

## The Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Amos 7:12-15
<i>Response</i>	Show us thy steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us thy salvation.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 1:3-14 or 1:3-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you...
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 6:7-13

The fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B begins a new chapter in our journey through the letters of Paul with the letter to the Ephesians, a truly beautiful epistle; a profound, a deep epistle, and out of all the Pauline letters, I would argue the one that is most profoundly and deeply focused on the mystery of the Church. So if you're interested in the mystery of the Church, what is the Church, the theology of the Church (scholars call ecclesiology), the letter to the Ephesians is Exhibit A. It's ground zero. It's the place you want to start as you're pondering that great mystery of: What is the Church and what is the Church's relationship to Christ?

So for the fifteenth Sunday, the Church is going to give us the opening verses of the letter to the Ephesians. Now it actually starts in Ephesians 1:3 and following. I'm going to read the first couple of verses just so you get the setting as a reminder of the fact that the letter to the Ephesians is one of the Pauline letters. In other words, it's one of the letters in the New Testament that is explicitly attributed to Paul. The Church, in the lectionary — unlike the letter to the Hebrews, which is anonymous and the Church will pronounce as “a reading from the letter to the Hebrews” — although some modern scholars question the authenticity of the Pauline authorship of the letter to the Ephesians, the Church proclaims it as a letter

of St. Paul to the Ephesians. So that's how I'm going to be treating it here in this particular lecture, and as we walk through the letter. I'm not going to get into the questions of the debate over the authorship of Ephesians.

Although I would add that although in the late 20th century, most scholars (contemporary scholars) were inclined to doubt its authenticity, they're a growing body of scholars — Catholic scholars included, such as Luke Timothy Johnson and others, N.T. Wright is an Anglican scholar — who have been making the case *for* the authenticity of Ephesians and for its authorship by Paul. And so I'm going to treat it in that capacity here in this lecture.

So let's begin. Ephesians chapter 1:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,  
To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus:  
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 3, this is where the lectionary picks up:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Okay, so what's going on here? You might have noticed what we just read was pretty complex. It was pretty complicated; it was pretty dense. In fact, it's even more complex in the Greek, because in the Greek, that's all just one long sentence. Okay, so Ephesians is a very elevated letter. And so for our purposes here, I just kind of want to walk through it and unpack *some* elements. We're not going to be able to treat everything, even though it's just a handful of verses.

So the first thing I would say here is that Paul begins as he always does in his letters — or, almost always does in his letters — with a blessing or a benediction. You'll frequently see the letters of Paul begin with a blessing, with an act of thanksgiving to God. This is pretty standard. But in this case, this blessing:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...

...launches into this long theological statement about what God has done:

...who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...

Okay, pause there. This is very important. It is not a coincidence that the letter to the Ephesians, which is arguably the most focused of all the Pauline letters on the mystery of the Church, is also arguably the most focused of all the Pauline letters on the heavenly dimension of salvation, the heavenly reality of salvation. And in order to illustrate this, again, I just appeal to the diagram that I've used in other videos of these two circles, of the old creation and of the new creation, of this world and of the world to come.

Now sometimes I'll put these two circles next to one another in a horizontal graph to kind of suggest a chronological framework from now into the future. But in Ephesians, you can also take these same two spheres of overlapping reality — the old creation and the new creation — and put them in a vertical axis, meaning this earthly world and the heavenly world that already exists now in the realm of God.

So when Paul talks about us participating in Christ in every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, he's teaching that those who belong to the Church *already* share

in the blessings of the new creation that are present now in Heaven and will be revealed on Earth at the end of time at the final judgment, at the resurrection. So he says:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

He continues:

He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Pause there. Another key theme in Paul's letters is the role of grace in our salvation, that we don't do anything to *earn* a place in the heavenly places. It is a free gift of grace that we receive through Baptism in faith. And so here Paul is highlighting that this grace that Christ bestows on us in His beloved — which, later on in the letter, he's going to identify Christ's beloved, His bride, as the Church — that this grace that He's bestowed on us is something that was part of his plan from the beginning of time, from the foundation of the world.

So this is a very interesting revelation of the Church as not just ... the Church is not just some earthly institution to which we belong as members of a parish or diocese. The Church is part of the mystery of God's eternal plan of salvation from the foundation of the world. So just as Christ is prefigured in the Old Testament Scriptures, in the book of Genesis and the account of creation, in the psalms about creation, in the story of the exodus, all that ... just as Christ is hidden in mystery in the Scriptures from the very beginning of time, the beginning of Genesis, so too the Church is prefigured. It's in the Old Testament. It's part of the plan of salvation from the very foundation of the world. And those who belong to the Church are chosen by God from the beginning — actually, from all eternity, but from the foundation of the world, from the beginning of time — to belong to Christ's

beloved, to the Bride, to the Church. And it's all grace. It's a gift of God's grace. And Paul continues. He says:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to...

