



The Holy Mysteries

By Father Raphael Armour

The Meaning of a 'Mystery'

In the Orthodox Church we view the whole of life as a sacrament – a means by which God makes contact with us. To use the Orthodox term, it is a 'mystery', a 'Holy Mystery'.

The Orthodox theologian Jaroslav Pelikan points out that we normally talk of a 'mystery' as something we don't know, don't understand: (as he puts it), 'a mystery story is one in which the detective identifies the culprit ... and thus solves the mystery'.¹ In other words, the dead body in the parlour stops being a 'mystery' once you know the butler did it.

Jaroslav Pelikan complains that theology, especially in the West, has accepted this definition of 'mystery'. What you didn't know tended to be labelled 'one of God's mysteries'.

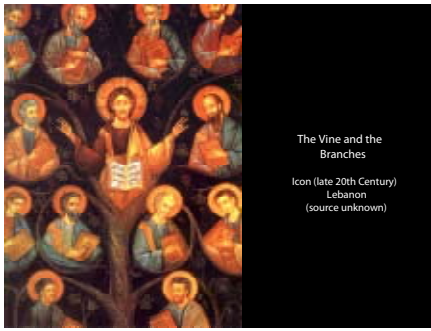
The problem is that, once you label something you don't understand – say, a thunderstorm – as a 'mystery', then if new knowledge comes along that explains thunderstorms, then you seem not to need God and God is pushed out.

In both the New Testament and the language of the Church, however, 'mystery' means not just what you don't know or fully understand, but also those things, known or unknown, that inspire a feeling of *awe*. We may now understand exactly how babies are conceived and develop – but that doesn't stop us being overwhelmed with wonder at the process.

It is this deeper meaning of 'mystery' – what inspires wonder – that the Church uses when she calls the sacraments 'mysteries'.

Our Orthodox experience shows us that the whole of our life is one unending sacrament or 'mystery': we are able to share in the life of God by many different means, and they inspire wonder. However, the Church has identified some *special* means, which we call the 'Holy Mysteries', or, in the West, 'the sacraments'. Like other mysteries – say, the beauty of the natural world or of the animals – they inspire awe and reverence, and they are *joyful*. They are activities of what the Liturgy calls 'the *life-creating* Trinity'. They show that God is interested in matter – in material things. Through the mysteries, the miraculous power that creates and sustains the whole of life comes to us.

The Mysteries are what is revealed to us by God – but not revealed exhaustively – for the Mysteries reach into the very depths of God Himself. We shall have flashes of 'what it's all about'. Eventually, we hope to understand fully – but it will not be on this earth.



Visual Aid 1: *The Icon of the Vine and Branches*

The Vine and the
Branches
Icon (late 20th Century)
Lebanon
(source unknown)

The Mysteries as bringers of life

We began our first Session by looking at an icon of Jesus as the Vine, with all of us strung out along its tendrils, connected to the Vine's life-giving sap, turning into rich, succulent fruit.

One feature of a grape-vine is that there seems no reason, even in this world of decay and death, why it shouldn't go on for ever. In Hampton Court Palace there is a grape-vine planted by Capability Brown almost 250 years ago. It now extends the length of a greenhouse that is like a long corridor in glass, and every year it produces around 250 kilos of luscious grapes. The Church is like that vine, and by its Mysteries it conveys the life of God to each one of us, so that we shine with health like the bloom on those grapes.

The Mysteries as restorers of life

We would continue to be part of that eternal Vine, bursting with life, endlessly productive, nourished by God's life through the thousand natural ways God communicates himself to us – if only we had not, in one way or another, cut ourselves off and been cut off by others from the source of life. But now, we are all less than we were meant to be, so we can't always feel joyfully alive and much of the time we have a sense that things are not quite right. Marriage ought to be a joy – sometimes it is a chore. Praising God in church services should be delightful – sometimes it is really hard going, some might say boring. That is why St John Chrysostom says the Church is also like a hospital, and why it is sometimes appropriate to use medical terms to talk about its Mysteries. Or to go back to Capability Brown and his vine: we are like branches that have bruises through which life seeps away if the good gardener doesn't bind them, we even have diseased bits that need pruning. So you can see the Mysteries of the Church as the doctor's remedies or as the gardener's care.

