

# The Mysteries of the Life of Jesus

*Michelle K. Borrás*

CATHOLIC INFORMATION SERVICE



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GENERAL EDITOR

Michelle K. Borrás, Ph.D.

*Director of the Catholic*

*Information Service*

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COVER IMAGE

The face of Christ, flanked by Mary and John the Baptist. From the chapel  
at Centro Aletti, Rome. The mosaic was completed by Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik  
and the artists of Centro Aletti. Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

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## Contents

*“O Great Mystery!”*

- 1 “Your face, O Lord, I seek”
- 4 “The mystery that surpasses all understanding”

*A Mystery of Joy*

- 9 “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”
- 11 “O marvelous exchange!”

*A Mystery of Light*

- 15 “He who has the bride is the Bridegroom”
- 17 “You have saved the best wine for last”
- 19 “This is my body, which is given for you”

*A Mystery of Sorrow*

- 23 “I thirst!”
- 25 “Unless a grain of wheat...”

*A Mystery of Glory*

- 29 The Seal of the Covenant
- 32 Ascension and Pentecost
- 34 “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come!’”
  
- 39 Sources
- 44 About



*“Your face, O Lord, I seek, hide not your face from me.” (Psalm 27:8-9)*

Christ flanked by Mary and John the Baptist.  
Chapel of Centro Aletti, Rome.  
Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

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# “O Great Mystery!”

“It is part of the mystery of God that he acts so gently, that he only gradually builds up *his* history within the great history of mankind, that he becomes man and so can be overlooked by his contemporaries and by the decisive forces within history; that he suffers and dies and that, having risen again, he chooses to come to mankind only through the faith of the disciples to whom he reveals himself; that he continues to knock gently at the doors of our hearts and slowly opens our eyes if we open our doors to him.”

— Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*<sup>1</sup>

## “Your face, O Lord, I seek”

Human beings have a remarkable capacity to yearn for something greater and purer than anything they have experienced. This is particularly evident in young people, but it is not limited to them. We “thirst for what is great, for fullness,”<sup>2</sup> even if we don’t know how to attain this, or live in ways that contradict it, or can’t bear it if it comes. Otto Neubauer, a young scholar who teaches at a Catholic center for dialogue in Vienna, Austria tells of an encounter with a student that encapsulates this yearning for a beauty and a love that surpasses us:

After a year in a course on media, one student asked me if she could ask an “intimate” question that touched on my faith. During this whole year she had repeatedly expressed that, though she was an unbeliever, she felt incredibly at home in the course, as well as in this house. Now she wanted to know whether at the end I had prayed for her. At first I hesitated to reply, because she wasn’t looking to be converted. Who, after all, wants to be an “object of mission”? When I said “yes,” she asked if I had prayed for her since the beginning of the course, that is, for the last year. When I said “yes” again, she said emotionally, “To be honest, I was hoping you had been!”<sup>3</sup>

We are all hoping. Perhaps we hope simply for someone to notice our yearning for something we don’t understand. So many people don’t receive the love they need from the world. Even us. Sometimes, “in this time of God’s absence when the earth of souls is arid,”<sup>4</sup> our hope threatens to turn into despair. We would like to forget that we yearned for anything – that is, until we encounter something, or Someone, who yearns for us.

It can be the smallest experience of being taken seriously, of being loved. It can be the most fleeting encounter with beauty in another human person, in art or music, or in the natural world. We might even have the inexplicable intuition that we wouldn’t thirst for something we can’t give to ourselves unless Someone had first thirsted for us. And suddenly something rises up in us that is like the ancient prayer Pope Benedict XVI quotes, begging God to show himself to all those who seek him: “*My soul is thirsting for you,*



*for the living God; like the earth, it is parched, lifeless and without water. My soul is thirsting for you...*" (Psalm 62:2).<sup>5</sup>

Someone *has* first thirsted for us. In a way, this is the whole Christian Gospel. God is already perfect in himself, and yet "his heart aches for us, he reaches out to us"<sup>6</sup> to such an extent that he chose to become man. At the heart of the Christian faith is the God who not only created us. He was so moved by our suffering that "in Christ [he] descended to the lowest depths of the human being, even into the night of hatred and blindness, the darkness of man's distance from God, in order to kindle there the flame of his love."<sup>7</sup>

Like the young student in Vienna, we all hope without quite knowing what we hope for. Our souls are like the parched and lifeless earth. Very many of us are tempted to cover over our yearning, to smother it or simply forget it, because it doesn't seem as if it will ever be filled. Not unlike the Gentiles who sometimes came to pray in the courtyard of the Temple in Jerusalem – or many people of our own day who don't yet have faith – we wait, dissatisfied with the "gods, rites and myths" we have made for ourselves. We continue to "desire the Pure and Great, even if God remains for [us] the 'unknown God' (cf. Acts 17:23)."<sup>8</sup>

This "unknown God" stooped down to show us his face. He entered into a relationship of love with us, binding himself to us forever.

When this happened, all the earth was filled by "the great and complete reality that we are all awaiting."<sup>9</sup> It was filled with God's power, which took the form of poverty. It was filled with the humility with which he begs for our love.<sup>10</sup>

In the face of this revelation, we suddenly become able to accept our search for God, and “the yearning concealed within it.”<sup>11</sup> We then find that our yearning doesn’t disappear, but is instead transformed, filled with wonder at the beauty that has appeared among us. Our temptation to despair in “this time of God’s absence” becomes a marveling gaze at the One who is *present*.

Jesus is God and man joined in an irrevocable covenant. In his person, he weds heaven and earth. Confronted with his love – with the Son of God being born, dying and rising in our midst – we suddenly understand ourselves. We understand that all this time, he who is our beginning and end, our origin and our destiny, hoped that we were hoping for him.

