The Divine Mystery

By Very Rev. Alphonsus Maria Duran, MJ

Let’s talk about mystery. Today, to a good degree, we want to have control of everything, to understand everything.

But we come to frustration because we can’t. First, in the physical world. We understand our physical world more and more, but there are still many things we don’t understand. There are millions and millions of stars and so many theories about them, nothing but theories. I remember the first time that Armstrong went to the moon. Many scientists thought that there would be ten feet of dust on the moon, and that the men would be buried when they stepped on the moon. Well, when Armstrong stepped on the moon he wasn’t buried in dust, because the moon was solid rock. The moon was a mystery for us. So many theories about how the stars are formed. But they’re all only theories. We don’t know exactly; they’re still a mystery for us.

A deeper mystery for us is the human mind. How much we are a mystery to ourselves. How much we don’t know about ourselves. We can say, “Oh I know everything about myself.” Oh really? Until one day everything collapses – a car accident, a mental breakdown, an emotional shake-up. And we don’t know what is up or what is down. We don’t know the beginning or the end. We just don’t know anything about ourselves. I know a fellow who used to say, “I do the things I don’t want to do, and I don’t do the things I want to do.” He was stuck in the same situation that we are in. We are a mystery to ourselves, a deep mystery.

This mystery helps us to throw ourselves into the hands of God and say, “Well, God, here I am. You know how I am because I sure don’t.” When I think I have the whole thing figured out and I really have perfect control of my life, then something happens and I lose perfect control of my life. I’m a mystery to myself.

The most important mystery is the mystery of God. Of course He has to be a mystery. This brings us precisely to the Holy Mysteries. The word “sacrament” is a Greek word, and it means “mystery”. In the Divine Liturgy and the Holy Mass we’re dealing with the Divine Mysteries. These are mysteries of God – the wonderful, the awesome, the profound, the infinite, the incomprehensible. As we say in the Divine Liturgy, “the mysteries of God”.

We live in the mystery of God. All these external ceremonies we are doing are important because they help us in our senses, in our imagination, to go into the depths of God in the soul. But we are now dealing with the mysteries. How many things happen in our souls when we attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Divine Liturgy? Only God knows. So many things happen in our souls. They are very real things that happen, and we are unaware of them.

The modern and superficial man tries to measure things by feelings. “Whatever I feel is real.” Dr. Low, a famous Jewish psychiatrist from Chicago used to say, “Feelings are not facts.” Sometimes we can feel something very strongly, and it is not true. Other times we don’t feel something else, but it is true.

Let’s celebrate this sense of mystery, immerse ourselves in the mystery of God. In the Divine Liturgy it says that thousands of angels and archangels are around the altar worshiping God. We cannot see angels with our physical eyes, but they do exist. Like we don’t see the soul, but the soul exists.
The Bond of Charity that unites us with God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Pope and each other.

Editor's Note: The 500th anniversary of Queen Isabel's death prompted a Puerto Rican prelate to examine her faithful service to Christ and his Church. This talk is particularly appropriate as Queen Isabel is a patron of Miles Jesu.

Imagine that you have before your eyes a map of the world. Looking at the map from heaven’s perspective, imagine that the places strong in the Catholic faith shine with special brilliance. Ireland, for example, would be one such place. History shows that this island owes its faith and Catholic culture to St. Patrick, who is rightly known as the “Apostle of Ireland.”

Now move your eyes west across the map, across the Atlantic to America. How can we account for the fact that Spanish America, not just a small island or a large peninsula, but one entire continent and a large part of another has been — and is still — predominantly Catholic?

After Columbus’ first voyage to America, he reported to Queen Isabel that, as far as he could see, there was not much promise of material wealth in the lands he had visited. No mountains of gold or other precious metals were seen. How did Queen Isabel the Catholic respond to this news? Her response is recorded in history: “Though there be nothing there but stones, I would continue there while there may be souls to save.” These words reveal her heart. Much more than any possible monetary gain, her zeal to spread the Catholic faith led Queen Isabel to sponsor Columbus’ expeditions. This truth, which is often left out of history books, deserves recognition: Most of Spanish America is Catholic because of Queen Isabel.

Christ said we can know the tree by its fruits. What exactly were the fruits of Isabel’s faith? As the author Nemesio Rodriguez Lois points out, America “will soon be home to more than half of the Catholics of the whole world. This is the reason for which recent popes have baptized these lands with the significant name of “The Continent of Hope.” Truly, the great hope that this continent holds can be traced back to the extraordinary virtues of Queen Isabel: her hope of bringing Christ to new peoples; her charity in making laws to protect these peoples from exploitation and enslavement, and her great faith, whose legacy still lives in South and Central America, Mexico, the western United States, the Canary Islands and the Philippines, among other places.

