Recovering the Paschal Mystery: Rediscovery in the Year of the Priest?

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By Russell Hardiman

Introduction

In 1995, at the time of the silver jubilee of Pastoral Liturgy a collection of 43 articles were published together as The Years of the Year: the Paschal Mystery celebrated in Christian worship. The linking of the various sections of the book had titles associating their part of the liturgical calendar: the Paschal Mystery in the liturgical seasons; the Paschal Mystery in Ordinary Time; the Paschal Mystery in the Order of Mass; the Paschal Mystery in Bereavement; and the Paschal Mystery and Popular Devotions. Even that categorisation shows how widespread is the celebration of the Paschal Mystery in every aspect of the corporate life of the Church through the liturgy.

Some of the reviewers of the book made particular emphasis on the Paschal Mystery and its general implications. Rev Kevin O'Sheacssr wrote in his review:

"I strongly recommend this book for all who minister in, and actively participate in, the liturgical mysteries. It will help us all to integrate the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist with the 'liturgy' of life itself. The best thing about the book is that its messages can be located in what actually happens in church practice, when the liturgical are properly used. One value of this book, in its outline of the place of the Paschal Mystery in our liturgy is its amplitude..."

Any study of the place of the Paschal Mystery in the life of the Church cannot go forward without an explanation of how the preeminence of the Paschal Mystery has been recovered in recent decades on the rediscovery of more ancient texts and re-expressed in the contemporary liturgical books.

The theological meaning of mystery

Mystery of its very self needs some explanation. In popular language mystery is a negative. It is often presumed to be something that cannot be understood. In another usage it is seen as something with twists and turns, like a plate of spaghetti, something like an intensive detective novel. The theological use of the fullest scriptural background of the word mystery is mostly associated with the German Benedictine Monk of Maria Laach, Odo Casel OSB.

In roughly the same period of the second half of the 19th century German scripture scholars, at Tubingen University, had recovered the Pauline theology of the Mystical Body of Christ. Major significance of this was to go beyond the loss of the primary meaning of the Body of Christ to be the Church, when it was channeled in the 5th and 6th centuries of the eclipse of the sense of symbols so that the Body of Christ now was interpreted in the realism of the presence of Christ of Nazareth in the Eucharist. All of the communitarian dimensions of the integrated life of the Church tended to be channeled into a personalist interpretation of devotion leading to grace.

In the 19th Century there had been a great development of religionsgeschichte (comparative religion or history of religions). This approach continued into the 20th century that led to a negative critique to the use of the "mystery" concept because the prevailing view was that such comparisons were to the detriment of Christianity. By and large, in the Greco-Roman world the shrines and places of mystery worship were places of water rites that were associated with images of birth-rebirth.

The theme was often dying-rising, or death-rebirth, based somewhat on the natural sequence of seasons of the year, and their variations based on solar or lunar calendars. Casel overturned the negative focus in mystery cults by claiming Christianity was the fulfillment of the grouping of the mystery religions, which he termed praeparatio evangelica or a pre-Gospel. There has been observed many similarities and commonalities between the Eastern Mystery cults and the rites of Christianity.

In a similar way Justin Martyr, in his defense to the Roman Governor (c150 AD), had spoken of similarities of water rites in Christianity and in mystery cults because the devil had transferred them from the Church to the cults. Justin made the claim that Christians revered pietas and their piety was proof of theirs being a valid religion.

Odo Casel of Maria Laach

Through his publications Casel met with considerable resistance, especially by the teaching Church. His new approach to mystery religions ruffled some feathers, or raised hackles, especially dealing with the era of the Greek speaking Fathers. He showed how in patristic writers, and to some extent in patristic liturgies, there was a corresponding vocabulary where the terms and expressions had been borrowed from the mystery cults and were used to explain and illustrate especially the sacraments. Also in the Western Latin Church the same key words were used. There are complex concepts that show the combination of this.

The vital word mystery was Mysterion in Greek which was literally translated as mysterium in Latin and that became sacramentum in church Latin and subsequently sacrament in other languages deriving from the Latin.

