

THE SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY OF THE ASSYRIAN CHURCH OF THE EAST

Introduction

There is nothing more visible in the Church than her sacraments (mysteries). Most of us relate to the Church identify our membership in the Church by the frequency with which we celebrate the sacraments. Sometimes we hear some excuses “I am not a good Christian” usually meaning “I don’t attend the Eucharistic celebration every often.” Yet even for the person who has drifted away from a fuller and richer participation in the life of the Church, *the sacraments continue to be the most visible expression of communion with the Church.* That may be one of the reasons why a baptism or Eucharistic celebration of anniversaries continues to have such an appeal for even less than fervent faithful member of the Assyrian Church of the East. The sacraments are the most visible sign of our participation in and identification with the Church.

The Meaning of the Word *Rāzā*

The Syriac noun *’rāzā* literally means secret, or anything having a secretive or mystical meaning; further synonyms are: type, figure, sign, symbol and likeness. This Syriac technical term also means mystery (sacrament), and when used in the plural, it refers to the Holy Eucharist. The term *’rāzā* is a loanword from the Semitic modification of the Old Iranian *razah* (neuter), meaning solitude, or ‘being alone.’ However, the term is more frequent in Middle Persian; known as Pahlavi; in modern Persian it has the meaning of ‘hidden,’ or ‘secret.’¹

The Western Churches use the Latin term *sacramentum* (sacrament) which means “to make holy.” It was a legal term belonging to the language of Roman jurisprudence. It referred to the oath taken by a Roman soldier upon his enlistment in the army (a pledge to set himself apart for this service. Tertullian (160-225) applied the word to Baptism, asserting that each Christian’s reception of the rite thus enlisted him in Christ army. From that time on, *sacramentum* or sacrament was applied in the Church of the West to another rites believed to have been instituted by Christ.

The Greek Churches were employing the term *mysterion* (mystery) which had a deeper meaning than sacrament and appeared in the Scriptures.

“In the Synoptic Gospel, *mysterion* refers to the “the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 13:11, Mk 4:11, Lk 8:10) which Jesus reveals through parables. In St. Paul’s writings *mysterion* often refers to Christ (1Cor 2:7-10, Rom 16:25-26; Col 1:26-27; 4:3; Eph 1:9-10; 3:3-12, 1Tim 3:16) who reveals the divine will to save all people, who himself is the

¹ S.P. BROCK (ET & intro.), *Ephrem: Hymns on Paradise*, Crestwood 1990, 42. The Arameans borrowed this term from the Persians, probably during the period of Cyrus’ conquest of Babylon (538 BC). They became subject to the Persians and had among them Persian officials, soldiers and citizens. That this word also passed into Hebrew is clear from the fact that it appears twice in the book of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, in passages 8:18 and 12:11, written sometime around 200 BC. However, it is used in a secular sense.

mystery through whom all things are restored, and who dwells in those who believe. Christ crucified is the supreme manifestation of God's wisdom (1 Cor 2:1f., Col 2:2).

Thus, the word *mysterion* appears in the Scriptures and signifies God's entire scheme of redemption – the new creation of all through the life, death resurrection and glorification of Christ. From the Eastern Christian point of view the mysteries of the faith (sacraments) reflect the whole Mystery of what it means to be in Christ. St. Chrysostom writes, "It is called a mystery because what we believe is not the same as what we see, but we see one thing and believe another" (PG 61:51).

Sacraments are Real

When we talk about the mysteries, we need to underline that what is taking place in the sacramental sign is *real*, even though it is a distinct and unique reality. It is true that all of us have different ideas of what is real, and for many people there is a temptation to consider only sensible things as real. *Yet even here we recognize that there is a quality of existence beyond the concrete. Memories are real. We cherish them and many times relive them.* Our historical reenactments, often in the form of memories and reflections, autobiographical and biographical, all bear testimony to the powerful reality of memory.

Imagination is also a form of reality, even though by definition we are able with a vivid imagination to expand the limits of our daily experience. Increasingly with new technology we deal with what is termed virtual reality. While it is not the same as what is actual in our lives; nonetheless, *virtual reality is a recognized form of existence and is part of a rapidly growing area of entertainment.*

Sacramental presence is also a unique kind of reality. It is not limited to the concrete data and sensible materials of this world. At the same time, it is much more than memory, imagination, or virtual reality. *Sacramental presence combines sensible, concrete, experiential elements with the spiritual and supernatural dimension of life.* Thus Mysteries are material, visible signs that point to, and bear within themselves, the spiritual and invisible reality of grace (namely, the presence of God).