### ***“The mystery that surpasses all understanding”***

The experience of thirsting and hoping for what we don’t fully understand is not new.

When two young Jewish fishermen sat by the shore of the Sea of Galilee many centuries ago, mending their nets with their father, a man with strangely compelling authority walked by and said to them simply, “Follow me.” Their immediate response reveals the startled glimmer of recognition they must have had in that moment: “And they left their father in the boat with the hired servants and followed him” (Mark 1:20).

In this rabbi who was calling them, James and John caught a glimpse of something for which, together with the faithful people of Israel, they had been waiting all their lives.

For three years, they watched Jesus pray, teach, heal, cast out demons, feed multitudes, and calm the wind and the waves. On one unforgettable day, together with Peter, they saw him transfigured on Mount Tabor, his face shining like the sun and his garments white as light. They heard the voice of God the Father delighting in his Son and fell on their faces in terror (cf. Matthew 17:1ff).

The brothers knew there was something great in this man that they did not understand, and that he was worthy of their fidelity and love. And as they followed him from day to day, they discovered that when they prayed the ancient psalms of Israel, the words were filled with a new and still undefinable light: “*Yours is more than mortal beauty, grace is poured out upon your lips ... therefore all the peoples praise you*” (Psalm 45:3, 18).

The younger of the two brothers, John, must have often gone back in his mind to that first moment by the seashore, when he left his nets and his father to step into the adventure of following Jesus. Yet even during his three years at Jesus’ side, John could not have imagined that one day he would stand on a hill of execution, watching his master die an agonizing death on a cross. He could not have known that, as he watched his friend’s body placed in the tomb, the words he had learned as a child would suddenly mean something infinitely greater than they had meant before: “*Your face, O Lord, I seek; hide not your face from me*” (Psalm 27:8-9).

Every familiar category of thought would burst open for James and John, the sons of Zebedee, as they gathered with the other distraught and frightened disciples after Jesus’ death. Neither could have had the slightest premonition that

their master, who had died, would step into their midst and wish them his peace.

A little more than a week later, a fruitless night of fishing with a few other disciples would end with nets filled to bursting, when a stranger standing on the shore told them to cast their empty nets on the other side of the boat.

John, whose sight and hearing had become ever more attuned to the voice and the figure of Love, exclaimed, “It is the Lord!” (John 21:7).

Their master, who was on the shore offering the disciples grilled fish and bread broken by his hands, was someone whom they knew intimately and yet hardly knew at all. He was the friend who was also the stranger before whom they dared not speak. “None of the disciples dared to ask him ‘Who are you?’” (John 21:12). It was too obvious, but also too incomprehensible. He was too full of the mystery of God.

In the 40 days Jesus spent with them after Easter, opening the Scriptures to them, the apostles understood ever more deeply that a whole lifetime would not suffice to ponder what they had seen with their eyes and touched with their hands (cf. 1 John 1:1). For this man who was born a helpless child and conquered death, was the Son of God made man. Jesus didn’t simply possess “more than mortal beauty” (Psalm 45:3). He was beauty itself come to dwell among men. He was “the almighty Lord of heaven and earth, [who] chose to become incarnate, concealing his glory under the veil of our flesh, so as to reveal fully to us his goodness (cf. Titus 3:4).”<sup>12</sup>

When the apostles scattered to proclaim to the ends of the earth the Good News of the redemptive life, death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ, they and all those who came to believe through them knew that Jesus' life contains a mystery. In fact, his life is *the* "great mystery" that unites heaven and earth (cf. Ephesians 5:32). This mystery isn't something irrational or that cannot be known; rather, it contains inexhaustible depths. It reveals the God who "so loved the world" (John 3:16) that he would bind himself to his creature forever. And because it shows us our destiny and our salvation, the life of the incarnate Son of God reveals the full "truth about man."<sup>13</sup>

Ever since the Son of God "humbled himself" (Philippians 2:8) to be born as a man and to die for mankind on a cross, the Church's wonder at God's incomprehensible gesture of charity has grown. The more the apostles allowed the experience of Easter to illumine their hearts and their minds, the more they became aware that the life of their master infinitely surpassed them. Like a lover who cannot gaze long enough at the face of his beloved, they returned to everything they had seen, heard and touched, contemplating it with hearts full of wonder.

A modern-day successor of the apostles, Pope John Paul II, reminded us that 20 centuries have not diminished this wonder, or made the contemplation of the life of Jesus Christ any less necessary for the men and women of today. Everything the Church is and all that she does "will be determined by the ability of Christians to enter into the 'perfect knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:2-3)."<sup>14</sup>



*“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”*  
(John 1:14)

Holy Family Chapel, Knights of Columbus  
Supreme Council, New Haven, Connecticut.

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# A Mystery of Joy

***“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”***

We enter into the knowledge of the mystery of Christ together with Mary, his mother. The young Jewish woman who was chosen to be the mother of the incarnate Word was the first to encounter the full mystery of God’s boundless humility – the mystery in which God reveals that he is Love. In her transparent faith in the Father’s goodness, in her utter docility to the Spirit of God, she heard the question God posed to her and simply said: *Yes. Yes, come. Though I can’t possibly comprehend what this word of yours might mean for me, I know you are good. Yes, “let it be done to me according to your Word”* (Luke 1:38).

Pope Benedict XVI observed that all of history leads up to “the decisive moment at which God knocked at Mary’s heart and, having received her ‘yes,’ began to take flesh, in her and from her.”<sup>15</sup> God’s grace had prepared and enabled her response, but there is no coercion in love. So at that moment, all creation’s thirst for God, expressed in the centuries-long prayer of the people of Israel, encountered a God who waited for the “Yes” of his creature. With Mary’s “Let it be done,” the way was opened to the God who is Love. In Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, God could entrust himself to her and to us.