Make no mistake: we all need to be healed, to be put right. Jesus had little time for those who thought they were OK. His mission was to those who recognized their need. He said: 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick' (Matthew 9.12). As opposed, perhaps, to treatment by doctors and nurses, in the hospital of the Church everyone will get well. But we need the hospital and its treatment to fully experience the joy. ***We are not bad people needing to be made good – we are sick people needing to be made whole.***

Some of the Mysteries, such as Baptism and Chrismation (or Marriage, or Ordination), appear to be one-off events (a bit like the connection of a saline drip). You see something happen, though you may not realize that it makes possible an on-going infusion of what is essential for health. Other Mysteries – the Eucharist, for example – are like taking basic food, necessary vitamins – something that has to be repeated regularly to keep you healthy. Others, Repentance or of Anointing of the Sick, for example, are more like medicine or even major surgery: something applied as need arises, when the system is out of order.

I can imagine someone objecting: ‘I’m fit, I enjoy life, I have fun, I just want *more* fun. If Christians are this bunch of sickly zombies, kept going by a life-support system, why on earth would I want to join them?’ It’s here that the Christian religion gets tough. If you are convinced you are well and have no need for health, don’t waste your time with us now: go away – for a day, a month, a year. ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.’ Come back when you feel the need.

The cost of Christian faith

For those who have stayed, the news is even worse. The faith teaches that the only way to live fully is to die fully. If you want joy, happiness, the only road to it is through the death of your self-will, your egotism. Every baptized Christian is a dead man or woman – we have ‘died’ with Christ. What does that mean? It means that you have given up yourself, your pride, your ‘go-it-alone’ mentality, your eagerness to ‘do it my way’, and have laid your hopes and ambitions and dreams at the feet of Christ. ‘If any man would come after me’, Jesus said, ‘let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’ (Matthew 16:24).

Why then do we still live? We live because, though we have died, we have also been resurrected with Christ, and are kept alive by the life of God Himself, through being nourished by the life of Christ Himself in the Eucharist. And because the source of our medicine is God himself, the life which our Heavenly Doctor gives is ‘life more abundant’ than we would otherwise have. Not less joy, but more joy.

Mysteries as symbols – and more than symbols

We may call these activities of God ‘Mysteries’ not only in the sense that they inspire awe, but also in the more commonplace sense, because we only partly understand what is going on: the full reality is ‘hidden’ from us. They are *symbolic* actions and the standard definition of a symbol is that it is itself but has a meaning beyond and greater than its most obvious one. Who is wearing a wedding ring?

[Ask each in turn to say what that ring means to them].

What is clear from what people say is that that small band of metal means, symbolizes, a whole relationship between two human beings. To lose or damage it makes one feel dreadful, not because it is solid gold or platinum but because of what it stands for. The Church’s Mysteries are symbolic actions in this sense.

BUT – and this is a massive ‘but’ – the Church’s Mysteries go way beyond the normal meaning of symbols. In Baptism, you are not just submerged in the water to signify death to selfishness, and pulled up from it to symbolize new life in Christ: you actually *get* new life. When you are sick and anointed with oil, the anointing is not just a sign of God’s willingness to heal: it *is* healing.

We Orthodox Christians (and we share this belief with the Roman Catholics, with many Anglicans, and others of the Christian churches) – we maintain that when Jesus said of the bread ‘This is my Body’ and of the wine ‘This is my Blood’ he meant exactly what he said. Not ‘this bread *signifies* my body’, not ‘this wine *symbolizes* my blood’, but ‘this bread *is* my body’, ‘this wine *is* my blood’. So we believe that the bread and wine at the Communion are natural nourishment and *at the same time* Christ’s Body and Blood, feeding our human

body and spirit with his divine nature, so that we are steadily being made more fully into Christ's own Body.

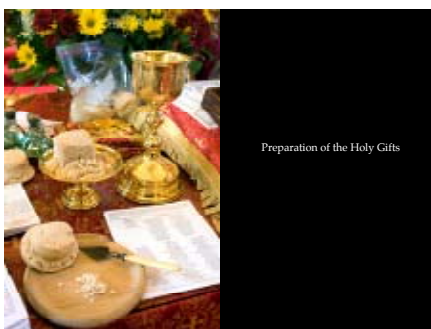
Here is a mystery *and* a wonder. How can something be one thing and, at the same time, something else? The bread and wine are absorbed like any other nutriment; yet at the same time, our whole person, body and soul, is nourished by the flesh and blood of our King. This is one reason why we use the word 'Mystery'.