A True Follower of Jesus

Queen Isabel, who died over 500 years ago on Nov. 26, has often been likened to St. Teresa of Jesus, the 16th century Carmelite. Venerable Juan de Palafox, who made extensive studies of the writings of Isabel and St. Teresa, claimed “that if St. Teresa had been a queen she would have been another Queen Isabel and if Queen Isabel had been a nun she would have been another St. Teresa of Jesus.” Isabel was born of Catholic parents on April 22, 1451.

In 1474, Isabel was proclaimed queen of Castile. With her hand on the Bible, she vowed to be obedient to the Commandments, to honor her prelates and ministers, and to defend the Church with all her strength. The papal nuncio was present at her enthronement in Segovia along with the papal legate, clear signs of the Holy Father’s support of her taking the throne.

In anyone’s eyes, Queen Isabel would be considered great just by the fact that, with great prudence, justice and fortitude, she joined together 27 separate kingdoms into one strongly united Spain, with her husband King Ferdinand. It is a striking example of how a truly Christian leader can elevate a people from a state of extreme prostration to become a world power. Before Isabel’s reign, it was often not safe to walk or travel in cities or through the countryside. Many people were victimized by rampant violence, and there was terrible corruption among civil leaders. All this changed under Queen Isabel.

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A Reformer of Church and State

A true daughter of the Church, Isabel initiated religious reforms, and then undertook political reforms. She knew that if she could strengthen the Spanish clergy, religious orders and monasteries, she would thereby obtain the spiritual betterment of her people. Once a reform in faith and morals was in place, the political reform would be much more successful.

Her reforms of Church and state worked marvelously, resulting in many good fruits: unity in the kingdom, the strengthening of the crown to better serve the people, the establishment of a stable peace and the restoration of justice, exemplary clergy and religious orders, a unified front against the enemies of the faith, and the promotion and defense of morality. These elements form the basis of good government. How many of today’s world leaders could learn from her example of how to govern without compromising one’s faith or violating one’s conscience?

Isabel clearly stated her motives for carrying out these two reforms: the greatest service of God and the exaltation of the holy Catholic faith. Thus, the Catholic Church in Spain was well prepared for the great enterprises for which she was destined, especially the evangelization of America and all of Spain’s territories. Because the faith in Spain itself was so strong, the country enjoyed a unity free from the splintering effects of Protestantism. And let us not forget the great Spanish saints who rose out of Isabel’s reforms: St. Teresa of Jesus, St. John of the Cross, St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Francis Borgia, to name a few.

Devotion to Jesus and Mary

Like these saints, Queen Isabel’s devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was outstanding. She created and promoted many eucharistic associations which even until today, foster devotion and reverence to the Blessed Sacrament. She also wrote personally to all the bishops of her realm asking that they encourage devotion to, and take much care in their handling of, the Blessed Sacrament. She wrote them not so much as their queen but as a concerned daughter of the Church.

The queen’s devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was not only fervent but, in a way, visionary. She co-founded the Order of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception in 1489 with St. Beatriz of Silva. Around the same time, she also wrote to the Holy Father and respectfully asked him to take appropriate steps against those who denied the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. She did both of these things 365 years before the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was even declared.

Queen Isabel once received two monks from the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem and after they had departed, she sent them the enormous sum of 1,000 ducats every year which she ordered to be used in Jerusalem for the things necessary for divine worship there, and for the upkeep and improvement of the Holy Sepulcher itself. She also gave them a veil to put on top of the Holy Sepulcher, which she’d made with her own hands. From these few examples, we can gain some appreciation for the strong devotion which Isabel had for the Catholic faith.

Her determination only to fight wars that were both just and unavoidable is demonstrated by the fact that, whenever possible, Isabel avoided fighting against other Christian rulers. And she never took sides with Christian rulers who were opposing the Holy Father. In all, she carried out two successful campaigns against the Moors, one in Granada and one in Africa. These victories helped save Spain and Europe from the very real Moorish threat to conquer Christendom. In addition, her sponsorship of the evangelization of America resulted in the conversion of many native people.

Bold, Decisive, Faith-filled Action

Isabel proved that her Catholic faith was not simply a pious phrase said in passing but the deepest conviction of her being. In a heroic way, her actions matched her words.

