Experiencing, Living, and Celebrating Our Christian Story

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Introduction

Although I was raised a Catholic, I lived more than half of my life as a self-confessed agnostic. I used to convince myself that life is composed of unrelated and uneventful experiences. In my mid-twenties, I longed for happiness; hoping it can help me discover the meaning of life. At that moment of groaning and groping, God had found and lifted me from my lowest point. It made me feel how the story of the two despairing disciples on the road to Emmaus—who were brought back to life by their encounter and conversations with the risen Jesus—sums up my own life journey. God changed my outlook towards life through the lens of His loving eyes of mercy; as the same love had empowered me. Now, I see my life as a grand narrative woven together by intricate patterns of meaning and redemption.

Searching for Meaning in the Rhythm of Life

Such is the transformative power of the story of our redemption to transform lives and give meaning to our collective groaning and groping. Tad Guzie, S.J. in *The Book of Sacramental Basics* notes that there is a rhythm of three elements that makes life human: *experience, story, and festivity*. Everything begins with a raw experience; yet it only becomes a lived experience when significance comes into play. The lived experiences involve recognizing the significance in

the raw experience, which is usually related in some way to our self.[1] When an experience becomes significant, we put it into story form. Storytelling is our most spontaneous and basic way of naming an experience.[2] Furthermore, festivity provides a pre-eminent context for storytelling as we share our meaningful stories during reunions and family celebrations.[3] Retelling and remembering helps us re-enter our lived experiences with new eyes and a sense of purpose. An important experience is thus retold in story and remembered in festivity.[4] The story names our lived experience, festivity frames it.[5]

However, we do not always get to name our experiences. We tend to disregard what goes on around us; we live in the midst of stories larger than our own: stories of our families, communities, etc. These groups provide us with "myths," those larger stories that surround and affect us. They communicate values, frame our experiences, and shape our attitudes. There are many myths surrounding us that offer contrasting attitudes, which help form the whole construction of the meaning of life.[6] Our fundamental attitudes seem to be changed only by a new experience and by our entry into a new story. We call such changes "conversion" and we describe the source of the change as a new "revelation."[7] Going back to the Emmaus Story, the disciples were talking about their raw experience when the Lord walked with them, retold the scriptures, and explained to them that Christ should suffer and enter into

1 Tad Guzie, S.J., *The Book of Sacramental Basics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 8.
2 Ibid., 11.
3 Ibid., 15.
4 Ibid., 7.
5 Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics*, 21.
6 Ibid., 72.
7 Ibid, 73.

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his glory (cf. Lk 24:26). The larger story thus helped make sense of their experience, and they end the day with a moment of sharing and celebration with hearts burning.[8] Like the disciples, we are all invited to enter the Christian Story: to be in touch with our experiences of God's love,[9] to tell our stories about Jesus in our gatherings,[10] and to celebrate them in festivity to lead us further into the Christian experience.[11]

Rekindling an Intimate Relationship through the Christian Story

The Christian Story began when God initiated a dialogue with Abraham and assured him of manifold blessings—to which Abraham responded with faithfulness. Through Abraham, the Hebrew people will recognize their own identity: a people whose God spoke His Word to them and reigns over their lives.[12] God began with Abraham, but His plan was to form a people, and through this people, save all people. The Story of Abraham was the beginning of Israel's ancestral experience of the divine Word that will continue into the tradition built by Moses and the Prophets.