What?

...the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight....

The third key point:

... the mystery of his will...

Now that Greek word is a word that Paul uses often, or at least when he uses it, it's significant. It's the Greek word *mysterion*. Now we can use the word "mystery" today to kind of refer to a puzzle, like if you like to read mystery novels. A lot of times the plot will proceed along a path of trying to discover, unravel the puzzle of who committed a crime or who committed a murder. It's got more like a riddle.

When Paul uses the language of *mysterion* though, the basic meaning is not so much a puzzle or riddle but rather, something hidden that needs to be revealed. It's some invisible reality or some invisible truth (some hidden truth) that has to be unveiled ... which of course, there is a connection here if you think about reading a mystery novel. What's exciting about the mystery novel is that the identity of the perpetrator of the crime, for example, is hidden. It's secret, and then the book will end once the mystery is unveiled and what was hidden is now made known.

But this is ... what Paul is referring to here is an invisible mystery of God's will, of God's plan:

... which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time...

And what is that plan? That plan is:

...to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Pause there. Go back to that image of the two circles, the old creation (this world, the earth around us, the visible that we see) and then the invisible mystery of the new creation (the world to come, the heavenly realm that Paul speaks of at the beginning of Ephesians). What he's saying here is that the entire mission of Christ, the whole plan of salvation, the mystery of God's will from the foundation of the world is to take that earthly reality and that heavenly reality and make them one to unite all things *in Christ* — things in Heaven, think here of God and the angels, and things on Earth, think here of the created world and of human beings, of humanity. So that all those things would come together *in Christ*.

Now... so if you picture it as the old creation, the bottom circle would be the Earth, the world, the things on the Earth. The top circle, the heavenly realm and the new creation would be spiritual blessings, the angels, the risen and ascended Christ (because He sits at the right hand of the Father), as well as all those spiritual blessings that He wants to pour out on the Church.

The mystery of God's will is precisely where those two spheres overlap, that in Christ all things would be united. Or perhaps a more literal translation of the Greek would be that all things would be restored in Christ.

What does all that mean? Well, this is a very dense passage, and basically what Paul is going to do over the course of the rest of Ephesians is unpack the mystery of the Church and unpack the mystery of God's will as he's laid it out here at the beginning. For example, you'll see in Ephesians 2 ... or 3:8, for example, Paul will say:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.

So for Paul, the mystery of the Church is something that even the angels, the principalities and powers, didn't fully understand — this mystery of the union of Heaven and Earth, all things in Christ.

Okay, so that's the verses here. What can we draw from this? How has this verse been interpreted in the living tradition? Well, for this, I would actually turn your attention not to the Church Fathers but to the most recent ecumenical council that the Church has had, commonly known as Vatican II — the Second Vatican Council in 1962-1965. I wasn't alive yet, so those of you who might remember it, this was a momentous occasion in the history of the Church. There have only been 21 ecumenical councils in the two thousand years of the Church. And Vatican II produced some of the longest and most extensive documents in the history of the ecumenical councils.

So I've got a copy here of the Second Vatican Council. It's not actually as long as this appears. This edition has the major documents of the council — the 16 major documents — but also some other documents of the Vatican in curial offices and popes' encyclicals and stuff like that. So it's not as daunting as all this.

But in the most important of the Vatican II documents, *Lumen Gentium*, which is the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the Church devoted an entire dogmatic constitution just to the mystery of the Church. And this was really a first in the history of the Church, to have an ecumenical council address the theology of: What is the Church? What does it mean to belong to the Church? What is the mystery of the Church? And in the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, which is the Latin name of the Dogmatic Constitution — it means a light to the nations — Vatican II used Ephesians 1 to help us understand exactly what is the Church.

And I'm going to read this to you, but I want you to listen to it and I want you to think here and ask yourself, "Is this how *I* think of the Church?" Because lots of us have lots of different ideas and lots of different things that we mean when we speak of "the Church." For some people, the Church is the parish that I grew up in. For other people, the Church is the diocese to which I belong. For still other people, the Church, we will ... sometimes Catholics in particular will use the word Church to

refer to just the Magisterium. “The Church” says this, “the Church” says that. What you mean is the pope and the bishops — that’s the Church.

According to Vatican II though, there is some truth, obviously, to all those, but listen to how Vatican II describes the essence of the Church using the letter to the Ephesians:

The Son, accordingly, came, sent by the Father who, before the foundation of the world, chose us and predestined us in him for adoptive sonship.

Notice that — predestination is a Catholic doctrine. I deal with that in another video, but just notice it.