A Sacrament Accomplishes What it Symbolizes

To properly understand what a sacrament is, we need to recognize what we mean by a symbol and the various ways in which a symbol can be used.

Symbols and signs stand for something not present. They point the way. A wedding ring, for example, is a sign of marital love—but it is not the love itself. A lighted candle in church may be a sign of personal devotion, but it is not the devotion itself. A box of chocolates given on Mother's Day may be a symbol of a child's love for his or her mother, but it is not the love itself. *Symbols serve a purpose. They speak to us of something beyond the symbol itself.*

A sacrament is a very special kind of symbol or sign. *What is unique about a sacrament is that it not only points to what is beyond it but also realizes what it symbolizes.* In the sacrament of baptism, for example, the water symbolizes the washing away of sin and the restoration of new life, the dying with Christ and rising to share in his resurrection. At the same time, it also begins to accomplish what it indicates.

Because mysteries actually accomplish what they symbolize, *they are unique signs. Because they put us in contact with God in such a way that God's grace touches us, they*

are holy signs. In a very real sense, the transcendent, spiritual supernatural world of God, God's grace and everlasting life, intersects with this limited world and limitations in a sacrament.

Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) maintains that the mysteries consist of visible elements that make present invisible realities. For him, "every sacrament consists in the representation of unseen and unspeakable things through signs and emblems."²

Christ is the Main Founder of the Mysteries

As a fundamental principle, Christ is the chief protagonist of the mysteries, which are enacted in the context of the liturgical celebration of the Church in the various sacramental rites. According to Timothy II, the mysteries of the Church are those means of conferring grace instituted by Christ and his disciples, and fulfilled in the Church—the proper place for dispensing the mysteries, through the mediation of the priesthood. The Syriac fathers consider the Church to be a true model of the heavenly Church and the place where the dispensation of Christ takes place. Christ poured into the Church all the riches of grace and truth gained through his death and resurrection.

The visible Church is also the great sacrament. It is a living continuation on earth of its divine founder. Jesus is truly the Son of God, but equally an individual man, the Son of Mary. In a like manner, the Church is the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit, a bearer of heavenly gifts, yet it is also very human in its existence. *The sublime mission of the Church is carried out through human agents. In doing their work those human agents perform sacred ceremonies that we call the mysteries, using ordinary realities of human life: bread, water, wine, oil, gestures, and words. Just as the Word of God took on a human body and became man, so too the Church, the continuing presence of the Risen Lord, takes on the flesh of the liturgy to continue the work of Jesus. The Church uses words, sings symbols and all forms of reality to accomplish her work—just as her divine founder did. We call this mysterious working of God's grace through human words and actions the liturgy. The Church continues to do today what Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection. Even the means are the same. Signs words and symbols manifest and accomplish the work of salvation.*

The Validity of the Mysteries

Abdīšō' provides three elements that constitute the holiness of each of the seven mysteries render them efficacious: First, a true priest, who has attained the priesthood rightly, according to the requirements of the Church. Secondly, the word and command of the Lord of Mysteries, whereby He ordained each of them. Thirdly, right intention and confirmed faith on the part of those who partake of them, believing that the effect of the mysteries takes place by a heavenly power.³

The validity, therefore, of the each of the seven mysteries (sacraments) is based on three essential elements: their source, mediator and receiver. The mysteries should be established or constituted by Christ or according to 'the word and command of the Lord'—the source of the Church's mysteries. The priestly minister of the mysteries, as mediator,

² THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*, 17.

³ 'ABDĪŠŌ', *Marganitha (The Pearl)* = IDEM., *The Book of Marganith (the Pearl): On the Truth of Christianity*, MAR E. SHIMUN (Introd. & ET), Kerala 1965; reprinted, Chicago 1988, 47.

should have valid ordination acquired according to the canons of the Church. Finally, the one receiving the sacrament must have a right intention and disposition in its reception, a firm faith and belief in the salvific effect of the mysteries. For ‘Abdīšō’, therefore, the mysteries are rather a ‘subjective’ participation in the mysteries of Christ—in that one must be properly disposed and believe in their power and efficacy—as opposed to the Anonymous Authors’ more ‘objective’ understanding of the efficacy of the mysteries.

While for Timothy the mysteries should be constituted by Christ, who operates in every mystery, the presence of the Holy Spirit effectively consecrating the sacramental material and a validly ordained priest are essential.