In the Exodus Story, God's saving power and faithfulness to His promises is revealed. The liberation of the Hebrews from slavery left an indelible mark on their national consciousness and became the basis for the formation of a new nation and the ethical life of a new people. This event shaped Israel's perception of God as compassionate and faithful, giving them

8 Ibid., 23.

9 Ibid., 21.

10 Ibid., 22.

11 Ibid., 17.

12 Louis Bouyer, *The Eternal Son: A Theology of the Word of God and Christology* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor: 1978), 44; Dr. Joaquin Yap, "Theo 204: Ecclesiology," Unpublished lecture notes (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, SY 2017-18).

a reason to believe in Him. Moreover, the gathering of the people (*qahal*) around the Word of God (*dabar-YHWH*) was an invitation to enter into an enduring covenant relationship with Him, with God assuring Israel of His fidelity and God demanding that people harken to His voice in obedience and loyalty.[13] This reveals God's true nature, His mercy (*hesed*) and grace, His personal name (YHWH: "I-am-who-am," "I-will-be-there-with-you") and His salvific will for the people. Israel's election is not because of her own merits of quality and achievement, but out of the greatness of God's love. Not only are they called, they are called out (*ek-kalein*) of the many nations to be a holy people before the Lord to listen to His word and offer Him worship.

With this, God can be found in the midst of this world, in our story… and in all the ambiguities of ordinary human experience.[14] The Divine presence is captured in the Hebrew word *shekinah* (to dwell in a tent), presenting God as a wanderer like them accompanying them in their earthly sojourn to express His closeness (transcendent immanence).[15] But YHWH is also *merkabah*, the chariot of fire which God uses to traverse the universe as "the power which sets Israel in motion and urges the people on."[16] God progressively manifests Himself, through history as He raised up prophets to

13 Notes from Dr. Joaquin Yap (Theo 205: Revelation and Faith) SY 2016-17.

14 Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics*, 73.

15 Louis Bouyer, *The Meaning of Sacred Scripture* (UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1960), 117, Dr. Joaquin Yap, "Theo 237: God, One and Triune," Unpublished lecture notes (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, SY 2019-20).

16 Louis Bouyer, *Christian Mystery: From Pagan Myth to Christian Mysticism* (UK: T&T Clark, 1989), 87, Notes from Dr. Joaquin Yap (Theo 237: God, One and Triune), SY 2019-20.

deliver his Word to the whole people[17]: a word of salvation, of redemption, and of ultimate victory for God's people.[18]

Reclaiming a Lost Identity through the Story of Creation

The salvation they experienced in the Exodus Story led the Hebrews to envision creation with an optimistic view of man and woman, created in the image and likeness of God[19] and that God created a good world out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) through the creative power of His word (*creatio per vebum*). His creation exists out of God's sheer abundance of life and love emanating from His divine nature (*Dei Filius*, ND 412). This stands in contrast to the ancient religions of that time where good and evil clashed. The Book of Genesis thus affirms that God is the cause of everything good (*General Council of Florence*) and that God is bonded to creation through love. However, it also emphasizes human agency in sin as the prophets did, and recognizes in the Myth of Adam and Eve that radical evil comes when humankind refuses to acknowledge creaturehood in its complete dependence on God. While the traditional understanding of the temptation story ascribes the existence of personal evil to the "serpent," it can also represent the unconscious and endless desire within us of an evil infinite, the restlessness that makes us discontented with the present. Adam and Eve represent that part within us that is weak, the structure of finite freedom that is easily led astray. Being human is thus difficult because of this ambiguity.

17 Avery Dulles, *Revelation Theology: A History* (California: Herder and Herder, 1969), 20-21

18 Bouyer, *The Meaning of Sacred Scripture*, 18.

19 Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics*, 73.

However, the story reminds us that Paradise as the place from which man was driven is an attestation that sin is not our original reality. It proclaims the historical character of radical evil but asserts that it is not primordial evil. "Sin" may be older than sins, but innocence is deemed older.[20] Beyond the human person becoming a sinner, there is one's being created. The Adamic myth is, therefore, a symbolic representation of the optimism of salvation that is eventually fulfilled by the grace offered by Jesus Christ.

