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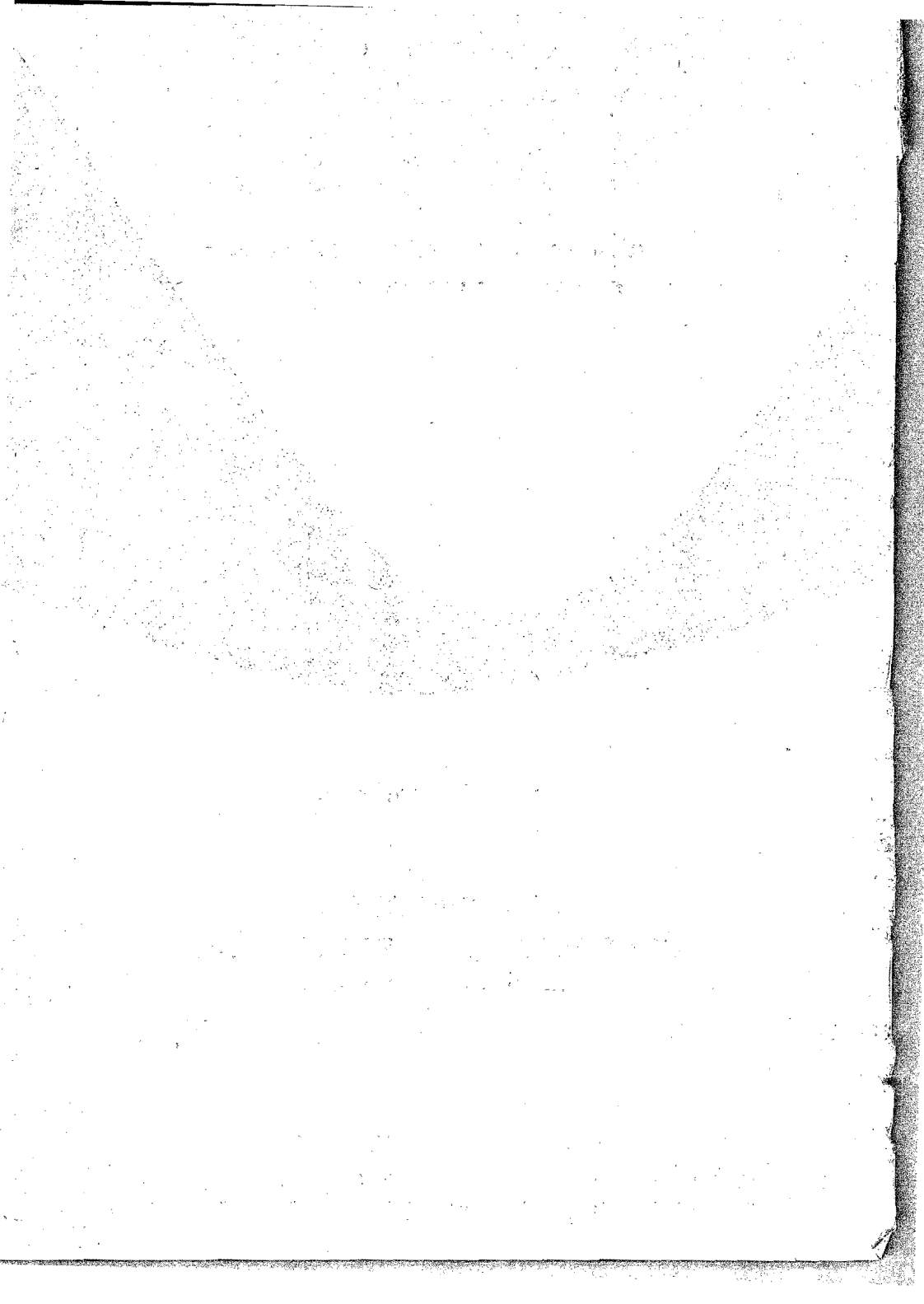
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Carlo Martini s. j.

**BE CONVERTED
AND BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS
The Gospel of Mark**

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Carlo MARTINI s.j.

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FOREWORD

For the first time we present to you a PROGRESSIO SUPPLEMENT on Scripture, and we do so with distinct pleasure. So important and fundamental a source of our Christian faith and life is the written word of God that a fuller and deeper understanding of its message is sure to produce rich fruits in our lives. Do not our CIC General Principles list Scripture as the first of the sources on which our spirituality draws? Are we not there urged to base our daily personal prayer "especially on Sacred Scripture"? Are not the Spiritual Exercises, our specific CIC source and instrument, saturated with Scripture? And the present study of the Gospel of Mark is most timely, since the cycle of Bible readings for this liturgical year draws heavily on Mark's Gospel.

Regular PROGRESSIO readers will already have profited from the series on Mark now appearing, which began in the March issue. The topic of the present SUPPLEMENT is quite different, but complementary. In the series in the review, the treatment is of the literary genre of the Gospels and the ways one can go about reading them, of the basic approach and special characteristics of Mark's account, of its setting and import in the current liturgical cycle.

The SUPPLEMENT, on the other hand, explains and develops the central themes of Mark's Gospel in relation to what appears to be his overall purpose, that of a step-by-step introduction to Christ and the Christian life particularly directed to catechumens, newcomers to the faith. The two aspects, in fact, complement each other in an almost ideal fashion.

The author Father Carlo Martini, S.J., is Rector of the Biblical Institute in Rome, and a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. His many books and articles on a wide variety of Biblical subjects are justly respected and acclaimed. Both his writings and his many lectures and conferences are especially valued for the way in which they combine solid learning with a deeply spiritual and pastoral concern and a simple and unpretentious style. May this SUPPLEMENT of his aid us all to understand better, meditate more deeply and live more authentically the Word of God.

PROGRESSIO

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I

CONVERSION, CALL AND FOLLOWING

There is, of course, more than one way to read the Gospel of Mark. In reading him one makes use of some key to aid interpretation. For example, in B. Rigaux's book, Witness of the Gospel of Mark, we have an example of a reading that uses a historical key-of-interpretation. This book can pose the question: what testimony does the Gospel of Mark afford for a history of Jesus?

Another key to interpretation can be this question: what message does Mark contain for those persons in the primitive community who are making their first approach to the faith?

This Gospel, then, can be read in different ways, and what is here proposed is one point of view. Such a viewpoint is required in contemporary exegesis. More and more there is recognized the importance - even the inevitability - of approaching the sacred text with a question which brings out the meaning of the individual portions of the text. There is always present in an approach a question which we call "pre-comprehension": a certain affinity with the object one wants to study, and an interest which is expressed in a question. The important thing is not to eliminate the question, but to clarify it, that is, to be aware of it. The practice approved today tends to high-

light this pre-comprehension so as to become conscious of it, to carry it forward methodically and openly rather than as a question that is concealed. This, then, is why a key-of-interpretation is important. And it should be a global key, namely, one that supposes the reading of, and so attention to, the whole Gospel; global too in the sense that the question aims at reference to every part of it. Alongside a thematic reading, it would be useful to take, for example, some individual episodes, showing how each individual event can be seen and understood under the light of a certain key-of-interpretation, which can contribute to understanding certain aspects of it.

An overall key for interpreting, then, which is not so much something to be demonstrated as to be verified. For example: the Gospel of Mark is the Gospel for catechumens. So, reading the Gospel, we see whether this way of approaching the text throws light on it in a coherent way, or whether it rather leaves things obscure, fails to unify the text into a comprehensible system. If the latter is the case, then the key has failed.

Now let us look at the commitment the catechumen makes if he accepts to enter from outside into the mystery of the Lord. This commitment is summarized in the words : conversion, call, following. These three aspects appear at the beginning of the Gospel, after the prologue, when the activity of Jesus first begins. We see them expressed one after the other in chapter 1, verses 14-20. Verses 14-15 illustrate for us the theme of conversion: "Be converted". Immediately after, verse 16 and the following portray the theme of call : "Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men". And verse 18 gives the sequel : "And leaving their nets, they followed him". There are, then, three themes, barely touched on here in the beginning, which then recur in the early part of the Gospel. They can then sum up well the proposal made to him who wishes to enter the Kingdom. It is not a theoretical proposal, but a practical one: be converted, hear the call, follow me.

What meaning could the invitation to conversion and to penance have for the catechumen who was hearing this proposal for the first time?

It is not very easy to answer this question, since the proposal was simply tossed out - be converted - with-

out saying what conversion might mean : conversion from what, and to what. So an analysis must be made to be able to say what concrete signification this might assume for the catechumen.

In Mark, this work occurs from the very beginning, in the preaching of John the Baptist, chapter 1: 4. John preaches the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It occurs in verse 15 in the mouth of Jesus. And it occurs again in chapter 6 : 12, the culminating moment of the first part of the Gospel, when it is said that the Apostles themselves preached conversion : "So they set off to preach repentance". Here we see the importance of this theme: the preaching of John, the preaching of Jesus, the preaching of the Apostles. The catechumen hears repeated three times in the mouths of the three key personages of this first part of Mark, the message of conversion.

The same theme is found in another place in Mark (4: 11-12), even if it is there stated in the negative form : they do not perceive, they do not understand, they are not converted, they do not have their sins forgiven.

This should be understood as a positive appeal : look carefully, listen in such a way that you grasp, so as to be converted and to receive forgiveness. We have here, then, the preaching of John in verse 4 of the first chapter: the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And yet, it is not easy to say just what is meant by this repentance, for there is question of a generic term, which can be applied to many things, and which can take on a meaning, a color that may be social, sociological, political, psychological... At least here, in this context, nothing specific is said as to what kind of conversion is intended. To grasp this let us examine chapter 1: 15, which is the key verse in which is presented the announcement of repentance on the part of Jesus. In this passage and in other references in Mark, let us seek a fuller understanding of this theme.

Chapter 1, verse 15: Jesus goes into Galilee, preaches the Gospel of God : "The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News". In these words Mark sums up the whole preaching of Jesus. Matthew explains this preaching fully. But Mark

gives no other indications except in detached phrases; he does not give a comprehensive discourse. There is question then, here, of three or four key themes, put together in this very dense phrase in a rhythmic form to make a kind of verse easy to remember. In the Greek original the three parts of the phrase have, respectively, two accents, three accents, four accents.