Timothy II provides the underlying principle of the fundamental understanding that everything the Church does is for a reason and does not happen by chance; he states: “there is nothing in the holy Church (which happens) by chance or simply, God forbid! Because the Holy Spirit who is the source of truth, is the establisher of all that which he assigns in it.”⁴ There are particular rituals instituted by Christ himself such as priesthood, baptism and the Eucharist. However, determining the ‘material’ necessary for the mysteries was established by the apostles—as can be seen especially in the case of bread and wine for Eucharist and Oil and water for baptism.⁵ While, whether the Eucharistic bread is to be leavened⁶ or unleavened, or whether the wine is to be mixed or unmixed, is determined by the ecclesiastical canons of the fathers of the Church under the influence of the Holy Spirit.⁷

The Effects of the Mysteries

The East Syrian fathers emphasize on the future fulfillment of what the mysteries typify for us in this world. The final ‘intentionality’ of the mysteries—which are pledges for the resurrection from the dead and immortality in our future life with Christ—will be realized at the *eschaton*. Timothy admits that the reality of the Spirit is within us but it is not realized in a perfect mode until the time when will have a full realization of God’s grace after the resurrection. However, in another place, Timothy indicates that the reality, which is realized partially, corresponds to the earthly symbolic events by means of the mysteries of the Church. He asserts: “The priest writes (the name of the candidate for baptism in the register) as heir and son of the kingdom and places it in the archives of the earth symbolically; for in truth he is inscribed in the archives of the spiritual books in heaven.”⁸

Theodore of Mopsuestia and Timothy indicates that the mysteries of the Church represent the future reality of immortality and immutability after the general resurrection. In them (sacraments), we do not receive this reality yet, rather we receive the pledge of the things that are to come about in the next world. In fact, this understanding of the mysteries as ‘pledges’ of the future life actually goes back to the *Mystogogical Catechesis* of Theodore, explaining the mysteries of the Eucharist and baptism. However, many East

⁴ TIMOTHY II, *Mystery of Baptism: Nestorian Patriarch (1318-1332)*, P.B. KADICHEENI (ed. & ET), Bangalore 1980, 53.

⁵ Cf. TIMOTHY II, *Mystery of Baptism*, 13.

⁶ Timothy attests the Apostolic origin of the Holy Leaven and Oil of Unction in the tradition of the Church of the East.

⁷ Cf. TIMOTHY II, *Mystery of the Eucharist*, J.M. KOCHUPARAMPIL (ed. & ET), PIO (Rome 2000), 53; TIMOTHY II, *Mystery of Baptism*, 13.

⁸ TIMOTHY II, *Mystery of Baptism*, 83.

Syrian authors indicate that the mysteries confer the grace that they represent. We find this concept in Timothy's treatise on baptism:

For until the death of our Lord, man was only body and soul, but in baptism, by the mystery of the death of our Lord, and by being (born) again, body, soul, and spirit (become) parts of the definition of a Christian; these three are parts of our being, not nominally and conceptually, but in (reality)... Therefore, the Spirit of grace of which (oil) is a figure and which we have received sacramentally in holy baptism is one with us.⁹

The Septenary Number of the Mysteries

The number seven being regarded as a perfect number since antiquity came to be seen as representing a sort of 'unification' between the natural and the supernatural realms in creation. Hence, the total of the numbers four—representing the four human temperaments¹⁰ or the four corners—and the number three – symbolic of three divine persons of the Trinity—yielded the perfect number seven. The number seven was also seen as representing the 'seven deadly sins;¹¹ and hence called for the remedy of these spiritual illnesses through a seven-fold spiritual remedy. Foremost among these are the seven candlestands that stood before the presence of God (Rev 1:13) and seven pillars before the presence of the Lord in the temple of wisdom (Prov 9: 1-3), and the seven letters to the seven churches in the New Testament (Rev 2-3), and the seven petitions of the Our Father.¹²

During the 12th century, the Eastern fathers also engaged in the use of the symbolic septenary enumeration of the mysteries. They saw the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit¹³ as analogous of the seven mysteries; since these seven-fold charisma come from the messiah, he bestows them on those who are his followers.¹⁴

In the Assyrian Church of the East, until the time of 'Abdīšō' (1318) there was no official enumeration of the mysteries. In fact, the early Eastern fathers did not enumerate the mysteries as such, nor did they limit their understanding of sacrament to the seven we know today. Their understanding of sacrament was much broader, and many of the rites of the Church came to be seen and understood in light of being a 'mystery'—or sacrament— which the Church celebrates. J. Meyendorff notes that during the patristic age there was no technical terminology when discussing the mysteries, and even the term 'mystery' (Gk. *Mysterion*) was used in a broad sense of 'mystery of Salvation.'¹⁵ The term 'mystery' was

⁹ TIMOTHY II, *Mystery of Baptism*, 39.

