

THE MYSTERY OF FAITH

By EDWARD MALATESTA

FROM GENESIS TO the Apocalypse the Word of God describes faith as nothing less than a communion with God experienced throughout salvation history by individuals and by the entire body of the Lord's people.¹ Scripture unfolds the history of this communion, intended by God to be a relationship of reciprocal fidelity, as a history of darkness and light, sorrow and joy, failure and success which will enter its definitive stage when God and his people dwell together forever in peace.² The gracious deeds of Father, Son and Spirit from age to age are God's side of the mutual relationship which forms the unique and everlasting 'mystery of faith'.³ He who has loved us with an everlasting love,⁴ he who is Love,⁵ remains faithful.⁶ The greatest sign of this fidelity has been given to us in the person and deeds of Jesus, the faithful and true witness,⁷ the merciful and faithful high priest,⁸ who loved perfectly unto the end,⁹ and who now both intercedes for us in the presence of the Father,¹⁰ and dwells in our very midst.¹¹

Our side of the relationship of the mystery of faith consists first of all in becoming aware of God's fidelity towards us. The initiative in all creation, in all redemption – in all that is good – is his; ours it is first of all to wonder, to admire, to be thankful. It is true that the eyes of our heart are not pure enough to discover his loving presence in all the persons, events and objects that surround us and that form, so often apparently without design or pattern, the fabric of our lives. But here again the initiative is God's; and he who wishes all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth¹² himself purifies

¹ See McCarthy, Dennis: 'Covenant and Community', in *The Way*, vol X (October, 1970), pp 344–350.

² Apoc 21, 1–4.

³ According to J. Jungmann, we cannot ascertain how, when or why the expression 'mystery of faith' was inserted into the institution narrative of the Mass. But we do know that antiquity would have taken the words 'as a reference to the grace-laden *sacramentum* in which the entire (objective) faith is comprised. The chalice of the New Testament is the life-giving symbol of truth, the sanctuary of our belief'. *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, Riepe C. K., ed. (New York, 1960), p 422.

⁴ Jer 31, 3.

⁵ 1 Jn 4, 8, 16.

⁶ Deut 32, 4; Ps 36, 7; Isai 40, 8.

⁷ Apoc 3, 14.

⁸ Heb 2, 17.

⁹ Jn 13, 1.

¹⁰ Heb 7, 24–25.

¹¹ Mt 18, 20; 28, 20.

¹² 1 Tim 2, 4.

our hearts and invites us to discern his presence even where we think he might not be.

Far from being frozen and static, this mutual relationship implies constant creativity, movement, development. God's faithful love for men is an imaginative love, expressing itself with ever new gifts designed to purify and unite with himself all his children in the constantly changing circumstances of human history. The believing community is continually invited by the Spirit of God to respond with new forms of life and service of God and man. Every event of history – individual, social, national, international – becomes an episode of realized salvation to the degree that it is penetrated and transformed by God's faithful love and the generous, believing response of man.

The community of believers is, therefore, by its very nature 'for others'. Individually and collectively, believers are united in the communion of the holy Spirit to the Father and the Son. At the same time, the believing members of the Body of Christ are united together by the same Spirit. And by their very relationship to each other and to God, believers are directed towards all of humanity. Jesus intended that the community founded by him be like himself, sent into the world to be its light, its salt, its leaven. One of God's greatest gifts to his Church in our times is the renewed awareness of our responsibility as christians to be the servants of the world, in order to co-operate in its mysterious transformation into the Body of Christ.

The prayer of Christ in John 17, the jewel of johannine theology, expresses with profound insight the dynamic and selfless nature of the mystery of faith. Jesus, in his love for the Father, for his fellows and for the world, prays to be glorified so that he may glorify the Father anew: that is, he prays to be manifested, by his loving obedience to the Father's command in his paschal mystery, for what he is – a faithful son; so that he can manifest the one true God for what he is, a faithful Father – faithful to Jesus and to the followers of Jesus.¹³

Just as the Father had sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus sent his apostles into the world.¹⁴ Because by Jesus' ministry they have been reborn into eternal life, because he is glorified in them,¹⁵ they must in turn go forth to share with the world the Father's word which they have received from Jesus. In view of their mission, Jesus prays

¹³ Jn 17, 1-5.

¹⁴ Jn 17, 18.

¹⁵ Jn 17, 10.

that the Father keep them faithful to the revelation of his Name, and that they be consecrated for their task by the very truth of the revelation which is Jesus himself, a revelation he will continue as he continues to reveal himself in his paschal mystery and, by the gift of the Spirit, throughout salvation history.¹⁶

The circle of those for whom Jesus prays widens as his gaze embraces not only the Father, his own glorification, and his disciples, but also those who will accept the disciples' preaching, 'those who will believe in me through their word'.¹⁷ The petitions for unity offered on behalf of future believers, the most developed and profound requests of the entire prayer, are themselves turned towards a still wider audience, which transcends the limits of the circle of apostles and believers and encompasses the totality of God's children: 'so that the world may believe that you have sent me . . . so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you loved me'.¹⁸ There could be no clearer statement of the mission of the community of faith, precisely as believing, towards all humanity. Such is the mystery of faith. And this is why it is a great mystery. The Blood of the New Covenant is the saving nourishment of a community sent to the world.