Yet the Orthodox believe that something real happens in the Mysteries – not something dependent on you being in the right frame of mind or being willing to imagine something is going on. The sacraments have a practical effect, irrespective of the emotional perceptions of the person receiving them. The positive benefit of Communion has come to myriads of Christians over the centuries, and often taken them by surprise.

On the other hand, St Paul himself warns that Communion can have adverse effects on those who present themselves casually or unprepared – and this is the clearest evidence that the early Church experienced the Mysteries as having actual and not just psychological power.

But the Mysteries are given for our good, and one aspect of their goodness is their capacity to act on us irrespective of our feelings. This is particularly important when we come to the Mystery of Repentance (otherwise called Confession). By declaring his wrongdoing and repentance before the Church, in the person of the priest, and hearing the pronouncement of God's love and forgiveness, the Christian is reconciled to God – *full stop* – and this is so, whether the person continues to feel bad or not: it is not something to do with 'feelings'. Nor is it a question of being able to remember (or even to recognize) the totality of what one may have done wrong: the act of turning to God with the cry 'Lord, have mercy' is enough. Even if you fear you have hidden, undeclared depths of wrongdoing – and I mean here that you have not deliberately hidden something – it is still *'full stop'*: everything is swept away by the tide of God's love. And when God has forgiven you, over the place where He has sunk all our sins and shortcomings, he has also put up a large notice: 'NO FISHING!'

All this is by way of general introduction to the Holy Mysteries. Now we will look at them in some detail.



Visual Aid 2: Preparation of the Holy Gifts

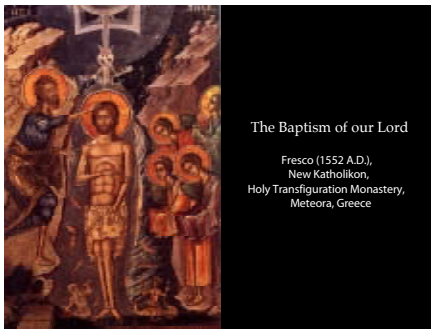
The Eucharist

The Eucharist is the central and continuing Mystery of the Christian faith. We have already talked about the Divine Liturgy in a previous talk and because it is feeding upon God, the Eucharist is the one Mystery that is eternal, and our love-feast here on earth is a foretaste of the perpetual Feast we shall enjoy in the Kingdom of Heaven. It nourishes

us with the food of eternal life, taking us from an existence that is purely biological and so subject to decay and death, transforming us by its life-creating food from glory to glory, into beings that live for ever.

Baptism

The entrance, the passport, to this new life, is Baptism. Baptism is what makes us Christians and so it is essential. This is what Bishop Hilarion says about it: ‘The sacrament of Baptism is the door into the Church, the Kingdom of grace, and the beginning of the Christian life. Baptism is the frontier that separates the members of Christ’s Body from those who are outside it.’²



Visual Aid 3: Icon of the Baptism of our Lord

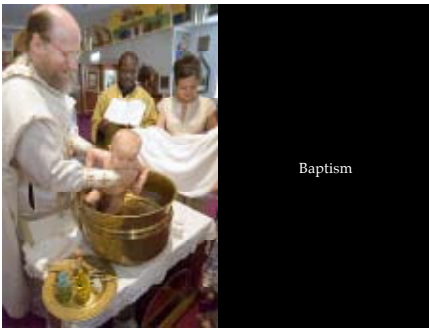
Jesus himself received baptism at the hand of John at the beginning of his ministry, and it has often puzzled Christians that the one who was sinless should undergo what seems to be a ritual of cleansing. But in all things, Christ is our leader, and since Baptism is the gateway to life, the Prince of Life himself leads us in by that door.

How many of you remember your baptism? I guess, not many. And even if your family produces lots of children, I doubt if you have a very clear recollection of what goes on at a baptism. Yet the service is packed with meaning for us.

The first thing the priest does is to breathe in the face of the candidate in the form of the Cross. This is done to imitate the account of God in the Book of Genesis breathing life into Adam when Adam was created – in Hebrew breath and Spirit are the same word, *ruach*.

The priest then makes the sign of the cross on the person, three times on the forehead and three times on the breast – and this is something of great significance, (whether the person to be baptized is an adult or a tiny baby). If you were a slave in the ancient world, I might mark you as mine by branding you with an identifiable mark. This ‘Jesus-brand’, the sign of the cross, often matters a great deal to parents of a new baby: the child is marked as Christ’s possession – and because he or she belongs to Christ, the little one is now under Christ’s protection.