The teachings of Council of Chalcedon (c441-450) justified the divine/human duality of the person of Christ and was continued through the ministry of the Church. Pope Leo I expressed this transition in the phrase quod redemptoris conspicuum in sacramenta transivit which is translated as "what was visible about the redeemer passed over into the sacraments of the Church".
What Our Lord did visibly has passed into the sacraments of the Church has been epitomised in the prayer which Leo the Great wrote for the Christmas Mass in the 5th century and which is still used in every Mass in the Latin Rite, when the water and wine are mingled, to the words “through the mystery of this water and wine may we become the sharers in the divinity of Him who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

The word sacrament has various connotations in the early Patristic church. For example, feasts and seasons were called mysteries or sacraments i.e. Christmas, Easter, special events in the life of Christ. It has ramifications in the history of the numbers of sacraments. For example, St Augustine thought there were hundreds of sacraments. His definition was that anything material, such as ashes, palms, candles, can lead to the divine. Even the final definition of numbers in the 12th century was a debate, with St Peter Lombard, settling on seven, with the last ritual excluded being the Coronation of Kings being deleted from the sacraments.

In modern times the broadening expansion of the nature of sacraments has been reshaping the definition of a sacrament to be “anything human endowed with divine power”. This expansion has been exemplified as to how Vatican II could call the liturgical year a quasi sacrament and likewise with religious life.

The main theological teaching of Odo Casel was that the worship of the Church, the rites and ceremonies, the feasts and seasons etc were the occasion that the work and person of Christ were perpetuated down the centuries in the life of the continuing Church.

The Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Liturgy takes a direct quote from one of the Prayers over the Gifts in the Roman Missal. At the time of Vatican II this text was read on the 9th Sunday after Easter but by the time it was situated in the Roman Missal of Pope Paul VI, in 1969, and every edition since, this prayer is allocated to the second Sunday in Ordinary Time, almost the very beginning of the “ordinary” action of the Church in the context of the every day and every Sunday of the life of the Church. The contemporary text of the prayer reads:

Father,  
may we celebrate the eucharist  
with reverence and love,  
for when we proclaim the death of the  
Lord  
you continue the work of his redemption,  
who is Lord for ever and ever.

This focus on the continuous now of redemption becomes the heart of the second paragraph in the Liturgy Constitution.

For it is through the liturgy especially the divine Eucharistic Sacrifice, that “the work of our redemption is exercised”. The liturgy is thus the outstanding means by which the faithful can express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church. It is of the essence of the Church that she be both human and divine, visible, and yet invisibly endowed, eager to act, and yet devoted to contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it. She is all these things in such a way that in her the human is directed and subordinated to the Divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, which we seek... at the same time the liturgy fortifies the faithful in their capacity to preach Christ. To outsiders the liturgy thereby reveals the church raised above the nations (cf. Is 11: 12). Under this sign the scattered [people] of God are being gathered into one (cf Jn 11: 52) until there is one fold and one shepherd (cf Jn 10: 16).

Mystery in the theology of Casel

Odo Casel’s notion of mystery is not something we cannot understand. Rather it is something we know through revelation and in which we can continue to grow by the way we celebrate and live it. This brings us closer to the scriptural or biblical notion as well as the patristic notion of Christian freedom. Casel did not emphasise these biblical roots enough to avoid pressure from authorities, but his biblical perspective was developed more in the 1940s by his successors and second generation advocates. Casel’s contribution was further advantaged by the major sequence of encyclicals of Pope Pius XII – even in the midst of WWII and its first years post war.

- In 1943 Pope Pius XII published the encyclical Mystici Corporis which affirmed the Pauline theology of the Church as the Body of Christ, compared to the Trent’s model in the style of institution.
- In 1943 he published Divino Afflante Spiritu affirming the tentative work of early 20th century scripture scholars and encouraging all scholars to continue their mission in opening up the Scriptures.
- In 1947 Pope Pius XII published the encyclical Mediator Dei, the first Papal encyclical endorsing the monastic liturgical movement of the 19th century and the pastoral liturgical movement of the 20th century beginning with the communal reforms of St Pius X.

