

Church in regard to marriage is unlikely to be substantially different today from what the Chief Pastor conceived it to be in his time, namely the fostering among married followers of those many facets of *agape*—kindness, fidelity, mercy—which will make conjugal life a sacrament of the divine covenant. That task has more to do with the living out of marriage than with its definition; it cannot be fulfilled adequately as long as it has not been dissociated from concern for validity. In the sector of the Church from which I write, conditions are favourable for that issue to be at least clearly grasped and for the recommended solution (ratifying the locally existing distinction between valid marriage and sacramental marriage rather than forcefully combining both) to be progressively viewed as desirable. The problem, as it was pointed out to me at a recent deanery meeting, is that in practice the Law must be followed and that it is laid down in other quarters of the Church. Is it too much to hope that the memory of the First Council of Jerusalem will move some influential theologians and canonists to address themselves to this question? Is the tradition according to which marriages between baptised partners require Church recognition for validity and *ipso facto* involve the reception of the Sacrament of Matrimony, one of those ‘necessary things’ which must be imposed upon converts of non-European extraction?

## Recent Catholic Writing

### on the Resurrection

#### (1) The Empty Tomb Story

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The foundation of Christianity, as fact and doctrine, is the resurrection from the dead of Jesus who was crucified,

“a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God”

(I Cor 1: 23 - 24).

Great efforts have been made over the centuries to spell out the presuppositions and implications, historical, metaphysical and theological, of this event, and it is unlikely that anything wholly

new will be discovered now. In the last ten or fifteen years, on the other hand, study of the resurrection narratives in the New Testament has quickened dramatically, among Catholics, and it is important for us all to recognize that some divergence of interpretation is now established. Without attempting even to summarise the ever increasing Catholic literature on the subject, or to examine the various problems which the divergence creates, and which the new interpretation involves, it seems worthwhile to delineate briefly some features of the approach to the gospel accounts of the Resurrection to be found in some recent Catholic theology from Germany. The same approach may be traced elsewhere, most notably in major works by the Dominican theologians Christian Duquoc and Edward Schillebeeckx, but since neither of these has yet been translated into English, it seems more useful to limit this survey to three more accessible works: Hans Küng's *On being a Christian*, Walter Kasper's *Jesus the Christ*, and *The Common Catechism*. It is not a matter of accumulating authorities for the new approach; it is rather a question of registering how widely accepted the new approach already is.

That Hans Küng should disturb generally accepted ideas will surprise nobody; he has done that so often in the past twenty years that many readers now turn away from his books. As they do so, however, they should not ignore the fact that his books are more widely read than those of any other contemporary Catholic theologian: for better or worse, many thousands of Catholics find their faith more profoundly explored and more illuminatingly articulated in his writings than anywhere else—and many who disagree with him have to acknowledge that, in other respects, the air of theological liberty which we now all breathe is due in large measure to his courage. Walter Kasper, on the other hand, is a distinctly conservative theologian, who often finds himself in disagreement with Hans Küng on various matters. As for *The Common Catechism*, it is perhaps the single most important theological publication in the last ten years—perhaps even in the last four hundred years. Apart from the fact that it is written with such simplicity and freedom from jargon that almost anybody could read it, it is a systematic presentation of Christian beliefs produced jointly by theologians of the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches who find in the process that over a great deal of the ground agreement is possible. France and Switzerland are represented as well as Germany, and the thirty-six collaborators include, to mention names well known in theological circles, on the Protestant side, Ferdinand Hahn, Heinrich Ott, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Ulrich Wilckens, and, on the Catholic side, Alois Grillmeier, Walter Kasper, René Laurentin, Karl Lehmann, and Rudolf Pesch.

In so many ways, in the last ten years, the Catholic community in this country has been disconcerted by quite unexpected

shifts in theological perspective. In our relationships with other churches, for example, and in our thinking about sexuality, perspectives have recently opened up which no one would have predicted ten years ago. What judgment is to be made is another matter. The rapid advance of views which were so recently unthinkable among us does not guarantee that they are sound—though it need not make us suspect and dismiss them as passing fads either. Our only purpose here, then, is to pinpoint some recent Catholic thinking on the gospel stories of the empty tomb and of the appearances of the risen Christ to his disciples.