In her womb and then in her arms at his birth, the Virgin Mary received the Word through whom the world was made (cf. John 1:3). The mystery of her son's life would fill her own life more and more as time went on. It would also fill the lives of Jesus' disciples. And all peoples, nations, and languages would one day contemplate the risen King of the universe (cf. Daniel 7:14). Still, the contemplation of Jesus Christ on the part of all believers remains rooted in Mary's first, wondering gaze at the incarnate Word.

The second Person of the Holy Trinity descended from heaven like rain for the parched land, yet he was also a fruit of the earth.<sup>16</sup> An infant in Mary's arms, he came as God who "has shown his face and opened his heart to us," as "the bridge that truly brings God and man together."<sup>17</sup> In the angel's quiet greeting and in the poverty of the stable at Bethlehem, the mother of Jesus was the first witness of "the wonderful union of the divine and human natures in the one person of the Word."<sup>18</sup>

The all but hidden event of the Incarnation contained something infinitely greater and purer than anything in creation. As Mary began dimly to grasp from the moment the Spirit overshadowed her (cf. Luke 1:35), this child, this man who preached, suffered, died and rose again, "is not only *described* as the Son of God, he is the Son."<sup>19</sup> By his very presence, he communicates to us the Love that God is in himself. As Jesus himself told his disciples, he shows us the face of the Father.<sup>20</sup>

Gazing on her newborn child, Mary beheld the mystery that would become the core of the Church's faith. As John



Paul II explained, “the Word truly ‘became flesh’ and took on every aspect of humanity, except sin (cf. Hebrews 4:15). From this perspective, the Incarnation is truly a *kenosis* – a ‘self-emptying’ – on the part of the Son of that glory which is his from all eternity (Philippians 2:6-8).”<sup>21</sup> The Fathers of the Church often stated that God made himself poor so that we might become rich: “The Son of God truly became man that man, in him and through him, can truly become a child of God.”<sup>22</sup>

Contemplating this child, who alone fully reveals God to us, we begin to understand something about the God who would make such a gift of himself. We intuit what might make God come to us not with force but in poverty, and with a gentleness that brought kings to their knees in adoration (cf. Mt 2:11). And we glimpse God’s inner life of love, which has been opened to us.

The Apostle John finally found words to express this unsurpassable event that filled him, like Mary, with wonder. This wondrous event still fills the contemplation of all believers: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14).

### ***“O marvelous exchange!”***

In the face of such hidden glory, we might ask why God did not come in a more obvious way. Why would the master of the universe want to knock quietly on our hearts, or entrust

himself to the hands of his creatures? But then, gazing with Mary at the child, we begin to understand.

“It is part of the mystery of God that he comes so gently,” wrote Benedict XVI. “And yet – is not this the truly divine way? Not to overwhelm with external power, but to give freedom, to offer and elicit love.”<sup>23</sup> Is not God’s “emptying himself” precisely the revelation of his glory? Is not loving us and eliciting our free response the only way to draw us into his life and love?

In the light of that gentleness – in the light of the humble charity that reveals to us the true power of God – we also begin to understand something about ourselves.

“*Your face, O Lord, I seek....*” Perhaps we feel an echo in us of that ancient longing. Perhaps we do not know what we seek. But when we encounter the face of God revealed in this defenseless child, we begin to understand what *God* seeks. He seeks our love. He wants to share his life with us, drawing us out of our self-imprisonment in sin. In Jesus Christ, God desires not only to show us his face. He reveals to us our origin and our destiny. He shows us “the true face of man.”<sup>24</sup>

Pope Benedict explained in a Christmas homily that in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, we finally learn what it means to be human:

The Angel had said to the shepherds: “This will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12; cf. 2:16). God’s sign, the sign given to the shepherds and to us, is not an astonishing miracle. God’s sign is his humility.... How we would prefer a different sign, an imposing, irresistible sign of God’s power and greatness! But his

sign summons us to faith and love, and thus it gives us hope: this is what God is like.... He invites us to become like him.... When we see him, the God who became a child, our hearts are opened. In the Liturgy of the holy night, God comes to us as man, so that we might become truly human.<sup>25</sup>

What Mary gazed upon as she held the infant in her arms, what James and John intuited on the day they left their nets and their father, is the mystery of the God who bends down in love to his creature. It is the mystery of the creature lifted up to share in the life of God. And so even though this infant was destined to suffer and die for us, the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word is always a mystery of joy.

This joy, which filled Mary and Jesus' disciples, still reechoes in the Liturgy of the Hours, the daily prayer of Christ's Church. Filled with a joy that never grows old, she utters this exclamation of wondering adoration: "O marvelous exchange! Man's Creator has become man, born of the Virgin. We have been made sharers in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share our humanity."<sup>26</sup>



*“He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice.” (John 3:29)*

Detail of the baptism of the Lord,  
Wall of *The Incarnation of the Word*,  
Redemptoris Mater Chapel, Vatican City.  
Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

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# A Mystery of Light

## *“He who has the bride is the Bridegroom”*

Thirty years later, Mary’s wondering gaze was reflected in the wondering gaze of John the Baptist, when he saw Jesus coming to him to receive the “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). In that moment, John caught a glimpse of just how far God descended when the Father sent his beloved Son into a world disfigured by sin.

John the Baptist understood that sin is deliberate imprisonment in the “night of hatred and blindness.”<sup>27</sup> It is our senseless rejection of communion with God and with one another. All the faithful people of Israel knew that sin means death, for death is what comes when we cut ourselves off from the God who made us to share in his life.

