“Missing the Forest for the Trees”? – The Centrality of the Paschal Mystery

Martin Stuflesser

Some time ago I was invited to an evening in a parish and was asked to give some suggestions for the celebration of the Eucharist following the liturgical reforms of Vatican II. As an introductory quotation I chose the Office hymn for the feast of Corpus Christi, “Pange lingua,” by Thomas Aquinas. In the first stanza we read:

Sing, my tongue, the Saviour’s glory,
Of His flesh the mystery sing;
Of the blood all price exceeding,
Shed by our immortal King.¹

Before I was able to begin my lecture an elderly woman vigorously raised her hand and asked me what this talk of mysteries was all about. The word “mystery” is mentioned frequently in the liturgy, and she wanted to know which mystery is actually being referred to in the celebration of the liturgy. During a moment of astonished silence I thought of my liturgy teacher, Klemens Richter, who in his lectures never ceased explaining the importance of understanding the word “mystery” in Christian worship. The question raised by the elderly woman touches a highly significant issue, and leads right to the center of our faith. Finally it is all about the hope for which we as baptized Christians must render an account (1 Pet 3:5), the “mysterium corporis gloriosi” mentioned in “Pange Lingua” which we celebrate in the liturgy. What does saying that we are celebrating a mystery in the liturgy mean? What is that mystery about? How is it celebrated?

The Liturgy as Remembrance of the Paschal Mystery

Reminiscere miserationum tuarum, Domine, et famulos tuos aeterna protectione sanctifica, pro quibus Christus, Filius tuus, per suum cruorem instituit paschale mysterium. Qui vivit et regnat in saecula saeculorum. Amen.²

Like a rousing thunderbolt this prayer introduces the liturgy of Christ’s suffering and dying on Good Friday. God, the Almighty, is asked to remember his deeds of salvation that he has worked for his people in the past. The most important deed, as expressed in this prayer, is the paschal mystery that his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, introduced by his suffering, his death, and his resurrection: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”³

The question of how the liturgy celebrates Christ’s mystery can be answered from this prayer alone. Two key phrases are particularly noteworthy:

• The liturgy is a memorial: “Reminiscere…”
• The contents of this memorial celebration are expressed by the words “paschale mysterium” – ”paschal mystery.”

To answer the questions posed above we must take a closer look at what is happening in the so-called anamnesis that comprises the first section of the quoted prayer.⁴ The liturgist Hans
Bernhard Meyer explains anamnesis in the liturgical prayer as follows: “Anamnesis is the simultaneity of the celebration of God’s deeds of salvation as they have happened in the past and as they are promised in the future. This simultaneity is effected by the liturgical celebration itself, in which the celebrating participate and in which they encounter the personal foundation of the celebration which is the triune God and the glorified Lord.”

Therefore anamnesis – the celebration of the memorial – does not imply that we ourselves remember something, but rather that through anamnesis, God’s deeds of salvation become present in the liturgical celebration. What is more – as Meyer points out – we are concurrent to these deeds.

Let me clarify this with an example: The anamnesis of God’s deeds of salvation is more than a pious memory. Think of the Jewish Passover. Even now, in Jewish families, the youngest child asks the housefather the essential question: How is this night different from all other nights?

The housefather responds: Once we were slaves, now we are free – or, the children of freedom! The liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt is recounted as a present event. The anamnesis of this deed is not the report of something past but of God’s actions occurring here and now, even though the Israelites were delivered from the pharaoh three thousand years ago. Hans Bernhard Meyer would say that the tradition of the Passover meal is temporally concurrent with the exodus and participates in the very same freedom given by God’s liberating deeds. Based on this definition of anamnesis, it becomes possible to describe the presence of Christ’s sacrifice in the eucharistic celebration with the words of the prayer over the gifts on Holy Thursday:

Lord, make us worthy to celebrate these mysteries. Each time we offer this memorial sacrifice the work of our redemption is accomplished. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the Lord. Amen.

This anamnesis/memorial is directed towards God the Father. Celebration of the memorial means confronting God with his own deeds of salvation. We do not do this because God is forgetful, but rather to “remind” God of his deeds since trusting in God’s mercy is our only chance for salvation. This mirrors the basic structure of Jewish-Christian prayer, which is exemplified in the following diagram:

![Diagram of Jewish-Christian prayer structure]

Those who pray stand in God’s presence. They praise God here and now. Then they ponder God’s past deeds of salvation. They offer God thanksgiving for his actions in the past, eventually sending a prayer to God, trusting in God’s faithfulness and promises for the future. The opening prayer of Good Friday’s liturgy expresses this in a very condensed form:

“Reminiscere miserationum tuarum, Domine…”
What is the Paschal Mystery?

