

1] Why did St John write his gospel? He tells us himself towards the end of his account of the Life of Christ: 'Truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.' [Jn.20:30-31]

2] So that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the apostle and evangelist presents the reader with seven, carefully selected episodes, vignettes chosen from Jesus' life on earth, as witnessed by those who knew Him. These seven miracles, or signs as John calls them, begin with Christ's changing of water into wine for the wedding at Cana. And John presents each sign in such a way as to show that these are not just random phenomena, performed to attract attention; not mere illusions designed to impress for a time; but acts of the Divine will, vindicating the Church's faith in her Lord and Saviour, the One who had come to dwell among them, full of grace and truth, whose glory had been revealed by these very signs. (cf. Jn.1:14)

3] Between the narrative passages telling the story, and the monologues spoken by Our Lord to convey His teaching, each of these miraculous signs, in its own way, has a clearly theological meaning; each one, holding in itself, something of relevance to the life in Christ, known since the days of the apostles. The water into wine, referring to the fulfilment of the religion of Moses through a life of worship in Spirit and in Truth; the healing of the nobleman's son, indicating our restoration in the resurrection body; The feeding of the five thousand, prefiguring our unlimited participation in the communion of the Holy Gifts. And today's story, the healing of the paralytic man at Bethesda, pointing to our forgiveness found in the mystery of the waters of Baptism, stirred up by angels.

4] The great Orthodox biblical scholar, Fr John Breck, says that, 'Within Orthodoxy, the relationship between Word and Sacrament is one of essential unity, grounded in silence.' This is an idea worthy

of our consideration, and we find it here, today, in John's gospel, for the words of Christ - who is, Himself, The Word, and these signs recorded in the gospel that he accomplishes, have the same purpose throughout: 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.'

5] I was never particularly good at mathematics, but I recognise in the order and logic of numbers a particular beauty that reveals, naturally, something of the mind the Creator. If a thing is true, it must be beautiful, and anything of beauty must speak of truth. So why did St John choose seven as the number of signs? Perhaps he wished to reflect the six days of Creation in the beginning, followed by the day of rest, for these signs proclaimed a new creation, a new birth in Christ, by whom, he tells us, 'All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.' [Jn.1:3-4]

6] The Jews have long seen mystical significance in numbers: it is a crucial part of their mystical tradition, the Qabbalah. Six, the number signifying the less and perfect: so the creation is six days where all was 'good' but it was not brought to perfection. The seventh day, the Saturday, the Sabbath, the day that signifies resting in perfection; the same day on which Christ rested in the tomb after all things had been consummated, finished and brought to completion at the crucifixion, as Christ says in His last words from the cross, 'So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.' [Jn.19:30]

7] But the seventh day, in the scheme of the week, gives way to the first day once again, the Sunday; what we call the Lord's Day. This is the eighth day, the number that signifies eternity. Just as the biblical story has a first day of creation, what we call Sunday, so Christ rises again on the first day of the week - the seventh great sign in John's gospel - and a new creation is begun, that new and eternal life into which the believer enters, as Christ says: 'And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.' [Jn.6:40]

8] This is why the Church gathers as one on the first and eighth day of each week, while time abides: not now the sabbath, the seventh day, as Moses commanded, but the Lord's Day, when Christ arose and our life, completed and perfected, began again.

9] St Leo the Great, writing in the fifth century, teaches that after His Ascension into the heavens, our Redeemer's visible presence passed into the sacraments. By tradition we receive that number, seven, to be the number of sacraments in the Church, although we, quite properly, prefer the term, mysteries, from the Greek, to the Latin, sacramentum, meaning a pledge, legal deposit or an oath. The idea of the mysterion fits well with Fr John Breck's idea of being 'grounded in silence.'

10] From the Reformation onward there was a fierce debate within western Christianity, as to whether there were seven sacraments, according to the Catholics, or just two, according to the Protestants. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, has never been too keen on tidy book-keeping and precise definitions, according to the limits of human philosophy. For there comes a point at which our minds and our reasoning must give way before the divine mysteries, and we can only stand in silence and worship by faith, believing in order to understand, not the other way round.

11] We do indeed receive from Holy Tradition seven common mysteries of the Church, beginning with Baptism. The whole of this present Creation is a sacred mystery, pointing beyond itself and declaring the glory of God. Yet each of these mysteries, taking their elements from this very present creation, serve to establish among us the theological truth of that new life, that new creation, in Christ, just like those seven miraculous signs in John's gospel. Truly, Christ is still among us, visibly baptising into His death; sealing with the gift of God the Holy Spirit; forgiving sins and passing over trespasses; sanctifying our sicknesses to heal the body and cure the soul; blessing husband and wife to become icons of the mystical union of Christ and His Church; granting authority to certain men to serve the people as pastors in the sacred ministry;

and to feed our souls and bodies with eternal life in the communion of His own precious body and blood.

12] Do not misinterpret this silence before things divine. The mind exercising thought and reason through logic and argument, as an honoured place among us, but it is not the limit of the heart's understanding. There are those among us who, limited in knowledge and learning, can yet believe and know great mysteries of the Word without being able to articulate them in words of human language; and there are those of profound, scholarly learning, who nevertheless, can only bow down in silence before the depths that they behold in faith. No wonder it is the simple humility of Hesychasm, the way of silence: the prayer where, by God's grace, the mind stands silently in the heart and prays for mercy, that we hold to be the height of the spiritual life in Christ on this earth.

13] How can any of this be ours unless we share this in a common life? We do not believe those who would try to persuade us that we have no need of the Church; who would de-sacralise the glory of this creation; who would remove the mysteries and take away the means of receiving grace, substituting what goes on in their own minds as a spiritual experience, and through pride and hubris, having confidence in their own personal beliefs, quite apart from the true apostolic tradition. Here, in the body of Christ, on the first day of the week, let us also stand in silence.

14] A troparion recited in the prayers of thanksgiving after receiving communion, speaks of the Church being revealed to all as brilliantly lit heaven, leading the faithful in the way of light. We shall never come to understand this unless we approach in silence. Even entering here, into the courts of light, the house of God, we must guard the heart, seal the lips, sign ourselves with the sign of His cross and stand and wait and serve with an expectant silence within, where even the hymns of His Church on earth cannot extol the fulness of Christ's glory. As John explains at the end of the gospel, that just as the whole world could not contain the books describing all that Christ has done (cf. Jn.21:25]) so it is, in the end, with all our words in theology: they will never exhaust the mystery. Yet in the Liturgy, reflecting as in an icon, the inexhaustible grace

of the kingdom, we come to stand before the mystery of communion. As the Cherubikon Hymn, sung at the Liturgy on Holy and Great Saturday, commands: 'Let all mortal flesh keep silent and stand with fear and trembling, and ponder nothing worldly within itself, for the king of kings and Lord of lords cometh forth to be slain and given as food to the faithful. Before Him come the choirs of angels, with all principalities and authorities. The many-eyed cherubim and the six-winged seraphim, covering their faces and crying aloud the hymn. Alleluia.

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!