

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NUMBER OF THE HOLY MYSTERIES

The number of Holy Mysteries were not determined either by the New Testament or by the Holy Fathers and ecclesiastic writers. Indications are found in Holy Scripture that reveals their Divine institution. The Holy Fathers of the ancient Orthodox Church simply named them while from the 12th century and onwards others raised their number to seven. In different ages the Fathers included the mysterious ceremonies as God-instituted such as the Funeral Service, the Blessings of Water, etc among the Holy Mysteries and their number was increased. Henceforth, after the 13th century the reason for determining the number of Holy Mysteries was raised and all Orthodox Churches, despite their differences, were in agreement on this matter. Many have struggled to find the reason for the Divine Wisdom having had the good will to grant the Holy Mysteries to the Church. The only answer to this question is that God Willed it and had the good pleasure.

1. The Number of the Holy Mysteries According to the New Testament and the Holy Fathers

Each Holy Mystery is witnessed in the New Testament as having its institution either directly from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Founder and Head of His Church, or indirectly through His Holy Apostles and Disciples. Each Holy Mystery is a special way and main pipeline by means of which Divine Grace is transmitted to the faithful within the Church. In the New Testament we do not find any specific number¹ concerning the Holy Mysteries.

This is also noticed among the oldest Holy Fathers and ecclesiastic writers of the Orthodox Church. For practical purposes and not for any dogmatic reasons they (the Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists) mention two main Holy Mysteries, which introduce the faithful to the Church and incorporate him within Christ - those of Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist. St Justin the Philosopher and Martyr gave us very important and detailed information in his 1st Apology. The Didache, besides other guidelines concerning the way that the Holy Mysteries should be officiated, gives us the ancient types of prayers that were used at the “tables of love” (“agapae”) and at the Divine Eucharist, which was associated with them. The Apostolic Fathers also mentioned ordinations of bishops and deacons,² confession of the sins³ and the Holy Mystery of Marriage, which was conducted “...with the consent of the bishop...” so “...that the marriage may be in accordance with the Lord and not due to lustful passions.”⁴

¹ See: Meyendorff, *Theology*, pp. 191-192.

² *Didache*, 15, 1, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 157. St. Clement of Rome, *1st Corinthians*, 7, 4-8, 1-5; 42, 4-5; 44, 2, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 32-33, 51, 52.

³ *Didache*, 4, 14 and 14, 1-3, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 152 and 157. *Barnabas*, 19, 12, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 186. St. Clement of Rome, *1st Corinthians*, 51, 3 and 52, 1, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 57.

⁴ St. Ignatius, *To Polycarp*, 5, 2, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 117.

For the same practical reasons, in order to initiate the newly illumined and to make them understand their participation in the Divine Mysteries, St Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodorus of Mopsuestias and St Ambrosius and the author of the book “*de Sacramentis*” referred in their writings (Catecheses) only to Baptism, Chrismation and Holy Eucharist. In the African Church Tertullian does not only mention these three Mysteries but also that of repentance, distinguishing “*the preparation repentance*” for Baptism from that of the exact Baptism. He also refers to Ordination (“*ordinatio*”) as well as Marriage, through which “...*the Church united ... the Divine Eucharist assured and the blessing sealed.*”⁵ Likewise, St Cyprian includes Baptism, Chrismation, Holy Eucharist, Repentance and Ordination⁶ in the Mysteries. St Augustine, on the other hand, presented in a more advanced manner the teaching concerning the Holy Mysteries. He determined Baptism and Eucharist as Mysteries, characteristically adding “...*and whatever else is constituted in the canonical Scriptures.*”⁷ He referred to Marriage and Ordination as Mysteries that he compared to Baptism. Elsewhere, he also called the Symbol (Creed of Faith) and the Lord’s Prayer Mysteries, which, during the preparation for Holy Baptism, children were taught.⁸ St Hippolytus’ prayers of Ordination and Blessing of Oil were preserved in the “*Egyptian Order.*” Origen spoke of the confession of sin committed against priests, in order to expose the sin and to request the proper medicine to cure it⁹. He also combined repentance as well as the laying on of hands with the use of oil and prayer, according to the teaching of St James.¹⁰ Furthermore in the “*Euchologion*” (Prayer Book) of St Serapion three prayers for Ordination are found, two prayers “...*concerning the offered oil...*” of which the one concerns “... *the offered oils...*” and the second “... *the oil of the ill.*”¹¹

Thus all those Sacred Ceremonies which were used within the entire Orthodox Church were numbered as Holy Mysteries. St Augustine assured that “...*whatever the universal Church upholds were not laid down by Holy Synod, but were always practised and correctly believed as having been passed down by Apostolic authority.*”¹²

2. Later Attempts for Systematic Numbering of the Holy Mysteries

In the East some attempts were made to number the Holy Mysteries. At first in the writings that were believed to be by St Dionysius the Aeropagite, the Holy Mysteries of “*Illumination*” or Baptism, “*the Gathering or Communion,*” “*the Rite of*

⁵ Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, 41 and *Ad uxorem*, II, 9, in migne, *P.L.*, 1, 68 and 1415.

⁶ St. Cyprian, *Epist.* LXX, 3, in migne, *P.L.*, 3, 1080. Ibid, *Epist.* LXXIII, §§ 20 and 21, in migne, *P.L.*, 3, 1668. Ibid, *Epist.* LXIII, § 14, in migne, *P.L.*, 4, 396-397. Ibid, *De lapsis*, c. XXV, in migne, *P.L.*, 4, 499.