In attempting to explain the term “paschal mystery” we come across a problem of translation. “Mystery,” as it is defined by the dictionary, is “something that is difficult or impossible to explain,” or the equally opaque “condition or quality of being secret.” Nowadays “mystery” evokes images of gothic novels, Harry Potter, and fantasy stories. Reiner Kaczynski remarks: “The word mystery brings us the indefinite and mysterious, unrecognizable and inexplicable, the unimaginable and even the sinister.” In the New Testament the Greek word ἀντιλήπση means something recognizable (in faith) and (theologically) intelligible. For example, Paul points out in the letter to the Romans (16:25-27):

Now to him who can strengthen you, according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages, but now manifested through the prophetic writings and, according to the command of the eternal God, made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith, to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ be glory forever and ever. Amen.

According to Paul “mystery” does not mean something that is and should stay hidden or secluded but something that will be revealed. This revelation occurs throughout all of salvation history. “Mystery” means God’s plan of salvation, both as a whole and in the individual phases of its realization. For us as Christians the key moments of God’s salvific deeds on behalf of his people are the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now that we are aware of the difficulties and limits of translating ἀντιλήπση we will turn to a definition of the mystery that we celebrate in the liturgy. The Second Vatican Council states that the celebration of Christian liturgy is always and everywhere a celebration of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. The Council fathers explain the meaning of “paschal mystery” as follows:

SC 5: The wonderful works of God … were … a prelude to the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God. He achieved His task principally by the paschal mystery of His blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and the glorious ascension, whereby “dying, he destroyed our death and, rising, he restored our life.”

The paschal mystery, as Vatican II points out, is the (paschal) deeds of salvation that God performed in his son, Jesus Christ. The Council states that we commit this act of God for our salvation in every form of liturgical celebration. For the Eucharist, this means:

• it is always a celebration of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection;
• it is always a memorial of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross;
• the gathered assembly participates in his sacrifice;
• the church offers praise and thanksgiving;
• it is the participation in Jesus’ fate; sharing his body and blood in communion.

Let us consider the importance of the understanding of Christian liturgy as the celebration of the paschal mystery in one rather difficult example: the notion of the Eucharist as a “sacrifice” as one possible model for interpreting its celebration. This model is derived from the understanding of Jesus’ death on the cross as the “offering of the body of Jesus Christ once
[and] for all” (Heb 10:10). This biblical understanding of Jesus’ death as a sacrifice “once [and] for all” is correct and appropriate. Since we celebrate Jesus’ death in every Mass, we can also say that we celebrate his “sacrifice” in every Mass. It is imperative, however, to recognize that we do not sacrifice Jesus again and again on the altar at every Eucharist. This would be contradictory to the notion in Hebrews 10:10 that his sacrifice, which was “once [and] for all,” was sufficient.

Nevertheless, we have to acknowledge that Jesus offered himself. “Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God” (Eph. 5:2). To quote John Baldovin, S.J.: We are “speaking here of free self-sacrifice. The sacrifice that Christ made once and for all on the cross and which is celebrated in the Mass arose from his freedom. The same needs to be true of us... Sacrifice is no longer the offering of animals or food and drink, but the offering of oneself.”11 As Saint Paul writes in his letter to the Romans (12:1): “I urge you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.” This self-offering of Christ and of ourselves is celebrated in the Memorial of the Eucharist, as Saint John Chrysostom points out in his Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews: “It is not another sacrifice, as the High Priest, but we offer always the same, or rather we perform a remembrance [i.e., a memorial] of a Sacrifice.”12 The Lima document on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry, whose twenty-fifth anniversary we celebrated last year, captures the above idea of the Eucharist as sacrifice with the title “The Eucharist as Anamnesis or Memorial of Christ”: “The Eucharist is the memorial of the crucified and risen Christ, i.e. the living and effective sign of his sacrifice, accomplished once and for all on the cross and still operative on behalf of all humankind.”13

Eucharist as sacrifice is an integral part of the paschal mystery, yet it does not exhaust the totality of this mystery for this also includes:

- Jesus’ incarnation;
- his life and his ministry;
- his passion, his death and resurrection;
- his second coming.