Exegetes, however, hold that this synthesis is not that of Jesus himself but rather a kind of overall reflection composed later on, taking the main points of the preaching of Jesus, which are therefore: the time has come; the Kingdom is near; you must be converted and believe the Good news.

What might Jesus have said apropos of these three aspects? For the time has come, Jesus probably recalled the prophecies of the Old Testament about the fulfillment of the times, and pointed out some of the signs of this fulfillment. Very likely, for example, Jesus quoted Isaiah 40 about the path to be prepared, about the forerunner, making reference to John: Look, the time is fulfilled. He cited too Isaiah 61, recalled by Luke in 4:18: "Look, here is the year of jubilee, in which the liberation of prisoners is preached". Thus with various prophecies Jesus made explicit the fulfillment of time, which could be none other than the period foreseen by the prophets for the manifestation of salvation. This preaching of Jesus certainly based itself on passages of the Old Testament which caught the salvific character of the present moment, evidence that the kingdom of God had come. And here Jesus did two things which showed the signs of the approach of the Kingdom: exorcisms and healings. "If I cast out devils, it means that the Kingdom of God is at hand". In addition, he preached with affirmations and declarations that indicated the presence of that Kingdom: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom", "Blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice". All this witnessed to the presence of the Kingdom. Or again: "Blessed are those who see what you are seeing. Many have desired to see it and have not seen it", "A greater than Solomon is here..." With these exclamations Jesus manifested the proximity of the Kingdom, of the revealing of the sovereignty of God. It was in this atmosphere that the exhortation to conversion fell on their ears, and that there followed the appeal to

believe the Gospel. This "Believe the Good News" is special to Mark. The themes, then, of conversion and of faith in the Gospel fall in a context of the fulfillment of time and the imminent advent of the Kingdom; they are elements that are not marginal in the work of salvation but that refer to the fulfilling of the designs of God.

It seems, though, that the Gospel presents exhortations of such a broad sweep that they allow for a vast variety of interpretations.

To analyze better the word, conversion, now that we have seen its context let us make an analysis of the thoughts and associations that the word evokes in us. For, often when we examine words such as these, we are unconsciously led astray by the meaning and connotation they have already acquired in our deeper consciousness. Let us expose to the light then this meaning which it has for us, along with its current applications... When we hear this word - conversion, be converted - we do not apply it to ourselves, for we are already converted. Conversion is a word that refers to others. Which others? For the most part the unbelievers, the sinners, people immersed in vice. Or again, for others this word has a more immediate connotation: to convert means to bring to church those who are not going.

But these interpretations, even if they be true, are not those which were aroused by the word "conversion" in the catechumen who heard it for the first time. In the Gospel of Mark we are faced with catechumens who ordinarily were pagans, for whom this word assumed a meaning related to the environment in which they found themselves. The New Testament tells us clearly what it means in the concrete: to be converted meant for them to abandon their idols. Such is the first application that a pagan made of this word.

We can see this in the 1st Letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 1:9. It speaks of the striking effect caused by the conversion of the Thessalonians who, by their way of acting proclaimed in the Greece of that day the fruits of Paul's apostolate. And in the second part, "how, when you were converted to God, you broke with idolatry"; that is, from an atmosphere of idolatry, of superstition, to conversion to the true God. That is the first meaning that would arise in the mind of the catechumen when hearing this word: be converted.

This is not the same thing as would come into the mind of the Jew of the time of Jesus, who was not an idolator. So it is necessary to keep in mind the community to which Mark is addressing his Gospel. Another passage from the epistles which can shed light for us on the milieu from which the converts come is the 1st Letter to the Corinthians 12:1. Here the situation before conversion is described as that of people who "let themselves be irresistibly drawn toward dumb idols, when you were pagans". This describes the point of departure of the conversion. It is this idolatrous mentality, in which the presence of God is reduced to an instrument of personal success, and of slavery to all external circumstances.

Leaving behind idols necessarily involved leaving behind too all the moral baseness linked with the worship of idols. In fact, the cult of idols was closely linked with a whole mentality and way of living. It was a kind of worship which lent itself to a certain atmosphere of worldliness and immorality. To be converted, therefore, meant detaching oneself from this whole way of acting.

This is very well expressed in 1st Corinthians 6 : 9-11, where there is a list of ten different attitudes which impede entrance into the Kingdom of God, which one must, then, abandon in order truly to undergo the conversion needed to enter the Kingdom: "You know perfectly well that ...people of immoral lives, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, usurers, drunkards, slanderers and swindlers will never inherit the Kingdom of God. Such some of you once were. But now you have been washed clean, and sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus".

Concretely, then, for these people "be converted" meant, negatively, to abandon the pagan mentality, which is that of immediate success and the crushing of others, self-satisfaction at the cost of depriving others; and, positively, as the point of arrival, a religious and moral worship of the living God and an openness to a new understanding of God.

First Thessalonians 1 : 9 speaks of "being converted from idols to the service of the living and true God", to a God therefore who requires a personal relationship of responsibility and who introduces us to a personal history which will make difficult demands.

In Romans 12:1-2, the admonition is given: "I beg you, offer your living bodies as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing to God. Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God". To serve, then, the living God and to seek what He desires, to enter into this personal relationship in order to please God.

Up to now we have found evidence of what would be the meaning of the word "conversion" outside the Gospel, but we can follow an analogous approach also in the Gospel of Mark, keeping in mind some particular characteristics of his writing. In the three accents which he gives to conversion - namely, the preaching of John, the preaching of Jesus, the preaching of the Apostles - Mark does not furnish a specific content of this conversion, precisely because it is effected in a pagan atmosphere, and would be different in a Jewish atmosphere. The requirement is that a man be in the situation of being ready to break with the past, but he does not specify what this global abandonment means.

What he is speaking of has reference to any human situation. It is the demand made on man, in the face of the divine message, to effect a reversal of his values and mentality, as defined by his present circumstances. The basic requirement is not linked to this or that situation, but has a global character. We do not find this global accent in other places where conversion is stressed. For example, the prophets when they speak of conversion, just as Paul, speak of the point of departure and the point at which man is to arrive.

Take Isaiah, chapter 1:10-20: "Wash, make yourselves clean, take your wrong-doing out of my sight, cease to do evil; learn to do good, search for justice, help the oppressed, plead for the widow". Here what is meant by "converting oneself" is specified.

The rather general preaching as we have it in Mark is to be implemented in an overall fashion. It is the demand God makes on man to leave completely his own situation and to put himself at the disposition of God for a complete overturning of things. And this is done as well in order to provoke in the catechumen a recognition of the seriousness

of what he is called to do : what he is asked is not this or that, but rather he is asked to place his whole mind and outlook at the disposition of the Gospel.

A passage that throws light on the subject of "conversion" is Mark 7: 21-23 (in Mark we rarely find moral teaching, only here and there some traces of it, but less fully developed than in Matthew). It is when Jesus sets forth his judgment as to what is truly harmful to man and makes him impure; here, Mark too gives a list of twelve attitudes that are incompatible with true purity in man. They are not very easy to understand, for it is a catalogue of sins, but here instead we have specific interior attitudes that are given: "for it is from within, from men's hearts, that evil intentions emerge : fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within and make a man unclean". It is a passage like that of the First Letter to the Corinthians, but with some differences. It needs to be analyzed word by word, to see other analogies in other portions of the Gospel of Mark. For here we are told concretely what is meant by being converted.

It tells us too that the conversion Jesus demands is not so much abandoning these attitudes (for this passage is not aimed directly against those attitudes), but rather wishes to show us that these attitudes arise from within, that is, from the heart. What is made clear, then, is that the conversion Jesus requires is the conversion of the heart. That the conversion Jesus demands is therefore an overall conversion, a conversion in depth.

Chapter 7 : 6 too takes up again the theme of the heart, as in 7 : 21. Jesus, rebuking the Pharisees, says, "It was of you hypocrites that Isaiah so rightly prophesied when he wrote : 'This people honors me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless, the doctrines they teach are only human regulations'". In this context appears more clearly what conversion requires, namely turning one's out look upside down : it demands that the heart be changed, that the heart be given entirely to God and that one cease to give honor only with the lips.

This is further clarified in the 1st Letter to the Thessalonians : "be converted to the living and true God".

It is question of entering into a true personal relationship with God. It is not a conversion that demands giving up doing some things in order to do others. Rather, it requires that the heart turn to God as to a person, and enter into a relationship with him that goes beyond that of mere regulations. This is conversion as it is understood in the Gospel of Mark. It is not enough to say: how must I act, what must I stop doing, what must I begin to do? Rather, the catechumen is gradually brought to recognize that he is in a relationship with God, that this places him in a situation of continual requests to be fulfilled, that it is precisely a person-to-person rapport.

The rest of the statement of Jesus must be taken up : be converted, believe the Good News. The two demands are closely bound together. While in "be converted" may be accented the aspect of "what is up to me to do", the phrase "believe the Gospel" balances this aspect by saying that it is not enough to come to a certain state : there is need to entrust oneself to God, to his salvific action, to let him act.

Here too the catechumen is asked to give himself in a general way, to abandon himself to God, to his Gospel, to his saving action, without yet saying what God will do or what he will ask. A global availability or "disponibility" is asked for entering into the mystery of the Kingdom and the portions that follow, from chapter 1 : 21 ff. up to chapter 5, can be read as a confirmation for the catechumen who has entrusted himself into good hands by putting his trust in the Good News of God and letting that Gospel that Jesus preached be implemented.

In those chapters we have episodes showing the power of the word of Jesus. The catechumen is invited to entrust himself to the Gospel, that is, to Jesus who knows how to say to the demon, "be quiet and go out of him"(Mark 1:25); to Jesus who takes Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and lifts her up from her sickness (Mark 1 : 31); to Jesus who cures many who are afflicted and many possessed by devils (Mark 1:34); to Jesus who cleanses the leper instantly (1 :42); to Jesus who can forgive sins (2 : 5).