But what do we mean today by the christian 'community'? 'Community' is a current topic of heated discussion in both secular and religious milieux everywhere throughout the world.¹⁹ The first thing one should say about communities that can be called christian is that they are grounded in union with the Father and Jesus. St John's first letter, a pressing exhortation to a church in crisis, offers an exquisite meditation on criteria for communion with God and communion with each other. Indeed the author states his purpose very clearly: ' . . . that which we have seen and heard, we proclaim also to you, so that you, too, may have fellowship (*koinōnia*) with us. And our fellowship (*koinōnia*) is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ'.²⁰ This statement should adorn the walls of every place where contemporary christians gather to discuss 'community'.

No one blueprint can determine in detail what form believing communities must take. Both the history of the Church and contem-

¹⁶ Jn 17, 11-19.26; 14, 15-17. 25-26; 15, 26-27; 16, 4-11.12-15.

¹⁷ Jn 17, 20.

¹⁸ Jn 17, 21-23.

¹⁹ *The Way* recently devoted an entire issue to 'Community' (April 1970). See also Barbé D: *Demain, les communautés de base* (Paris, 1970) with a preface by J. Loew, and a stimulating issue of *Lumière et Vie*, 'Les communautés de base', no 99 (août-octobre 1970).

²⁰ 1 Jn 1, 3.

porary experience illustrate that variety characterizes communities of believers. From the community formed by Jesus, the Twelve and the women who accompanied Jesus,²¹ to the communities founded by Mother Teresa in India and those springing up in the *barrios* of Latin America, the Spirit has been at work drawing the faithful together in different ways. The mystery proper to the Spirit and the diversity of his gifts render impossible any rigid pre-determination.

But however varied the structures may be, several signs seem to characterize creations of the Spirit: prayer, discernment, poverty, unity, love and service. And each of these signs is such as to be relevant to the local situation in and for which the community has been created. Only when faith has become incarnate in relevance can it be truly challenging, just as Christ the Lord challenged his times and all times, because what he said and did was what men needed – and still need – to hear, see, and receive.

Of these signs we will consider here only prayer in its most perfect form, the celebration of the Eucharist,²² and discernment. In every eucharistic celebration we acclaim the Body and Blood of Christ as the mystery of faith, as the New Covenant.²³ We do this because by his love for us and for his Father, by his obedience to the Father's command throughout his life and at the moment of his death, Christ was himself perfected.²⁴ He was joined to God in covenant as intimately as any man could be, and therefore he became the cause of salvation for all who obey him.²⁵ His own faith was tested and made so perfect that he remains forever the high priest of the confession of all who come after him.²⁶

His relationship with the Father and with his brothers exists as the perfect model and presents the unique foundation for all union of men with each other and with God: 'that they may all be one, even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us . . . that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one'.²⁷

The Eucharist is the greatest of the sacraments because it realizes among us in a privileged way the Lord's paschal mystery and offers us the presence of his own person. The most efficacious invitation to

²¹ Lk 8, 2-3; 23, 27-49-55.

²² On personal contemplative prayer, see the July 1970 issue of *The Way*, especially the fine article of B. J. Bush, *Prayer and Experience*, pp 199-210.

²³ 1 Cor 11, 25; Lk 22, 20.

²⁴ Heb 2, 10; 5, 9; 7, 28.

²⁵ Heb 5, 9.

²⁶ Heb 3, 1-6.

²⁷ Jn 17, 21-23.

communion with God and each other, it is at the centre of our lives. The unique and definitive New Covenant celebrated in every Eucharist, perfection and realization of the aspirations of God's successive covenants with our Fathers in faith and with all the people of Israel, continually advances the union of believers with each other and with God while drawing the world to faith in Jesus. Truly all we are and all we do should lead to and derive from the Eucharist.

It is unfortunate that the necessary growing pains of liturgical reform sometime distract us from the heart of the matter. We can become so preoccupied with the external details of 'how' to celebrate or so anxious 'to experience community' that we forget we are celebrating first of all the life, death, resurrection and glorious presence of the Son of God and our own incorporation into him. Only to the degree that adoration in Spirit and Truth²⁸ pervades our worship, both private and public, will all other gifts be given to us. In regard to prayerful reverence we still have much to learn, it seems to me, from the best liturgical traditions of the eastern churches and of our own western monastic communities. If we can but accept what we hear when God speaks to us in the scriptures, and mean what we say as we respond by professing our faith and by proclaiming the greatest act of God on our behalf, we will be united to Christ in a way which will necessarily transform our lives.

'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me'.²⁹ The celebration of the Eucharist enables us to live in constant communion with Christ and so with the Father, and with our brothers in the Spirit. The Christ who teaches us and who comes to us anew in every Eucharist, whom we can frequently adore in this sacrament, thus becomes the ambience of our existence: in him we live and move and have our being.³⁰ The 'Jesus prayer', treasure of the oriental tradition, is well adapted to dispose us to the grace of the Spirit who empowers us to say 'Lord Jesus',³¹ to the activity of the Father who draws us to

²⁸ Jn 4, 23-24.

