

This Great Mystery

Session 5. The Mystery Made Known

The secret gets a definition, and the Church turns out to be heaven's lesson.

What We Found

Paul, a prisoner, refuses to call himself Rome's prisoner: he is Christ's prisoner on behalf of the Gentiles, and his sufferings are their glory. Then he finally tells us what he means by the mystery: the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus. In Greek all three words begin with 'together with', and one of them Paul apparently had to invent, because no existing word said what God had done.

The prophets had promised blessing for the nations for centuries, so the fact was never secret. What was hidden for ages was the shape: full co-inheritance, one body, no lower tier, lodged 'in God who created all things' before any of it happened. The promise was published; the shape was sealed.

Verse 10 gave us the largest claim about the Church we have met so far: through the Church, God's many-colored wisdom is made known even to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. Spiritual intelligences learn something of God by watching this body of forgiven people. Your parish is heavier with meaning than it looks.

Then Paul dropped to his knees and prayed for us: strength in the inner self, Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith, rooting in love, and being filled with all the fullness of God. His doxology set the Church beside Christ himself: glory 'in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever'.

Voices of the Church

St. John Chrysostom, d. 407

Preaching through this passage, Chrysostom lingers in astonishment over verse 10. The mystery, he teaches, was hidden not only from human beings but, in its full shape, even from the angels; the heavenly powers themselves learn the manifold wisdom of God by seeing what God has now done in the Church. What was kept from the eyes of heaven for ages is displayed among gathered, forgiven people.

Homilies on Ephesians, on 3:8-11. Summary of St. John Chrysostom's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. When you wonder whether the visible Church really matters, here is a Father of the Church saying that angels receive instruction through it.

St. Thomas Aquinas, d. 1274

Aquinas asks the obvious objection: how can anything be 'made known' to angels, who behold God? His answer, in substance: the angels knew God's plan in its eternal source, but its concrete unfolding in time, Gentiles made co-heirs in one body with Israel, they see accomplished through the Church. And the wisdom is called 'manifold' not because God has many wisdoms but because his one simple wisdom expresses itself in many ways, across ages, peoples, and providences.

Commentary on Ephesians, chapter 3. Summary of St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. A satisfying answer to 'why would angels need to learn anything?': knowing the plan in its source is not the same as watching it happen.

St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, d. 1906

This young Carmelite took Paul's prayer in 3:16-19 with complete literalness: Christ really does dwell by faith in the baptized heart, so heaven does not wait for death to begin. She described her whole vocation as staying home with the God who dwells within, recollecting herself to find the Trinity already present in her soul, and she drew her very identity from this letter, loving Paul's phrase about living for the praise of God's glory.

Letters and retreat notes. Summary of St. Elizabeth of the Trinity's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. Ephesians 3:14-21 is not rhetoric. A woman about your age built an entire life inside this prayer, and the Church canonized her.

Live It This Week

Practices

1. Pray Ephesians 3:14-21 out loud once a day this week, putting one specific person's name where Paul says 'you'. Kneel if you are able; Paul did.
2. Once this week, when something costs you real time, comfort, or patience, offer it silently 'on behalf of' someone, the way Paul offered his chains.
3. Before Mass this Sunday, remember verse 10: you are walking into the thing through which God instructs the heavenly powers. Arrive five minutes early and tell him you know it.

Scripture Memory

Ephesians 3:20-21

"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen."

Ephesians 3:20-21

Go Further in the Catechism

- CCC 760. the world created for the sake of the Church
- CCC 1066. the mystery of God's will, proclaimed and celebrated
- CCC 2214. divine fatherhood, source of human fatherhood
- CCC 2714. contemplative prayer in the words of Eph 3:16-17

Before next session. Read Ephesians 4:1-16 before we meet, and count how many times Paul writes the word one.