Then follow prayers of exorcism – to drive away anything evil. The person to be baptized, or a child’s sponsor, faces the west (which, because it is the place where the sun sets, represents darkness, ignorance and evil). He or she renounces Satan and all his angels and all his evil works and all his pride – and spits on him. Then, turning to face the east – the direction from which light comes each day – he or she declares for Christ, proclaiming ‘I unite myself to Christ’. Then the candidate for baptism or his or her sponsor on their behalf recites the Creed, as defining the faith that the new Christian accepts. The candidate is next given a candle to signify that they have come to the light of truth and they are then anointed with oil for the healing of body and soul.



Visual Aid 4: Baptism

Now that the would-be Christian is completely ready, he or she is plunged three times into water and baptized in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This total immersion signifies not just that we are washed from all evil and uncleanness, but also that we die with Christ, drowned in the waters.

And yet on the rebound, as it were, we are immediately lifted from the water, signifying that we are rising to new life with Christ. Our nakedness is dressed in new clothes to show that we need no longer be ashamed but have ‘put on Christ’ – the entirety of His death, burial and resurrection. With Jesus covering us, we now have the ‘robe of light’. The robe that is put on us signifies the robes of the priest and king, for as followers of Christ we have joined the priesthood of all believers and are ranked as kings among kings.



Visual Aid 5: Chrismation

Chrismation

The next stage for the newly baptized Christian is chrismation, where we are anointed with the holy chrism, the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit, who from now on will be our guide and comforter. This is the moment of empowering.

Sometimes, you will see the Mystery of Chrismation used to accept Christians from other Churches into the Orthodox Church.

This whole rite of initiation is completed with the reception of Holy Communion: Baptism opens the door to the party; Communion *is* the party.

Claiming one's baptism

To this whole description of the wonderful things baptism and chrismation are supposed to do, you might reply: ‘That’s fine – but why don’t I *feel* any of it? Why am I so full of wrong impulses, things I dislike in myself? Why do I lack the health, faith, joy and peace that are promised to me?’ This is particularly a problem for those of us who were baptized as tiny children.

If we don’t feel the benefits, that is because our baptism is a bit like a bank account set up for us. We have to ‘activate the account’. You can’t make use of an inheritance till you’ve

been told about it, found out what is there and how to draw on it. Till you do, everything lies dormant, in trust for you.

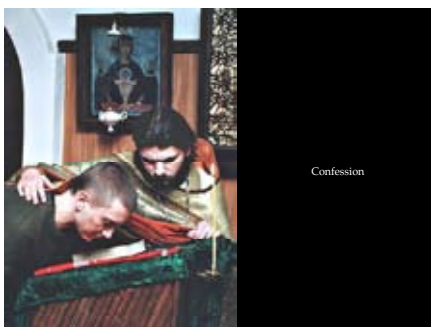
But there is one obstacle to drawing on this account, entering fully into this inheritance, and it's one we've mentioned before. You have to die so that you can be re-born. That is the password to the trust account, the key to the Kingdom. We have to grow into our baptism by a continuing process, endless small repetitions of 'turning to Christ'. And that involves denying our self, taking up our Cross daily and following Christ, which I mentioned earlier.

What does this mean? You can get a glimpse every time a young baby is baptized by the Orthodox: it is pushed under the water – and it usually screams. The child cries out because it instinctively sees what is happening as a threat to its life: it seems like a *drowning*.

Baptism *is* a drowning. It means being identified with Jesus in his willingness to give up himself, even if that means going to a disgraceful death. We want to be safe – and baptism makes us *unsafe*. We want to live, to hold on to our pleasures and delights: baptism may involve us giving them up, even sacrificing our lives, going right against the basic instinct of self-preservation.

This may not mean, literally, giving up our life – though in the case of Jesus and of many of the apostles, and of many disciples right down to the present day, it has meant exactly that. But there are many smaller ways of 'dying'. The boss at work asks you to do something that involves cheating the customers; you refuse because you think it's wrong, and a few days later he finds an excuse to sack you, and you are out of a job. All your life, you will meet dangers of that sort, great and small.

As you grow into your baptism, it will get worse – as is the experience of all who have embarked on the Christian life. Allowing Christ to take you over, to be your new nature, to live in you and through you, to clothe you with himself, agreeing to subject your will to his – that is always going to be a struggle, even if (at the same time) it is also a great release and a great joy.