By these miracles Mark is illustrating for us what the power of the Gospel is, and why it is right to abandon oneself to this Gospel, to believe it, even without knowing completely what it will demand, but leaving it to God to take action.

With these introductory words the catechumen is placed face to face with demands that are global, personal, absolute. They require of him an act of complete trust in God, which must be an act of confidence in the word of Jesus, who can bring about this change in the human situation, without explaining what this will involve for him. Gradually he will be shown what entrusting himself to the Gospel means, what concrete consequences it will bring. But the first step is that of giving himself with full confidence, accepting that through these contacts, through these words, through this community which is catechizing him, salvation is being presented to him in the name of God, and that it is a powerful salvation which has effected prodigious changes, and so will be able to effect in him too a different situation if he knows how to abandon himself to it.

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II

THE COMMUNITY OF MARK

When Mark directed the Gospel which bears his name to the community, his intention certainly was that the work be read and understood as a unity. And it is this kind of interpretation that we are seeking, along with the community for whom the Gospel was destined, above all that part of the community which found in this Gospel an introduction for understanding the Christian mystery, namely the catechumens. Let us read the Gospel therefore with a unifying key, not through trying to interpret many individual texts, but by an attempt to approach it as a whole. Let us read it as the Gospel for the catechumen, the Gospel of conversion, that is, as that Gospel which wishes to discover the mystery of the Kingdom to someone who does not yet know it, except from the outside. We can take as a point of reference Mark 4 : 11, in which Jesus says : "To you is given the mystery of the Kingdom of God". So Mark is a Gospel through which we are given the mystery. The expression in Mark is stronger than that of the parallel Gospels, which have, "To you is given to know the mystery of God". Here is said, "to you is given the mystery". A Gospel, then, through which we are given this mystery, and in which it is given by preference to those who remain outside this mystery.

The second part of the verse goes on, "to those who are outside everything comes in parables". There are many

outside, who see the same things we see, but for them they are a riddle. There is need to make an effort in order to enter inside and so to receive the mystery of the Kingdom. This is the path that the Gospel of Mark wishes to take us along. Who are those outside, of whom this verse 11 speaks?

Some exegete has said that, since the scene took place in a house, "those outside" are the ones who remained outside the house. Obviously the meaning is much deeper. The expression is found elsewhere in the New Testament to indicate those who are somehow in contact with the Christian mystery, but do not perceive its meaning. For example, in 1st Corinthians 5 : 12, there is a clear distinction made between those who are outside and those who are within : "It is not my business to pass judgment on those who are outside; of those who are inside, surely you can be the judges".

Or again, in the Letter to the Colossians, chapter 4 : 5, "Be tactful with those who are outside" (that is, those who observe you and are around you and should see in your conduct wisdom and prudence). And so too in the Letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 4:12 : "so that you are seen to be respectable by those outside."

"Those outside" of Mark 4 : 11 means those who have contact with Christianity, see the same reality that Christians see, but to them it appears puzzling, "everything comes to them in parables". The things of the Church, the things of the Kingdom of God, are incomprehensible. They perceive the external face of them, but they do not grasp their meaning : "to you it is given to grasp the meaning".

The Gospel of Mark is an effort to enable people to pass from this purely external observation of the mystery, to the discovery of the Christian reality. Understood in this way it is not only the Gospel of the catechumens of the past but also of those of today.

To complement what we have been saying, let us now take a look at verse 12 of the same chapter 4, which gives the reason for this difference between those outside for whom everything is a riddle, and those on the other hand who possess the mystery of the Kingdom. "Everything comes in parables (to those who are outside), so that they may see and see again, but not perceive; may hear and hear again, but not understand; otherwise they might be convert-

ed and be forgiven". In this verse 12 we have expressed in another way, in a negative form, the journey that the catechumen needs to make; but we can read it in a positive way. Here is said that : There are these people who see from the outside and do not understand, because all is a puzzle to them, they hear and they do not understand, so they remain always foreign to a true commitment, to a true conversion, they remains always immersed in their own faults, in their own habits of evil. What is the path to be taken? One needs not only to see, but also to perceive internally, not only to hear, but also to understand, in order to arrive at conversion and at the forgiveness of sins. Here, then, a synthesis is given of the catechumen's path according to the Gospel of Mark: become aware, listen, understand, perceive the mystery, be converted and receive pardon.

These verses serve as a reference point in all research into the Gospel of Mark, in the way that it passes from the enigma to a clarifying of one's understanding of the mystery of God; in the way that it passes from a purely external hearing to an understanding, and then arrives at conversion and pardon.

These verses make us presume a milieu or a group of persons to whom Mark speaks and presents his message who are in a state of incapacity to understand the mystery of the Kingdom. There is a state of ignorance of the Kingdom on which Mark wishes to shed light. In the Gospel of Mark, this state of ignorance is underlined many times. That is, Mark often returns to a rebuke of this ignorance, not only to make us understand that Jesus had rebuked it in his disciples, but to make us who are reading it realize, to make the catechumen who is just now beginning to understand it realize, that the first step must be to recognize he understands nothing, that the mystery of the Kingdom is, for him, still obscure.

In the first part of Mark's Gospel blame for this incomprehension occurs often. For example: chapter 4:13: "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand any of the parables?" (it is supposed that the disciples listening had not understood). Again, chapter 4 : 40 : "Why are you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?". And the same subject of lack of faith comes up in chapter 6:6, where it is said that Jesus was amazed at

their incredulity. This sentence refers to the incredulous people of Nazareth, but, read in the circle of the catechumens, it is an invitation to realize that they too are in a state of incredulity and that the Lord is amazed at their incapacity to comprehend.

Chapter 4:24 is an invitation to sharpen the eyes of the spirit: "And he said to them : take notice of what you are hearing".

Chapter 6 : 52 says (this verse has been mentioned as one that might be reconstructed from a very ancient fragment of the Qumram papyrus), "they had not seen what the miracle of the loaves meant; their minds were closed". And one finds this thought again in chapter 9:32, after Jesus began to speak clearly about the mystery of his Death and Resurrection: "They did not understand the words, and they were afraid to ask him". So, not only did they not understand, but they did not even have the strength to take the first step towards beginning to understand.

These texts show us that this Gospel supposes in the milieu hearing it a certain condition of spiritual torpor, a merely external contact with the Christian reality and a certain bewilderment and inability to penetrate beyond what one sees.

We can now ask ourselves: Does the Gospel of Mark describe for us more in detail this state of lethargy in the face of the mystery of the Kingdom, a state of lethargy from which the Gospel wants to awaken us? It would seem so, since when we read many passages of the Gospel, we can behind them see traced the spiritual outline of the type of lethargy or ignorance that the Gospel comes to stir us out of.

The passages of Mark in which the mind of the hearer is prodded to attempt the process of conversion are those in which are reported the reproaches of Jesus. In Mark, Jesus lays blame on concrete situations and in these criticisms there is a description of the situation of the catechumen, from which he is called upon to arouse himself so as to understand the mystery of the Kingdom. What, then, are some of these attitudes that are reproached by Jesus, and which therefore look not only to the difficulties in which the first disciples were mired, but also to the difficulties of anyone taking his first steps in the faith?

An attitude clearly criticized by Jesus as an obstacle to conversion, or better as a disposition of those outside who do not understand, is ignorance of the true liberty of the children of God. That is, he who is outside, who is not in contact with the mystery of God, takes everything in a material sense. He has not understood the meaning of the Christian commandments. He looks at them almost mechanically, and is in precisely this state of ignorance, of incomprehension. He deserves therefore the rebuke of Jesus, in chapter 2: 25: "Have you never read what David did, when he and his followers were hungry, how he entered into the Temple of God, under the high priest Abiathar, and ate the loaves of offering which only the priests are allowed to eat and how he also gave some to the men with him?"

This criticism - don't you understand this scriptural way of acting - is addressed to the situation of a person who, knowing only the external face of the mystery of the Kingdom of God, thinks of it as something rigid and mathematical. He has not grasped the meaning of what is taking place, he takes it materially. So he does not understand the truth expressed in 2 : 27 : "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath". It is a statement, taken by itself, could also be abused and become a material principle. But it is a way of entering into the mystery of the Kingdom, of understanding that the mystery of the Kingdom is made up of orientation, of significance, of proportion, and is not something that one regards materially, from the outside, as a thing already accomplished. This outlook is typical of the catechumen. This aridity of spirit is condemned as an attitude that, first of all, we must recognize in ourselves. If we are like that, then we have not yet understood anything, we deserve the criticism : How full of ignorance, of timidity, of fear you are!

This is the first outlook that is stigmatized, so that the catechumen may recognize himself in it.

Another attitude that is blamed is presented in chapter 3:5, one that Mark says Jesus became irritated at. Jesus looks round in anger, deeply saddened by the hardness of their hearts. This obtuseness is described in chapter 3 : 1-5 : these men standing round who, when Jesus wishes to heal this sick man on the sabbath, do not dare to reply to the question of Jesus : "Is it allowed on the sab-

bath day to do good, or to do evil, to save life, or to kill? And they were silent". It is, namely, the typical situation of someone who is on the outside, who is afraid to commit himself in a situation, who is ready to criticize (we are told: they watched him to see if he would heal on the sabbath, so they could accuse him). The typical posture, then, of someone "outside", ready to criticize everything, ready to see evil in things, but not daring to commit himself. It is the catechumen, who observes the mystery of the Church from outside, ready to accuse in everything the Church herself and her way of acting, but never ready at all to hurl himself within in an act of courage, never ready to take position for this or for that. This is one of the attitudes that arouses the indignation of Jesus, and so the reader of the Gospel is invited to recognize himself and to say: Perhaps I am one of those. Perhaps I am faced with the anger and the profound sadness of the Lord.

Another outlook implicitly stigmatized we find in chapter 3: 21. Here there is question not of Jesus blaming others, but of others, those who do not understand Jesus, blaming him. But it is put by Mark in a paradoxical way to make us recognize that those who reproach Jesus are persons who do not understand. We are told that his relatives came to get him and that he was so immersed in his activity, not having even time to eat, that they "set out to take charge of him", for they said "he is out of his mind".