This trinity of the affirmation emerging from Rome was taken even further at other levels and forums which, in retrospect, we can trace the beginnings of the Papal leadership that led to substantial changes in liturgical life and practice and, ultimately to the calling of the Vatican Council.

In the same year of 1947 Pope Pius XII also spoke to the First International Congress of Pastoral Liturgy at Assisi-Rome. In his address to the 1300 participants of the Assisi convention who came to Rome Pius XII called the Liturgical Movement the sign of the Holy Spirit operating in the Church. Many of the earlier promoters and adherents to the Liturgical Movement would have been affirmed at the confluence of direction in Rome itself.

The Restoration of the Easter Vigil

After the first year’s experiment Pius XII set up a special commission of skilled experts to plan and review the decree for a further three years extension. There was also an encouragement for priests in parishes to ask their
Bishop for approval to use the faculties of this decree of the Pope on January 11th 1952. Very little was subsequently heard about the Pian Commission until John XXIII’s call for an ecumenical council led to the formation of a Liturgical Commission led by Cardinal Lercaro with Monsignor Bugnini as the Secretary who carried their work into the halls of Vatican II and beyond.

The Pian liturgical commission is one of the building blocks that Pius XII obviously had in mind, beyond the publication of the encyclicals, to initiate further steps for renewal and reform. The most obvious outcome of that is in 1951, when he initiated a trial adaptation of the Liturgy of the Easter Vigil, which after three years experiential practice led to the formal restoration of all Holy Week in 1955 to begin in 1966.6

In short, this meant that the structure of Holy Week was to restore the biblical timeframes of the events celebrated, from Palm Sunday through the Easter Vigil. This meant that no longer was the Last Supper commemoration at the Thursday Mass at 9am. Similarly the Good Friday celebration was in the mid afternoon biblical hours not on Friday morning. In this spirit the Easter Vigil was no longer to be on Saturday morning but only began after sunset with the Easter fire on Saturday evening into the lengthy catechumenal ceremonies leading to Christian Initiation and full communion in the life of the Church with the Vigil.

Easter Mass at night
Part of the 1951 Easter experiment was to invite feedback from the Bishops of the world on the renewed format for Holy Week. The collegial consultation between the Pope and his partnering Bishops around the world was a further example to consultations with Bishops leading up to the Declaration of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 (Pius IX) and the Declaration of the Assumption in 1954 (Pius XII). The Theology of the Mystical Body of the Church was being expressed in very tangible and visible levels long before Vatican II suggested the Synod of Bishops to be a forum of bishops regular consultations.

The final step in the renewal of Holy Week, following this consultation and referral between the Pope and the Bishops, was the concluding practice that from 1956 the Easter celebrations with the full Vigil at the proper hour would be the norm for the Roman Rite from that year, 1956, onwards.7 Other historical recoveries in the new Order for Holy Week included the Washing of the Feet which had historically been a monastic tradition associated with the Abbot’s washing the feet of his community members. Such an innovation in Holy Week has been repeated by John Paul II with the new tradition of renewal of priestly vows inserted as part of the Blessing of the Oils on Holy Thursday or earlier in the week.

Mystery in the Bible
Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are on the one level of the Divine presence revealed with the human in events, human encounters and occasionally Divine interventions supported by the messengers of Yahweh through the angels and others mediums.

The biblical basis of Mysterion does occur in the Scriptures, chiefly in the New Testament though there are some occurrences in Hebrew and Aramaic references e.g. Daniel Mk: 11, after the parable of the sower – the secret of the Kingdom. “These mysteries have been revealed to you, but to other spoken in parables”.

Mystery in the writings of Paul
Paul, the product of his formation in the Jewish Rabbinical schools, was forced by his Damascus encounter to see more than human presence. He connected that spiritual body of Christ whom he had persecuted and took up the notion of the mystery of the kingdom to mean God’s purpose or plan revealed first in the Hebrew Scripture, conceived from eternity, but then revealed in Christ and now put into effect by Christ through the Spirit animating the Church now proclaimed.

