

The line between sin and holiness is not drawn at the doors of the church.

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The general introduction to the “Order of Christian Funerals,” used in our Roman Rite, says “there is never to be a eulogy.” Instead, “the homilist should dwell on God’s compassionate love and the paschal mystery of the Lord, as proclaimed in the Scripture readings.”

People sometimes comment on the consolation that they find in what I say about the life and character of the person who has died. Someone even said: “I want you to bury me. You make us all sound good!” Yet I would be guilty of pandering if I did not think that I am trying to faithfully follow this further instruction:

The homilist should also help the members of the assembly to understand that the mystery of God’s love and the mystery of Jesus’ victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased and that these mysteries are active in their own lives as well.

Here the general introduction is grappling with a mystery we encounter in the call of Samuel: “Samuel was sleeping in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was (1 Sm 3:3).” Put in our terms, Samuel was a churchgoer. Twice God calls to him, yet the lad is unable to respond rightly. Why not? “At that time Samuel was not familiar with the Lord, because the Lord had not revealed anything to him as yet” (1 Sm 3:7).

Just like young Samuel, we can be participating members in Christ’s flock without recognizing the presence of God, without having what we call an experience of faith, a moment when we recognize that mystery itself, something ever so much larger than ourselves, is asking us to surrender to it.

Indeed, it is possible to be a member of Christ’s flock and to resist the mystery that envelops us. In fact, it is not simply possible; it happens all the time. This is what we churchgoers mean by the word “sin.”

Conversely, those outside the household of faith can still surrender to the mystery that is God in the manner that they understand it. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* repeats a teaching of “Lumen Gentium,” the Second Vatican Council’s “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”:

Those also can attain to salvation who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience (No. 16).

Consider the countless souls, those alive today and all those in generations past, who have never been given an opportunity to respond to the Gospel the church preaches. The Catholic Church teaches that, because all men and women are created by God for life with God, we virtually “swim” in God. When we say “yes” to the call of the greater, to mystery, we say “yes” to God.

Yet seeing how easy it is for us to reject the call to the greater, the mystery of God, we fully recognize the reality of sin in the lives of all men and women. Certainly, those outside the church can also resist the call to the greater. Put another way, they can be like us in both holiness and sin.

In or outside the church, we often choose real evil for ourselves and the rest of creation, an evil that takes on a life of its own, becoming a malign mystery that envelops us. Consequently, we believe that all men and women, whether they know it or not, need the savior whom we have found in Jesus Christ. When any man or woman says “yes” to the call of conscience, to the greater, they say “yes” to him.

I do not have much call to bury contemporary Buddhists or those who died long before the advent of the Gospel. I do bury people who may have proudly proclaimed themselves to be atheists. And I bury people

who would probably admit that they should have been in church all these years. How can I speak confidently of their salvation or damnation?

Here the Catholic Church is again amazingly consistent. I cannot. Who am I to judge? Sin is real, and it affects all of us. Some are here every Sunday. Some are not because the woundedness and confusion wrought by sin sweeps them outside the assembly. Sometimes the sin is theirs. Sometimes it is ours. Often it is both. Yet all of us need to focus on “God’s compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord.”

Someone who should have been a churchgoer still says “yes” to the mystery when, for example, she looks in on a neighbor’s needs. Or think of those who are raising their grandchildren or caring for their parents. Or those who selflessly serve the public, either as volunteers or in their chosen careers. Conversely—and quickly to the point—there are priests so captive to sin that they live lives of utter hypocrisy. The line between sin and holiness is not drawn at the doors of the church.

So, what have we learned? Try to be good and the rest does not matter? Good luck with that! Just as God is the mystery in which we swim, evil is an uncontained pollution. We need a savior. To accept a savior is to call him by his name, to know his face as revealed to us in the Gospels, to proclaim to others that you know who he is and what he means to you and to all men and women.

As soon as his wakened wits were about him, Samuel went running to Eli. He understood that the mystery that had overwhelmed even his slumber was leading him to community, to service. Samuel no longer said “Here I am” into the darkness. He said it to Eli.