To quote again from the Lima document: “The eucharist is the sacrament of the unique sacrifice of Christ, who ever lives to make intercession for us. It is the memorial of all that God has done for the salvation of the world.” In other words, Christian liturgy celebrates “all that God has done for the salvation of the world.” Christian liturgy celebrates the paschal mystery. At this point, the Second Vatican Council regains the broad and comprehensive understanding of the biblical notion of muste_rian that is laid out in the New Testament. As a gathered community we therefore proclaim the “mystery of faith” at a very crucial point during the Mass, affirming that: “Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life, Lord Jesus come in glory!”14 As Klemens Richter explains, “Through Christ God’s mystery becomes visible for us. It is continued in the gathering of the worshipping community that itself becomes this mystery, and at the same time celebrates this mystery in liturgical symbols, in word and sacrament.”15

What is the relationship between the celebration of liturgy here and now and God’s concrete deeds of salvation history as they are related to us in Scripture? As we have mentioned, the celebration of liturgy is always a celebration of a memorial of God’s deeds of salvation in his son Jesus Christ.16 Liturgy is the continuation of Christ’s priestly work, and this sacerdotal ministry
belongs to all the baptized who are integrated through baptism into the body of Christ. Consequently all the baptized are agents of liturgy. This is summarized by Pope Leo the Great’s words: “All that has been visible in our Savior Jesus Christ is now translated into the mysteries of the liturgy.” Or, as Pope Benedict XVI points out in the post-synodal exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis: “The Eucharist should be experienced as a mystery of faith. Our faith and the eucharistic liturgy both have their source in the same event: Christ’s gift of himself in the Paschal Mystery.”

Evaluating Reform of the Liturgy in Vatican II

During the last forty-five years Vatican II and its liturgical reforms have been accused of having destroyed the “mystery” of the liturgy – whatever “mystery” means in this context. Some have even suggested that only the reintroduction of pre-Vatican II liturgical rites can return the “mystery” to our liturgy. This point of view has been nourished by the motu proprio Summorum Pontificum that Pope Benedict XVI published on 7 July 2007. In this apostolic letter he allows a more frequent usage of the pre-Vatican II rite as “an extraordinary expression” of the one Roman Rite (article 1). It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at this “liturgy war.” If we want to evaluate the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, we first must understand what the Council’s intention was. Were the bishops gathered in Rome during the Council really “raiders of the mystery”? Did they destroy a wonderful pre-Vatican II liturgy? Did they, assisted by some left wing liturgists, replace this “eternal” rite of the Roman Church by a post-Vatican II rite that has lost its identity, its soul, and its “mystery”? Recall that our perception of a liturgy as “mysterious” does not automatically mean that we are celebrating the paschal mystery. The celebration of the paschal mystery is crucial for a theological understanding of Christian liturgy in general. The intention of the Council is expressed clearly in article 21 of Sacrosanctum Concilium:

In order that the Christian people may more certainly derive an abundance of graces from the sacred liturgy, holy Mother Church desires to undertake with great care a general restoration of the liturgy itself. For the liturgy is made up of immutable elements divinely instituted, and of elements subject to change. These not only may but ought to be changed with the passage of time if they have suffered from the intrusion of anything out of harmony with the inner nature of the liturgy or have become unsuited to it.

This article demonstrates that the intention of Vatican II was not iconoclastic. The Council makes a clear distinction between those elements of the liturgy that are changeable and those that are not. The theological rationale for believing that certain elements are immutable is quite clear: they are “divinely instituted.” Other elements not only can be changed but they even ought to be changed for the simple reason that they are “out of harmony” or “unsuited” to the inner nature of the liturgy. The main reason for the Council’s decision to reform the liturgy was to make clear which elements of our liturgy are “divinely instituted” and which are changeable, out of harmony, and therefore have to be modified.

According to the Jesuit liturgist Hans Bernhard Meyer, we can categorize the difference between unchangeable and changeable elements with the terms Sinngestalt and Feiergestalt, which I translate – following Gregory Dix – as “shape of the meaning” and “shape of the celebration”
respectively. The “shape of the meaning” of Christian liturgy has remained the same throughout the centuries: the celebration of the paschal mystery. Liturgy has always been:

- a memorial of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection;
- the great thanksgiving for God’s deeds of salvation;
- the praise of God’s glory;
- the prayer of the gathered community.