This is another typical attitude of the catechumen or of someone who stands outside and does not want to commit himself. So he denounces fanatically all that transpires in the mystery of the Kingdom. It is this fear of losing oneself that Jesus will denounce later on (in the second part of Mark, chapter 8: 35, where he begins to unveil the mystery), saying that whoever seeks to save his life, to preserve it, he loses it, and only he who loses it succeeds in regaining it. Here the matter is again presented in a parable, to make us see that he who is outside, who does not understand, whose heart is darkened, regards as something strange this conversion to the Kingdom that Jesus illustrates. The catechumen, therefore, is being invited to see whether he fails to take the step to conversion because he has an outlook that is in fact a sign of an incapacity to give oneself definitively.

These three attitudes in chapters 2 and 3, which introduce the mystery of the Kingdom, are synthesized in chapter 4 when Jesus, under the form of a parable, raises the question: Why is it that the seed of the word, which is good seed, does not bear fruit? Why do some persons remain on the surface and not enter into the mystery of the Kingdom? And this, even though they hear the same word that all hear, for it is the identical word and is good for all men? In the preceding chapters the reply to this was given through practical examples. Here, however, there is an attempt at a global and theoretical response, given in the parable of the sower.

In chapter 4: 5-7 are described mistaken attitudes in the face of the word. Portrayed are the risks the word itself encounters, the obstacles as a result of which a person remains, though baptized, outside the reality of a Christian commitment.

Here three are stated: the birds, the rocks, the thorns. Or, in the explanation given that follows: the devil, personal instability, the fear of persecution, the too great concern for the things one is involved in.

Here we have, traced in broad strokes that are applicable to many, the situations in which the catechumen is invited to see himself as in a mirror. Perhaps a fear of persecution, perhaps his personal instability, perhaps the excessive concerns he has become involved in. Perhaps these are the things that do not permit him to pay attention to and assimilate in depth a true catechesis, and are holding him outside, back from the Kingdom.

We find another example in chapter 7: 21-23. In chapter 4 he speaks rather of external obstacles: the cares, the temptations, the interference of Satan that can assail the catechumen. In chapter 7 the analysis becomes more interior. That is, some never acquire a deep grasp of the mystery of God but go round in circles because in their hearts there are evil thoughts, fornication, theft, avarice, deceit. It is a list of specific sins. They are in a way an examination of conscience for the pagan catechumen. But above all they describe the pagan vices in which, if the catechumen recognizes himself, he is invited to withdraw from if he really wishes to hear the mystery of the Kingdom.

Through these examples and these general descriptions, whether presented directly or in parables, the Evangelist is not satisfied to say : there exists an ignorance of the Kingdom, an incapacity to understand it. He says more : that it exists for these and these reasons. The catechumen reading this is continually being invited to recognize himself in one or other of these situations and to say : Look, that is why I am so ignorant with regard to the Kingdom of God, that is why I have never really felt myself part of the Christian process.

The writer of the Gospel does not stop here. Once he has brought the individual to recognize the erring situation in which he finds himself, he offers the possibility of a way out. There does exist a state of blindness with regard to the Kingdom of God that is evidenced in certain situations. Still, for the person who humbly recognizes himself in these situations, this fact is a Gospel, it becomes a good news, a way of escaping from this situation. In fact, Mark 1 : 1 is presented as the good news taken in general, and this is Jesus. But it is important that the catechumen, from the very beginning of the negative introspective analysis of his own situation far from the Kingdom, sees at the same time a hope : there is a good news! For whom, then, is this good news of Mark 1 : 1? It is precisely for all the weak and the sick, for those who are in situations of failure. And this is declared in the first part of the Gospel, which shows how Jesus cures a sick person, how he cures all the sick, he is even the physician of the sick. In these examples of healing from sickness, Jesus is presented to us without saying what he does, but simply telling us that he is the doctor who heals from difficulties. For example, Mark 1 : 32 : "they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils". That is, Jesus is presented as he to whom go all who recognize that they are in situations of oppression and difficulty. Jesus to whom all the sick have recourse is himself the physician (Mark 2 : 17). Those who cannot recognize themselves in any of these negative situations described by the Evangelist have no need of Jesus. And this is the good news: Jesus comes precisely for those who have recognized that they are in situations of failure. "It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners".

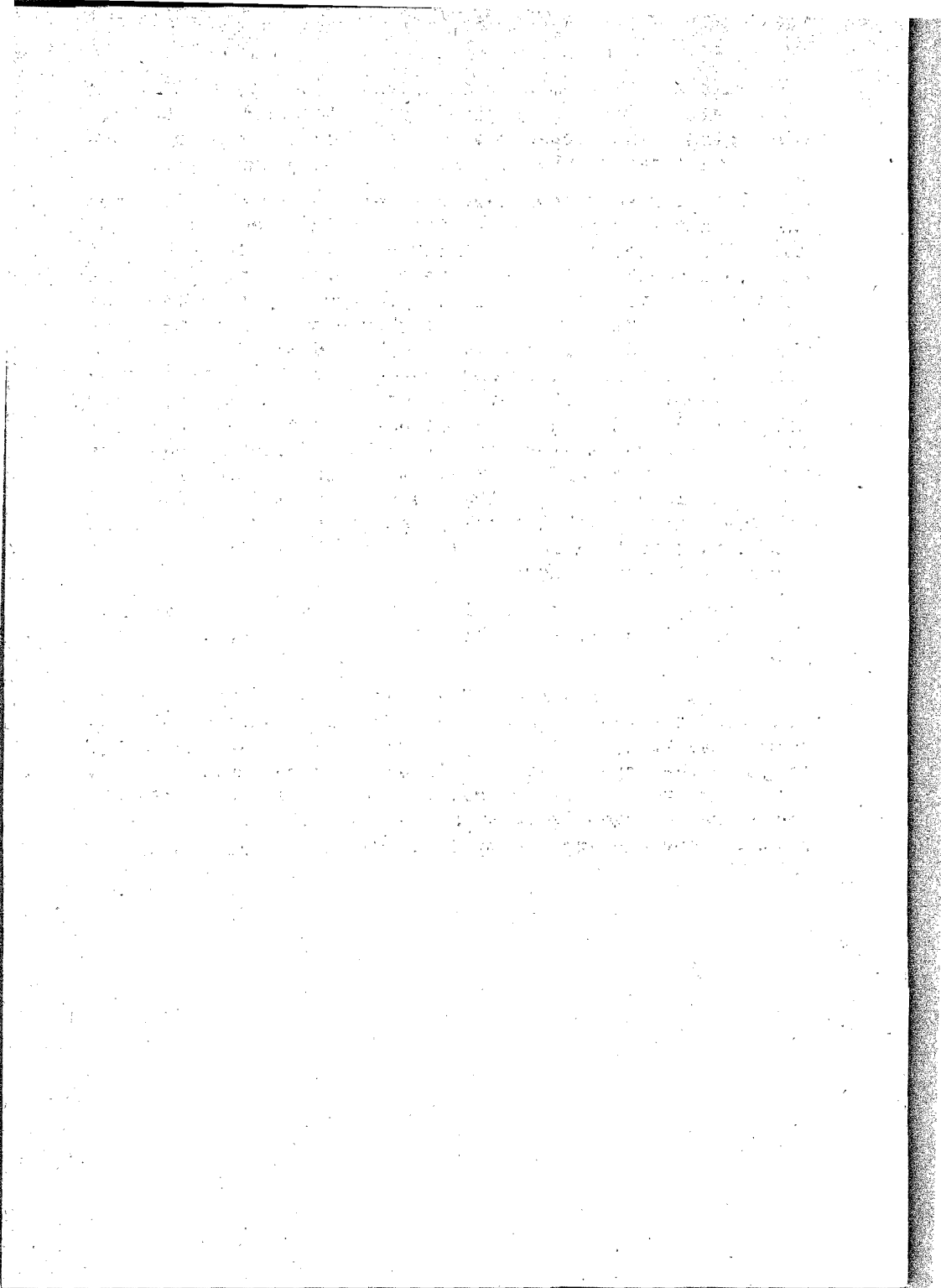
This is the premise from which all openness of spirit and so all overcoming of blindness with regard to the Gospel begins : the recognition of being sick, sinners, and therefore those to whom the good news of Jesus applies.

But this good news does not come easily. It is something that requires preparation. It is for this reason that the Gospel of Mark, which opens with the coming of "the good news", at once in verse 2 speaks of preparing the way for it. The way will be prepared by repentance, as we will see later on. But from this passage Mark warns us that it is a Gospel for the weak and the sick, and so there is the possibility of passing from this blindness to an openness, to pass from outside to within the mystery. This path demands a preparation which here looks in an overall way to the mystery of Jesus. The catechumen has the intuition, in a confused way, that Jesus, who heals the sick and sinners, will liberate him from this situation. So, then, as a psychological preparation, the question is raised that we find in Mark 4 : 41 : "Who is this whom the winds and the sea obey?"

Those, then, are the elements of preparation. Through them the catechumen makes himself ready to receive the message.

To sum up. A series of verses and of situations have been presented, all of them forming part of the first chapters of Mark: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. Through them we can manage to grasp the impact that the Gospel had on those who were preparing themselves to receive the Christian mystery. There are analogous situations today reflecting the stage of those approaching the mystery for whom this Gospel was written.

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III

THE GOD OF MARK

In Mark's Gospel there is very little said about God. If we were to check how many times God is named in this Gospel, perhaps we would not find even one mention of him per chapter. This does not mean, however, that in a book which is the essential religious manual of the catechumen, God is hardly ever referred to. It could be put in another way : In Mark God is silent; he does not speak directly, and he is seldom spoken of. Some might draw a theological conclusion related to the "death of God", saying : While the Old Testament continually speaks of God, not only on every page but almost in every line, the New Testament speaks rather little about God, and all our attention is directed to the words of God among us, to what man must do upon the earth.

To grasp what the message is that the Gospel of Mark conveys to us, we must reply by indicating in what manner God is present in the Gospel of Mark.

