

Odo Casel: Mystery, Worship and Word

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It is just fifty years since the inception of the liturgical movement associated with the great Benedictine abbey of Maria Laach in the Rhineland. What has come to be known as the *theologia lacensis*, the theology of Laach, is only the doctrinal side of a multiple appeal to the Catholic world to foster its truest insights, an appeal which goes out just as much in the way the monks worship in the ancient basilica and in the works of religious art that come from the ateliers. But whatever the place and importance of other aspects of this manifold undertaking, the theological ideas which derive from Maria Laach have proved by far its most decisive influence on the general life of the Church. The most characteristic of these ideas are those of Dom Odo Casel. Born at Coblenz in 1886, he entered the monastery in 1905 and was soon caught up in the liturgical and patristic research which was to form his life's work. His theory about how the death of Christ, itself the greatest event in sacred history, is reactualised in the liturgy, the famous 'doctrine of mystery-presence', aroused passionate argument in German-speaking theological circles in the 1930s and soon came to play an essential part in the remarkable outburst of interest in liturgical, ecclesiological and theological issues that has taken place in the last thirty years within European Catholicism. In 1922 Casel had become chaplain to a community of Benedictine nuns in Westphalia and it was there that he suddenly died, during the Easter vigil in 1948, just as he had sung the threefold *Lumen Christi* and as he was about to sing the *Exsultet*. For one whose whole life had been dedicated to bringing out the meaning of the greatest festival in Christian life no more fitting end could have been devised by the pious imagination of a medieval hagiographer.

Casel's most representative and influential book was *Das christliche Kultmysterium*, published in 1932 and now made available in English¹. The translation has been made from the most recent German edition and

¹THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP, by Dom Odo Casel; D.L.T., 35s.

thus contains, besides the original book, a generous supplement of extracts from letters, conferences, notes, etc., mostly, though not entirely, from Casel's later years. Fr Charles Davis has contributed a very useful preface to introduce the English edition. Before we tackle Casel's ideas, however, something must be said about the quality of this translation. Apart from the ugly cover, one is also distressed by the irrational use of italics and capitals throughout the book: Church, church; Fathers, fathers; Logos, *logos*, etc., often within a few lines of each other. Presumably none of that is the fault of the anonymous translator (all that one can make out about him is that he knows a good deal about philosophy and scholasticism and that he has read John of St Thomas as well as St Thomas Aquinas). So far as the translation itself goes, it may be said at once that it reads fairly easily and that I found no instance in which what Casel was trying to say entirely failed to come across. Nevertheless it is not at all a good translation. If the only point of reading a book in these busy days is to get a rough idea of the general drift, then this version will certainly do—and there is a sense, as we shall see, in which this is all one wants from Casel anyway. But after a careful check of the first twenty or so pages against the German text, I have to report that they are so full of mistakes and infelicities, even if mostly of minor significance, that the whole book would probably benefit from a thorough revision. Perhaps a brief analysis of a page taken almost at random (page 24) will show what I mean. The following sentence is part of a quotation from St Methodius: 'This *pneuma* of truth, sevenfold, according to the prophet, is called the *Logos*' right hand; God takes from him, after the holy distraction, that is the incarnation and the passion, and from him makes the helpers, the souls which are bound up to him and entrusted to him.' Nobody could maintain that this is a shapely English sentence or that the meaning is very clear. What is in fact being said is that the *side*, not the right hand, of the Word may truly be identified with the Spirit of truth and that God, taking from Christ's side during his *ecstasy* (a not uncommon patristic way of talking about the Passion), prepares for him a *helpmate*, not helpers, that is the Church (in the same way as God created Eve from the side of the sleeping Adam.) Why the translator should have here given a version which misses most of the point when he shows later on (page 166) that he understands it after all, there is no way of telling, but this is a good example of how he blurs the meaning all the time. A little further down page 24 he suppresses the inverted commas round 'memorial of the Passion' and thus loses the reference to what Methodius is quoted as saying on the

previous page (but he had already lost it by inexplicably translating 'suffering' instead of 'Passion'). Then Christ has not 'given' himself as the food of the world but 'described' himself as such (*bezeichnet*). Why is 'supernatural life' translated 'life beyond nature'? Is it really true that the word 'supernatural' cannot be used in an ordinary theological context? For that matter, why cannot one say 'his word and his Spirit' instead of 'his utterance and his *pneuma*'? At the last supper the union between Christ and the Church received not 'its concrete and holy fulfilment' but a 'concrete and yet highly spiritual fulfilment', which is saying rather more. A phrase has disappeared from the next sentence. For 'This makes clear that not only the incarnate *Logos* but the *Logos* murdered is the world's food' read 'Here it becomes clear that it is not simply the Word incarnate but the Word sacrificially slain which is the food of the redeemed world'. The choice of 'murdered' is quite astonishing. This does not exhaust the departures from the German text on this one page: let us hope it is the worst in the book.