Some of Paul’s dominant ideas can be gleaned from his subsequent writings to the Christian communities he had founded, as can be seen when he tries to lead his Jewish converts beyond their previous convictions that pagans can never be saved. For example:

Glory to Him who is able to give you the strength to live according to the Good News I preach and in which I proclaim Christ Jesus, the revelation of a mystery kept secret for endless ages, but now so clear that it must be broadcast to pagans everywhere to bring them to the obedience of faith. This is only what Scripture has predicted and it is all part of the way the eternal God wants things to be. He alone is wisdom; give glory therefore to Him through Jesus Christ forever and ever. Amen. Rom 16: 25-27.

The community at Corinth had raised some angst in Paul that they were not fully yet a Christian community but he urges them to connect with, and respect, the Body of Christ. For example:

I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, the gospel you received and in which you were firmly established; because the gospel will save you only if you keep believing exactly what I preached to you ... I taught you what I had been taught myself, namely that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; and that he was raised to life on the third day. That he appeared first to Cephas and secondly to the twelve. 1 Cor 15: 1-7.

A text that has become more prominent in the theology of death and used in the sprinkling of the body at death or at the funeral is Paul’s connection with the first encounter in Baptism:

You have been taught that when we were baptized in Christ Jesus you were baptized in his death: in other words: when we were baptized we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father’s glory we too might live a new life. If in union with Christ we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his resurrection. Roman 6: 3-6.
Recovering the Paschal Mystery

Mystery as unifying past, present, and future

These major themes, not just Paul’s, but the vision of the New Testament, became the overall category in which to express the life of the Church. This paradigm from salvation history, initiated by Odo Casel, employs a threefold concept flowing from, and into, the one plane.

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As we indicated above the essence of mystery translated into the various languages used by the people in different times moved from *Mysterium* in Greek, to *Mysterion* in Latin, to *Sacramentum* in Latin. In fact they are all are facets of the one mystery of Christ’s mission in the world, supported by the promise to be with the Church for all time. No matter in what era in the church history, we need to keep in mind that in every age, and in every nation, the ministry of the Church is shared at all levels of hierarchy and ministry. All such actions are facets of the continuous mission of the Church.

In contemporary Biblical theology the benefits and ongoing development of much biblicoliturgical renewal means the connection with the Hebrew tradition, and in particular meanings of vital words and key phrases. The vital dimensions of these phrases are exactly connected with the celebration of the Paschal Mystery into the three fold dimensions of Past, Present and Future. This becomes most obvious in the ecumenical confluence amongst nearly all Christian traditions that the analysis of the Passover and the memorial dimensions of looking back while looking forward in the shared celebration of the moment in evoking the Holy Spirit to bring about the final goals of God’s plan. An extraordinary example is in the structure of the Eucharistic Prayer where many traditions have very similar texts and Biblical theology.

Anamnesis

The word anamnesis is the first dimension of the phrase of the three fold paradigm of Past, Present, Future. The word is literally the denial of amnesia, because in Greek to put “α” or “αν” before a word, such as ahistorical, apolitical or anathema, makes the word negative. Thus non-forgetting is a form positively straining and urging to remember. An obvious connection is the gospel words of the Last Supper with Jesus’ words “Do this in memory of me” (Lk 22: 19).

When God remembers, or God is reminded, then God comes and acts. This is not a magic result but the God-given signs by which people can invoke God and God will respond graciously because these are the very means Godself has given; cf Exodus 12: 13. The memorial is for the benefit not just for Israel, but of Godself i.e., again for Israel.

