified life in witness to the oneness to which we are all called in Him.

Holy Unction: Divine Healing

BODILY SICKNESS, THE RESULT of sinfulness, is inextricably intertwined in human life. Part of the mission of the Apostles and of the Church is the liberation of the children of the Kingdom from the bondage to sickness, sin, and death which is a consequence of the Fall. So it was that the Apostles *"went out, and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them"* (Mark 6:12-13). This mission of healing was clearly, understood by the Apostles, as the Epistle of James witnesses: *"Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the Church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him"* (Jas. 5:14-15).

The Church continues this mission of healing in the Mystery of Holy Unction - so called from the anointing with blessed oil. In it, our Lord, our Physician and Healer, ministers to the *whole* person healing, forgiving, and purifying. While the effects of topical medicine, the technological treatment of some acute manifestation of human disease, may in some cases be impressive, such treatment *never* ministers to the real problem - to the total sickness of the patient, which arises from his state of fallenness and separation from his Creator. Let this not be misunderstood: Holy Scripture teaches quite clearly that there is no necessary connection between a specific sin and a specific illness; but with equal clarity it teaches that our subjection to sickness arises from our fallen state and our sinfulness *as a race*. For true healing to occur, it is necessary that the "treatment" respond to the total condition of the sick man, a condition which originates and is centered in his spiritual disease. If we rely on human wisdom for our well being, we can reasonably expect simply to go from one sickness to the next - for what human wisdom perceives as sickness is merely the symptomatic manifestation of the real problem. But if we turn to our Lord for healing, throwing ourselves upon His mercy and submitting ourselves in faith to His Body, we can be quite confident that, even if the superficial manifestations of our disease continue, the *real* problem is being treated and that its outcome in our lives will be in accordance with His will and purpose.

This should not be construed as a rejection of medical intervention and treatment. But such treatment is not complete unless it is sought in the context of prayerful submission of ourselves to the ministrations of the Holy Spirit. In His love for His people, our Lord has provided in the Church the means for true, total healing. This healing begins at the heart of the problem, in the core of our being; habitual, chronic symptoms may linger on even after healing has begun, annoying and disheartening us in the weakness of our faith.

In obedience to the example and direction of the Apostles, the Church continues to respond to illness with the Mystery of Holy Unction. While Holy Unction may be administered for any serious illness, and as many times as needed for an individual, usually it is given only once for any one illness. Our first response to awareness of our sickness should be to turn to the Body of Christ for healing, seeking the *"prayer of faith"* which will *"save the sick man."* For Orthodox Christians, the Mystery of Unction is the obvious response. We must be wary of a counterfeit form of 'spiritual healing' which arises from an immature (or even demonic) spirituality separated from the one Body of Christ. Spectacular healings of superficial symptoms of the inner sickness of man may arise in this context, with the result that those so "healed," like so many of the patients of human medicine, search no further and remain victims of their true inner sickness.

The Church does not take this Mystery lightly. In its full form it should be performed by seven priests, but it may be performed by only several or by just one priest. Seven selections from the Epistles and seven from the Gospels are read, accompanied by seven lengthy prayers for healing, forgiveness and restoration of the sick person. Seven times he is anointed with blessed oil mixed with wine. At the conclusion of the anointings, a prayer for the healing and forgiveness of the supplicant is said while the Gospel-book is laid upon his head in blessing. Throughout the rite, there are sung Psalms and hymns which speak of our own fallen state, our weakness and need for the Lord's mercy - and of our assurance that Grace is poured out upon us by our loving God.

This ministration of the Church is a source not of mere bodily healing. To wish and seek mere physical well being is to declare ourselves children of this world. It is a corruption of our Christian understanding to see in our sickness divine punishment for our sinfulness - but its presence in our lives is allowed that we may become more deeply aware of our true inner sickness/sinfulness and more readily seek genuine restoration to oneness with our Lord and Creator.

A World of Mysteries

IT WOULD BE QUITE MISLEADING to leave this discussion of the sacramental life at this point, giving the impression, despite the disclaimer in the first chapter, that there are "seven sacraments." On the other hand, it is quite impossible adequately to explore the multitudes of sacramental acts that so deeply infuse the lives of devoted Orthodox Christians. We must content ourselves with a brief indication and description of only a few of these.

We earlier defined "sacrament" as something real that does something that makes a material change in the created order. Sacraments are the continuing, operative form of the act of Redemption, in which spiritual and material reality are alike and together brought into that communion which in its fulfillment is the Kingdom of God. A multitude of actions and created objects participate in this creative process.