As it happens, it is on this same page that the word 'spirital' is revived to render *pneumatisch*. Surely a footnote is always desirable when one does a thing like this. German theologians often speak of the Holy Spirit as the *Pneuma*, and the adjective, equally frequent, is peculiarly tricky to render in English. It is not enough to say 'spirital' because this simply does not function to describe the permanent action of the Holy Ghost—to define the Spirit-regenerated milieu in which we live as members of the risen and glorified body of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a good try, to revive 'spirital', though I am not sure it would not be better to rescue 'pneumatic' from the world of industry and technology. Philosophical and theological German is alive and rich in neologisms in a way that English certainly is not, but it would take us too far afield to go into all the implications of that state of affairs.

Turning now to the book itself, *The Mystery of Christian Worship*, let us ask what is the use of having it at this time in the world of English Catholicism. We might begin by recalling that it was to restore the sense of Christian life as 'mystery' that Casel worked and wrote. We need not deceive ourselves into thinking that we have this sense very strongly. And yet the first thing to be said, against Casel's opening chapter, is that it is too facile, and too common among Catholic pundits, to say that we have lost our sense of mystery altogether. It is true that the divine mystery has been pushed out of the world and the world itself shorn of its numinous significance with the gradual advance of science. But surely it is possible to feel that the world's becoming

steadily more profane, more fathomable, much easier to manipulate, only makes God more and more transcendent, more and more remote and awful and unapproachable—more and more GOD. Much current embarrassment with organized religion springs from the fact that people cannot understand how all these doctrines, rules and rites, all this preaching and ceremony, could possibly add up to the divinely instituted medium in which God comes to meet us. It seems only to trivialize God. What truck could God possibly have with all this human fuss—God who, if he exists at all, must surely be someone, some *thing*, so awful, so majestic, so unnameable and so transcendent, that the antics of churchgoing folk seem simply silly and even blasphemous? The world has indeed had to surrender its mystery: it is now at least in principle within the scope and the control of science and technology. But if the Church fails to hold and draw people it is not always because they have too little sense of mystery but often because they have too much. They feel, however obscurely and mistakenly, that the mystery of whatever it is that is absolutely ultimate in the universe is something so stupendous, so unutterable, so *beyond*, that the only decent attitude for us is modest agnosticism. The only fitting response is silence. People who doubt the existence of God are not so much belittling the idea of God as expressing their deepest conviction that *man* is much too incidental and transient a phenomenon in the cosmos to be privileged to have dealings with the force, with the mystery, at its source. It seems incredible that God—the reality so transcendent and mysterious as any respectable God must be—could be sending out signals, so to speak, that beings like us could pick up and interpret. And if this scepticism about man's capacity to hear God commonly passes into total apathy about religion altogether it is not because it cannot do anything else. It has, in fact, the makings of a real basis for faith. What is man that thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man that thou visitest him? *Domine quid est homo quia innotuisti ei?* The whole point of Christianity is that the ultimate source of all existence has disclosed itself within world-history and invited us into itself. It is the role of the Church to be the setting and the medium in which this encounter between us and the divine reality takes place. The Church is what the human race becomes when it picks up God's signals. Our position, in fact, is not simply silent respect for the anonymous mystery. The mystery not only confronts us as something eluding all the categories of our experience. It deals with us and speaks to us. We *can* hear the word of God.

For all that, however, one must admit that the sense of mystery and

the experience of churchgoing do not always coincide. This is true both for unbelievers, who may have some sense of a mysterious reality at the bottom of everything but find churchly and Christian ways of serving and expressing it wholly alien and unreal, and for many believers, who may often find very little in the performance of their churchly duties which brings them into contact with the mystery. Of course we all know that Christianity is a 'mystery' but can we really claim that we behave as if we knew? Are there not still far too many priests gabbling their way through the mass and snarling impatiently at their servers for one to credit that they realise they are engaged in the divine mystery? Are there not far too many of the faithful hunkered down in the pews so apathetically that one cannot believe that they have much sense of the mystery either? Surely it is true for far too many of us that Christianity is, as Fr Davis puts it, only 'a matter of accepting a collection of doctrinal statements and of observing a strict moral code, assisted in this by periodical infusions of helps from God called graces'. For Casel, however, as for the whole Catholic tradition right back to the Gospel, Christianity is primarily a participation in the divine reality, in the intimate life of the living and everlasting God. It is precisely the sense of mystery we have when we consider the ultimate source of the universe that should find expression in the practice of our religion. When Catholics are bored with their faith it is surely for exactly the same reason as many reverent pagans feel that organized religion at all is simply irrelevant. It is because one's sense of God has become divorced from one's experience of the Church. One's awe at the divine reality is not sufficiently 'ecclesialized'—that is not sufficiently tied down to and expressed in one's churchgoing. One fails to sense deeply enough that one's churchly activities are in fact participations in the divine life. It is, therefore, the sense of mystery which must be 'ecclesialized' or the experience of churchgoing which must be 'mysterIALIZED'.