Let us look at the milieu in which this gospel message was presented so as to understand why this rather limited reference to the name of God, why it is rarely mentioned. To see too how, in spite of this rather limited mention of God's name, there are nonetheless presented a series of characteristics that are important to recognize if we are to understand the message that Mark wishes to give us.

The catechumen to whom Mark is directed possessed already a strong religious sense, and his way of speaking was one in which God was present in all the manifestations of life. As Paul tells us in 1st Corinthians, chapter 8 : 5 : there were many "things called gods, either in the sky or on the earth", so-called "gods". It was the common feeling of the man of that time that the divinity was everywhere, that God appeared in all the manifestations of existence. In a certain sense, the catechumen did not need to acquire an idea of the existence of God, it was something taken for granted, as a point of departure. But it is also true that this religiosity of the world into which the New Testament brought its message was a religiosity often gone astray. Paul even says it : "There are 'gods' and 'lords' in plenty". And in the Acts of the Apostles, in chapter 7, we see how Paul at Athens was filled with indignation when he saw how the city was full of idolatry. It was a religious sense that was widely diffused but warped. In Acts, chapter 19, we see another important city of that time, Ephesus, full of magic practices, so much so that they were able to make a bonfire of all the books on magic formerly possessed by those who were converted : amulets, spells, etc. From this we see that the world to which the Gospel message came was a world not only filled with a certain religious sense, but with a religious sense that had gone astray and in fact alienated from God. A religiosity that transferred to the divinity one's own duties and responsibilities, as in the case of magic. It was a religious atmosphere very distant from an understanding of the true message of God. This was the milieu in which the Gospel of Mark was heard.

How was religious education given in this milieu? Even though the name of God was continually being bruited about, the first Christians nonetheless felt it was important to communicate a correct sense of God. They would not have understood at all the proposal of some theologians of the "death-of-God" school, to cease referring to this concept for a while in order to purify the religious sense of people. The Christianity of the first days communicated a profound and rich sense of God, but it did this by making use above all of the Old Testament. The formation of the catechumen in a true sense of God was done by means of the Old Testament readings and in particular by that of the Psalms; it was to these sources that was en-

trusted the development of a true sense of God. When, therefore, we read the Gospel of Mark, we must presume that, behind the rare mention there made of God, there was given a whole formation in the sense of God, mainly from the Psalms and the other books. It would be a mistake to think that, because God is rarely mentioned, the catechesis was deficient in this, since the catechetical formation took as a basis not only the Gospel, but also, as said, the Psalms. And these make continual mention of God, of his action, of his presence. So we need to read the Gospel of Mark taking as a premise the supposition that the catechumen had this religious sense of a transcendent God, above all things, the Creator, at work in history for the salvation of men.

We can now ask : presuming, then, such a knowledge of God as a general foundation - that of the Psalms, of Isaiah, of Genesis - which aspects of God are more accented in connection with the typical Gospel preaching? In other words, which aspects are immediately linked with the evangelical conversion that the Gospel of Mark aims at?

Let us read some passages that throw light for us on the figure of God presented to the catechumen so that he could comprehend the mystery of the Gospel. Some of these excerpts look to God directly. Others invite us to reflect, yet are also an indication of God. Personal research will let us see what sense of God is needed for a movement of conversion. Chapter 1 : 1 speaks of Jesus Christ, son of God, but this passage is the subject of some controversy, since "son of God" is lacking in some of the manuscripts. Verse 2 is the first where the presence of God unquestionably appears : "It is written in the book of Isaiah the Prophet, Look, I am going to send (God is here introduced, not by being named, but by his action) my messenger before you, who will prepare your way". Here we have two things. God is presented to us as someone who takes a mysterious initiative. God is wrapped in obscurity. He is the one who speaks and takes a certain step, consisting in a path towards man. He is the God who mysteriously takes action and the God who comes. These are the two aspects of an experience that the catechumen needs to make.

The third mention we find in verse 10, very indirect. Jesus comes out of the water and sees the heavens opened

and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. The expression that interests us is "the heavens opened". In "heavens" there is a clear reference to God, and "the heavens opened" takes up again the idea of verse 2 that there is a mysterious divine initiative through which the mystery of God is about to make itself known to men. So it is a message of coming-near, of communication. We can now understand better the other mentions of God, both in chapter 1: 14-15. The first is, from a textual standpoint, somewhat controversial, for it says that Jesus came into Galilee and proclaimed "the Gospel of God" (according to some manuscripts) or "the Gospel of the Kingdom of God" (according to many others); it seems, though, that the first reading is the more authentic.

In these two verses God appears as the God of the Gospel and the God of the Kingdom. Therefore the earlier obscure idea - God is coming, God is about to manifest himself - begins to concretize itself in regard to man. He is the God of the Gospel, that God who brings good news, but he brings about this happy result by a change in the situation of the catechumen, a change that the catechumen, when he observes his condition as a sinner, desires. In the face of man's inability to grasp the reality of things, God comes forward with good news: it is God who takes things in hand, who makes the gift; it is the Kingdom of God. Not only, then, the God of the Gospel, but the God of the Kingdom. Here, too, it is obvious that the catechumen does not understand what is meant by: the Kingdom of God. In simple words one might say: the God who reverses situations for the better, the God who puts an end to what was not going well. The idea of the Kingdom is presented as an action taken by God in which he shows his sovereignty, his super-power, transforming situations that have gone wrong. We are still in the period of expectation, there is not as yet any promise of this change. It is only that the catechumen is being invited to ponder that, this transformation of things, it is God who will be accomplishing it. The whole effort of the Gospel writer is to propose to the catechumen that he recognize he is in a bad situation, that things are not right, and that "it is not you who will change them, but it is God who is taking action to effect the change". This is very important, for it puts the entire Gospel activity in a strongly theological light: it

is the work of God. It is not the catechumen who is invited to make himself better, to make a personal effort to see things. Rather, he is invited to accept the action that God is in the process of accomplishing.

In this first chapter there are five or six rather veiled references to God, but clear enough to point out a certain approach, in which the mystery of God is absorbed as something present in one's experience. In verse 35 we are told, "In the morning, long before dawn, Jesus got up and left the house, went off to a lonely place and prayed there". Here is evoked for the catechumen everything about prayer: what prayer is, how it is taught him, namely the prayer of the Psalms : of thanksgiving, of praise, of petition. The God here presented in the example of Jesus, as he who is the Christ, prays. This means he wishes to be prayed to, and this is what is important in the formation of the catechumen, a formation in prayer, through the example of Jesus. In the first chapter, then, one finds the basic elements through which the catechumen is prepared for opening himself to the mystery of the Kingdom.

There is in chapter 2 an aspect allied to this. It is one of the few mentions of God in Mark and is found in verse 7. Around Jesus are those who are murmuring at the miracle that Jesus is about to perform and who say, "What blasphemy! Who can forgive sins except God alone?". This too is an important emphasis. Even if placed in the mouth of the scribes, yet it represents a basic scriptural element, an element that it seems the catechumen could absorb, namely that the God recognized as the God of the Gospel is a God who can forgive sins. This is something important for a pagan catechumen. And here it is set forth as something presumed, and reinforced by the fact that Jesus himself assumes this prerogative. The catechumen is, then, carried forward in his search : he finds himself in a bad situation, God takes the initiative, comes to meet him, God forgives sins. His preparation for accepting God's intervention in his own life is developing.

After this verse there is hardly any mention of God until chapter 10, where there is a reference that corresponds to chapter 2 : 27. There it was said : only God can forgive sins. Here, in chapter 10 : 18-19, we have two episodes. The rich young man asks Jesus: "What must I do

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bles and of the mystery(verses 10-12) and so gave the chapter the form in which we now know it. It is a hypothesis as to the development of this chapter. We will make use of this hypothesis in so far as it will throw light mainly on the three parables about the seeds. But we will consider the chapter in its present structure, that is, as a chapter which seeks to explain the mystery of the Kingdom of God.

There is question here of a response to a crisis (of faith) that at a certain moment arises in the catechumen who wishes to enter definitively into the community. To understand this crisis as it is expressed in Mark, the following steps should be taken. First, consider the crisis in the ministry of Jesus as it occurred historically, recalling the crisis to which the preaching of Jesus was actually subjected during his life, as it is described in Mark. With this as a background, attempt to pinpoint the crisis of the catechumen and of the primitive Church. And to understand it better, it helps to translate it into the tests that our faith encounters, quite similar to those of the primitive Church. Then, with this background, to consider the formation of the catechumen in the mystery of the Kingdom.

There was, then, a crisis in the ministry of Jesus as it actually took place; on this the exegetes are in agreement, and they find frequent traces of it in the Gospels. Especially in the second part of Mark, there are clear indications that at a certain point a situation of growing tension developed between Jesus and his public.

We have a first concrete example in Mark 6 : 4, where Jesus laments that a prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, among his own relatives and family.

Following this, the situation seems to diffuse itself more widely. Jesus is disappointed by the way in which his message is greeted. And there is the rather curt reply he makes to the request made by the Pharisees for a sign from heaven. Jesus sighs from his heart and says, "This generation looks for a sign; but I tell you no sign will be given to this generation", and leaves them in a boat and goes to the other shore. It is a symptom of a certain rupture between Jesus and an important part of his hearers.

In the same chapter we have evidence that this tension was not only with some who were rather distant from him, outside, but also that there was a certain lack of understanding even among the Apostles. In chapter 8 : 18-21, there is a series of reproofs to the effect that they have n't understood at all : "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you not yet understand? Have you no perception? Are your minds closed? Have you eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear?..." It is a crescendo of evidence that make clear Jesus is not satisfied with what the Apostles understand of him. This situation comes at a later period in the life of Jesus, for at the beginning Mark records that great crowds followed him. For example, chapter 3 : 7, where this expression is twice repeated : Jesus with his disciples leaves the region and withdraws to the lakeshore "and great crowds followed him from Galilee, from Judea and Jerusalem", and then he concludes the geographical listing by saying "great numbers, who had heard of all he was doing, came to him".