The empty tomb narrative appears in all four gospels and the differences between the versions repay study. Mark's account is, however, generally held to be primary and we may limit ourselves to it here. For the *Catechism* theologians the eight verses in question (Mark 16: 1 - 8) form "the conclusion of Mark's gospel in its original form", and also constitute "the oldest account of Easter in the gospels" (p. 169). As everybody knows, there is no way of deciding once and for all whether Mark's gospel concludes as the writer intended or merely breaks off abruptly for some unknown reason (either because he was interrupted or because the text has been damaged). Odd though it is to end with a conjunction, as the Greek text does, the very possibility of this cannot be excluded on grammatical or stylistic grounds. Whether Mark's gospel concludes intentionally with the flight of the women from the tomb is something that, in the end, the reader decides—and has to decide—on purely internal literary grounds, on the basis of his reading of the preceding chapters of the gospel as a whole. This means, in effect, that we decide on implicitly theological presuppositions and criteria. It either fits or fails to fit with the reader's interpretation of Mark's gospel as a whole that it ends without any appearance of the risen Christ. Many readers feel that Mark's gospel must be incomplete because it has no such resurrection appearance: the writer of Matthew's gospel may have been among the first to feel this. Many others, including the *Catechism* theologians, find that Mark's gospel concludes appropriately *without* any appearance narrative.

The *Catechism* theologians go so far as to say that the empty tomb narrative in Mark is "the oldest account of Easter in the gospels". In other words, although he apparently knew of a seeing of the risen Christ in Galilee (Mark 16: 7), Mark regarded the Easter message as adequately proclaimed in his empty tomb narrative. That would mean, of course, that if Mark, composing his gospel about AD 66-70, felt no more need than Paul, writing his letters in the preceding twenty years, of providing appearance narratives in anything remotely like the style of the other three evangelists, the question arises as to whether resurrection appearances of that kind are anything like as central an element in Easter faith as is commonly supposed by Catholics. If, as his text certainly allows one

to think, Mark deliberately omitted appearance narratives of which he had knowledge, possibilities arise which, though of a different sort, are quite as disturbing to accepted ideas as those produced by the alternative supposition—that Mark had no such detailed narratives at his disposal at all. The question of the status of the appearance narratives in the other three gospels may be deferred until we come to them.

For the *Catechism* theologians, the women's visit to the tomb as we now have it since Mark wrote it down need not be taken simply as a historical account (p. 170). While clearly wanting to leave it open for any who wish to do so to go on reading these verses as a first-hand report of how certain women found the tomb of Jesus empty, the weight of the *Catechism* interpretation leans towards treating the verses as we now have them as a setting of the church's already established Easter faith in the context of an angelic message. The very attempt to anoint the body two nights and a day after burial cannot be historical, as the author of Matthew's gospel realised. The stress on the greatness of the stone—two of only eight verses deal with the stone, and the sight of the "megolith" is conveyed very effectively in the succinct Greek—suggests that this is at least as symbolic as historical. Rather than a tradition handed down from the beginning of how the women found the tomb empty and concluded that Jesus had been raised, the *Catechism* theologians plainly prefer to take these verses as a narrative setting of the early church's already existing Easter faith in terms of an angelic revelation. If, as they say, "we take the whole as a presentation of the message of Easter announced by the angel", then "it is probably a more adequate interpretation of Mark's text to regard this section ... not primarily as 'the story of the empty tomb', but, in the light of its central theme, as Mark's Easter gospel" (p.170). The theme of these verses, as we have them, is more the origin of Easter faith in divine revelation than concern with the historical fact of the tomb's being empty. "The clear intention of the passage is to use the messenger angel as a means of giving the women—and through them the reader—the news of the raising of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, and to present it as 'divine news', and not a human invention" (p. 170). According to the *Catechism* theologians, then, what the angel says is more central to the story than what the women find, and the theme of the text as Mark presents it is the divinely revealed character of the church's Easter faith rather than the fact of the empty tomb as evidence. It does not follow from this, however, as they go on to say, that there was no tradition that certain women found the tomb empty—"on the whole it seems probable" (p. 171). In other words, for the *Catechism* theologians, Mark's empty tomb story is a dramatic presentation of the Easter message with all the stress on what God has done rather than on what the women found (proclamation rather

than apologetics)—but that does not mean that the tomb was not empty.

Walter Kasper, a member of the *Catechism* group, starts in his book from the question whether the empty tomb narrative is a report of how Easter faith actually started, or a reflection upon Easter faith long after it was established. The generally accepted view, so he says (p. 126), is that the Easter faith sprang from the discovery of the empty tomb. It is on the strength of what this account tells us—together with the appearance narratives—that we can ground our faith historically. Kasper has no doubt that the generally accepted view can be defended “using historico-critical methods”; he cites the work of the distinguished Protestant scholar Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen. He goes on, however, to qualify the generally accepted view so considerably that he has no difficulty in entertaining the legitimacy of a different approach.

