

# INITIATION

This book continues and complements the exploration of the Christian mysteries I began in *The Seven Sacraments*, but you do not need that earlier book in order to read this one. That book was about the sacraments and the other patterns of seven mysteries that we find in the tradition, going back to the days of creation in Genesis. (You will find a summary in Appendix 5.) The present book is also concerned with Scripture, but opens with the last book in the canon, one of the most mysterious books of the Bible, the ‘Book of Revelation’ also known as the Apocalypse of Saint John.

The Apocalypse provides a way in to the heart of the Christian revelation; it gives us our key to understanding both Bible and Tradition. It is about the ‘end’ of the world, in the sense of the ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose’ of the world. For at the end of his life Saint John arrives at an End who is also a Beginning, the Alpha as well as the Omega. His vision of Jesus, the Son of Man, takes place on the Lord’s own Day, the Day of the Sabbath when God is at ‘rest’. It takes us back to Genesis and re-interprets everything. It is an unveiling of the mystery of the world in Christ himself.

John’s is a visionary book. In it we confront the Christian imagination firing on all cylinders. It takes us into the heart of theology, but this is theology in the original sense—that is, theology as it used to be understood in the Church before it became a purely academic subject, divorced from spirituality and prayer. John’s Apocalypse is a work of inspired visionary poetry, a kaleidoscope of images full of meaning, sparks thrown out by the impact of Christ. Its approach is the very opposite of ‘rationalistic’ and ‘moralistic’. It does not start with commandments or a logical philosophy. It is more like a gushing stream or rising fountain of living water, from which we drink, perhaps at our peril.

### An Outline of Mystagogy

The need for ongoing formation in the mysteries of Christ and of the Church, a catechesis traditionally known as *mystagogia* ('initiation into the mysteries'), has been noted in Catholic circles for years.<sup>1</sup> Mystagogy is a technical term for the stage of exploratory catechesis that comes after apologetics, after evangelization, and after the reception of the so-called 'sacraments of initiation' (Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation). While Baptism and Confirmation may be given only once, Christian initiation is a continuing adventure, since the new life of prayer must continue to grow, if it is not to wither and die. The Book of Revelation, I believe, encapsulates the *mystagogia* of the early Church.

The main focus of Catholic mystagogy today is on seven particular mysteries, called 'sacraments'. The word is based on the Latin *sacramentum*, referring to consecration, which in turn was a translation of the Greek *mysterion* or 'mystery'. The sacraments are therefore the Christian mysteries *par excellence*. The whole Christian mystery is, as it were, coiled up inside them. They are a kind of extension of Christ's presence in the world. Their forms and even their number evolved over the centuries, but each leads us back to specific actions of Christ on earth, when he forgave, baptized, and blessed the men and women around him, and gave himself to them in the shape of food.

Each sacrament is a set of rituals and symbols that expresses an aspect of Christ's life, and which is used by him to reach into our lives and transform us, provided we permit him to do so. In other words, they are symbols, but more than symbols: they are conduits of grace. In Baptism we are claimed for Christ, in Confirmation strengthened, in Confession reconciled, in Marriage joined to each other, in Ordination joined to Christ, in Anointing healed, and

1. The modern revival of the ancient Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) by the Catholic Church in the 1960s was an attempt to recapture a sense of the initiatory power of the sacraments as it had been experienced by the early Christians. There is a period of formal mystagogy at the end of the RCIA, which continues from Easter Sunday through Pentecost and then monthly for the remainder of the year. But this does not go nearly far enough. It certainly does not suffice to introduce the catechumen to the full richness of mystical theology.

from the Eucharist, which is Christ, all these other sacraments receive their power.

The Church gave the sacraments a sevenfold form because each could then represent one of the seven days of creation, which were also the seven dimensions of the Old Covenant, and these can be seen to correspond with the seven primary needs of the human heart defined by Christ himself in the Lord's Prayer. In this way the sacraments constitute a re-forging of the Covenant and the re-making of the world itself. The multiple sevens that readers can see in the Book of Revelation also reflect this underlying covenantal structure and emphasize its importance. Although in John's time Christians may not have thought in terms of 'the seven sacraments', the reality they describe was already present.

Numbers were important for the early Christians for many reasons. They are, in a way, inherently mysterious—even today philosophers cannot quite agree what they are, and why they seem to play such a vital role in the order of nature. Are they the thoughts of God? The ancient writers loved the patterns they made, and the simpler the better. Seven is made up of four and three. These numbers when multiplied give us twelve. Each of these numbers—4, 3, 7—is fundamental to Christian mystagogy and has multiple applications throughout the tradition.