¹⁰ Temperament theory has its roots in the ancient four humors theory of the Greek doctor Hippocrates (460-370 BC), who believed certain human moods, emotions and behaviors were caused by body fluids (called "humors"): blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm.

¹¹ Pride (the excessive belief in one's own abilities), Envy (the desire for others' traits, status), Gluttony (an inordinate desire to consume more than that which one requires), Lust (an inordinate craving for the pleasures of the body), Anger (It is known as Wrath), Greed (the desire for material wealth or gain) and Sloth (the avoidance of physical or spiritual work).

¹² MARTOS, J., *Doors to the Sacred*, New York 1981, 51; AUER, J., *A General Doctrine of the Sacraments* (DT 6) Washington D.C. 1995, 89.

¹³ Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit are: Wisdom, Knowledge, Counsel, Fortitude (Courage), understanding, Piety, and fear of the Lord. These gifts are enumerated (approximately) in Isaiah 11:2-3.

¹⁴ MEYENDORFF, J., *Byzantine Theology*, New York, 192.

¹⁵ MEYENDORFF, *Byzantine Theology*, 191.

only secondarily applied to the rites and liturgical actions of the Church which had as their aim the sanctification of the faithful.

The insistence on the number seven with regard to the mysteries was first established in the Church of the East by 'Abdīšō' of Nisibis' *Book of the Pearl (Marganitha)*, and later came to be followed by Timothy II as well.

The Seven (Sacraments) Mysteries of the Church of the East

The sources of the Assyrian Church of the East's understanding of the mysteries are three: 1) Sacred Scripture, 2) Church Fathers and 3) liturgical rites of the Church.

The patriarch Yabhb'allaha III (1281-1317) commissioned 'Abdīšō' to write his dogmatic theological treatise, the *Marganitha (Pearl)*. This work is divided into five parts, treating of God, the creation, the Christian dispensation, the mysteries of the Church, and the things that depict the world to come;¹⁶ it was completed in 1298.¹⁷ The fourth part of his treatise deals with the mysteries of the Church. According to 'Abdīšō', the mysteries of the Church according to the Holy Scriptures are seven: ***Priesthood, baptism, oil of unction, the oblation of the Body and Blood of Christ, absolution, holy leaven and the sign of the Cross.***¹⁸

According to 'Abdīšō', while, the mystery of priesthood "is the ministry all other mysteries,"¹⁹ the sign of the cross "is that by which Christians are ever *kept*, and by it all the other mysteries are *sealed* and *perfected*."²⁰ In fact, the Church of the East has a rich and profound soteriological theology of the Cross.²¹ Baptism is the new-birth in immortal life, and the power of the Holy Spirit is the effective agent of the renewal (Jn 3:6, 8) while the Body and the Blood of Christ are the spiritual nourishment in eternal life. The leavening elements, which are holy leaven and oil of unction,²² are considered *rāze* (mysteries) by 'Abdīšō' and they are an apostolic tradition in which by generation have been handed down in the Church to this day orally. The holy leaven is united to the mystery of Eucharist while the oil unction is united to the mystery of baptism. The holy leaven²³ is added to the Eucharistic bread prior to baking while the oil of unction is added

¹⁶ See 'ABDĪŠŌ', *Marganitha (The Pearl)*, 1-81; BO III/1 332-351.

¹⁷ A. BAUMSTARK, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte*, Bonn 1922, 324; R. DUVAL, *Anciennes Littérature Chrésiennes II*, Paris 1907, 245; B. CHABOT, *Littérature syriaque*, Paris 1934, 139; 'ABDĪŠŌ' translated into Arabic in 1313 as has been cited by 'Amr ibn Mattā in the book of *Majdal*, where large portions of it are quoted. See BO III/1, 360, 586; cf. Vat. Arb 110.

¹⁸ 'ABDĪŠŌ', *Marganitha (The Pearl)*, 45-61.

¹⁹ 'ABDĪŠŌ', *Marganitha (The Pearl)*, 48.

²⁰ 'ABDĪŠŌ', *Marganitha (The Pearl)*, 46.

²¹ For a theological and liturgical significance of the holy cross see MAR APREM, *Sacraments of the Church of the East*, Kerala 1978, 41-44.

²² For more details see MAR APREM, *Sacraments*, 34-35.