Among liturgists and Scripture scholars there is now a strong consensus that memorial is now to be taken to mean the presence of the fruits of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Anamnesis (Past)
Eucharistic Prayer I

*Father, we celebrate the memory of Christ, your Son.*
*We, your people and your ministers,*
*recall his passion,*
*his resurrection from the dead,*
*and his ascension into glory;* and from the many gifts you have given us we offer to you, God of glory and majesty, the holy and perfect sacrifice: the bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation.*

Anamnesis refers to the prayer just after the Institution Narrative (as above) stemming from the invitation “do this in memory of me” whereby in Eucharist and Sacraments the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection are spread to his people now.

There can be a notion that the past is made present to us even to the extent of Christ’s death being repeated – rather than taking us back to the original event and sharing the fruits of Christ’s resurrection. In that context the words of the hymn “were you there when they crucified my Lord?” is not a substitute for a visual portrayal for the Passion of the Christ. The three fold time frame is in recalling the sufferings of Christ and in our commitment in the power of the Spirit we are strengthened to continue to follow His Way. The past is renewed/re-presented to us.

Epiclesis

Epiclesis is the second dimension of the phrase of the three fold paradigm of Past, Present, Future. It literally means invocation, but specifically the invocation of the Holy Spirit – in making real the presence of Christ in his ministry with the Church.

Perhaps the Eucharistic Prayer III gives the clearest expression of the sense of past brought in the present for a specific purpose in the direct invocation of the Holy Spirit. The action of the Holy Spirit in the first epiclesis level focuses on the Eucharistic change of bread and wine.

Epiclesis (Present)
Eucharistic Prayer III

*And so, Father, we bring you these gifts.*
*We ask you to make them holy by the power of your Spirit,*
*that they may become the body and blood of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,*
at whose command we celebrate this eucharist.*

After the narration of the Last Supper the second level of the epiclesis unfolds to show the ongoing nurturing of the Spirit’s mission with us as part of the Body of Christ in His mission for the Church:
Father, calling to mind the death your Son endured for our salvation, his glorious resurrection and ascension into heaven, and ready to greet him when he comes again, we offer to you in thanksgiving his holy and living sacrifice.

Look with favour on your Church’s offering, and see the Victim whose death has reconciled us to yourself.

Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ.

The Holy Spirit then became the Divine agent of the Holy Trinity, bringing the historical work of Jesus Christ into the present, to present again to the Father in the form of prayer as doxology.⁸

Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, almighty father, forever and ever. Amen.

Prolepsis

Prolepsis is the third dimension of the phrase of the three fold paradigm of Past, Present, Future connecting the past and present in the one plane of God’s plan.

Through the epiclesis the Holy Spirit makes real the action of the Holy Trinity, bringing the historical work of Jesus Christ into the present in order to present Jesus again to the Father as fulfilling the Divine plan in language we call doxology in praising the Trinity. Every Eucharistic Prayer and virtually all Presidential Prayers, like the Collect Prayer, the Prayer over the Gifts, and the Prayer after Communion,⁹ have a unified structure that keeps affirming our worship in God’s presence now and in the eternal future.

Prolepsis (Future)

Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, almighty father, forever and ever. Amen.

It seems some priests are often prone to choose the shortest text or briefest prayer whenever they are made available. Many people have a response like Pavlov’s dog to respond automatically “Amen” whenever the phrase “Through Christ our Lord” is used. That is why it happens so often in the middle of the Prefaces where some of the Prefaces do have such a phrase. With most of the Presidential Prayers there is either a longer form of conclusion, or a shorter form. The issue might be to reflect on whether we can express better and fully the real meaning of the Doxology involving all three: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This could be a Lenten challenge for all priests to think about our responsibilities to the formation of the people.

Invoking the Holy Spirit is the expression of faith, the summit of prayer confident in the fulfillment of the consummation or anticipation of the final goal. We are sharing in the goal of our prayers not only in “making present” the fruits of Christ’s death and resurrection but there is also the faith anticipation of the final consummation in God’s plan, the goal of prolepsis.