Our churchgoing, above all, is our worship and liturgy. It is precisely Casel's contention that in worship we pass into the realm of the divine reality. This is certainly what Fr Davis calls 'the important message that Casel has for the ordinary Christian', and I agree that it would be a pity if readers were put off by thinking that Casel writes only for specialists and can be understood only by the erudite. These are the ones who will understand him least of all, because they will get sidetracked in scholarly doubts and dissents. What Casel wanted was to 'encourage and promote the interior participation of the layman in the Church's life. It is my hope that worship understood as a mystery which brings in its train the

intense participation of all initiates will encourage this interior participation. The more interior the religious life which lay people share in the Church, the more they will be able to take part in the works and the offices of the Church. In this too there is a measure of preparation for the union of all Christians' (page 104). That already suggests the lines on which one wants to criticize Casel, but first we must try to state briefly what his main idea is.

The greatest event in sacred history is the death of Jesus Christ. The divine plan to bring the human race into communion with God himself was worked out in a series of historical events, in a salvific history, the climax of which was the death and resurrection of Christ, that single event in which the Servant of the Lord died for us all and the Lord God raised him to life again, thereby reconciling the human race, in principle, to himself. This history, culminating in all that Christ did and does, is the mystery of the will of God (Eph. 1, 9), the mystery hidden in God from the beginning of time (3, 9). This, in Casel's terminology, is the *Heilsmysterium*, the redemptive mystery. It is the mystery of God, it is *Christ* (Col. 2, 2), Christ and all he means for the world, all that the Word incarnate is and does in the carrying out of the divine plan for salvation. It is all this, that is, sacred history as the realization of God's redeeming purpose, above all in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that has now passed into the Church. All this has been, so to speak, 'ecclesialized', by taking the form of the Church-community. The *reality*, which is God's will to save us carried out in Christ, is now a churchly reality, or rather *the reality* which is the Church. How that reality becomes visible and tangible in earthly terms is precisely in the liturgical mystery, in the worship of the Church-community, in what Casel called the *Kultmysterium*. The *Heilsmysterium*, then, appears as the *Kultmysterium*. That is, God's redemptive design as effected in the Passion of Christ becomes manifest, not now as the bloody death on Calvary, but as the worship of the Church. The 'mystery', to recapitulate, is *God*, but God revealed and reconciled in *Christ*, and Christ accessible in *Liturgy*.

The liturgy thus ensures the presence amongst us of the *Heilsmysterium*. This is Casel's great message, and of course it is nothing new. His achievement was to renew interest in it and hence to release not only a flood of theological reassessment of liturgy but also the restoration of its pastoral value. The Church as a worshipping community, with all the implications of this for sacramental theory and ecclesiology, is one of the many new fields for theological investigation that have

been discovered in recent years. But, far more important to Casel, the idea that the culminating event in Christian history is reactualised in the worship of the community has led to a re centring of piety and devotion in the corporate act of the Church. It brings out that Christian mysticism is fundamentally liturgical and congregational and something, therefore, within the reach of every devout member of the worshipping community. Here, precisely, is the strength of Casel's work, as an insistence on the irreplaceable value of community worship, of common prayer. The intensely tricky problem of how exactly the *Heilsmysterium* is present in the *Kultmysterium* is the point at which Casel's line becomes so controversial. He maintained, for example, and never budged from the position, that it is not only the *effect* of the Passion that becomes present in the Eucharist but the Passion itself. The difficulties in the way of accepting, or even of understanding, this view are plainly enormous and need not detain us here (it may be noted that some Dutch theologians, notably L. Monden and E. H. Schillebeeckx, have gone some way to integrating Casel's position with the classical tradition of Catholic theology). There are certain other criticisms of Casel's book which it will be more useful to make.

