



BOOK REVIEW

Published in the *Holy Trinity Parish Bulletin*

TITLE: *The Mystery of Christ*

AUTHOR: **Father John Behr**

The Mystery of Christ calls the Church to shift its theological focus from the various Trinitarian and philosophical formulae of recent centuries to the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Father John Behr is a professor at St. Vladimir's Seminary and a noted patristics scholar. His many articles and works throughout his career have focused on the Cross as the foundation of Orthodox Christian theology. *The Mystery of Christ* is a summary of the first two volumes of his ongoing *Formation of Christian Theology* series, an overview of Christian theology up to the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

Christian theological reflection was shaped by the apostolic proclamation, which in turn was shaped by the Risen Lord opening the Scriptures to the Apostles. The disciples were not able recognize Christ as the Son of God during His earthly ministry. The light of the Passion and Resurrection illumined the disciples' exegesis (analysis/explanation) of Scripture so that they could see Christ prefigured throughout the entire text – for example, Abraham's offering of Isaac in Genesis, the Passover lamb slain in Exodus, and the image of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. The disciples were able to draw from the Scriptures (what Father John calls the "Old Testament") and the Eucharist the key to understanding the events of Christ's life, as well as "a thesaurus, a treasury of imagery, for entering the mystery of Christ". Father John writes that the four Gospels are more than historical narratives, but interpretations of Christ's person and work expounded with references from the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets. For St. Irenaeus of Lyons, the faith received in baptism is the "canon" or criterion of truth used to interpret the Scriptures. Subsequent theological reflection was shaped by his framework of Scriptures, the canon of truth, apostolic tradition, and apostolic succession.

Through this framework, we can also discover that God reveals His love and purpose for us through the Cross. Father John writes that "Christ's taking upon himself the role of a servant, voluntarily going to the Passion...actually manifests his true divinity" and the transcendence of God manifest in darkness and death transforms the life of the world. The apostolic preaching narrated in the Gospels allows us to truly contemplate this mystery. This encounter with the Word opens a new perspective on the Creation and Fall. Father John quotes the philosopher Kierkegaard – "we only understand life backwards, but we must live it forwards" – to illustrate the entire span of God's economy. Like the disciples at the Passion, we have abandoned Christ through our sinfulness. Despite our failures, He calls us to be His companions and to share table fellowship with Him. The Eucharist is "a taste of a life not bound to death and hell", in which humanity can understand and transcend sin and death. Because of the Lord's Passion and Resurrection, we are now dead to sin and alive in God. This is an ongoing process until the Lord's return; we are "in travail" according to St. Paul. However, Christ is incarnate in those who are born again in the Church, their "Virgin Mother", through the Holy Spirit. Humanity is no longer the "barren one", but continually gives birth to Christ in the body of His Church through the Gospel proclamation. By sharing in the life of Christ and glorifying God in our bodies, like the martyrs and ascetic saints, we become fully human in His stature. Dying to sin reorients us from the sinful abuse of the passions to the fulfillment of our creation. The climax of the book, in my opinion, is this explanation of our life's purpose: "Christians themselves, as forgiven sinners, are called to become wounded healers, extending the work of God to the whole world, to a point – the final eschatological point".

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Reviewed by Mark Vassilakis

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