*For it is in him that it pleased the Father to restore all things (cf. Eph. 1:4–5 and 10). To carry out the will of the Father Christ inaugurated the kingdom of heaven on earth and revealed to us his mystery; by his obedience he brought about our redemption. The Church—that is, the kingdom of Christ already present in mystery—grows visibly through the power of God in the world....*

And then it skips down:

All men are called to this union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and towards whom our whole life is directed.<sup>2</sup>

So why did I read that? What stands out to me? Well, what stands out to me in that verse is this. According to Vatican II, following Ephesians 1, the Church in its essence is not primarily the earthly institution, the Vatican curial offices, your local parish, the diocese ... whatever it might be. In its essence, the Church is:

... the kingdom of Christ already present in mystery ...

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<sup>2</sup> Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* 1.3, trans. A. Flannery



... on Earth. So what is it saying here? What is the Church? In essence, the Church is the heavenly kingdom of Christ, which is already fulfilled through His passion, death, resurrection, and ascension, which is present on Earth in mystery — through the mystery of all those who belong to the Church in this earthly realm.

Now why is that so important? It's because, I think, for most of us, at least for myself, for many years, I tend to have it backwards. I tend to think of the Church primarily as an earthly institution that will eventually end up in Heaven. But according to Vatican II and following Ephesians 1, in its essence, the Church is the heavenly kingdom of Christ, which is now spreading throughout the Earth and is only present on the Earth *in mystery*.

In other words, when we look at the Church on Earth, it doesn't *look* like the kingdom of Heaven. There's a mysterious element to the Church. I'm trying to think of an analogy ... oh, I've got one.

It's kind of like a field, where there are weeds and wheat planted together. Just stay with me here for a second. And the weeds grow up along with the wheat so that you can't see and distinguish the good wheat from the bad weeds, right? That's how the kingdom of Heaven is, according to Jesus in the Gospels, and that parable is a precise illumination of the mystery of the Church. In Her essence, the Church is a heavenly reality. It's the kingdom of Heaven over which Christ reigns right now in glory. But that heavenly kingdom — which consists of Christ, the Blessed Mother, the angels, the saints, they're all part of the heavenly kingdom — exists on Earth now, according to Vatican II. It is present on Earth now but it's present *in mystery*.

In other words, the weeds and the wheat are still together. Saints and sinners are still blended with one another. You can't quite see or distinguish ... it won't be clear until the final judgment who the weeds are and who the wheat is. And yet it is a visible reality present in this world but in mystery.

And so many of the parables of Jesus are precisely designed to usher us into the mystery of the Church and help us to understand that in God's plan, to unite all things in Heaven and things on Earth, the Church plays the central role. The

Church plays the central role. The Church is the heart of that mystery, because it's precisely in the Church — which as we'll go on to see in Ephesians, who is the bride of Christ — that humanity is united to Christ and united to God through the Mystical Body of Christ.

Anyway, I bring this up just because I think a lot of the difficulties that people experience, at least in our own day — say with scandals in the Church or sin in the Church or institutional inequalities or injustices in the Church — a lot of those scandals (which are real, not in any way to diminish them), we would be able to bear them more easily or more fruitfully if we realized that in its essence the Church is a heavenly reality. And that because She's present here on Earth in mystery, we have not yet seen the fullness of the glory of the Church unveiled as we will at the end of the book of Revelation, for example, in the new heavens and the new earth.

And so, for now, in this world, the Church is going to look like a field, like a *corpus mixtum*, a mixed bag of weeds and wheat. Second, it also shows us something very important about Jesus' promises about the Church. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, there's a famous Catholic priest in France called Alfred Loisy. He was a biblical scholar and a theologian — very influential. And he eventually apostatized, left the Church, became an atheist, and died excommunicated. And he wrote a famous book on Jesus and the Gospel of the Church, in which he said these words: "Jesus promised us the kingdom, but what came was the Church."

Now Loisy's words were not interpreted by many of his followers as a compliment. He actually was implying — and what his followers went on to infer — was that Jesus promised the kingdom of God, and it didn't come. It was a failed promise. He promised the kingdom of God, and all that came was this Church ... this sinful organization of people like Peter and the apostles and you and me, instead of the glory of the kingdom of Heaven as Jesus had promised.

So Loisy died outside the Church, regarding Jesus as a failed prophet. And he influenced many people to think that way. And it's precisely because he did not understand what Ephesians is saying here and what Vatican II is revealing to us ...

is that yes, the Church is the kingdom of Heaven. But it's the kingdom of Heaven present in mystery.

So as we move through the letter to the Ephesians, you're going to see this theme of recognizing that not only is God a mystery, not only is Christ a mystery, but the Church itself is a mystery. There is an invisible reality hidden behind the visible reality of what we see and what we experience in our lives in the Church. And that it's only when we begin to understand the mystery of the Church not just as an institution — but as Ephesians will show us, as the Bride of Christ — that we will truly understand and appreciate how the Church is the fulfillment in time of the mystery of God's will in His plan of salvation.