We can now see how the sense we have of the unfathomable can first be Christianised and then ecclesialized. The mystery of liturgico-churchly experience coincides with, expresses and identifies the mystery of whatever it is that is absolutely ultimate in this universe. But how far does Casel's way of recommending the 'mystericalization' of liturgy really work? Is it the best way to encourage the ordinary layman in the practice of congregational worship, and is it ecumenically helpful? I cannot see that it is. To take the latter point—if the Catholic position is to be presented in a way which is ecumenically helpful it must be presented as fully, as representatively, as possible. It does not seem to me that Casel does so. It is not that his basic intuition betrays the Catholic position in the slightest, but it seems to me that he suffers so badly from the limitations of his generation that what he says can now never be adequate or any less than misleading. I am not thinking so much of the pages and pages he devotes to finding analogies and anticipations of Christian worship in the mystery-cults of the Hellenistic world, though that would indeed settle an adherent of the Reformed tradition in the belief that Romanism is nothing but heathen idolatry. What is more damaging, ultimately, than this misplaced erudition is Casel's radical insensitivity to the Bible. In this of course he is like many other Catholic theologians, especially his opponents, and it may sound a hard thing to

say of one who uses scripture so tellingly as he does in this book, but there is too much that gives him away. Is the world of St Paul's imagination really 'shot through with Platonism' (page 101)? Can one accept anything of what he says about Paul's conception of tradition? It is surely far more misleading than enlightening to discuss the Catholic idea of tradition in terms of the Greek mysteries. The Jewish conception of tradition, which Casel dismisses out of hand, is exactly the background one would investigate first today. This is only to say how much more biblical our perspectives are now. We look for the antecedents of blessing not in the mysteries of Eleusis (page 117) but in the Old Testament. Similarly with the structure of the eucharist: probably nobody would now admit that it has any resemblance to pagan ritual, but we should all want to follow the line taken by Fr Audet² and look for a deeper understanding of the eucharist in the form and content of the Jewish 'benediction' or *berakhah*. Time and again, however, in this book, the Jewish and Old Testament origins and prefigurings of so much Christian faith and worship are played down or denied. 'The Christian Easter', we read (page 122), 'has been set on the course not of the Jewish pasch but of the pagan Spring festivals'. It is true that the translation is slightly inaccurate and that what Casel actually said was that 'the Christian Easter is not only in line with the Jewish pasch but also with the pagan festivals', and that in any case all that he means is that the date of Easter is fixed according to the first full moon of the spring. But, being as fair as one can, it still remains impossible to suppress the suspicion that the preparation for the coming of the messiah in the history of Israel appeared to Casel to be so abortive that God had to turn to the Hellenistic world of theosophy and mystery-cults to find the language in which to speak to us. 'The Jews', he writes (page 133), 'were in fact less well prepared for the idea of a son of God than the Phoenicians whose god had a son as well'. But the very terms of this statement are all wrong. What one is confronted with is a more and more profound communication from and communion with the living God—an encounter between the human and the divine which ultimately takes place in the body of Mary's child. That extraordinary 'humanization' of divinity is surely not so remote from the great apocalyptic vision Ezechiel had of 'a likeness as it were of a human form' at the centre of the radiant manifestation of God's glory (a theophany, incidentally, which is profoundly cultic and liturgical in its form). When one con-

²J. P. Audet, 'Literary Forms and Contents of a Normal *Eucharistia* in the First Century', in *The Gospels Reconsidered* (Oxford, 1960).

siders what glory meant to Ezechiel, and of how basic the theology of glory is in the Old Testament, and then of the appearance of this human figure at the heart of the vision, it becomes difficult to see how much more light would be thrown on the Incarnation by oriental mythology than is here in Ezechiel³. A final example: Casel speaks of God revealing himself in the Old Testament 'merely as terror' and not as 'the deepest, incomprehensible love'. It is a common enough thing to say, but is it true? It cannot survive acquaintance with Hosea, Jeremiah and the psalms, just to take the most obvious places in which the overwhelming love and compassion of God comes out. The God of the Old Testament is the God of that ancient and much-quoted liturgical formula: 'Yahweh, Yahweh, God of compassion and graciousness, slow to anger and great in love.'