Redeeming Fallen Dignity in the Story of Jesus' Redemption of Humanity

The human journey, our being incarnate and living out our incarnation, was consecrated by Jesus when he totally embraced our human condition with all its ambiguity and lack of security.[21] Out of the divine mercy to save His people, the Word (*dabar*) became flesh and dwelt among us: Emmanuel ("God-is-with-us"). Jesus is God's Word, but is also an event, the Christ event—the incarnation of the Eternal Son, the hidden life of Jesus of Nazareth, the ministry of Jesus, the passion and death of Jesus, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, and the descent of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost.[22] This is the fulfillment of the words of Scriptures (Isaiah 40:1-8, 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, 53:4-12) and the eternal

20 Paul Riceour, "The 'Adamic' Myth and the 'Eschatological Vision of History" in *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston, Beacon Press: 1967), 232-278, Jose Mario Francisco, S.J., "Theo 239: Creation and Eschatology," Unpublished lecture notes (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, 2016-17).

21 Guzie, The *Book of Sacramental Basics*, 75.

22 Brian Daley, S.J., "He Himself is Our Peace (Ephesians 2:14): Early Christian Views of Redemption in Christ," in *The Redemption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 149-76. Manuel Francisco, S.J., "Theo 221.34: Soteriology and Mariology," Unpublished lecture notes (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, SY 2019-2020).

covenant of Yahweh's everlasting faithfulness in the face of Israel's turning away.[23]

As the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15) dwelling among us, Jesus is fully human and fully divine. He restores to us, by His incarnation, our union with God and unites himself with each one of us. By shedding His own blood, Jesus reconciled us to God and among ourselves and "blazed a trail [where our] life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning" by suffering and dying for us. As the Risen Christ, Jesus opens the way to a new life where we can cry out in the Spirit: *Abba*, Father (GS 22, CCC 654). We thus received the first fruits of the Spirit that enables us to "discharge the new law of love" (GS 22).

The mystery of Jesus is ultimately intertwined with ours; Jesus invites us to enter it as fully as he did. The Story of Jesus is our own story.[24] Through His immense love, He became what we are in order to bring us to be what He is Himself (St. Irenaeus). He united humanity to himself in such a way that he remained God, unchangeable. He imparted divinity to human beings in such a way that he did not destroy but enriched them by glorification (Pope Leo the Great). This restoration transforms humanity through the forgiveness of sins and the human growth in holiness until it reaches its fulfillment in the resurrection of the body,[25] so we can have abundant life (Jn 10:10) free from sin as God's sons and daughters (1 Jn 3:1). It is through the Son that we are forgiven, sanctified, adopted as children of God, and deified.[26] This lifelong process reaches completion in eternal life with God; when grace becomes

23 Riceour, *The Adamic Myth*, 232-278.

24 Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics*, 78.

25 Daley, *He Himself is Our Peace*, 149-176.

26 Daniel A. Keating, *Deification and Grace* (FL: Sapientia, 2007), 40, Dr. Joaquin Yap, "Theo 240: Sin and Grace, Unpublished lecture notes (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, SY 2017-18).

glory. The Risen Christ is the source and principle of our future resurrection (CFC 624).

As Christians, we are thus invited to graft our own personal histories onto the mystery of Jesus (Jn 15:5).[27] Christ died for our sins, not just our personal sins but encompassing all the "contradiction, brokenness and alienation characteristic of mankind on its journey."[28] The Christian, by virtue of Baptism, undertakes this same responsibility, accepts the human condition and the pilgrimage of human life. Baptism into Christ is a baptism into the death of Jesus so that "as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life" (Rom 6:3-4).[29] As Jesus shows, walking in newness of life and becoming ever more human is a lifelong process; Christ's universal redeeming love (CFC 577) declares that becoming fully human is the greatest act of creation in which we can engage.[30]

Reassuring Divine Presence and Action in the Story of the Church

All these happened as a preparation of that new and perfect covenant ratified by the blood of Christ, a new race one in the Spirit. Jesus gathers the scattered People of God and reunites the whole human race with God through the mystery of His death and resurrection, recapitulating all things in himself and reconciling all things among themselves.[31] The work of God continues as we live a "life in the Spirit." United in the Holy Spirit, we all share the joys, sufferings, hopes, and responsibilities of heeding the call to commit our total lives to

27 Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics,* 77.
28 Ibid., 67.
29 Ibid., 75.
30 Ibid., 119.
31 ND Intro to Ch VI: Jesus Christ the Savior.

the example of Christ. The saving presence and action of God in Christ is now mediated through the community formed and animated by the Spirit and faith called *ekklesia* – Church. [32] The story of God through Christ lives on in the Story of the Church, guided by the Spirit of Christ.