For Kasper, as for the *Catechism* theologians, the empty tomb story as we have it, is not presented as a historical report (p. 127). His argument runs as follows:

“The wish to anoint a dead body, which has already been put in its shroud in the tomb, three days later, is not given any explanation, such as being a custom of the time, and is unintelligible in the climatic conditions of Palestine. The fact that the women do not realize until they are already on the way that they would need help to roll back the stone and enter the tomb betrays a degree of thoughtlessness which is not easy to explain. We must assume therefore that we are faced not with historical details but with stylistic devices intended to attract attention and raise excitement in the minds of those listening”  
(p. 127)

Thus, for Kasper too, Mark’s intention need not be interpreted as simply being to hand on the evidence of certain women. The narrative seems rather to be “constructed” to reach its climax in the message of the angel: “he is raised!” The silence of the women—“they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid”—with which Mark’s gospel concludes, is “a typically Markan motif”, which confirms, for Kasper, that the text is more marked by theological preoccupations of the period AD 66-70 than historical details dating from AD 33-35.

It may be noted in passing that it is since William Wrede first drew attention in a book published in 1901 to the pattern of recurrent silences in Mark’s gospel that the question has been open as to how far Mark’s record of events as they happened in AD 30-35 is not rather a theological tract dealing primarily with ecclesiological and missiological problems current in AD 66-70. This is certainly not at all an easy matter to assess. The spectrum of interpretations now runs from treating Mark’s gospel as an attempt to put down the inflated notions of certain early Christians about the

importance of miracles by insisting on discipleship as sharing the suffering of the cross (Weeden) to continuing to regard it as a faithful attempt to hand on the facts about Jesus (Lane). The truth, as so often, no doubt lies somewhere between these two extremes, as Hugh Anderson and Rudolf Pesch argue in their recent commentaries. But the great and ever-widening gap that divides Catholics from each other today is due in part to the fact that many go on assuming that the gospels are straightforward enough historical records while others now read them otherwise. The difficulty is that if the former become more aware of what the latter are doing they may either lose their own respect for the reliability of the gospels or else suspect the others of “heresy”—while the latter, perhaps still a tiny minority, can no longer imagine themselves remaining Catholics unless they nourish and sustain themselves in part on the newer exegesis. Just as, for example, Picasso, Stravinsky and James Joyce remain largely unassimilated, still a minority taste, more than sixty years after they began their creative work, so too in Catholic theology there seems to be a parallel between current movements in biblical exegesis and the blank hostility and incomprehension which they often meet—not to mention the incautious enthusiasm elsewhere! It would be impossible in Holland or Germany, but it is not unusual in Britain for highly intelligent Catholics with international reputations in their own fields, sometimes for revolutionary ideas, to have no sympathy with, or elementary knowledge of, current work in theology. Those who find much in the biblical exegesis of the last seventy years to thank God for easily become estranged from, and suspect to, those who wish that theologians should not produce anything very different from what has previously been generally accepted.

Clear that the emptiness of the tomb as a historical fact is not the point of the story of the women’s visit to the tomb, and that it is thus not to be taken primarily as a historical record, Walter Kasper goes on to suggest (following Ludger Schenke) that it makes better sense to read it as a “reading” appropriate for a liturgical service:

“We know from other sources that in Jewish society at that time it was normal to honour the tombs of distinguished men. So the primitive Christian community in Jerusalem may well have honoured Jesus’ tomb and have assembled yearly at or in the empty tomb on the anniversary of the Resurrection for a cultic ceremony, during which the joyful message of the Resurrection would be proclaimed and the empty tomb used as a symbol” (p. 127)

It is noteworthy, however, that, like the *Catechism* theologians, as we have seen, Walter Kasper explicitly states that classifying the so-called empty tomb story as a sacred lection, a *lesson*, or a “cult aetiology” in his jargon, implies nothing either way about the his-



toricity of an event behind it. On the contrary, Kasper reads Mark's concluding verses as making best sense on the hypothesis that they started life as the precipitate of a liturgical reading at the earliest Easter celebrations of the primitive church in Jerusalem—but he does not regard that interpretation of the text as we have it as excluding either the historical fact of the empty tomb or even the existence of a historically reliable tradition about this. But even if we could prove that there is a historical core to the empty tomb story, so Kasper argues (p. 128), this would have nothing to do with providing proof of the Resurrection as a fact. "Of itself, the empty tomb is an ambiguous phenomenon". His conclusion is that originally there were *two* traditions—the tradition that certain women did in fact visit the tomb and find it empty, and the tradition of celebrating Easter with a liturgical service at the tomb—and that Mark "must have been the first to combine them" (p. 128). The lection about the angel's message which accompanied the (hypothetical) Easter liturgy in Jerusalem would have been superimposed upon, or conflated with, the (probably reliable) report that certain women found the tomb empty. This somewhat contorted interpretation is clearly far from inescapable, and Kasper claims no more for it than that it is the best way he can see to account for the difficulties of the text. The empty tomb story shows either too much or too little: the angel's message is already the established faith of the early church, but the empty tomb itself is ambiguous. The purpose which Mark ascribes to the women cannot be right, and the behaviour which he attributes to them as they depart makes sense within his theological perspective but is hard to account for as a historical detail—they could not have said nothing to any one, otherwise how could Mark ever have known? How does one refute Dibelius' suggestion that, taken literally, the closing phrase would mean that Mark was the first to make the incident known? When, and why, did the women break their silence, and eventually tell somebody? If Mark was the first to be told, either soon after the event or while he was composing his gospel, why did he say that the women said nothing to anybody? The puzzle has been obvious from the beginning: the author of Matthew's gospel revises Mark's text and states flatly that the women went straight from the tomb to tell the disciples (Matt 28: 8), though admittedly he never says that they actually did so. Walter Kasper's interpretation may seem unduly complicated to many readers, but it must surely challenge others to return to the text and discover the complexities that make a straightforward interpretation far less obvious and compelling than many would suppose.