The beginning is a success, but gradually we see this disappear. More and more there arises the aspect of challenge in the complaint of Jesus, "This people honor me with their lips but not with their hearts"(Mark 7: 6). Our again "You faithless generation! How much longer must I put up with you?"(Mark 9: 19). And this continues up to the final and more serious opposition that Jesus meets in the Pâs-sion, when the crowd - the same crowd that was portrayed in Mark 3 as following Jesus - seems as a bloc to reject him. This posture is expressed by Jesus himself in the parable of the vineyard and the vintners in Mark 12 : 1-12, and has its culminating point in that of the stone rejected by the builders. Jesus feels himself challenged, marginalized, rejected.

Such is the crisis in the ministry of Jesus as it occurred: the crowd fell away and Jesus chose a small group. With this as a framework, let us see what the crisis might be of the catechumen and also of the Christian in the primitive Church. "Why are we such a small group? Why are so few converted?"

In the early Church there was clearly evident, on the one hand the enthusiasm of the converts, on the other the fact that, when one looked around, the great mass of the

Hebrew world was not entering the Kingdom and that the pagan world had hardly been touched by the message. Why, if this is the word of God, does it not overturn the world? This was a question that really caused anxiety to the catechumen, who had to leave the pagan world to which he was accustomed and in which he had found a certain security, and to face this situation of a few persons, a little flock, if he was to hear the word of God. It is natural that there arose in the catechumen the doubt: Is this really the word of God, this which bears so little fruit and is destined for failure?

The questions that the catechumen and the primitive Church posed are very like those we raise: Why does my apostolate show so little results? Why does the Gospel, when preached, not have the power to convert at once? Why do political and social messages take hold, and the Gospel does not? Why this apparent failure of the world? All these are obstacles raised by such an apparent lack of effectiveness of the Gospel message.

On the personal level, this test of the first Christians we can apply also to the committed Christian with the query: Why does God not make me better? Why after so many years of ascetical effort and spiritual labor do we find ourselves no better than at the start, and perhaps even less good? It is a very serious temptation for the committed Christian who had hoped for the transformation of his whole being in Christ, and finds himself after ten or twelve or twenty or thirty years almost in spiritual peril.

The response afforded by the Gospel message consists in leading us to see that the growth of the Kingdom is not such as one might expect. It is not something that can be "programmed", based on the power of the word in itself. This is the first facet of the Kingdom mystery, that its growth is obscure and secret, known by few and only slowly revealing itself. While it seems, looking at it from the outside, that the things of the Kingdom ought to go forward triumphantly, things have not gone that way, beginning with Jesus.

To explain the mystery of the Kingdom, three parables are used, namely those of the seeds.

The parable of the sower had a clear meaning. If the word of Jesus does not bring the results that it ought, the fault is not that of the word, which is good, but of the different conditions of the soil. In other words, the Kingdom of God, the word, does not bring results automatically; those do not depend only on it, but on the very different circumstances of the earth where the word is sown. The fate of the word that is offered is foreseen from the beginning by Jesus : it will not necessarily triumph, but will meet responses of different kinds, quite a few of them negative. So Jesus asks his follower to accept this destiny of the word of the Kingdom, which he was the first to encounter. In the parable, Jesus also points out some of the conditions that are an obstacle to the word's being effective, even though of itself, because it is the word of God and so the power of salvation, it ought to have that effectiveness. These circumstances are expressed symbolically by the birds of the air, the shallow soil and the thorns. They are explained in the same chapter by some applications which Scripture scholars hold are the fruit of reflections on the parable made in reference to the situation of the community.

For this very reason they are of interest. For they show how the community has applied to itself this problem of the scandal of the word that is ineffective.

The explanation given in verses 13 to 20 reflects the influence of the community. It reveals to us how serious the problem was, how there was need to explain why and how the message was welcomed by so few. Why do so many reject it? Why did the Jews reject it? This was a very great scandal, one that for the first Christians was almost incomprehensible. So here are listed some of the conditions that operate negatively. The first is that recalled in the parable in verse 4 : "the birds ate it up". In the parable itself this could refer to many sorts of difficulties. The explanation makes it explicit through "satan", who comes and carries away the word that was sown. This can refer to many types of temptations to which the Christian was subject. However, the gravest temptation, that of persecution, of tribulation, is applied to the following condition, that of the earth too shallow to sustain roots (verse 17), so it cannot be directly applied here to this allusion to "satan" made by Jesus. Keeping to the Gospel of

Mark, we can relate this verse to chapter 8 : 33, which is the other instance where "satan" is unmasked as being the tempter. These are the words directed by Jesus to Peter, "Get behind me, satan, because the way you think is not God's way, but man's". By comparing the mention of "satan" in 4: 15 with this fuller explanation in 8: 33, we can see in this type of temptation precisely that triumphalistic mentality of indefinite progress of a human kind. With such an outlook the catechumen greets the word, believing that everything will change in him and around him. And the first time he is deluded in this expectation, he falls.

And it is exactly "satan" who makes use of this mentality prevalent in the world, which is a mentality of being effective, of getting results. To relate it at once to the word, it is an outlook that judges by comparing the effort with what is produced, as if the word did not have within itself the key to success. Here, then, is made explicit a very strong temptation of the pagan catechumen, who approaches the Gospel with this mental outlook, and may remain stunned at the first delusion that comes to him or to the community.

Another facet of the plants without roots: they lack sufficient soil because it is rocky underneath, so they do not put down roots themselves. Here a question may be asked : does this "having no roots in themselves" refer to something more specific? It could form part of a psychological emphasis: that the word does not penetrate sufficiently, is not assimilated enough, and so in fact does not sustain the test later. One can also suppose that here there is question of explanations elaborated in the community, that the community has the idea expressed in similar words in the Letter to the Colossians (chapter 2: 7), where it is asked that the perfect Christian be strongly rooted in Christ. In other words, that there be a deepening and rooting of the Christian in the mystery of the Lord which will keep him from being carried away at the first temptation. It is possible, then, to read in these references other more concrete aspects, keeping in mind how these themes were meditated in the community, which had access to a wealth of teaching, as we know from other places in the New Testament. The essential teaching is very clear : the word does not fructify automatically. Woe to him who fools himself into thinking that it is enough to hear the word,

that it is enough to launch it in order to obtain success. In fact, ordinarily one must expect moments of failure whether in the word as preached or as heard. The Kingdom does not go forward according to the law of success.

The second explanation of how the Kingdom grows is in verses 26-29: the seed grows of itself. Here, in a fashion typical of the Gospels, the opposite aspect is stressed of what was said in the parable of the sower. Sometimes the Gospel advance is paradoxical. In the first parable it is said that the word does not automatically bear fruit. Here, in verse 28, that it does so automatically, that is, that the earth of itself produces fruit. What then is the sense of the parable? That the word seems to bear no fruit, that it is exposed to all sorts of disappointments, but when man least expects it, it produces fruit. It gives a corrective to the first teaching, telling us that we must entrust ourselves blindly to the divine action. Jesus is, then, saying: "It seems that the word is ineffective. But even there where one sees nothing and where man is not giving it attention, the word in reality is productive and at a given moment it sprouts". It is, therefore, an invitation to the catechumen, in spite of what he fails to see, to nonetheless launch himself in faith into the hearing and the putting into practice of the word, certain that it will produce fruit in himself and in others. The word has been sown. We are sure one day it will bear fruit even if we cannot see it. We cannot subject it to human laws of growth, which is just what, with our outlook, we tend to do.

The third parable, that of the grain of mustard-seed, moves on a similar plane. The word does not automatically bear fruit. Nevertheless it will of a certainty bear fruit in its time. And here the Kingdom is summed up in this way: the Kingdom of God begins from very little. This too is a reality that the catechumen does not expect, but for which he must prepare himself, something that he will im-
bibe later on. The Kingdom of God takes its start with things that no one notices, begins with a reality little apparent. One must, then, open one's eyes and notice this reality, for from it great things will come to maturity. In his wisdom, God effects great things from very small things. There is a lack of proportion between the beginning and the result, between what we see and what will be

revealed. This disproportion is contained in the parable of the seed when it purposely contrasts the results : from one, thirty; from one, sixty; from one, a hundred. In other words, from a little comes a vast quantity. The catechumen is invited to make an act of faith, to recognize that the little community into which he wishes to enter is something insignificant in the sea of paganism, but that, all the same, putting himself on this road of accepting what is not visibly apparent, he is taking the right path of God, which Jesus was the first to follow. In this same chapter there are other parables that complement in some way this framework. There are those found in verses 21-23. The light is not placed under a basket, but on a candlestick. There is nothing hidden that will not be made known, nothing covered up that will not come to light. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. A phrase, this, that is found on all the occasions where we are confronted with the typical mystery of the Kingdom.

The other parable follows : "Take notice of what you are hearing. The amount you measure out is the amount you will be given--and more besides. For the man who has will be given more; and from the man who has not, even what he has will be taken away". It is somewhat paradoxical, since he who has not is not aware what might be taken away from him.

The first of these two parables is in all likelihood to be referred to Jesus himself. Jesus, in his life and his beginnings seems hidden, seems to work in an obscure manner. But the moment comes, and must come, when the work of Jesus will be revealed. It is another way of stressing what is said in the parable of the seed hidden in the earth which, without man being aware of it, is growing. Jesus is light and must enlighten. The word is light, and he who welcomes it is certain that it will bear fruit. If a person continues, he is accomplishing a positive work, even if he is unaware what is happening. The parable supposes that one is unaware, that he does not perceive the effect of this light. The light on the candlestick is shining; it may seem not to shine, but in reality its effect will certainly be accomplished.

The following parable underlines this situation from another point of view. It applies especially to the per-

son, the Christian, who in this situation of obscurity sees a work of Jesus, only just begun, a community almost insignificant, a movement intermingled with a thousand other messianic or political movements. If in spite of this mysterious obscurity he gives himself without measure, he will receive in overflowing measure. If instead, his faith commitment is feeble, the return will be like that of the seed that fell on rocky ground, and even what he has will be taken away.