Much more might be added. There is, for instance, the whole question of Casel's interpretation of St Paul's *mysterion*. Here again he turns to mystery-religion for enlightenment where we should rather insist that the notion is deeply embedded in the Old Testament conception of God's secret purpose and counsel, of the *Heilsplan*, and has nothing directly to do with cult at all. And of course there are other criticisms altogether that one might make. Fr Davis rightly draws attention to the fact that Casel was out of touch with the realities of pastoral liturgy and that his approach is prone to obscurantism. He defends the use of Latin in the liturgy precisely because it is unintelligible and hence promotes the sense of mystery. One wonders where mystery differs from mystification. If we have preferred to stress Casel's weakness on the biblical side (and we are not blaming him for it, only asking how far his approach can help us now, thirty years later), it is because this raises the issue of the Word of God, of doctrine, preaching, and theology, of intelligibility. What Casel never brings out properly is the fact that the liturgy is the Bible. It is the Word of God recited, sung and acted in the middle of the assembled People of God. He refers (page 35) to 'the Jews with their purely Semitic, imageless, legal thinking' . . . Well, it is the sacred literature of these same Jews, in the form of the Latin Bible, the Vulgate, an inexhaustible treasury of religious images, that fecundated and shaped the monastic culture to which Casel belonged and which is so great a part of our Christian inheritance. When we ask now how liturgy may be employed to serve either ecumenism or the religious needs of the faithful, it seems to me that the idea of Christianity as the

³See Joseph Bourke, *From Temple to Heavenly Court*, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, April, 1962, esp. pp. 413-414.

religion of the Word of God is absolutely vital. Any presentation of Catholicism which plays down or fails to bring out the fact that it is primarily hearing the Word of God, that it is an *evangelical* religion, is too unfair and lopsided an account to do for ecumenical purposes. While one agrees with Fr Davis that Casel's book 'will endure as a classic statement of the meaning of the liturgy—indeed, of the meaning of Christianity', one wants to insist that it is not a *complete* statement. It is precisely this identification of Christianity as the religion of the Gospel that has been the achievement of postwar theologians and liturgists in France⁴. The opposition between *word* and *sacrament*, as representing that between Protestantism and Catholicism, must be resorbed. The assembly of the believing, worshipping community is the site for the reassertion of the Word of God, for the reproclaiming of the gospel message. The greatest event in sacred history, the death on the cross, becomes manifest both in preaching (I. Cor. I. 23) and in the eucharist (I. Cor. II. 26).

This whole area, around the idea of the Word of God, is perhaps the most interesting in current theological investigation. Without going into it at present, we only notice that it brings up the question of preaching, and that is salutary because no liturgical life can be developed apart from what happens in the sermon. But to speak of the sermon is to speak of doctrine and of theology. It is no exaggeration to say that liturgical revival, catechetical reform, social teaching, ecumenism, Bible-reading and the rest of it, depends utterly on *sound doctrine*⁵. Sound doctrine means, among other things, good theology—not erudition, specialism, jargon, arid speculation, dreary distinctions, and whatever else the ordinary Catholic (and, too often, his pastor) suspects theology of, but a real reverent endeavour to help in the communication of the Word of God to a world dying of hunger for it. Of course it is a communication of mysterious realities too, and our meeting with the living God ultimately takes place in secret and dark places, or rather in a blinding radiance, beyond the power of any words to describe or convey, and this ineffability must never be violated. One has only to recall certain mass-commentaries to see that it is possible to say the wrong things and to speak at the wrong time. For all that, however, there is no way out of telling the good news to the world. It must always be primarily by means of doctrinal instruction, by all the mani-

⁴See Louis Bouyer, *Life and Liturgy*, recently republished as a paperback (Sheed and Ward).

⁵Charles Davis, *Liturgy and Doctrine* (Sheed and Ward; 1960).

fold forms of the word, that the community takes shape as the site for that participation in divine reality which we saw to be the nature of Christianity. It is here that Casel fails us. He was always rather anti-theological, that is, anti-intellectual, and this means that he fails to bring out the vital need for solid doctrine in the communication of mystery—for an *intelligent* sense of mystery. The whole history of the liturgical movement since Casel wrote is the history of the recovery of theology, of the realization that our entry into communion with the mystery is primarily through meditation on the Word. Perhaps we in this country, who are so behindhand with our revival, may use our relative backwardness to drive straight to the root of all revival: the cultivation of a sound theological tradition. It would be nice to think that we might.

The Living Relationships of Social Work¹

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'Relationship is the soul of casework' says Fr Biestek at the beginning of his book on the Casework Relationship². The forming of relationships between persons is one of the basic necessities of life, for man was made a social being. Relationship comes into every sort of personal and social situation. Nevertheless, the use of relationship in a particular way and for a particular purpose is the essential and basic factor in social work. It is, as Fr Biestek says, the 'soul' of casework and without it social work would be lifeless and meaningless. The theory of relationship in social work has been analysed by some of the ablest thinkers in the social work field. My aim in this paper is not to recapitulate what is in the text books or to attempt to summarise the literature about relationship. To do this would be both boring and ineffective.

¹A paper given to the Guild of Catholic Professional Social Workers.

²*The Casework Relationship*, by Felix Biestek, S.J., London, 1961.