²⁹ Jn 6, 56-57.

³⁰ Acts 17, 28. See *The Divine Milieu* of Teilhard de Chardin. The Eucharist was the source of Teilhard's contemplation of Christ in all creation, as has been shown by H. de Lubac, 'Les extensions de l'Eucharistie' in *La prière du Père Teilhard de Chardin* (Paris, 1964), pp 61-71, and C. F. Mooney, 'The Incarnation and the Eucharist' in *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* (London, 1966), pp 67-103.

³¹ 1 Cor 12, 3.

Jesus,³² and to an intimate exchange with Jesus himself in faith.³³

As Pope Paul mentioned at the end of the Vatican retreat preached by Père Loew, Jesus must ever be rediscovered by those who belong to him.³⁴ It should not surprise us that we have always much more to learn about him, that we can grow in intimacy with him, that we must be more deeply purified in order to resemble him, more firmly strengthened so that we can announce him. As the days and years go by, every new experience of ours must be christianized, must be related in faith to Christ the Lord. To progress in faith, in union with Christ, in apostolic effectiveness, we need constantly to exercise the gift of discernment, especially when the context in which we live is charged with contradictory options of thought and action.³⁵

The exercise of discernment is related to the Eucharist. For discernment of the Body of the Lord,³⁶ offered once and for all in sacrifice as the expression of perfect love for the Father and for all men, and now gloriously present among us, progressively accomplishing the reconciliation of all things to the Father, implies discernment of the daily sacrifice we are invited to make as the members of Christ, children of the Father, and servants of our brothers. Each celebration of the Eucharist in faith provides us both with insight to discern the call of Christ and the strength to respond. And because we need to see and respond in the life-situation of every day, it is reasonable for the believing community to seek daily inspiration and generosity from the Eucharist.

Discernment characterizes the true believer who, like Paul, presses 'on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus'.³⁷ Our faith in Jesus is not a gift made once and for all in a perfect way. It must constantly be renewed, purified and deepened, in spirit and in truth, certainly; but also as and where we are – in the context of and in reference to the concrete details of everyday living. But openness, renewal and creativity do not mean an irrational leap into any kind of thinking or acting. The same

³² Jn 6, 44.

³³ Jn 15, 1–11. See the three precious books by an anonymous monk of the eastern church: *The Prayer of Jesus. Its Genesis, Development and Practice in the Byzantine-Slavic Religious Tradition* (New York, 1967); *Jesus. A Dialogue with the Saviour* (New York, 1963); *A Day with Jesus* (New York, 1964).

³⁴ Loew J: *Ce Jésus qu'on appelle Christ. Retraite au Vatican 1970* (Paris, 1970), pp 305–310.

³⁵ May we take this occasion to call attention to E. Malatesta, *et al.*, *Discernment of Spirits* (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1970), a translation of the article 'Discernement des Esprits' in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, together with an introduction and bibliographical note.

³⁶ 1 Cor 11, 29.

³⁷ Phil 3, 14.

Paul who, in his travels and letters, confronted the varied situations occasioned by the creation and development of the first christian communities from Jerusalem to Rome, exhorts us; 'let us hold true to what we have attained'.³⁸ Progress in continuity could well be the motto of believers everywhere.

The believing community will have a prophetic, missionary impact only insofar as it discerns the workings of the Spirit in itself and in those to whom it is sent to serve. Discernment also presupposes faith. Only that community which vitally believes in God's activity in the circumstances of everyday living will possess the readiness to seek and the sensitivity to perceive, individually and collectively, the signs of the Lord's saving activity with which it is called to co-operate. This faith leads to discernment. The relationship of the Covenant inevitably stimulates attention to the presence of the Lord and the desire to carry out his every design.

Because a living faith involves us in mystery, it is easy for us to become apathetic, immobile, and slavishly attached to accustomed ways of thinking and acting. Or we may tend towards the other extreme and become nervously progressive and progressively nervous; so that we cannot commit our minds to any idea or our energies to any project beyond the space of twenty-four hours. But even if excuses can be made for inertia or for fickleness, neither can be defended by saying that faith is a mystery! Living the mystery of faith means rather being rooted in Christ in order to think and act with Christ, with the insight and strength sufficient for each day.

If in the service of Christ we can do nothing without him,³⁹ we can do all things in him who strengthens us.⁴⁰ Indeed, just as Jesus has won a victory over the world by reason of his faith in the Father and his love for the Father and all his brothers,⁴¹ so by his gift, we too have won a victory over the world, and this victory is our faith,⁴² a faith which the world will be drawn to share through the unity of the believing community.⁴³

³⁸ Phil 3, 16.

⁴¹ Jn 16, 33.

³⁹ Jn 15, 4-5.

⁴² 1 Jn 5, 4.

⁴⁰ Phil 4, 13.

⁴³ Jn 17, 21-23.