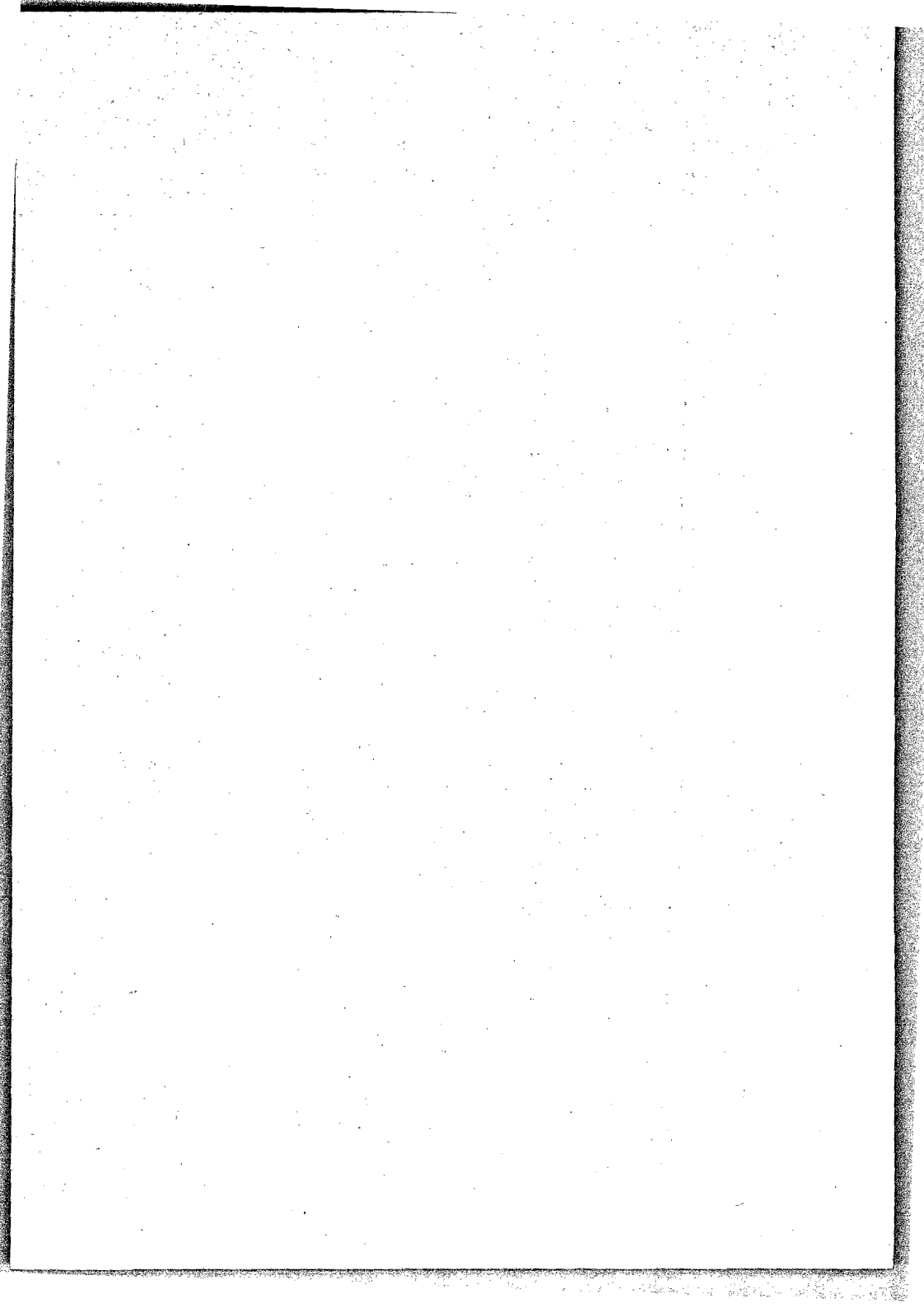
Through these different parables the catechumen is stimulated to give himself trustfully to this new way of life of which he understands little. He senses that there are profound aspects. But what he sees, above all on the surface, are things difficult to accept, even contradictory. If today he has the courage to take this step, then the Kingdom will be put in his hands. And so there will begin to be revealed in him that power which Jesus came to set in motion upon the earth.

The chapter of the parables can then be incorporated into the work of Mark in this way: as a first step in overcoming the scandal of the Kingdom. It enters the soul of the catechumen to give him the courage to give himself completely, that is to commit his own life to that being which is Christ—something which was set forth in chapter 3 as the ideal of the disciple.

These parables do not answer the question "which persons produce more fruit than others?". Rather they respond directly to the question: "why does the word not always produce fruit?". The answer is: the word is good, but there are circumstances that keep it from producing fruit. And the primitive Church attempted to see what the situations were which prevented the fruit from maturing: which types of temptations, difficulties and concerns.

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V

THE MYSTERY OF THE BREAD

To the catechumen who welcomed the invitation to conversion, who felt the call of Jesus addressed to him, who was invited to follow the Lord, to him, after this act of faith in the Lord, was presented the mystery of the Kingdom (Mark, chapter 4).

Then follow the great miracles, those which show Jesus performing striking actions outside all the categories that the catechumen might imagine. Finally, after a second passage on the call, that of the mission of the Twelve (chapter 6 : 6-13), begins a section that has come to be called by the Bible scholars: the section on bread.

Such a section on bread seems in fact to exist. It would begin with chapter 6 : 30 and end with chapter 8:31. With verse 21 appears the last reproof : "are you still without understanding?", and then follows the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida, and finally the climax of Mark, the declaration of Peter regarding Jesus and the conditions for following Jesus, now explained openly. In chapter 8:32 "Jesus spoke the word openly", he proclaimed his message clearly. Up to that point he has not spoken openly. So in the chapters we are now studying, up to chapter 8, there is something mysterious, hidden.

The section on bread that begins with 6 : 30 and finishes, it would seem, at 8 : 21 is called thus because it is enclosed within the framework of two multiplications of bread. The first is in 6 : 30-44 and the second in 8 : 1-10. But there follow some elements from verses 11 to 21 that are very important, which reemphasize the mystery of the bread. At any rate the two passages about the multiplications form the framework of the section, one at the beginning and the other towards the end. It would seem there is some special reason why Mark has kept this double multiplication, which Luke on the other hand has eliminated, since one multiplication already expresses of itself the power of Jesus.

The presence of these two multiplications is not the only reason why this part is called the section on bread. There are also here and there within the section certain other references to food. For example, the reply of Jesus to the Greek woman of pagan origin : "'It is not good to take the bread of the children and give it to the dogs. And the woman said, 'Lord, even the young pups, under the table, eat the crumbs that fall from the children'"(7: 27-28). There is here too a call to the table, to bread, to the bread of the children and the overflowing table that can be given to many others besides those who have a right to it.

Another mention of bread occurs in 8: 14 and the following verses. It is the discussion between Jesus and his followers and the reproach with regard to the leaven of the Pharisees, followed by the lament of the disciples that "it is because we have no bread" and the reproof of Jesus, "why are you talking about having no bread?".

A third mention of the matter of food is had in chapter 7 : 1-23. It seems then that the exegetes have some reason for designating this section with the name: the section on bread.

A more difficult question is : Is there a mystery of bread in Mark? That is, granted that this section has an obvious meaning from the fact that Jesus satisfied the crowd twice with food, was this section of the Christian teaching used to bring about a deeper entry into the mystery of Jesus? There are some verses that seem to point in

this direction, which make the reader reflect on the fact that beneath the mention of the bread there is something else the reader is being invited to ponder.

Chapter 6 : 52, following the multiplication of the bread and the miracle of Jesus walking on the water, says, "they had not yet understood what the miracle of the loaves meant; their minds were closed". The verse, then, in an editing note typical of Mark, is asking the reader what is meant by saying that they had not understood about the bread. They had seen the multiplication, they were amazed. What was it that they ought to understand more about the bread, and did not, because their hearts were blinded? Here there is a mystery that Mark wishes us to reflect on.

Another element is found in chapter 8 : 16-21. Mark gives this portion to a whole series of reproofs of Jesus to his followers with regard to the bread. This cannot be taken simply as part of a historical narrative. Instead there is behind it the aim of making the reader reflect on a mystery which, up to this point, he had not yet understood. "They said to one another, 'It is because we have no bread'. And Jesus knew it and he said to them, 'Why are you talking about having no bread, do you not yet understand? Have you no perception? Are your minds closed? Have you eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear? Or do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves among the five thousand, how many baskets full of scraps did you collect?' They answered, 'Twelve'. 'And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many baskets full of scraps did you collect?' And they answered, 'Seven'. Then he said to them, 'Are you still without understanding?'. What ought the Apostles to understand? They had perhaps understood the power of Jesus. But there is something else they did not understand, and that is the mystery of the bread. This mystery can be found too in another emphasis the account makes. In the first multiplication of the loaves, there is the demand, almost paradoxical, that Jesus insists on with his Apostles: "You give them to eat yourselves". And they reply, "But how shall we do it? Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for them. What are we to do?". This question, what can we do, is repeated in chapter 8 : 4 in the second multiplication, when the disci

ples say to Jesus, "How could anyone feed such a crowd of people in a deserted area?". This insistence on the incapacity of the Apostles to get themselves out of the situation seems to go in the same direction as other reproofs of Jesus: "You do not understand". You have not yet managed to grasp the real situation.

This mystery of the bread has, as its point of departure, a lack of bread. The phrase recurs a number of times in this section. In 8 :16 the disciples say, "We have no bread". In 6: 37: "How could we find so much bread?" In 8: 4 : "How could anyone feed such a crowd?" There is then a lack of bread, a situation in which those who follow Jesus find themselves. What does this lack of bread signify in the framework of the Gospel of Mark? What did it mean in the primitive Church? It certainly signifies the lack of bread with which to sustain ourselves day by day. If we reflect on the early Christian prayer, the Our Father, we see that we are invited to ask God each day for the bread needed to sustain ourselves. And the situation in which this prayer was made was precisely the situation of the disciple, of him who, having left all to follow Jesus, had to look to Providence for the bread of each day. This bread is then the bread needed for daily nourishment, of which man experiences the need, the lack of which is for him a real problem. And the assurance of having it is offered him, if he leaves all to follow the Lord.