It seemed that we sinful human beings had broken off every path of communication between God and ourselves. There was no bridge between Love and our refusal to love, the defenseless holiness of God and our self-protection in sin. Then John saw a sinless man descending even into the “darkness of man’s distance from God.”<sup>28</sup> As Pope Benedict explained, describing the baptism of Christ, John the Baptist watched as Israel’s long-awaited Messiah “loaded the burden of all mankind’s guilt upon his shoulders” and “bore it down into the depths of the Jordan.”<sup>29</sup> In this way, Jesus “inaugurated his public activity by stepping into the place of sinners. His inaugural gesture is an anticipation of the cross.”<sup>30</sup>

This moment, in which the incarnate Son lowered himself into the waters that symbolized death, was the moment of the confirmation of Jesus' mission. Jesus was sent into this time "in which the earth of souls is arid,"<sup>31</sup> in order to reveal there the face of the God who is Love.

John the Baptist saw the Spirit descend and remain on the one sent to bring the world back to God (cf. John 1:32). And for an instant, the last and greatest of the prophets of the Old Covenant heard the Father's voice (cf. Mark 1:11). This man who had spent his life preparing the way of the Lord, glimpsed the ineffable communion that is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit united in love.

With his lips and in his life, John the Baptist had given voice to the centuries-old prayer of his people: "*O Shepherd of Israel ... shine forth! ... let your face shine that we may be saved!*" (Psalm 80:1-4). In the man from Nazareth who had come asking for baptism, the Shepherd of Israel showed himself to be the God who is "love by nature," and who pours himself out into this suffering world.<sup>32</sup>

Religious art has captured this moment of startled realization. Through the centuries, paintings and icons show John the Baptist pointing at Jesus, his outstretched finger wordlessly expressing his proclamation: "Behold the Lamb of God!" (John 1:36). Gaze on him who has come! Look at him who takes upon himself all the sins of the world! Upon hearing this mysterious cry of recognition, two of the Baptist's own disciples responded: "The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus" (John 1:37).

John the Baptist had taught his disciples the longing contained in the psalms. They had heard from him the words of the prophets. And though the promise had seemed far from being fulfilled, they knew what God had vowed in love to his inconstant people: "I will make a

covenant for you on that day.... I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice ... and you shall know the Lord” (Hosea 2:18-20).

The disciples, one of whom tradition identifies as Andrew, could not fathom the mystery contained in their new master. Still, something in them sensed the reason for their old master’s fullness of joy. “He who has the bride is the bridegroom,” John the Baptist had said, referring to Jesus with a title Israel reserved for its Shepherd and Lord.<sup>33</sup> “The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now full” (John 3:29).

The time of God’s absence had at last become a time of God’s presence. The light of divine love had begun to shine from within the depths of our night.

### ***“You have saved the best wine for last”***

The light of God’s love would grow ever stronger.

For three years, John the Baptist’s two former disciples and their companions – the men who would become the Twelve Apostles – lived in this light. More and more, the brightness shone through the cracks in their hard-headedness and smallness of faith.

Laboriously, like blind men learning to see, they came to understand what Mary knew wordlessly the moment the child was conceived in her womb: “From the swaddling clothes of his birth to the vinegar of his Passion and the shroud of his Resurrection, everything in Jesus’ life was a sign of his mystery.”<sup>34</sup>

It took a long time for the disciples' perception to adjust to the radiant light of this love. At the beginning of their life with Jesus, they needed Mary to help them.

John the Apostle later recalled that Mary, Jesus and his disciples attended a marriage at Cana in Galilee (cf. John 2:1). Like every wedding for the people of Israel, that wedding contained echoes of the covenant God had established between himself and the people he loved. In that covenant as well as in the marriage covenant celebrated by their friends, Mary saw what was lacking. The embodiment of faithful Israel, she had a gaze already made clear by love. She said to Jesus, "They have no wine" (John 2:3).

It is not just that this newly married couple is ashamed because they have nothing left to offer their guests. We are all ashamed, because we lack the wine of God's love. We broke the covenant God established with us and have nothing left to offer him. We lack the one thing that brings joy. Laughter has dried up in us, leaving us fruitless and lifeless.

In response to Mary's statement, Jesus seemed to refuse her, with mysterious words that already point to the time of his suffering, "My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). Yet the disciples heard her instruct the servants, who represent all of faithful Israel and ourselves: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). Six clay jars were filled to the brim with simple water. A ladleful was taken to the steward of the feast. As he tasted it, he turned to the bridegroom in astonishment, exclaiming, "Everyone serves the good wine first; and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine; but you have kept the good wine until now" (John 2:10).



The disciples' eyes and hearts opened wide. "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11). Of course, they still did not understand all of his mystery. But as their eyes began to drink in his light, they took their first, stumbling steps into the mystery of our redemption.

God had changed the water of our humanity into the wine of his divinity. In the midst of the inconstant people of God and inconstant humanity, God himself had come to be the fidelity that would heal the broken covenant. He, the true bridegroom at the wedding between the Creator and his creation, had "kept the good wine until now."

John the Baptist declared, "He who has the bride is the Bridegroom" (John 3:29). Even today, the Church includes the Lord's manifestation to the nations, his baptism and the miracle at Cana in this single prayer of praise: "Today the Bridegroom claims his Bride, the Church, since Christ has washed her sins away in Jordan's waters ... and the wedding guests rejoice, for Christ has changed water into wine, alleluia."<sup>35</sup>

### ***"This is my body, which is given for you"***

The radiance of that sign, in which Jesus first "manifested his glory" to his disciples, endured. In the miraculous healings, the words of the parables, and even the arguments with the teachers of the law, the disciples caught glimpses of a love they did not comprehend. It surpassed them. Its light was too great for them. Sometimes, as when Jesus calmed a storm at sea with a

simple word of command, they caught a glimpse of this love's majesty. Awestruck, they whispered, "Who is this?" (Mark 4:41). But still, "they did not understand" (Mark 6:52).