For Walter Kasper and the *Catechism* theologians, then, the empty tomb narrative may indeed show traces of the record of a historical incident (a search for the tomb), but in its present form

the text permits, if it doesn't altogether require, an interpretation which leaves the historicity of the tomb visit on one side. Finding it impossible to credit that women would ever have sought to enter a tomb to anoint a decomposing body (as they would have supposed), these theologians prefer to assume that the tomb may have been identified later on—after the Easter faith had already been established—and now convinced that the crucified one had been raised.

Turning finally to Hans Küng, we find that he takes a very different line on that last issue. The Resurrection of Christ could still be bodily, Küng argues (p.366), even if the tomb were not empty. He clearly has scriptural as well as metaphysical arguments at hand. Just as, according to Paul (I Cor 15: 44), God will raise the dead in a “spiritual body”, *soma pneumatikon*, a phrase that surely comes near to transgressing the bounds of sense, evidently without necessarily emptying their tombs, so too God would not need to take to himself the relics of Jesus' earthly existence to bring about his resurrection. Metaphysically, there could be identity of the person without continuity between the earthly and the heavenly or “spiritual” body. At the time that the gospels were being composed, Küng seems to think, the empty tomb narrative functioned as a way of denying that the Lord Jesus was some other being, say some heavenly being, besides the man who was crucified and whose body was laid in the tomb. Küng is inclined to think that the original conclusion of Mark's gospel has been lost—“such losses were only too frequent with books written on papyrus leaves or in the form of rolls” (p. 365); and he thinks that the original conclusion may indeed have mentioned an appearance of the risen Christ, as in the other gospels. It is thus no surprise to find that Küng sees not Easter faith but simply fear and terror as the message of Mark's narrative of the women's visit to the tomb. Küng discussed the exegetical parts of his book with his Tübingen colleague Gerhard Lohfink, a distinguished scholar and the author of the standard work of the Ascension. It is clear, however, that he follows his own line and makes his own judgments on the various exegetical options which are open.

While allowing that “there are a number of influential exegetes even today who hold that the empty tomb is historically probable” (p. 365), surely a rather peremptory and presumptuous statement, Hans Küng insists that the simple fact of the empty tomb, being ambiguous, would prove nothing in itself—which few would dispute. He prefers, however, to take the story of the empty tomb as an expression in narrative form—“probably relatively early”—of the early church's faith in the Resurrection as contained in the message of an angel. The angel's message forms the centre of the narrative, which Küng sees as “shaped in accordance with the style of Old Testament epiphany stories” (p. 364).



Once again, what matters is not the empty—or, more precisely, the opened—tomb; it is the angel's message. The angel, or angels, who proclaim the Easter creed, function as interpreting angels in Old Testament style, and their appearance and activity are described in terms of contemporary apocalyptic literature. The only meaning that we can now be sure of finding in the story is that, for the early Christian tradition within which Mark's gospel at least was written, the message of Easter—"the crucified Jesus of Nazareth has been raised"—was regarded as *revealed by God*. How that revelation occurred, so Küng clearly thinks, had nothing whatever to do with the empty tomb:

"The empty tomb is not a condition, but at best an illustration, of the Easter event. It is not an article of faith, it is neither the ground nor the object of the Easter faith" (p. 366). Thus, according to this line of thought, the story of the angel's message to the women at the tomb may be read as a dramatic representation—composed some time after the Easter faith had established itself among the disciples—of their conviction that, whatever effort they had themselves put into "understanding the scriptures" (Luke 24: 45), their faith derived not from themselves but by revelation from God. Unlike the Sadducees, they knew both the scriptures and the power of God (Mark 12: 24).

It remains for us to examine how these theologians understand the gospel narratives of the risen Lord's appearances to his disciples. Then, having described the new lines of exegesis which have already become so widespread, we may be placed to discuss the implications of this approach—and of the divergence among Catholics which it reveals.

*(The second part will appear next month)*

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