But the “shape of the celebration” has changed throughout the centuries. When we look back in time, we see that Christians have always celebrated this “shape of the meaning” in different forms or ways. Historical research informs us that there was never an original “shape of the celebration” of the liturgy during the early Christian era. Rather, the opposite is true: even the New Testament testifies to a great diversity in the concrete forms of liturgical celebration. Nevertheless, despite all these diversities the “shape of the meaning” always remained the same. The magisterium has always needed to reform the liturgy (i.e. the shape of the celebration) to make the shape of the meaning clearer and to eliminate all forms of intrusion (Sacrosanctum Concilium 21). The history of liturgy is a history of the reform of liturgy. Even the pre-Vatican II rite is not the original Tridentine Rite since this rite was reformed several times after its initial publication in 1570, the last time in 1962 by Pope John XXIII. Neither is the Roman Rite we celebrate today completely new; in fact, it is only a reformed version of the Tridentine Rite. That said, when we are struggling today with the question of how liturgy should be celebrated, we should rest assured that we need neither “create” liturgy, nor even “prepare” liturgy. Christian liturgy is always already prepared because it comes with a pre-established shape of meaning. Nevertheless, we should be aware that the shape of the celebration needs specific forms of actualization and enculturation. If we have lost the mystery in our liturgy, then we must teach ourselves first and foremost what the mystery is that we are celebrating. In other words, we have to be aware of the meaning before we can shape the form of its ritual actualization. Therefore, I doubt that the re-introduction of the Tridentine Rite will necessarily and automatically bring back the sense of paschal mystery into our liturgical celebrations.

The shape of the meaning, which is celebrated by all the baptized, has never changed throughout the centuries, but different shapes of the celebration make the participation of all more or less challenging. That the pre-Vatican II rite has a different focus is clear from the very first words of the pre-Vatican II Missal, “Sacerdos missam celebraturus” (The priest who is going to celebrate Mass), compared with those of the post-Vatican II Missal from 1970, “Populo congregato” (After the people have gathered). Although different ecclesiologies may be operative here, the shape of the meaning is still the same.

The ability of a Mass to commemorate the paschal mystery is not completely dependent upon its degree of festivity. The transformative power of the liturgy is not solely contingent upon an increased number of candles, the use of incense, wearing highly festive vestments, and so on. These elements in the shape of celebration have the potential both of hiding the shape of the meaning and making it more difficult to understand, or of making it more transparent and intelligible, depending on the circumstances and contexts. This means that each period and each culture should search for a shape of the celebration that is suitable for making the shape of the meaning more lucid in new (or sometimes old) ways. The spirit of the late 1960s and early 1970s is the spirit of a specific time. Those years expressed the shape of the celebration by concentrating on the central elements of the liturgy – which we still appreciate today – and
through an emphasis on simplification, or even over-simplification – which is perhaps less appreciated today.

Time has moved on. It is our obligation to search for an appropriate shape of celebration for our own situation. If a younger, different generation today wants to express the shape of the meaning of Christian liturgy with more “smells and bells,” then there is no reason why they shouldn’t be allowed to do so, since they too are responsible – i.e., baptized and confirmed – Christians. They will then find a shape of the celebration that is suitably inculturated and more adequate for their own purposes. Once again: to celebrate the paschal mystery in more solemn ways does not necessitate the reintroduction of any pre-Vatican II rites but rather calls for a deeper understanding of the Council’s liturgical theology and subsequent magisterial teaching.

If we focus on the paschal mystery as the center of Christian liturgy, and if we celebrate and proclaim the meaning of this paschal mystery, then, in celebrating the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection we can avoid the “liturgy wars.” These controversies are neither helpful nor ultimately fruitful, but distract us from focusing on the paschal mystery, and absorb time and energy that could be spent on more important debates. If we focus on the true center of the liturgy, which is the common ground of the paschal mystery, we can stop accusing one another of not being faithful or orthodox enough in our writings, and, more fundamentally, in our beliefs. Before we become lost in translation(s) we should make sure that we know what our liturgy is really all about and what it is that our church professes in its faith – a faith that is both expressed in and nourished by the celebration of the paschal mystery in the liturgy.