Her greatest achievement was certainly her impact on America. In the evangelization of America, Granada and all of her realms, Isabel showed how she saw the Catholic faith as a most precious gem — a jewel that, once unveiled, would be dearly coveted by all those who accepted it.

While Isabel never stepped foot in America, her zeal to spread the Catholic faith caused and inspired many missionaries to sail across the Atlantic bearing the Good News of Christ. Therefore, Isabel merits a unique title as “Evangelizer of the New World.”

History offers no other candidates for this title. And today, Catholics in lands stretching from my island of Puerto Rico, down to the southern tip of South America, and all the way to the coast of California, can all look to Isabel as their historical mother in the Catholic faith.

Cardinal Luis Aponte Martinez is archbishop emeritus of San Juan in Puerto Rico.
“The point of view of every human soul is only partial, from some of the lower slopes of the mountain…but the (Catholic) Church’s point of view is from the divine top of the mountain, since her soul is the Holy Spirit.”

DR. PETER KREEFT
PATH TO ROME SPEAKER 2004
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

“...on my conversion, I was not conscious of any change…of thought or feeling, as regards matters of doctrine; …however…I am bound to confess that I felt a great change in my view of the Church of England…an extreme astonishment that I had ever imagined it to be a portion of the Catholic Church.” ('Apologia').

Significantly, Newman has often been called ‘The Father of Vatican 11,’ and there is no doubt that it was a ‘watershed’ for the Roman Catholic Church, just as the ordination of women was to be to the Anglican Church nearly 30 years later. Vatican 11’s emphasis on pastoral theology and ecumenism, on liturgical reform and the empowerment of the laity, both attracted ‘outsiders’ and repelled some ‘insiders.’ For example, John Wilkins (recently retired editor of ‘The Tablet’) described himself at its outset as “…this Anglican who knew so little about Catholicism,” who followed, “as best I could the unfolding events in Rome...” until, “Before the council ended, I had become a Catholic.” Testimony indeed. Perhaps it is only fair to say that many ‘cradle Catholics’ disliked changes to the liturgy, receiving in both kinds and front-facing altars, and that some ‘lapsed’ because of it.

However, post-Vatican 11 ‘high-
Fr. Ignatius Spencer
A review by Fr. Ben Lodge, CP, Catholic Truth Society

This booklet on the life of the Passionist priest, Fr Ignatius Spencer, is part of the ‘Saints of the (British) Isles’ CTS series which includes other better-known Englishmen, such as Edmund Campion, Robert Southwell and Thomas More. Ignatius Spencer lived and worked in the nineteenth century, a time less dramatic than the Reformation period when Catholics might be called to martyrdom. Yet his life and achievement, set against the background of the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850 and the Industrial Revolution, when Irish emigrants from the famine were pouring into English cities such as Liverpool and Birmingham, deserves wider recognition. His cause for canonisation was begun by the late Archbishop Worlock of Liverpool in 1992.

Spencer, whose baptismal name was George, was born into the heart of the English landed aristocracy in 1799. The youngest of eight children and the son of Earl Spencer of Althorp, he received the conventional education of his class, first at Eton, then at Cambridge. He retained a lifelong love of cricket – perhaps the only relic from his public school past that he later brought into the Church. In 1819, after leaving Cambridge with a first class honours degree (achieved at a time when gentlemen undergraduates often led a leisurely intellectual life), he was taken on the continental Grand Tour. Pious, sincere, shy and with a gift for languages, George noted that it was ‘the first time I entered a Catholic church’. Unlike Robert Hugh Benson, son of the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, who went on a similar Grand Tour later in the century and who also became a Catholic priest, it did not make much of an impression at the time. In Milan Cathedral he found the liturgy ‘mummery’. However, narrowly escaping a volcanic eruption in Naples, Spencer felt convinced he had been marked out for a special purpose in life.

What form this would take was as yet unclear. As a younger son, Spencer seemed destined to be an Anglican clergyman, enjoying a comfortable living on his father’s estate. He entered the Anglican ministry in 1824 and was by all accounts a most zealous pastor at the family living of Brington. Unworldly and somewhat impractical, he managed to give away most of his father’s generous allowance to the poor; when his income was reduced, he gave up wine and puddings. His family, to which he was and remained very close, thought him a ‘character’.