Visual Aid 6: *Confession*

The Mystery of Repentance (Confession) and the Mystery of the Holy Oil

The next two Mysteries might be called 'repair Mysteries': remedies for when things have gone wrong in the Christian life. The experience of failing, of not living and behaving as a Christian should, is an experience common to all of us. A monk was once asked: 'What do you do there in the monastery all day?' He replied: 'We fall and get up, fall and get up, fall and get up again.'³

God has provided through the Church a steam-cleaning system. The carpet of our nature was re-designed, re-woven through our baptism; but through slips, spillages, mishaps, wrongdoing, we get stained and muddied. We can take ourselves to the Mystery of Repentance (Confession) and allow God to restore us to our brand-new condition. It's like pushing the button on the cell phone or computer: 'Restore factory settings'.

When we come to Confession, we lay our whole life before God; we admit that we have not been able to live our life fully in Christ and we *name* the sins we have done. We must come in confidence, knowing that God is a loving Father, eager to receive us back to share in the joy of the Kingdom. In earlier presentations we have spoken about the parable of the Prodigal Son. Do you remember when the son was dragging himself back home? This is the passage:

'While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" ' (Luke 15:20-24).

That's what it's like when we come to Confession. God receives us back with joy. Jesus also tells us: 'There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance' (Luke 15:7). Again, we are told that 'there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents' (Luke 15:10).

One appropriate time to go to Confession is before Communion – although not all Orthodox Churches insist on confession before receiving the Holy Gifts.

One temptation is to approach the chalice casually, without making proper preparation – by prayer, fasting and (if necessary) by Confession. If you read the prayers preparatory to communion in the service book, you will find they emphasize the seriousness of approaching the Eucharist. 'It is', says St Symeon the New Theologian, 'like fire!' If you are not properly reconciled to God and your neighbour, Confession is the remedy.

But there is another and equally serious temptation, and that is to not approach at all. Jesus told us: 'Do this in remembrance of me'. In the Eucharist, Christ feeds us with his Body and Blood. He did not invite us to stand in church and watch from a distance but commanded us to 'Take, eat' and to 'Drink of it *all of you* . . .' Those who are content to remain on the touchline are often falling for the second temptation: of feeling communion is so serious a matter that they are not yet prepared, not worthy of it.

The mistake here is to think that we could ever, by our own efforts, be worthy to receive the Body and Blood of Christ – however much we pray, however much we fast, however much we confess, however much we hold back until we are 'ready'. None of us will ever be 'worthy' that way. We come to the chalice relying on God's promise to treat us as worthy, just because we have turned to him. The prayer before communion, when the chalice is brought out of the sanctuary, asks that we be delivered from fear, condemnation and judgement, as we draw near to receive Holy Communion. So do not neglect coming to the Eucharist for fear you may not be worthy, but be obedient to Christ's command: 'Drink of it, *all of you*.'

One last thing needs to be said about Confession, and that is about the role of the priest. The priest hears our confession on behalf of the Church and he pronounces God's forgiveness, not his own. He may offer us advice, ask us questions, suggest appropriate action to remedy what we have done wrong, if that is possible, or impose a penance. But he does all this praying alongside us, as a fellow-sinner.



Visual Aid 7:
Anointing

The Mystery of the Holy Oil

The Mystery of anointing with Holy Oil is another part of God's 'repair service', used when we are damaged in body, mind or spirit. When we come to it we will normally have made our Confession and – if critically ill – have received the Holy Gifts. It is also given to those nearing death. On one occasion in the year, either Wednesday evening or Thursday morning in Holy Week, it is given to urge us to repentance and as a sign of God's grace to everyone.

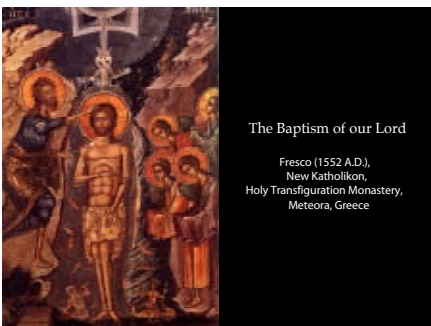
The first reading in this service is from the Letter of the Apostle James:

'Is any among you sick? 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 will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed' (James 5:14-16).