Certainly, they had moments of illumination. Filled with an insight that came from the Father, Peter exclaimed on behalf of the Twelve, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" (Matthew 16:16). For a few privileged moments on Mount Tabor, Peter, James and John would become an image of the future Church, who "contemplates the transfigured face" of Christ as "the Bride before her Spouse, sharing in his mystery and surrounded by his light."<sup>36</sup> But even then, the apostles came down the mountain and were engulfed once more in their lack of understanding.

Jesus' "hour," to which he had alluded at Cana, had not yet come. The disciples had not yet beheld the full revelation of Love. Yet ever since they caught a glimpse of Jesus' glory in the miracle at Cana, this hour was inescapable. Their master "set his face toward Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51), where the prophets had died, and the disciples followed, trembling.

Gathered with the apostles in the holy city on the night Judas left to betray him, Jesus allowed them to witness his intimate prayer to his Father: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you" (John 17:1). This was the hour of God's love - the moment when the Son of God would be handed over to sinners to redeem us and reveal to us the face of God. That night, in the transformation of the bread he broke for them and the wine he handed to them into his body and blood, Jesus would make his approaching death an act of love. "No one takes my life from me," he said (John 10:18). He gave it freely for the world - and above all, for love of the Father.

When Jesus instituted the Eucharist on the night before he died, his disciples began to perceive all the breadth and depth contained in the sign they had witnessed at Cana. They had not known it then, but the water made wine for the wedding feast pointed them to this evening and the three days that followed. For when Jesus heals the broken covenant, it is with his broken body. When he gives the wine of the “new and eternal covenant”<sup>37</sup> that binds God and man, it is with the shedding of his blood.

Pope Benedict explained that in the Eucharist, Jesus gives us the nourishment man really needs: “communion with God himself.”<sup>38</sup> He gives us the truly good wine, “the chalice filled with the wine of his love.... The Eucharist is more than a meal, it is a wedding-feast. And this wedding is rooted in God’s gift of himself even to death.”<sup>39</sup> In the Eucharist, we see “the bond [Jesus] willed to establish,” through his death and resurrection, “between himself and us, between his own person and the Church.”<sup>40</sup>

Before the wondering gaze of 11 of the apostles, the Son of God gave thanks to the Father. Then, as he blessed, broke and gave the bread to them, he gave himself totally for love of mankind (cf. Mark 14:22). “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.... This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” (Luke 22:19-20).

These are the words of the New Covenant. They are the words of a love that is stronger than death. And even though they introduced the chaotic “night” in which hatred seemed to triumph (cf. John 13:30), these words show us as clearly that the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word is a mystery of fathomless love. It is a mystery of God’s *light*.



*"Unless a grain of what falls to the ground and dies..."*  
(John 12:24)

Detail of the deposition, with the dead Jesus supported by Mary and Joseph of Arimathea. Chapel of the Hospitaller Sisters of Mercy, Rome. Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

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# A Mystery of Sorrow

## *“I thirst!”*

In the night and the day that followed the Last Supper, Jesus was betrayed by one of his own. He was delivered over to the authorities in such humiliating powerlessness that even those who thought they loved him fled. He who came to reveal to us the God who is Love, fell into the hands of loveless men. Then, before the eyes of John, the only apostle who was present at the Lord’s execution, and his mother Mary, he died an appalling death.

Here at the center of the mystery of our redemption, the full measure of the “marvelous exchange” begins to be unveiled. The Son of God not only became the Son of Man, fulfilling beyond expectation the great hope contained in the psalms and the prophets. Jesus came to be the purifying flame of Love in our midst, unsettling a world that had become comfortable in its estrangement from God.<sup>41</sup> He came to pour his Spirit on us and reconcile us to the Father.

When St. Paul tells us that the Son of God “emptied himself” (Philippians 2:7), he does not mention only Jesus’ birth. When the Son of God took on our humanity, his “exchange” with us goes all the way to the end: “Being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8).

Elsewhere, St. Paul points to the same unfathomable mystery of solidarity with sinners that John the Baptist had glimpsed at the Jordan: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

When we gaze with Mary and John on Christ, who “died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3), we come face to face with all the consequences of the Incarnation. In joining himself to his creation, the Son of God took on *all* our fate. He took on even the thirst of a world suffering its self-inflicted estrangement from God. Even death.

For centuries, the faithful people of Israel thirsted for God like the dry earth (cf. Psalm 62:2). They prayed, “My throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God” (Psalm 69:3).

All of humanity thirsted, for by sinning, we had rejected the source of our life. We had defended ourselves against the God who is Love. Yet our suffering in “this time of God’s absence”<sup>42</sup> was as nothing before the terrible cry Mary and John heard at the foot of the cross. “Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), *‘I thirst!’*” (John 19:28).

The tortured, dying man thirsted for water – but also for love. He thirsted for our love, for he had come to espouse mankind to himself. And although he was “true God from true God ... consubstantial with the Father,”<sup>43</sup> he thirsted even for God. John could not have imagined such a use – or fulfillment – of the words of the psalms as when the Son of God cried out his thirst to his Father: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34).

When John heard this, he somehow understood. Those words were written for this day. They were prayed through

the centuries so that Jesus might sum up all human thirst for God, all suffering and forsakenness, in himself. These words were handed down from generation to generation so that when the Son used them to express his own thirst, suffering, and forsakenness to his Father, *our* words would become *divine* words of unbreakable, unsurpassable love.

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit,” Jesus cried (Luke 23:46). Finally, “he bowed his head” and handed over the Spirit that bound Father and Son (cf. John 19:30). He made even his death a revelation of the unbreakable communion of Love that is God.

When a Roman centurion pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, John, Mary, and the centurion himself saw blood and water – a sign of Christ’s divinity and humanity – gush forth over the parched earth. The covenant was established. It would never be broken. The divine bridegroom had truly loved us “to the end” (John 13:1).