Perspective: Liturgy as Mystagogy

Obviously, the conviction of Vatican II that the liturgy is the celebration of the paschal mystery has both theological and practical consequences. On the one hand, we can respond to those individuals who criticize Vatican II’s reform of the liturgy for having destroyed “the mystery.” On the basis of the above discussion, we can answer “No!” and say that the Second Vatican Council has in fact rediscovered the mystery!20 The “mystery” referred to by the critics, as far as I can tell, has nothing truly mysterious about it. In contrast to this deficient notion of “mystery” stands the more authentic notion of mystery as found in Scripture and in the tradition of the early church: God’s acts of salvation in and through Jesus Christ. These actions of God in and through God’s Son are what we celebrate in the liturgy: the paschal mystery as related by the opening prayer of Good Friday.

On the other hand, the teaching of liturgy becomes a kind of mystagogy: an introduction to the celebration of the mystery.21 In accordance with this understanding of paschal mystery, worship itself should be celebrated mystagogically.22 Pope John Paul II proclaims in his final letter to priests of 2005:

− Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, the remembrance of Christ in his Paschal Mystery leads to the desire for a full and definitive encounter with Him. We live in expectation of his coming!23

Therefore, as Pope Benedict XVI writes in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation Sacramentum
Caritatis: “Each Christian community is called to be a place where people can be taught about the mysteries celebrated in faith.”

Learning about liturgy typically entails the search for a deeper understanding of the paschal mystery in order to encounter more fully the real mystery of God’s presence among his people, which is celebrated in the liturgy.

ENDNOTES


2. Unfortunately the English translation differs substantially from the original Latin text, and almost misses the point: “Lord, by shedding his blood for us, your son, Jesus Christ, established the paschal mystery. In your goodness make us holy and watch over us always. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.” The crucial aspect, that the liturgical celebration is characterized as a memorial by the very first word spoken into the silence, is completely missing in the English text. The German version is more literal: “Gedenke, Herr, der großen Taten, die dein Erbarmen gewirkt hat. Schütze und heilige deine Diener, für die dein Sohn Jesus Christus sein Blut vergossen und das östliche Geheimnis eingesetzt hat, der mit dir lebt und herrscht in aller Ewigkeit. Amen.”


6. In this case, the German translation is more literal as well: “Herr, gib, dass wir das Geheimnis des Altares ehrfurchtig feiern; denn sooft wir die Gedächtnisfeier dieses Opfers begehen, vollzieht sich an uns das Werk der Erlösung.” The Latin text is the basis of article 2 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II, Sacrosanctum Concilium, but the original reading, “exseritur” (exert, put forth, reveal, show) is toned down to “exercetur” (exercise, practice, pray, work at). See Hans Bernhard Meyer, Eucharistie, Gottesdienst der Kirche,
7. Compare the German understanding: “etwas, was nicht erkennbar und nicht erklárbar ist,” in *Wahrig Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1968) 1428.


16. See *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14, 26-29. Eph. 5:1-2: “So be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma…” St. John Chrysostum: *Homily* 17.6, in the Oxford translation: “That we offer now also, which was then offered, which cannot be exhausted. This is done in remembrance of what was then done. For (saith He) do this in remembrance of Me (Luke 22:19). It is not another sacrifice, as the High Priest, but we offer always the same, or rather we perform a remembrance of a Sacrifice.”

17. *Sermo* 74.2 (PL 54:398).

18. *Sacramentum Caritatis* 34.


20. The young Joseph Ratzinger points out that the “Mysterientheologie” that was developed by the German Benedictine Odo Casel was the most fruitful theological idea (fruchtbarste theologischen Idee) of the twentieth century in its influence on Vatican II. See Die sakramentale Begründung christlicher Existenz (Meitingen/Freising: Kyrios Verlag, 1966) 5.

21. Given the fact that liturgists learn about the different liturgical forms during their theological studies, this typically entails a search for a deeper understanding of the paschal mystery in order to encounter more fully the real mystery of God’s presence among his people which is celebrated in liturgy. See “Zu einem mystagogischen Ansatz in der Liturgiewissenschaft die Ausführungen,” in Wo zwei oder drei versammelt sind. Was ist Liturgie? ed. Martin Stuflesser and Stephan Winter, Grundkurs Liturgie 1 (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2004) 8.


24. Sacramentum Caritatis, 64.

25. See Stuflesser and Winter, Wo zwei oder drei versammelt sind, 8.

Martin Stuflesser studied theology at the theological faculties in Mainz and Muenester (Germany), and holds a doctorate in theology from the Westfaelische Wilhelms University in Muenster. He has been secretary of Societas Liturgica, an international society for liturgical study and renewal since 2003, and professor of liturgy on the theological faculty at the Julius Maximilians University in Wuerzburg since 2007.