²³ In discussion of the mystery of the Holy Leaven, it is essential to concentrate on the theological sense of the rite for the renewal of the Holy Leaven that takes place on Holy Thursday. It has two important roles: 1) It emphasizes on the unbroken continuing of the rite, indicating apostolicity (*diachronic dimension*). It connects us to the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper with the piercing of the side of Christ (John 19: 34). From side of Christ, is born the second Eve which is the Church. We find this through Ephrem's symbolic interpretation of the piercing of Christ's side where blood and water are flowed. The water symbolizes baptism while the blood is symbol of Eucharist and both of them served to create and nurture Christians, incorporating and drawing them into conformity with Christ (*Ephrem Commentary on Diatesaron, 21:11*). 2) It serves as the mystery of unity of each parish to its bishop and eventually to the

to the oil of baptism in which eventually will be used for the anointing of the entire body of baptized one. With regard to the mystery of absolution, ‘Abdīšō’ states that “the human race is apt to err and easily inclined to sin, and it is hardly possible that all should not be tried with spiritual diseases; and on this account the healing priesthood was given to heal freely.”²⁴ Hence, repentance is necessary and Jesus calls upon the sinner to repent (Mt 9:13). At the same time, Christ has given the faculty of forgiveness to the priest, who is the spiritual physician.²⁵ ‘Abdīšō’ affirms that the believers ought to confess their sins to the spiritual Physicians and “by absolution and penance they may obtain the cure of their souls and afterwards go and partake of the Lord’s Feast in purity.”

Timothy adopts the septenary number of the mysteries and distinguishes them according to two categories. First, the ‘mysteries’ in the proper sense are those rites that explicitly possess the prayer of invocation of the Holy Spirit, namely: the priesthood, consecration of altar, baptism and the Eucharist. Second, the ‘mysteries’ in the secondary sense are those rites without an epiclesis, namely: the perfection of monks, funeral service and marriage. He also distinguishes the mysteries of the apostolic commandment and ecclesial canons into those written and those handed down by tradition. The written tradition is defined as referring to the mysteries that are found in the Holy Scripture while in the case of the mysteries contained in the apostolic letters and ecclesial canons are required explanation occasionally. While the sacred rituals of the leavened bread, the sign of baptism and the oil and ordination (minor orders and the ‘perfection of monks’), the consecration of altars and other similar mysteries are handed down by means of the oral tradition of the Church.

Conclusion

It is important to recognize that the Mysteries have a visible and invisible reality, a reality open to all the human senses but grasped in its God-given depths with the eyes of faith.

The visible reality we see in the mysteries is their outward expression, the form they take, and the way in which they are administered and received. The invisible reality we cannot ‘see’ is God’s grace, his gracious initiative in redeeming us through the death and Resurrection of his Son. His initiative is called *grace* because it is the free and loving gift by which he offers people a share in his life, and shows us his favor and will for our salvation. Our response to the grace of God’s initiative is itself a grace or gift from God by which we can imitate Christ in our daily lives.

The mysteries prepare the faithful for the future life, but they also make that life real, here and now. We are given the vision and have the foretaste of the things to come through them. In them we encounter Christ, in order to be Christ. We enter upon a decisively new reality: in Christ we learn to become fully conscious of what it really means

Catholicos Patriarch (*synchronic dimension*)—it emphasizes to link the Institution of the Eucharist with each individual celebration of the Eucharist (emphasizing on *ecclesial communion*). The Joint Communiqué of the Fifth Non-official Consultatio in J. P. HOFRRICHTER & G. WILFLINGER (eds.), *Syriac Dialogue V: Non-Official Consultation on Dialogue within the Syriac Tradition* (Vienna 2003), 150; Ephrem Commentary on Diatesaron, 21:11 in C. McCarthy (tran. & intro.), *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diastessaron*, (*Journal of Semitic Studies Supplements* 2, Oxford 1993), 322. Brock, “The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ,” *Sobornost* 7 (1978): 464-472.

²⁴ ‘ABDĪŠŌ’, *Marganitha (The Pearl)*, 60.

²⁵ ‘ABDĪŠŌ’, *Marganitha (The Pearl)*, 60-61.

to be human. Encountering God, we also see the power of evil, whose force invades, pervades and distorts the image of God in us. Allied with Christ, we share in his victory over sin and death; the power of divine love overcomes evil in us and makes us a new into children of God and heirs of his Kingdom.

The basic principle of the sacramental theology of Oriental theologians, particularly Theodore, is the concept of the contemplation of the mysteries through signs and symbols. It lays stress on what the mysteries represent and symbolize. By contrast, Latin sacramental theology is interested primarily in causes and effects, and tends to focus “on *what* is being accomplished here and now and on *why* it is being accomplished.