Even the centurion, an unbeliever who knew neither the psalms nor the prophets, recognized this radiant humility and saw the glory of this love: “When the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, “Truly, this man was the Son of God!”” (Mark 15:39).

### ***“Unless a grain of wheat...”***

As she saw the blood and water stream “from the pierced corpse of the Crucified One,”<sup>44</sup> Mary’s loving gaze was filled with wondering grief. For her and for all those who believed with her, the life of Jesus had become a mystery of endless *sorrow*. Nonetheless, this sorrow is not like the despair that

threatened to engulf us in the time of love's absence. Although the death of the Lord contained unthinkable suffering, it is a mystery of the love that cast out our despair.

"They have no wine," Mary had said at Cana. In the face of the hatred that at times rages in human hearts, it seemed we had nothing at all. No joy, no life, nothing but the darkness of death. Yet from Good Friday afternoon, when Jesus died, through the silence of Holy Saturday, when he lay in the tomb, creation was drawn into a marriage covenant. Mary, John and a few others already glimpsed this at Calvary. For the blood that poured forth from Jesus' side "is his love, in which divine and human life have become one."<sup>45</sup>

The mother of Jesus didn't understand all this as she watched "the Healer ... wounded" and Life himself die.<sup>46</sup> But she accepted the mystery with the limitless faith, the total surrender and the love with which she first received the word of the angel. Standing at the foot of the cross, she said "Yes" once again for all of us. The woman, from whom God's gentleness had elicited a completely free act of love on behalf of all human beings, sorrowfully assented to the sacrifice that is the world's redemption. We are invited to gaze on the crucified Jesus with Mary, allowing the mystery to fill our eyes, our hearts and our minds.

In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI encouraged his fellow pilgrims to contemplate the crucifix at a Marian shrine in Austria. He explained that Jesus' outstretched arms represent in the first place "the posture of the Passion, in which he lets himself be nailed to the cross for us, in order to give us life." Yet, the pope continued, this is "also the posture of the one who prays, the stance assumed by the priest." It is the gesture of



one who offered the world to the Father in a perfect act of love. “That, finally,” Pope Benedict said, “is why the outstretched arms of the Crucified One are also a gesture of embracing, by which he draws us to himself.”<sup>47</sup>

The world *has* been received in truth and in tenderness. The Son of God revealed the “true love” that “can give nothing less than itself.”<sup>48</sup> Because God is a communion of Love that “wants to pour itself out,”<sup>49</sup> the Son descended into suffering, even the hell of our solitude. The gentleness of his coming gave way to the extreme powerlessness of the cross and death. When this happened, God’s descent into the barren world showed itself to be a mystery of love’s *fruitfulness*.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone,” Jesus had told his disciples. “But if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). We already glimpse the “fruit” of Christ’s death in the people standing at the foot of the cross. With Mary were others who had begun to participate in her faith and her love: John, Mary Magdalene, Mary the wife of Clopas, Salome, and even the centurion who sensed the greatness before him. These were witnesses to the gift of the blood and water poured forth over the parched and fruitless earth.

“The water was a symbol of baptism and the blood, of the holy Eucharist,” wrote St. John Chrysostom in the fourth century. “From these two sacraments the Church is born.”<sup>50</sup> In our own day, Cardinal Ratzinger expressed the same mystery of the fruitfulness of Christ’s death: “The Church originates from the opened side of the dying Christ.”<sup>51</sup>



*“All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with ... Mary the mother of Jesus.”*  
(Acts 1:14)

The Holy Spirit descending on Mary  
and the apostles at Pentecost.  
Wall of The *Divinization of Humanity*,  
Redemptoris Mater Chapel, Vatican City.  
Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

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# A Mystery of Glory

## *The Seal of the Covenant*

The Son of God truly “emptied himself” (Philippians 2:7). The Word fell into wordless silence. Mary Magdalene and others who loved him saw the stone rolled over the gaping tomb, sealing him into the shadows of death. As we profess in the creed, Christ “descended into hell” – the “depths of death,”<sup>52</sup> the realm of “those who are deprived of the vision of God.”<sup>53</sup> The glory of love shone so far into the depth of our night.

The earliest Christians intuited that this extreme self-humiliation out of solidarity for sinners was precisely the cause of Christ’s victory. In Jesus Christ, true God and true man, the “nuptial mystery of love” was accomplished.<sup>54</sup> God loved us “to the end” (John 13:1) – and the “end” could not hold him. The triune God, who is Life itself, burst the bonds of death. Christ’s humbling himself filled all creation, from heaven to hell, with God’s unshakably faithful love.

In an ancient Christian homily for Holy Saturday, Christ commands the first man, Adam, with these words: “Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. You are in me, and I am in you ... and we cannot be separated.... Rise, let us leave this place.... I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side for you who slept in paradise and brought

forth Eve from your side. My side has healed the pain in yours.”<sup>55</sup>

Adam’s eyes – all men’s eyes – had grown dim waiting for the salvation of God (cf. Psalm 69:3). But when his Savior came to lead the souls of the just out of the realm of the dead, those eyes were filled with astonishment. Precisely at the peak of Christ’s powerlessness in death, he showed Adam heaven opened: “The bridal chamber is adorned, the banquet is ready, the eternal dwelling places are prepared, the treasure houses of all good things lie open.”<sup>56</sup> In his Lord who became his progeny, the father of the human race saw God’s own life opened to man.

No one – not our first parents, nor Mary, nor any of the disciples – saw the moment in which Jesus was raised from the dead by the Father. No one saw him confirmed as “Son of God in power,” in the full outpouring of the Spirit of God (cf. Romans 1:4). Only the “dazzling” night, “bright as day,”<sup>57</sup> witnessed the consummation of the covenant between God and his creature. The Church still praises the “truly blessed night” between Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, “when things of heaven are wed to those of earth, and divine to the human.”<sup>58</sup> At the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God burst forth into the world from his – from *our* – risen, glorified flesh.