That is the authority for the Holy Mystery. The second reading is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-27) and its intention is that we should see Christ coming to us as the Samaritan came to the man left beaten up by the side of the road, pouring wine and oil into our wounds – wounds of soul and body – and binding them up. It also teaches us that evil comes upon the innocent. It is quite wrong to presume that somehow they must always have deserved it (or even that *we* have deserved it).

Ordination and Marriage

All the Mysteries we have talked about so far are available for any Christian, and they are means by which God gives us through his Holy Spirit the power to live Christ-like lives. In contrast, the two remaining Mysteries, Ordination and Marriage, which we will discuss only briefly, are empowerments from God for a special purpose.



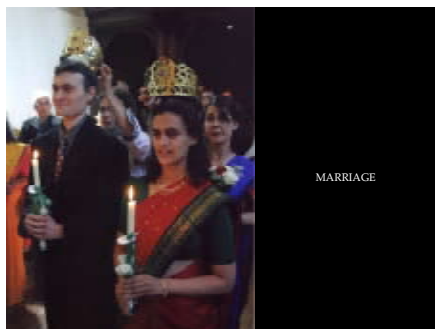
Visual Aid 8:
Ordination

Ordination

Ordination is the Holy Mystery that makes a bishop, priest or deacon, and it is the gift of the Holy Spirit for a special task in the Church. All Christians are priests and share what is called ‘the priesthood of all believers’: we all have the same equal status. Nevertheless, the faith must be preserved and taught and the Mysteries administered, and this is the special duty of the Bishop in any area, who has to be an *episkopos*, an ‘overlooker’ or supervisor. He is the successor of the apostles, his ordination is performed by other bishops, who were ordained by previous bishops in a chain that goes right back to the first leaders of the Church. He is our guarantee that what we are taught is the Christian faith that has been taught from the beginning and is the faith as recognized by Orthodox Christians everywhere. He is the focus of unity and the centre of authority.

Priests are ordained by him as his assistants, to celebrate the Eucharist and the other Holy Mysteries, and to teach the faith under his direction. Deacons are ordained by the bishop to assist him and his priests in their duties.

You might well ask, since we are all priests, why such special authority has to be given to individuals. But ask yourself some further questions. How do you know that you are being taught the true Christian faith, without additions or subtractions? The Bishop, whose knowledge and faithfulness to the truth is recognized by other bishops, is your guarantee. How do you know that the Holy Mysteries are those established by God through his Church for salvation and the healing and feeding of the faithful? The Bishop and the priests and deacons he has instructed and ordained are your surety that what you are getting is the genuine thing. The preservation and continuation of the faith of the Church is the task entrusted to the clergy, and their position is not one of privilege but of fearful responsibility.



Visual Aid 9: Marriage

Marriage

Marriage, which involves the well-being of husband and wife and (very likely) the bringing up of children, is also a fearful responsibility. But, you may say, ‘people have been marrying one another since the beginning of time. Why do we need a Holy Mystery of Marriage to start the whole thing off?’

We will talk more about marriage at a later session. Here, I’ll say only that the Mystery of Marriage is Christ’s action by the power of the Spirit to bring back the relationship of a man and a woman to what it was meant to be. Christ supports a married couple throughout their life together, and often in ways they hardly realize.

There are other ways of growing as a Christian, and some of them we will deal with in the next session: Bible reading, prayer, fasting. But the Mysteries, the sacraments, are

God's appointed means for our growth and supply. They are the means whereby the Lord Jesus Christ comes to you and to me in His Power and His Love. But, the greatest of all Mysteries – the Mystery of Mysteries, is the Incarnation – Christ coming to earth. 'For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son ...' (John 3:16). That is what the Apostle John tells us and that is what we pray with the priest at every Liturgy.

And the testimony of countless Christians is that Christ is reliable, that his promises to us are fulfilled, that 'turning to Christ', taking his Body and Blood, makes a real difference. Trusting God's promises, guarding His life within us by 'walking in the way of his commandments', not trying to snatch back responsibility for ourselves, results in a continuing change.

The end result will be the restoration of that lost perfection that God intended for us. Our destiny is to be 'changed from glory into glory', till we reach the likeness of God in Christ: that is deification – theosis.

Raphael Armour, David Frost

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1 Jaroslav Pelikan, radio talk.

2 Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Mystery of Faith* (Darton, Longman and Todd: London, 2002), p. 132.

3 Tito Colliander, *The Way of the Ascetics* (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1960), p. 68.