The Second Vatican Council affirmed that the Church comes from the Trinity.[33] God's gracious will and purpose is revealed and realized in Christ through the Church "to share with human beings the riches of his own divine life in an ineffable communion of love through Christ in the sanctification of the Spirit" (LG 2). The Spirit, dwelling in the Church through the believers, guides the Church to the fullness of truth and provides her with diverse ministerial and charismatic gifts in order to lead her to a perfect union with Jesus Christ. Christ is the one mediator who communicates truth and grace to everyone through the Church (LG 8), and the Church is a sacrament of communion with God and the unity of the entire human race (LG 1). It is to the Church that Christ entrusted the fullness of the means of salvation which are intended for all people (LG 48).

It is from our understanding of the Trinitarian God that we develop further a vision of the human person, society and the Church. By Jesus Christ, our fullness lies in imitation of his life and example. By revealing the communion of the Trinity, society ought to uphold a life of love and right relationships. Finally, the Church ought to mirror the ultimate destiny of all creatures by mirroring the mystery of the Trinity in its

32 Timoteo Ofrasio, S.J. "Theo 209: Christian Worship," Unpublished lecture notes (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, 2016-17).

33 Bruno Forte, *The Church Icon of the Trinity: An Introduction to Ecclesiology,* trans, E.P. Hontiveros, S.J., C.G. Arevalo, S.J., and F. Gustilo, S.D.B., (Makati: St Paul Publications, 1990), 16 cited in Celerino Reyes, S.J., *That They Bear Much Fruit,* 22-23.

equality, reciprocity and mutual love.[34] The Trinity is the sign of our faith; the story we hold on to. The faith of this *ekklesia* is embodied and expressed and nourished through the sacraments.[35] The outpouring of the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost ushered the age of the Church and leads it on. Christ continues to be with His Church through the sacraments, the communication of the fruits of Christ's paschal mystery in the celebration of the Church's sacramental liturgy (CCC 1076). Through the sacraments, we surrender to the transformation offered by the power of God, who promises to restore us to the divine image.[36]

Living the Symbolic Life in the Church

The Church defines a sacrament as a symbolic act or visible sign which effects or makes present a spiritual grace-filled reality or actions of God in Jesus Christ, proclaimed, realized, and celebrated in the Church. A sign points to a specific reality; a symbol represents a mysterious reality, leading to personal meaning at the level of sense, image, feelings, and intuition. It also enables us to participate in the mysterious reality to which they point. However, a true symbol must be known personally and lived into so that its symbolic meaning can be found.[37] They bring into awareness the realities of loving and being alive, living and struggling and dying together.[38] The action is a symbol of God's care for us in Christ. Enacting the symbol brings us closer to one

34 Catherine LaCugna, *The Practical Trinity* (Chicago: The Christian Century, 1992), 678-682, Notes from Dr. Joaquin Yap, "Theo 237: God, One and Triune," Unpublished lecture notes (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, SY 2019-20).