Many years later, still marveling, John wrote, “On the evening of ... the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, ‘Peace be with you’” (John 20:19).

The terrified disciples did not – could not – understand. But they who had lost all reason for gladness, “were glad when they saw the Lord” (John 20:20). Then, in a gift of unsurpassable intimacy, their God who was also their brother gave them the love that binds Father and Son. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he said (John 20:23). Breathing on them with his human breath, he gave them the seal of the covenant.

That day was too full of amazement for them to reflect on the meaning of such a gift. It was not until a few days later that the apostles began dimly to grasp what had occurred in their midst. They began to have eyes for the unspeakable love contained in their Lord’s resurrection.

The incarnation of the Word is more than a mystery of God’s charity. The life, death and resurrection of the Son of God is a mystery of reciprocated love. Jesus spoke God’s definitive “Yes” to his creature and the creature’s definitive “Yes” to God. His mother said “Yes” to the angel and assented wordlessly for all of us to Christ’s death on the cross.

When seven of the disciples encountered the risen Lord after that failed night of fishing (John 21:3), the light of understanding began slowly to dawn in them. “Man does not live from bread” alone, or even simply from being loved. “In the essence of his humanity, he lives from being loved and from being permitted to love.”<sup>59</sup>

“Simon, do you love me?” Jesus said quietly to Peter on the shore (John 21:16). Three times Jesus asked this of the man who had buried in his heart the unbearable shame of having three times denied his Lord. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” Peter responded. He who was asked to shepherd the

Lord's sheep answered for himself and the others. A threefold "Yes" for his threefold denial: the Lord's gift to him on this bright Easter morning. After all, the Son of God came so that we might be free to love.

In the wonderment of the chief of the apostles, whose sin had been forgiven, the Church would know for all the ages that she has been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb.

### ***Ascension and Pentecost***

The fishermen sitting with Jesus at the seashore were asked to carry the gift of God's forgiveness to the ends of the earth. They were entrusted with the inexhaustible gift of the sacraments flowing from the pierced side of the Lord. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," he had said to them on the evening of Easter, drawing them into the love between Father and Son (John 20:21). These men mute with wonder received the task of proclaiming God's work of redemption to the ends of the earth.

For 40 days, they saw and touched their risen master, who loved them and whom they loved. Promising them the nearness of the Father and the gift of the Spirit of God, he not only opened the Scriptures to them, but opened them to the triune God. All their senses were filled with his presence (cf. 1 John 1:1). Finally, with the mysterious promise that he would be with them until the end of the world (cf. Matthew 28:20), Jesus ascended to his Father in heaven.

On the day of the Ascension, the disciples *saw* the indissolubility of the covenant that God had established with

all of mankind. In the risen Christ, a man with our flesh and our face entered the life of the Trinity. The Son of God would never lose the human nature he had taken onto himself. God would never be unfaithful to his creature's answer of love. In this divine fidelity that opened heaven to the world and the world to heaven, the disciples saw more than a mystery of joy, light, or sorrow. The entire life of Jesus, from his conception to his Ascension into heaven, is a mystery of the *glory* of God.

This glory was so mighty and this love so great that it pressed forward to fill all of creation. "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature," Jesus commanded (Mark 16:15).

The disciples could not obey on their own power. For 10 days after their master ascended to heaven, they "devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with ... Mary the mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14). With the woman in whose faith and love they now had a share, they prayed, waited and listened. "The promise of the Father" would come (Acts 1:4). This time from heaven, the risen Lord would send them the Spirit that binds Father and Son.

When the day of Pentecost finally arrived, the Spirit came upon them as "tongues of fire" that burned through their fear (Acts 2:3). He enlightened their understanding, showing them the endless depths contained in the mysteries of the life of their Lord. This "intelligent fire ... that transforms, renews and creates a new man"<sup>60</sup> transformed these men into "those sent," or "apostles." He made them capable of communicating what they had witnessed in Jesus to all cultures and peoples of the earth.

Above all, the gift of the Spirit made this small band of disciples a communion on earth that reflected the triune communion of God. Through the ages, believers would return again and again to what happened at Pentecost. They would contemplate the apostles gathered with Mary in prayer, suddenly filled with the Spirit of God. For at that moment, the small group of believers that was the fruit of Christ's death became – *for the whole world* – the Church, the visible and effective sign of the God who is Love. God's unity in communion had penetrated and transformed the first Christians. With Mary at their center as the loving, praying heart of the Church, they became the sacrament of the world's salvation.<sup>61</sup>

Long before the coming of Christ, God had promised through the prophet Joel, "I will pour out my spirit upon all mankind" (Joel 3:1). In the disciples and in the Mother who taught them how to receive the gift of God, the psalms and the prophets met their fulfillment. These first believers, filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit, were the first fruits of redeemed humanity. They were the sign that the Son was given and the Spirit poured out so that all peoples of every time and nation might be drawn into the life of the Trinity.

### ***"The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come!'"***

At last, the suffering world can pray with the words of the psalmist, "My cup is overflowing" (Psalm 23:5). The earth is no longer parched and barren; it overflows with the wine of God's love. We still await the Lord's final coming "in glory to



judge the living and the dead.”<sup>62</sup> Then the incarnate Son, who bound God to man and heaven to earth, will present his finished work to his Father (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:24). Like his first coming, that day, too, will be a mystery of love. Yet already now the transformation of the world has begun.

Gently – and often, dramatically – the mystery already accomplished in Christ encounters the freedom of human hearts. He meets us everywhere, hidden in the face of our neighbor. In the Church’s sacraments, we are brought into contact with his inexhaustible life. He transfigures even the most basic elements of our existence. In baptism, water becomes a “nuptial bath.”<sup>63</sup> In confirmation, oil seals us with the seal of the Covenant. Bread and wine become the Lord’s Body and Blood, the food of the “wedding feast.”<sup>64</sup> The simplest things in the world suddenly bear infinite meaning, drawing us into the life of God.