A scholarly, reflective and spiritual man, it was not long before his reading of the early Church Fathers made him doubt the historical foundations of Anglicanism – a similar intellectual path to that taken by John Henry Newman in 1845. In 1830 he converted to Catholicism, influenced by his friendship with a dynamic young Catholic layman, Ambrose Phillpps de Lisle. Sent to the English College in Rome, Spencer was ordained a priest in 1832. During this period he also became friends with Fr Dominic Barberi, rector of the Passionist community at Lucca. At first he was appointed to parishes in the Birmingham area. He used his own money to build the Catholic churches in West Bromwich and Dudley.

At this time he began to develop his particular mission: praying and getting other to pray for the conversion of England. Today such a notion is often viewed with suspicion in certain ecumenical circles – but until the Second Vatican Council the ‘Prayer for England’ was automatically recited at the conclusion of Mass. Dear Steve,

I hope this letter finds its way to you, as I gather you may well be in Chicago.

I was very sorry to hear that you were unwell. My thoughts and prayers are with you. Look after yourself.

I thoroughly enjoyed the conference in November (Path to Rome in London). It was so pleasant to see you again and all the other MJ’ers as well. The atmosphere of Catholic friendship and enthusiasm was inspiring. You were a big part of it, as always – so get better soon – you are very much needed.

I am contemplating retirement in the near future. So my routine will be changing and there should be much less stress, but I shall find a lot to do. I am of course always in contact with Tom and Michael and hope to be able to meet Tom more often down in Sussex.

I send you, Steve, my kindest regards and thoughts.

Yours,
Brian Healy

continued on page 6
The doctrines and examples in this book are taken from publications approved by the Holy Catholic Church to whose Magisterium and authority we submit ourselves always and totally.

SECTION 6. TO WHAT DOES GOD COMMIT HIMSELF WITH RESPECT TO THE VOCATION?

It is what is called the “grace of one’s state in life.” That is, a very effective help that Our Lord grants to each person whom He calls and destines to some sacred service in His Church.

Pope John XXIII told how when he was elected Holy pontiff (in 1958) he experienced a terrible fright. But as soon as he opened the book, “Imitation of Christ,” at random the first thing he read was this phrase, “When God confides a special office to a person, He commits Himself to give him the helps and graces needed in order to exercise well the position entrusted to him.” And later the Pope said that from that moment onward he felt a great peace and that during the years of his Pontificate he could verify that, yes, it is true that God commits Himself to help in a very special way the people whom He calls to an especially holy vocation. The one who loves commits himself to the end.

“‘All the ways of this world are as fickle and unstable as a sudden storm at sea’

St. Bede the Venerable

Road to Damascus ... continued from page 4

of every Sunday Mass in this country. For Fr George Spencer, member of a once-Catholic family that had owned estates in Northamptonshire since the Middle Ages, now a zealous Catholic priest, such a mission was obvious: and to work and pray for England to return to her ancient and true Faith became his particular calling. In 1846, naturally sympathetic to the similar goal of Fr Dominic Barberi, who from his childhood had dreamed of an English mission, Spencer entered the Passionist Order and was given the name Ignatius of St Paul.

The rest of his life, until his death by the roadside in 1864 (he had prayed to die, unknown, in a ditch) was devoted to the cause of England’s conversion. Fr Ignatius was indefatigable; constantly preaching on the Passion of Christ, he once also found time to write 72 letters in two days. Although he used trains to save time, he covered long distances on foot; he once walked 33 miles as he forgot to take money for his return train journey. For a time he was appointed spiritual director of the seminary at Oscott. Usually his work involved Missions, often in Ireland, a country he believed that would be instrumental in England’s spiritual salvation. He would spend 3 days on these arduous exercises, beginning with confessions, then celebrating Mass, then giving instruction in the Faith and concluding with more confessions. Sometimes he spent 12 hours daily in the confessional during these periods. He never took days off.

Recognising that such demanding apostolic work required a deep personal spirituality, Fr Ignatius combined his outward labours with constant prayer. It is right that this unusual, gifted and holy man should come into the public eye today for he was in many ways prophetic: he recognised the need for an educated laity and also urged the founding of lay communities – common today within the new movements in the Church, but unheard of in the mid-nineteenth century. Fr Ignatius was often rebuffed – once by Newman himself in 1840, for which he later expressed his regret - sometimes mocked in the street, occasionally checked in his zeal by his Passionist superiors; yet nothing could disturb his trust and hope in God. To disappointments he would invariably respond, ‘Deo gratias’. We have much need of holy exemplars in this country and Fr Ignatius’ time has surely come.

Contributed by Francis Phillips
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