35 Ofrasio, S.J. "Theo 209: Christian Worship."

36 LaCugna, *The Practical Trinity,* 678-682.

37 Ofrasio, S.J., "Theo 209: Christian Worship."

38 Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics,* 48.

another in the Church to the Lord, who continues to be there for us.[39] The sacraments can be seen as festive moments that celebrate the continued presence of God as we journey on in our pilgrimage into the future.[40]

The sacraments are public and communal symbols that arise from the sharing of a common Christian experience.[41] When Christians gather to celebrate a sacrament, it becomes a festive action that call to heart their common story of a rekindling revelation, reclaiming of creaturehood, a redeeming love, and the reassuring accompaniment in the life of the Church. The commonness of the experience and the story are the dimensions of life that tradition has named "the faith of the church," beginning with the conviction that the story which we live and share is God's story as well as our own. The celebration of the sacraments calls us back to the myth of our creation, incarnation, redemption, and pilgrimage into our final glory as partakers of the divine nature—those larger stories which give significance to life. The commonness of the sacraments is meant to feed and enrich our personal stories.

These festive moments are suited to one's stage of growth in life and in faith.[42] There is birth and growth celebrated by the Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. There is also healing celebrated by Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick. There is commitment and service celebrated by Matrimony and Holy Orders (CCC 1210). Baptism expresses a new beginning, a new relationship with God through Jesus and in the Spirit; the hope of victory over sin is manifested. Christians first experience the Lord's forgiveness, proclaim the mercy

39 Ibid., 60.
40 Ibid., 76.
41 Ibid., 130.
42 Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics,* 80.

of God in their lives, then go to confession and celebrate it.[43] The Eucharist occupies a unique place among the Church's ritual sacraments; every work of the Church is linked with the Holy Eucharist and is directed towards the real presence of Christ's Body and Blood in the consecrated bread and wine (CCC 1211). It is in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup that the Church is healed and reconciled with God, the head.[44] In the Eucharist, Christians assemble, celebrate their lived experience, and commemorate the redemptive act of Christ and continually renews itself.[45]

The sacramental celebration is, therefore, a culminating moment that comes after a certain process has been experienced and lived.[46] A sacrament celebrates the Lord's giving, but this giving begins long before the sacramental moment.[47] We look at the stuff of our own stories and seeing that it is significant, we story it, we enact it, we feast it. We celebrate a love that is present to us long before we even learned how to celebrate it.[48] Sacraments proclaim and enable us to own a love that is already present to us. They help get in touch not just with a memory, but with a living present that contains a hope for the future and helps to carry us into the future.[49]

There is hope, there is a future, and the story is not yet finished. Deification, the process of becoming sons and daughters of God not by nature but by grace, already begins now and will be completed in the glory of heaven—from *gloria in via* (glory that is still on its way) to *gratia in patria* (grace in

43 Ibid., 87.
44 Ibid., 66-67.
45 Ibid., 57.
46 Ibid., 79.
47 Ibid., 88.
48 Ibid., 85.
49 Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics*, 49.

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its homeland).[50] Until then, the Church as the pilgrim People of God is on the way, but not yet in her homeland (*ecclesia viatorium, in via non in patria*).[51] This is the mystery of the Kingdom of God that Christ proclaimed and manifested in his person and work; it will be fully realized only at the end of time when Christ comes into His glory. But the Church on earth announces this mystery of God's saving love revealed in Christ, and already experiences it as a present reality (LG 5). God is present in life, always awaiting integration into our personal stories to give meaning and dignity to the whole human experience and existence.

Conclusion

The self-emptying in the Jesus Story is a story of our redemption. The extent of divine involvement - the willingness of God to take on "the most lurid effects of human sin"—makes the Human Story a journey through human weakness into the divine life.[52] We take the simple things of every day and see if the Lord is there.[53] Once our eyes are opened and we recognize the Lord, we celebrate the mystery of God's love and the significance of being in this world and becoming human in it. Seeing better the stories we are living, we focus on the process by which we live, name them through our stories, and frame our experience in festivity—like the disciples in the Emmaus Story. This is the rhythm that makes life human.[54]

50 Yap, "Theo 240: Sin and Grace."
51 Yap, "Theo 204: Ecclesiology."
52 Daley, *He Himself is Our Peace*, 149-176.
53 Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics*, 135.
54 Ibid., 21-23.