Another important theme is introduced by one of the greatest Christian masters of mystagogy, who wrote under a pseudonym around five hundred years after the birth of Christ. Denys the Areopagite, sometimes called Saint Denys (he is also the patron saint of France, where he was thought to have been buried), is called in academic circles the 'Pseudo-Dionysius' or 'Pseudo-Areopagite' because he identified himself with the convert of Saint Paul mentioned in Acts 17:34. Denys divided the Christian Way into three phases called *purification*, *illumination*, and *union*, and linked these to three hierarchies of angels, who assist in each of these three phases—to put it another way, the active, inner, and contemplative life, reflecting a Trinitarian structure. His division can easily be integrated with other familiar Christian triads, such as the three Theological Virtues of faith, hope, and love, and the Evangelical Counsels which are familiar to many people as the three Vows taken by a monk

or nun upon entering the consecrated religious life. The vow of *poverty* corresponds to purification, the vow of *chastity* to hope, and that of *obedience* (the integration of our will with God's) to union.

Consistently with this tradition, the modern *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (paras 2699–2719) divides Christian prayer into three types: vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplation. These, too, can be seen as corresponding to Denys's three phases. *Vocal prayer* brings the body into line with the spirit by expressing the spiritual Word in voice and gesture. We can think of it as a kind of discipline that points us towards God. *Meditation* involves the imagination, the 'eyes of the heart', by which we penetrate gradually to the inner meaning of the words and images of faith. Finally, *Contemplation* is the prayer of silent union with God, a beginning or foretaste of the life of eternity.

One of the most beautiful passages on Denys's three stages of Christian life was written by Blessed John Paul II in the final chapter of his last book, *Memory and Identity*. The Purgative Way, John Paul explains, is based on observance of the Commandments (see Matt. 19:16–17). It enables us to discover and live our fundamental values. But these values, he goes on, are 'lights' which illuminate our existence and so lead us into the Illuminative Way. For example, by observing the Commandment *You shall not kill* we learn a profound respect for life. By not committing adultery we acquire the virtue of purity. This is not something negative, but bound up with a growing awareness of the beauty of the human body, both male and female. This beauty, he says, 'becomes a light for our actions', so that we are able to *live in the truth*.

By following the light that comes from Christ our Teacher, Pope John Paul says, we are progressively freed from the struggle against sin that preoccupies us in the stage of Purification. We become able to enjoy the divine light which permeates creation. This perception of 'illumination' is based on a conscious awareness of the world's nature as gift: 'Interior light illumines our actions and shows us all the good in the created world as coming from the hand of God.' The Illuminative Way therefore leads into the Unitive Way, realized in the contemplation of God and the experience of love. Union with God can be achieved to some degree even before death. And when

we find God in everything, created things ‘cease to be a danger to us’, regaining their true light and leading us to God as he wishes to reveal himself to us, as ‘Father, Redeemer, and Spouse’.

### Tensions in the Church

Though the Christian religion does not depend on spiritual techniques, it does offer guidance and assistance in developing a life of prayer, and also in putting that prayer into action as a life of love. It offers the lives and examples of the saints, the writings of the mystics, and above all the Scriptures themselves as a treasury on which every Christian may draw. But there is an important difference to note between Christianity and many other religious traditions, where the seeker of wisdom will expect to find a human teacher, a *guru*, to lead him in this quest.

Christians do not need a *guru*. They may have priests, and indeed there are some wise priests and spiritual directors in the Church (thank goodness), but the priest’s role is essentially different from that of the Asian ‘master’. It is primarily to make the sacramental presence of Christ available to the faithful. The Catholic goes directly to Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and the sacrament of Confession. It is the priest who makes this presence possible. This is particularly important in the present historical period, with so much confusion caused by the mixing of religious traditions. Some of that confusion is reflected in the Church. Thanks to the changes in Catholicism after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, some argued that the Church had broken with tradition altogether, and many Catholics felt obliged to reject what they called the ‘New Church’ of Vatican II and the post-conciliar popes in favour of the ‘Church of all times’—which for some appeared to mean no Church at all, just a tradition.