Perhaps most obvious are the manifold blessings bestowed by the Church upon the Creation in which she exists. While nearly any dimension of this Creation may be, and sometimes is, blessed, perhaps the most conspicuous is the **blessing of water**. Done in its most solemn form on the feast of Theophany (January 6/19, also known by the name Epiphany), the blessing of water is also done in a lesser form at any Baptism, on August 1/14th, and at numerous other times throughout the year. In it, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the waters is invoked in a manner

directly analogous to His invocation in the Divine Liturgy. By it, the water so blessed is transformed from mere created water into a vessel of the "*rivers of divine Grace*" flowing throughout Creation. This water blessed at the Theophany celebration is sprinkled upon the faithful and drunk by them. It is taken for use in the blessing of homes and other objects. This Blessed water is kept in the church and many Orthodox homes throughout the year. Especially in times of adversity or sickness it is sprinkled upon the faithful and/or taken as a drink; in many homes the custom is to partake of it daily, often together with a particle of blessed bread (not the consecrated Body and Blood of the Lord) from the Divine Liturgy. Further, its use is prescribed in the blessing of various objects.

The **blessed bread** is the remainder of the loaves offered at the Divine Liturgy, "prospora," from which the particles to be consecrated as the Body of our Lord Jesus were taken. These portions of bread are blessed simply by their having been brought into the altar and offered. They are thereby transformed into something which is no longer just ordinary bread, but neither are they the Body of Christ. They are treated with great respect and partaken of after the Liturgy and at other times "instead of the Gifts" - "antidoron," as they are known.

The **consecration** of a **temple** (church) is an unusually elaborate blessing. A building is not just set apart for worship or dedicated in the sense that one might dedicate a building for the purposes of learning or living, but it is actually made what it was not before. It is no longer "just a building" but becomes a focal point, a *locus*, of the divine presence and Grace. Its use for any purpose other than that of worship becomes permanently and absolutely inappropriate. It cannot be abandoned to secular purposes or "deconsecrated."

As we indicated earlier, the Holy Scriptures themselves constitute a Mystery. Above all else is this true of the **Gospels**: the book containing them is always enshrined upon the holy table (the altar) of an Orthodox temple, and usually elaborately bound and decorated. Even more than the Book itself or the written text which it contains, the *proclamation* of the word of God is a sacramental act - it has, of itself, power to change those who in faith receive it. The book itself is placed upon the head of one to be blessed in the Mystery of Holy Unction, in the consecration of bishops, and, less formally, in blessing upon those who celebrate their namesdays or some other special occasion.

Just as the word of God has power in and of itself, so also does a **name**. In the life of a Christian child, the first event after his birth is his reception of a name. For Orthodox Christians, this act is placed firmly in the context of the Church. The name is given at the door of the temple, and the child brought at once into its midst, there to be dedicated to his Creator. The name is normally that of some predecessor in the faith, one of the saints, who thereby becomes a special protector and guide for the child. Many are the instances in which this patronage has had some readily discernible effect on the life of a child.

An Orthodox Christian who receives and heeds a call to the **monastic life** is given a new name upon entering into that state. By the blessing bestowed upon him and the vows he takes upon himself, he is made what he was not before. He takes upon himself and is given a new life, a life dedicated entirely to the service of his Lord. He renounces all attachments to the things of this

world: possessions, his own will and desire, and the comforts and joys and trials of marriage and family. In his profession, he is given the Grace necessary to this new state.

The final event in every Christian's life in this world is his **burial**. The sacramental character of burial is perhaps less obvious than is that of some other acts, but again there is a conferral of Grace, even as the Christian departs from this world. It is not merely in some vague sort of "immortality of the soul" that we as Christians believe but in the resurrection of the *whole* person. In keeping with this belief, the *whole* person is attended by the prayers and rites of Christian burial.

Even as the body is lovingly cared for in burial, so also in our lives as Christians our worship is a worship involving the whole person. We do not merely think or feel our faith but live it out continually in the action of our bodies. Such actions as the continual signing of ourselves with the Cross, reverences, and prostrations are not mere dramatic expressions of our faith. They are causative acts that invoke the Divine Grace upon us and our lives.

Further, there are the many lesser blessings bestowed upon **persons** and **objects**. Most obvious of these is the blessing of food and drink: the recognition that it is God's gift to us, its dedication to His purposes, and the calling down of His Grace upon it that it may be for our health and salvation. Beyond this, we bless houses, crops, animals, water sources - indeed, any object which is part of our life here on earth. Persons may be blessed in preparation for a special task or for a journey. Indeed, we should bless ourselves before beginning any work.