⁷ St. Augustine, *Epist.* LIV, 1, in migne, *P.L.*, 33, 200.

⁸ Ibid, *Enarratio in Psalm*, 103(104), § 9, in migne, *P.L.*, 37, 1343. Ibid, *De bono conjugal*, § 32, in migne, *P.L.*, 40, 394. Ibid, *Contra epistola Parmenia*, II, 28, in migne, *P.L.*, 40, 70. Ibid, *Sermo* 228, § 3, in migne, *P.L.*, 38, 1102.

⁹ Origen, *In Leviticus*, II, 4, in Migne, *P.G.*, 12, 418. Cf. Ibid, *To Psalm* 37(38), homily II, § 6, in Migne, *P.G.*, 12, 1386.

¹⁰ James 5, 14-15.

¹¹ Serapion, in Trempelas, *Dogmatique*, v. III, p. 60.

¹² St. Augustine, *De Baptismo contra Donatus*, IV, 24, § 31, in migne, *P.L.*, 43, 174.

Myrrh” (Chrismation or Confirmation) and “*the Hierarchal Orders*” (Priesthood) are explained. Also amongst the Holy Mysteries the “*Mystery for those who have sacredly fallen asleep*” (Funeral Rite) and the tonsuring of Monks are numbered. In this catalogue according to St Dionysius, of the six Mysteries only four are characterised as “*Hierarchal Mysteries:*” “*Divine and Sacred Symbols,*” “*perceptible images of the Heavenly,*” “*Divine and Holy Symbols,*” “*the perceptibly sacred intellectual images*” and especially the Holy Eucharist which is called “*Divine and perfect Mystery*” and “*Ceremony of Ceremonies.*”¹³

St Theodore the Studite numbered the Mysteries up to six although from his biography we learn that at his death he participated in the Mystery of Holy Unction. In another letter he himself bore witness to the custom of the Christians of confessing.¹⁴ Thus during the 9th century neither the term “*Mystery*” ceased to be used in its general meaning nor was the final list of Holy Mysteries completed.

Peter Abelardus (+1142) numbers the Mysteries up to six including Marriage. After him, Peter Lombardus (+1160) presented the final list of seven Mysteries in his work “*Sententiae*” and referred to them as the Mysteries of the New Law listing them as follows: Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, Repentance, Unction, Ordination and Marriage. Later different Provincial Synods¹⁵ in agreement proclaimed that the number of Holy Mysteries is seven.

Afterwards in the Synod of Lyon in the year 1274, those who participated from the East, the leader of whom was the Orthodox Emperor Michael Palaiologos, accepted the Confession of Faith of Pope Clement IV without any hesitation, in which the Holy Mysteries are seven. Three years later, in April 1277, the Patriarch of Constantinople, John Bekkos, repeated the list of Holy Mysteries in the same order as that of Lyon. In the second half of the 13th century, a Monk by the name of Job, in his work concerning the Holy Mysteries, added to the list the Tonsuring of Monks and Repentance combined with Holy Unction, although he distinguishes the two Holy Mysteries from one another.¹⁶ In this manner, in his list, the Mysteries remained seven. In the Orthodox Church, in contemporary times, the Theologians express the abovementioned opinion in their writings.¹⁷

3. The Mysterious Ceremonies

The term “*Mystery*” has also a wider meaning and includes some other ceremonies in the Mysteries as well. These ceremonies are similar to the Holy Mysteries and transmit Divine Grace invisibly through words and the use of matter as the Holy Mysteries but have not been Divinely instituted by Christ or by His

¹³ St. Dionysius, *Ecclesiastic hierarchy*, I, §§ 1 and 5; II, §§ 1 and 2, in Migne, *P.G.*, 3, 372, 376, 392, 397, 424 and 425.

¹⁴ St. Theodore the Studite, *Epistle*, book II, 165, in Migne, *P.G.*, 99, 1524. *Ibid*, *The life of Theodore of Studites*, II, 67, in Migne, *P.G.*, 99, 325. *Ibid*, *Epistle*, book II, 162, in Migne, *P.G.*, 99, 1845, 1504-1516.

¹⁵ The Provincial Synods of Durham in 1217, of Oxford in 1222, of Ratisbonne in 1235, of Valentia 1255 and of Cemon in 1247.

¹⁶ Codex 61, Supplem. Graeci Paris, fol. 239, in Trepelas, *Dogmatique*, v. III, p. 62.

¹⁷ Cf. Mogilas (A' 98); Kritopoulos (ch. 5); Dositheus of Jerusalem, *Confession*, (Term 15), in Karmeris, *The dogmatics*, pp. 635, 388, 526, 757, 690 and 580.

Apostles. They are not essential for man's Salvation **such as** the Holy Mysteries. They were **introduced** by the **Holy Fathers of the Orthodox** Church according to the authority **of** our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Son of God, **Who** assured and promised that *"...if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in Heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My Name, I Am there in the midst of them."*¹⁸ Furthermore, these Ceremonies are similar to the Holy Mysteries **and for this reason** they are called Mysterious (*"sacramentaux," "sacramentalis," "sacramentalien"*). **They** were distinguished into *"consecrations"* and *"benedictions,"* both referring to persons or lifeless things and places.

¹⁸ Matth. 18:19-20.