The changes in liturgical practice, the loss of focus in religious education, and the erosion of the sense of tradition and authority within the mainstream Church during those decades have been much discussed. The temptation to set the authority of tradition against that of Rome was felt by many of the most devout, precisely because they felt they understood the tradition so well. Yet the two authorities cannot be so divided. The mistake is partly due to a

foreshortened view of tradition, since looking back through history we are apt to tidy up and gloss over the imperfection and instability that are all too apparent when one is living through those times, and in this way we idealize a past state of the Church.

The seven sacraments have survived the liturgical reforms. They always remain valid as long as they are celebrated within the body of the Church, whose true intentions are expressed in the official Latin texts and known to the Holy Spirit who is the soul of the Church. The priesthood and the apostolic succession remain valid. Many individual priests and bishops may be unworthy of their ordination, and that has always been the case, but they are part of something greater than themselves. The continuing health of the post-conciliar Church is demonstrated by the fact that great saints, such as Padre Pio and Teresa of Calcutta, humbly submitting themselves to the authority of Christ and the successor of Peter, have continued to arise and flourish (and work miracles).

Through our participation in the Church, no matter how broken and corrupt it may appear to be at any one time, we are incorporated within the death and humiliation of Christ, comforted by him, taught by him in what happens to us moment by moment, and ultimately resurrected by him in a state beyond corruption and death, in that day when ‘all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well’.<sup>2</sup>

### The Way of Prayer

All of this will emerge with greater clarity as we journey through the Book of Revelation. That will occupy the first half of the present book, bringing us to a chapter on the Creed or Profession of Faith. Having been received and initiated into the Church, the Christian is at the end of one journey but only at the beginning of another. For Jesus is the Way, the Way to God, and to be with him and in him is to be on a journey. After we have explored the Apocalypse and what it is trying to teach us, the second half of this book is therefore concerned with the life of prayer—particularly private or individual

2. The famous words of Julian of Norwich, from Chapter 32 of her 13<sup>th</sup> revelation (*The Revelations of Divine Love* exist in many translations).

prayer, although we must bear in mind that no prayer is really ‘private’ because we pray in the company of the whole Church, including the angels. We will have moved, in other words, from a focus on the inner meaning of the sacraments and the liturgy of the Church (which is John’s primary concern) to a focus on the Triple Way of Purgation, Illumination, and Contemplation in the life and practice of the Christian as a member of the Body of Christ.

The organizing theme of this second half of the book is the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and its associated devotions. The Rosary is one of the most popular aids to prayer and meditation within the Catholic tradition. Though it is criticized by some Protestants for taking attention away from Jesus and giving it to his Mother, the intention behind it is quite different—indeed, the exact opposite. Correctly understood, the point of the Rosary is to *meditate on the Son* through the eyes of the Mother. Thus the Rosary meditations include the whole span of Jesus’ life, from the moment he was conceived in Mary’s womb until the moment he welcomes her into heaven and crowns her with glory. So the Rosary is a way of experiencing more fully the Incarnation and Passion of God. In it is reflected the whole of salvation history, and the struggles and destiny of the individual soul on her way to God in the fellowship of the Church. The Virgin Mary represents all of us.

We will also spend some time on the Way of the Cross. This can be considered an expanded version of the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary, describing the way of Purgation. There are fourteen Stations on the Way, representing the final stages of Jesus’s earthly life. The life of a disciple is a life of carrying the cross—our own ‘cross’, meaning our fate or burden, whatever that may be—in the knowledge that Jesus will help us to bear it, and make it light (Matt. 11:30). The Stations of the Cross give us a way to learn the pattern of perfect submission and self-giving that Jesus showed us in his last days on earth, a lesson we can apply not only when we too come eventually to die, but during every moment of our lives.

The final chapter looks at the last of the Glorious Mysteries of the Rosary, the outcome of the Way of Jesus, the fruition of his death on the Cross and of his ascension into heaven. Here the Sorrowful or Purgative mysteries, and the mysteries of Light or Illumination, give

way to the mysteries of Union and Contemplation which are already foreshadowed in the Joyful mysteries of Christ's childhood.

After the publication of this book I hope to continue my exploration of Christian spirituality at <http://thechristianmysteries.blogspot.com>.

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As anyone knows who has been bold enough to write on spiritual matters, it is easy to write as if one were wise, and much harder to live that way. I only dared to write this book as a reminder to myself of things that most of the time I forget, or things I fail to live up to. I have drawn on the wisdom of great spiritual writers and the guidance of the Church, and I ask the reader to forgive and overlook whatever comes only from myself.