Opinion
NCR Voices
A life-size station in the Stations of the Cross is seen on the grounds of the National Shrine of

A life-size station in the Stations of the Cross is seen on the grounds of the National Shrine of the Divine Mercy in Stockbridge, Mass., in this Jan. 30, 2020, file photo. (CNS/Octavio Duran)

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Tonight, the church celebrates Tenebrae. It is an ancient service that serves as a kind of vigil to the paschal triduum, with the extinguishing of the candles on the hearse — a mirror image of the lighting of candles that accompanies the Gloria at the great Easter Vigil. The Tenebrae service ends in silence, appropriately, as the events we are about to commemorate transcend our vocabularies. In this triduum, we celebrate the paschal mystery that is the very heart and center of the Christian faith.

Last week, a thoughtful reader asked about my use of the word "mystery" in my column about the atrocities in Ukraine. There, I wrote:

> *Suffering is, ultimately, a mystery just like love, which is the other side of the coin of human fragility. No, that is not right. There is no simile. Suffering and love are the same mystery because only those who love suffer. Suffering, whether in Ukraine today or on Golgotha 2,000 years ago, is the face of love in the midst of evil.*

For Christians, the word "mystery" is more complex than our common usage. A mystery is something before which we are silent, something that inspires such awe that our usual, quotidian intellectual and verbal reflexes are insufficient. A mystery inspires the fear of the Lord but it also attracts, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

The early church translated the Greek word "*mysterion*" into Latin as "*sacramentum* ." It transcends our understanding, to be sure, because it involves the divine, but volumes have been written about each and every mystery of the Christian faith from the Trinity to the eschaton, from the paschal mystery to the mysteries of the rosary.

The scriptures have Jesus referring to "the mystery of the kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11) and Paul uses the term to refer to God's plan of salvation. (Ephesians 1:9: "He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ"). The kingdom and the plan are hidden from plain sight, revealed to the apostles but, for the rest, Jesus spoke in parables, and Paul undertook some of the most dense and complicated theology ever to be written by a Christian.

The one thing that is not at all mysterious about the paschal mystery is its decisive quality. "But we preach Christ crucified," St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23). Or, as Pope Benedict XVI wrote in the opening of his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*:

"*We have come to believe in God's love*: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Saint John's Gospel describes that event in these words: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should... have eternal life' (3:16)." (emphasis in original)

This decisive quality is obscured when people say that, while they entertain doubts about Jesus' divinity, they consider him an outstanding ethical guide. This makes no sense. In the first place, there were many Jewish leaders crucified in the first century of the common era: Do these followers of the ethical Jesus find any of their teachings persuasive? Do they know any of these other crucified Jewish teachers by name?

No, it is this Jesus, whose teachings and actions convinced the authorities of his time to crucify him; he is the one whose teachings we still know. We still embrace those teachings precisely because there were those who encountered that crucified person as newly alive after his ignominious death. The paschal mystery is the turning point. It was that first Easter morning and it remains so today.

When I was a young man, and I was first wrestling with such questions about our Catholic faith, a wise pastor put in my hands Hans Kung's magnificent book *On Being a Christian*. For many years, I reread his account of the events of these three days as my Holy Week meditation. I regrettably lent the book to someone who never returned it but the gist was this: Jesus had it coming. He had challenged the religious authorities and observances of his day, healing on the Sabbath, disturbing the temple, forgiving sins. These deeds and teachings, in turn, challenged the political stability of the realm.

In the rock opera "Jesus Christ Superstar," the fictional Caiaphas sings:

> *So like John before him, this Jesus must die.*
>
> *For the sake of the nation, this Jesus must die.*

Jesus threatened the established order just as much as Barrabas' revolutionary efforts. Jesus undermined the norms of society just as much as the two thieves who were crucified with him, perhaps more so. That was Kung's approach and it has always been persuasive to me, and more spiritually challenging, than any other I have read.

Despite the unfortunate effort by John the Evangelist to pin the blame for Christ's crucifixion on the Jews, it was the Romans who put him to death. Crucifixion was a Roman, not a Jewish, punishment. The early Christian community was keen to make converts among the Romans and they may have wanted to diminish the role of Pilate in the death of Jesus. The tragic and ugly history of Christian persecution of

the Jews is rooted in the Gospel narrative, especially John's. Darkness and light comingle in the life of the church, in the life of humanity, even here, in these most critical texts of our Christian bible.

The church has developed a profound theology around all three days of this liturgical commemoration. We root our theology of the priesthood in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. Good Friday and Easter provide the historical basis for our theology of baptism and our doctrine of justification. Our theology of the Eucharist and our ecclesiology are inexplicable without reference to all three days.

Theology, however, is only an explication of faith. The triduum requires our faith itself to make its stand, to announce itself to our conscience and, hopefully, to bear fruit in our lives. These days, the goal is not to understand but to weep.

If there was no Last Supper, no agony in the garden, no betrayal, no crucifixion and no empty tomb, we would be the most miserable of people. Whatever our thoughts about any and all the ethical issues that present themselves to us today, none of them has a distinctive Christian quality if that tomb is not empty.

We may create a more just and inclusive society or we may fall back into old forms of oppression. We may confront the environmental challenges of our time, or not. We may build more peaceful relations in our families and among nations or lapse back into enmity and war. But only in the mystery of the paschal triduum do we discern the origin of the Christian claim (Luke 24:5,6): "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is Risen!"