There may be a great deal of suffering in the world, while the redemption slowly transforms it like leaven. There may still be tears, mourning and pain, for the risen Lord overcame the world through his death. In fact, tradition tells us that all of the apostles but John were martyred. Yet underneath their – and our – suffering is a radiant joy, for we live in the time of the covenant.

Like Mary, who was assumed into heaven, and the 11 apostles<sup>65</sup> who died before him, John knew this. All his life, he could not stop bearing witness to the mystery he had encountered in the life of his Lord. When the elderly John was banished to the Greek island of Patmos for proclaiming the Gospel, the eyes that had once marveled at the Lord’s

glory at Cana, wept at Calvary and gazed wonderingly at the empty tomb, once again opened wide with astonishment. The apostle who had been loved and who loved saw the *fruitfulness* of the covenant.

The vision recorded in the book of Revelation was granted to John for the believers of his time, who were suffering terrible persecution, and for all believers to come. “I saw a Lamb as though slain,” he wrote, beautiful and terrible together. And before the Lamb, “a great multitude which no man could number from every tribe, tongue, people and nation” crying out their praise and adoration (Revelation 7:9). In a vision of the end of the ages, John saw redeemed humanity transfigured, gathered before God’s throne.

“Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” he heard an angelic voice cry (Revelation 19:9). The fruit of the Lord’s gift of himself was the bride – all those for whom Mary had spoken her “Yes” to the angel. Perhaps it was when John saw the Church descending from heaven as a beautiful city, adorned as “a bride ... for her husband” (cf. Revelation 21:2), that he understood. He had once left his nets and his father to follow the bridegroom of Israel. Now he was privileged to behold God’s joy at the covenant.

John heard the familiar voice cry, full of gladness: “Behold! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the End” (Revelation 21:6). The Lord of time and history, who filled John’s gaze, bore the face of his master and friend. Jesus Christ, the one mediator, is the new and everlasting covenant between God and man.

The world has been loved. God has kept all his promises. Yet Israel’s and all the world’s yearning was not eliminated

by the coming of the Son of God. As John learned in his vision, this yearning was purified, transformed, broadened and deepened to become the Church's loving prayer of expectation for her Lord. At the end of the book of Revelation, we hear, "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come!'" (22:17). John repeats again – in the penultimate verse of the whole Bible – "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

Jesus has come – and he is coming. He hoped for us that we might live in hope. In a way, the Church has never left the room where the apostles were gathered with Mary at Pentecost. Even after the Church has gone into the whole world to fulfill her Lord's command, she waits in loving expectation. Until the day of his final manifestation in glory, "the Church, united with the Virgin Mother, prays unceasingly as the Bride to her divine Spouse... 'Come!'.... For the Spirit is given to the Church in order that through his power the whole community of the People of God ... may persevere in hope: that hope in which 'we have been saved.'"<sup>66</sup>

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NOTE TO THE READER: In the prayer of the rosary, Christians contemplate the life of Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, through the eyes of Mary. The rosary's cycle of joyful, luminous, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries guides the faithful slowly and prayerfully through the life of the Lord.

Those who say the rosary with an open heart often have an experience similar to that of Jesus' first disciples. The mother of Jesus, who "kept" all these mysteries, "pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19), teaches us how to pray. We are granted a share in her wondering love. She who once said "Yes" for us to God leads us into the "great mystery" of the world's redemption.

Catholic Information Service publishes *A Guide to Praying the Rosary*, #4772 on the CIS printed or online order form.

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## ***About the author***

Michelle K. Borrás, Ph.D., is director of the Catholic Information Service. She received a B.A. in English Literature from Harvard University; an S.T.L. from the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Rome; and a Ph.D. in theology from the Institute's Washington, D.C. session, with a dissertation on Origen's interpretation of the Paschal Mystery. Dr. Borrás taught at the John Paul II Institute in Washington an adjunct professor during the 2010-2011 academic year, and has given seminars in Catholic literature, the patristic interpretation of Scripture, and the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar at the internal school of the Missionary Sisters of St. Charles Borromeo in Rome. In addition to translating extensively, Dr. Borrás has published articles in the areas of Catholic literature and theology.

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#### **PART IV “LOVING IN DEED AND IN TRUTH”**

- 13 What is Freedom For?
- 14 Justice: On the Dignity of Labor
- 15 Justice: The Gospel of Life

#### **PART V “HE LOVED US TO THE END”**

- 16 The Dignity of the Suffering Person
- 17 “Behold, I Died, and Now I Live...”: Death and Eternal Life.

#### **APPENDICES: TOOLS FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION**

- A The Beauty of Holiness: Sacred Art and the New Evangelization
- B Technology and the New Evangelization: Criteria for Discernment

*“The life of Christ ... is resplendent with the Mystery that surpasses all understanding: the Mystery of the Word made flesh, in whom ‘all the fullness of God dwells bodily.’”*

— Pope John Paul II

### CATHOLIC INFORMATION SERVICE

The life of Jesus Christ contains inexhaustible depths. It reveals the God who “so loved the world” (John 3:16) that he would bind himself to his creature forever. And because it shows us our destiny and our salvation, the life of the incarnate Son of God reveals the full truth about man. In the spirit of Mary, who pondered the events of her son’s life in her heart, this booklet seeks to help the reader enter ever more deeply into the “great mystery” of the incarnation.



### **Catholic Information Service®**

*Knights of Columbus Supreme Council*

PO Box 1971  
New Haven, CT 06521  
cis@kofc.org

203 752 4276  
203 752 4018 (fax)  
www.kofc.org/cis