The Paschal Mystery in the Year of the Priest

The above development of various epochs of the liturgical life of the Church can be summarised or synthesised in the single phrase the Paschal Mystery. The step by step references, through the origins of mystery in the Bible, obviously emphasise the place of The Word in the Christian tradition. It also draws attention to the shared responsibility at many levels of the duties of those who are called to proclaim the Word of God. This can be illustrated by a single reference in the priestly functions from the Vatican II decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests. Similar to our earlier quote from Chapter 2, paragraph 4, of the Liturgy Constitution, an early quote from this document on Priestly Functions emphasises the unique role of proclaiming the Word, a challenge in this Year of the Priest:

Thus the Ministry of the Word is carried out in many ways, according to the various needs of those who hear and the special gifts of those who preach. In areas or communities which are non Christian, the Gospel draws people to faith and the sacraments of salvation. In the Christian community itself, especially amongst those who seem to understand or believe little of what they practice the preaching of the Word is needed for the very administration of the sacraments. For these are sacraments of faith, and faith is born of the Word and nourished by it.

Such is especially true of the Liturgy of the Word during the celebration of Mass. In this celebration the proclamations of the death and resurrection of the Lord is inseparably joined to the response of the people who hear, and the very offering whereby Christ ratified the New Testament in His blood. The faithful share in this offering both by their prayers and by their recognition of the sacrament for what it is. The dynamic thrust (the eschatological dimension) of all the priest’s action, which is demanded by the very concept of the pilgrim Church moving always forward to its final destination and perfection, is exemplified and realised in the celebration of the Mass. Here in the Liturgy of the Word his Ministry of the Word reaches its high point.¹⁰
Recovering the Paschal Mystery

Conclusion
This is where proclaiming the Word and celebrating the Paschal Mystery in all its facets is the vital lifeline at all levels of the Church.

Endnotes
3 Roman Missal 3. Preparation of the Gifts, to be said sub secreto “in silence” by the priest.
5 ibid p 234
6 ibid pp 245-248
7 Decree and Instruction of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, November 16, 1955 in Sealslitz ibid pp 209-218.
9 Wainwright ibid pp 340-41.

Australia's other ANZAC Day

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The Preparation of the Gifts was low key, but obvious when the French crusty bread was brought forward with a red wine to be poured into the goblets to “become for us the bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation”.

Leading straight into the Eucharistic Prayer, one could respect the power of the grace of these works whereby they have now become the essential presence of our Lord and our God. The breaking of bread was relatively easy and our Eucharistic Ministers knew their roles well.

Conclusion
This paper recounts some aspects of my pilgrimage to take part in the “Other ANZAC Day” at Villers Bretonneux in France in April 2009. While this was a personal journey it provided many opportunities to reflect again on liturgical form and style in a number of traditions, both secular and religious. The structured elements of the Dawn Service and of our small, improvised, group Mass were different, yet similar, in many of the ritual elements and the messages underlying them.

The contrasts between a large pre-planned, orchestrated event, and our small group Mass in an intimate setting seem obvious, yet there were many similarities. In the larger events, which are so popular today, there is an opportunity to join with the throng, to acknowledge a shared history; or quest for new knowledge – similar, perhaps, to the biblical images of the 5,000 who gathered to gain more insight into the teachings of Jesus. The small intimate setting such as the group Mass, again, allows us to take part in our shared history – not forgetting – yet in a forum where the intimacy is intense, and our “eyeballing” each other allows for reflection of a very different kind; which can be uplifting and comforting in equal measure.

Both the mega event of the Dawn Service, and the improvised small group Mass, ran the risk of farce and hyperbole: going through the motions for form’s sake, without due regard to the historical and ritual elements which are integral to such occasions, and of their potential for pastoral impact. With the great Feast of Easter and the secular memorial day of ANZAC calling us to ritual form during the month of April it is fitting that the structural elements of each can provide building blocks to make our ceremonies more poignant. Attention to detail (such a ensuring a good sound system) and to the historical elements which underpin the ceremonies, will ensure that participants gain the true depth of experience which must be the goal of all such occasions. Also, by ensuring that due acknowledgement is made to the calling to Pass Over into new ways of thinking and being, which is integral to the ceremonies, will provide a rich framework for personal and community growth.

Endnotes