Orthodox Christians customarily receive a priest's or bishop's blessing upon meeting and parting; in many Orthodox homes children receive a blessing with the sign of the Cross from the head of the household upon rising and before retiring, as well as at other times of the day. Such blessings partake of the nature of Mystery and Sacrament, for they are real and effective means of furthering our "spiritual armor."

The **icon** as a form of the infusion of Grace into our lives forces us to extend our definition of Sacrament. Our Lord has not left us blind, with no means of perceiving anything of the true reality which lies behind this transient world. Icons - sacred depictions - provide us with windows through which we may perceive something of that reality. The sacramentality of icons becomes apparent if we recognize that an Icon is to an ordinary picture as is the Body and Blood of Christ as we perceive and receive It in the Holy Liturgy to ordinary bread and wine.

This brief summary by no means exhausts the specific sacramental acts identifiable in Christian life. It may, however, enable us to perceive more clearly the call to truly sacramental living that is our vocation and birthright as children of God.

Sacramental Living

WE ARE CALLED TO LIVE in such a way as to **make holy** ourselves and the whole of Creation. This is the true meaning of sacramental living - and of the word itself. Our whole life and experience is to be given up to become one with and a part of the Mystery by which God became man. The reduction of our concept of "Sacrament" to an innumerable list of Sacraments -

whether two, seven, or fifty -makes of it a mere technology. Rather, a Sacrament is the means and form for the total **transformation** of our lives: the creation and living of a Christ-like style of life.

It is Sacraments - the infusion of Grace into the Creation in definite, specific forms - that distinguish a truly Christian life from a merely "good life." The world has known many masters and teachers of good, healthy, caring living. It has known only one God-become-man. Our call is to far more than simple *good living*; it is to a total transformation of reality, including our own lives. In that transformation, accomplished by the systematic sacramentalization of all Creation, we accomplish our true mission as christi - persons anointed and consecrated to oneness with Christ Himself

As we have insisted before, the Grace which is poured out upon us and the world cannot be manipulated, used as if it were magic. As Christians we are called to love one another and the whole of our Lord's Creation. If that love is not present in our lives - and it is one of the purposes of the Mysteries to nurture its growth - life itself becomes empty, hollow, a "tinkling cymbal" - and in that emptiness, the sacramental living to which we are called becomes a pointless series of magical manipulations.

An equally serious trap awaits us if we arrogantly suppose that we are capable of loving out of our own "goodness." That is, apart from the food, drink, breath, and life our Lord has prepared for us in the Mysteries entrusted to His Body. Without this support, guidance, and nourishment, all our well-intentioned attempts at love are almost certain to fall into mere worldly affection and attraction. Love in its Christian sense is a demanding reality, not a comfortable and cozy refuge. It requires strength, valor, sacrificial self-abnegation. Only the best of diets, the most invigorating of environments, and the most rigorous training can provide the strength essential to genuine Christian loving. It is precisely this need which sacramental living and that alone can meet.

It is, nevertheless, of course true that under extraordinary circumstances - e.g., in concentration camps, at times of natural and man-made catastrophes, etc.- the ordinary sacramental means of Grace may be inaccessible. Under such circumstances the Holy Spirit provides that which man cannot, and great heights of Christian love may be manifest under the most adverse conditions.

We have previously insisted upon some of the traps from which a correct understanding of the Holy Mysteries protects us: a vague niceness, a magical manipulation of reality, and a pointless diffusion of energy into a weak and senseless pantheism. An equally serious trap - and one into which human beings have repeatedly fallen in their attempts to understand reality - is that of dualism. In its most extreme form, this is the teaching that our present condition is the work of two different creators, one good and one evil, one as the Creator of the spiritual good and the other as that of the material evil.

The anti-Christianity of this blatant form of dualism is self-evident, but various less drastic forms have repeatedly insinuated themselves into *Christian* life and teaching. The Sacramental life, in its insistence upon the goodness and the possibility of divinization of Creation, of its essential role in our growth and life in Christ, guards against such a perversion of the Gospel. If mere

bread and wine are able to become the Body and Blood of our Lord, mere oil the vessel of His Grace poured out upon us - the list could go on endlessly - then it is obvious that this matter within which we live and of which we are made is good. It is not only good, it is in some sense capable of becoming of God while yet remaining matter. No higher calling or possibility can exist.

In His Divine humility, our Lord Jesus by His Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection restored Creation to its state of original Paradise - even in some sense transcending that of the first days of Creation. But since this is a world of process and change, even though that restoration and transcendence was accomplished in the Incarnation of our Lord, it must yet be worked out and completed in the living history of the human race and of the Church - in the order of "becoming." It is the function of the continuing, living sacramental Body of Christ to carry out this mission.

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