But there is behind this daily bread another meaning: that of the bread of the Kingdom, that of receiving the strength to walk toward the holy mountain of God, that bread which was given to Eliah so as not to faint along the road and to march even to the mountain. We find this aspect expressed in a mysterious and veiled manner in chapter 8 : 3, in the second multiplication of the loaves : "I cannot let them go off hungry, for they will collapse on the way". What is the situation of the disciple that one can observe behind this reference? The catechumen who has proposed to serve the Kingdom finds himself faced with very heavy sacrifices to make, in situations that disconcert him. He feels he will not be able to do it. He feels that unless there is a daily strength to implement the requirements of the Kingdom, an ever-new strength, he will not be able to go forward. He is subjected to all sorts of temptations, discouragements, fears. "Who will give me the

strength to face this situation, so risky, whether from the external, social and human point of view, or from that of the spiritual point of view that I am about to abandon?" For the whole pagan tradition that had gone before was to refuse to embark on a sea whose limits one did not know. To this temptation of discouragement, of fear that at the key moment one will lack food, a double response is given. The first is an affirmation: Jesus knows how to give bread in abundance to those who follow him with no self-interest. These two multiplications of bread are made in favor of people who have left everything, almost irresponsibly, and have followed Jesus, without thinking of what they were doing and what the consequences might be. So Jesus took care of them. This repetition, then, inculcates in the catechumen the certainty that if he follows the Lord wherever he goes, if he answers the call to come and follow, Jesus will know how to give him in abundance that of which he has need. The multiplications of bread are recounted in such a way as to demonstrate the presence of Jesus. As chapter 8: 2 says, "I feel sorry for all these people, they have been with me for three days now". The true disciples then are those who are "with Jesus", attached to him, and so he cannot leave them to themselves, be unconcerned about them.

In chapter 6:42-43 we see how those who have followed Jesus not only will never be abandoned, but will have bread in plenty, will be abundantly satisfied. So there is here an insistence on the prodigality with which Jesus will treat those who follow him without thought of themselves. "They all ate as much as they wanted. They collected twelve basketfuls of scraps of bread and pieces of fish. And the number of those who had eaten was five thousand and men".

This emphasis is found again in chapter 8 : 8-9, in different words but where the phrase, "they ate as much as they wanted" is again accented. This should make the catechumen realize that "there is no fear in following Jesus to the end". The path he is about to attempt is entirely new, it is a road through the desert, a region of which he knows nothing. But there need be no fear if he has confidence, if he has the faith that the Gospel recommends.

There is a second affirmation made to the catechumen. Not only should he trust in the Lord, who takes generous

care of those who follow him. More than that, the Lord knows that we are weak. We are to believe that he is aware of this weakness of the disciple, and there is no need for the disciple to present his difficulties, as if to awaken the Lord to them. Here one can grasp the meaning of the reproach Jesus makes to his followers : haven't you understood that I have assumed care of you? That in your dangers and difficulties I will see to it that you lack nothing? That is why in these accounts there is an insistence on the understanding that Jesus has. While on the one hand the catechumen can have the sensation that he is called to an almost inhuman renunciation, here, in 6 : 34, "Jesus took pity on them because they were like sheep with out a shepherd". And the same thought in chapter 8 : 2: he is full of compassion for them. And so there are reproofs for those who do not have confidence in this complete providence of the Lord. For example, chapter 6: 50, "They were all terrified (on the occasion of the storm at sea). But he said to them, 'Courage, it is I. Don't be afraid'". Or again, 6: 52, also on the boat, "Why are you talking about these things?". It is in this light that we must read the question, "Have you not yet understood?". Implying that they had understood nothing about the bread does not mean that they failed to grasp the essential fact of the miracle, but that they had not understood its deeper significance : that Jesus cannot abandon those who are his, that he knows their weakness, that he acts in a human and understanding way towards them.

This assumes a very special emphasis in the formation of the catechumen, who is called to a life of renunciation, one that seems impossible to him. But he is assured the call is from an understanding Lord, who treats him as a person and who is aware of his weakness, to whom he ought to entrust himself fully.

This is a first meaning of the insistence on understanding the mystery of the bread : the need to grasp the mysterious truth that the attitude of the Lord toward those who leave all to follow him is one that surpasses all our expectations.

But there is, among the many obscure expressions in this section, another that gives one pause. To begin with, chapter 8 : 14, with its series of reproofs, starts with

the statement that "they had forgotten to take any food and they had only one loaf with them in the boat". What is Mark trying to say? That they forgot to bring bread, were concerned about this, and that Jesus reproved them for it. Still, they had one loaf, but afterwards, forgot they had it. Given the care with which Mark describes details, perhaps this means something. What? They lack bread, but they do have one loaf and forget they have it; they are reproved for not understanding.... A mysterious phrase. The Gospel of Mark mentions for us several banquets that Jesus had with his friends. There is that with Levi, the converted publican: "He eats with publicans and sinners" and is blamed for this. The banquet that is strikingly presented is that of the multiplication of the loaves (6: 30 ff.), and it is described as a real "banquet". Jesus not only gave the bread, but ordered that all sit down, as for a great meal, in an orderly way, as if at grand tables. In verse 40 is repeated, "all sat down on the ground in groups of hundreds and fifties", and then the distribution began. It is like a banquet in which Jesus himself serves them.

This touch is accented again in chapter 8 : 6 when he orders all to sit down on the ground, therefore to get ready to eat together.

The fourth banquet, amply described, like a banquet in the true sense, with its preparation and its steps, is that of the last supper of Jesus.

It would seem these four scenes described by Mark as banquets of Jesus with his friends have a relationship among them. The first is that in which Jesus simply sits down at table with publicans and sinners, breaking tradition, and demonstrating that there is something special in him. In the second and the third, Jesus himself organizes two large banquets in a deserted area, and in a quite extraordinary way becomes the distributor of the food. Finally, in the third, Jesus offers himself as the bread given for others. In this perspective one can reflect on the mystery of chapter 8 : 14. What is this single, unique bread that they were not aware they had, because their minds were closed? And which they should have recognized that they possessed, if they had grasped the significance of the multiplication of the loaves. The catechesis of the

primitive Church on the Eucharist is that this bread should be understood as the presence of Jesus. The bread, for him who opens his eyes and grasps reality, is Jesus himself, who is placed at the disposition of all. One sees then the special importance that the last supper at the end of the entire Gospel acquires, when Jesus clearly reveals that the bread at the disposition of all is He. It is his life, it is his giving of himself for the others, his placing himself totally in an attitude of service. And the actions that he carried out earlier had as their aim to open people's eyes to this availability or "disponibility" of God for men in Jesus. The catechumen is, then, invited to listen to these accounts of the multiplication of bread, and the miracles connected with them, as to a great power of God that is revealed. And this with the certainty that God himself is put at our disposition, and that he is bread, he is security, he is the daily nourishment offered to the catechumen who is ready to welcome him fully in faith. In this way the stress of chapter 8 : 16 and the verses that follow on opening one's eyes, on listening, on seeing the mystery that they had not yet grasped, acquire a certain force. They present a mystery, a certain "discipline of the secret" which is gradually revealed to the catechumen so as to prepare him for comprehending the importance of the Eucharist. An importance accented by the fact that the Gospel narrative of the Eucharist comes at the close, initiating the account of the Passion, which presents Jesus placed at our disposition even to the end. There is then a gradual education of the catechumen. It takes him from a consideration of the external evidence of the power of Jesus on to the Person of Jesus himself, who is always present to the Christian, in the desert as in life, so that he will not faint on the road. And this, in the Eucharist.

In this type of catechesis performed by Mark, there is the first step towards a primitive catechesis of the Eucharist. This can be affirmed because an examination of some of the miracles recorded in Mark seems to be treated in a way that would also offer the opportunity for the catechist to explain them by making sacramental applications. The catechumen is placed face to face with the person of Jesus. Gradually he comes to understand that this person Jesus who heals the blind, who performs certain actions, continues to be present in the Church and at the disposit-

ion of all so as to help them and heal them : sinners, the sick, the suffering.

In this catechetical approach to the mystery, this initiation into the things to understand, we find a complete catechesis, leading to a grasp of the presence of Jesus in his Church under the sacramental presence.

A final question : then everything is understood here in a spiritual sense? From the bread which is the sustenance of the crowd, one passes to the bread which is Jesus. Is there then for the Christian no concern for the bread needed for those who suffer bodily hunger? This concern was present. The early Church felt it so strongly that it organized collections, as we read in Acts, chapter 2 and still more in the letters of Paul. The idea of bread for the others who were hungry could be made explicit in the multiplication of the loaves, but as an expression of this "disponibility" of Jesus. The catechumen perceives that Jesus was bountiful toward those who followed him, that he assisted them in everything, and even that he himself is the bread at the disposition of all. When this last lesson --given by the Eucharist sacrifice--has been grasped, namely how Jesus, as bread, is at the disposition of us all, then it is easy to graft onto this, "So, put yourselves at the disposition of others". From this arises the possibility of using these narratives as an invitation to do as Jesus did for us. As he served us even to the limit, providing us with bread, providing us himself, so the first Christians are invited to serve others, to give to them the bread for which they hunger.

In chapter 10 : 42 and the following verses, Jesus shows himself the model of the perfect servant, utterly at the service of all : "He who wishes to be the greatest among you, let him be the servant": let him be a master too in love and in offering bread to others, "for the Son of Man has not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life for the redemption of many". Here is implied the need for each of the disciples to be where Jesus was, and to put his life at the disposition of others as Jesus has put his own. It is the need for love, not only a humanistic love, but the need to be with Christ in order to do what he has done. It means having grasped his total disponibility and availability for others, expressed under

the form of bread. The catechumen, then, is gradually led, on the one hand to going beyond purely material necessities and, on the other, to find and take up the service of others, once his life has been put entirely at the disposition of the Kingdom of the Lord.

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