

# The Local Christian Commune: an Effective Sphere to Comprehend the Divine Mysteries

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## **Introduction**

In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed.<sup>1</sup>

Adopting a sense of speed in a skating game provides strength to a participant to reach his/her destiny by defeating the other. At this point the notion of defeating the other or overpowering the rest becomes the basic principle of success. In today's globalized world the fields such as, politics, culture and socio-economics are predominantly engaged with the principle of skating. This further motivates us to think that the entire orchestration of above mentioned realms are put into practice with a eugenic frame of mind. When we compare the techniques of skating with the life of the people who are very much involved in the *game of gain*, in the present society the phrases namely, my safety, let us roll fast, catch-up, weal the deal, impress the rest, get rid of the least and show your strength emerge. This emergence defines the mood of the game. This mood carries an inherent connotation, which is nothing but "rush."

Here the tempo that resonates the nuances of rush, which they maintain reaches them to the space of victory. Thus this sense of triumphalism becomes the hidden motive of the participants. In fact this mood of

triumphalism becomes the basic formula that determines the upward movement of the participants in a society. In other words, we can qualify this entire programme of such upward movement in terms of selection and omission or in terms of inclusion and exclusion.

The game of gain is not a strange phenomenon to humanity, but rather it has been very much active from the beginning of human race. That is, it has been the practice of pressing the toll of power on the weak in order to erase the memory of the fragile from the historical reading of the human world. Here we are reminded of an oft repeated phrase called the *survival of the fittest*. And this leads us to substantiate the omission or the exclusion of the underside story of the margins by the narratives of the powerful.

Claude Levi-Strauss (a French anthropologist) explains this act of exclusion of the fragile from the mainstream of the human society by the powerful from the primitive and modern human perspective. He conceives the primitive exclusion as *anthropophagic* and modern as *anthropoemic*. He argues that, "The primitive societies deal with the strangers and the deviants by swallowing them up, by making their own and by gaining strength from them. These are the anthropophagic, or cannibalistic. Modern societies in contrast, are bulimic, or anthropoemic; they vomit out the deviant, keeping them outside of society or enclosing them in special institutions within their perimeters."<sup>2</sup>

The present human endeavor in this so called "information age" has not detached itself from the cannibalistic and bulimic approach. That is, the current context is very much in alliance with the denial of the prominence of the local or the insignificant identities. Here we have to accept the fact that since church is also moving with the current situation it is also tainted with the trends, which perpetuate exclusion and negation.

This exclusion takes place in varied shades in the day-to-day affair of the church, such as caste, creed, language, culture, region, West-East disparity etc., Of course we are not pessimistic towards the progress that has been taking place in this new age, but in practice the negativity that the oppressed

and margins experience is much grosser than the recognition that they enjoy in the public realm.

When we compare the performance of the church or the Christian community with the secular organizations, it is true that it feeds the needs of the local concerns. Indeed it is very much sympathetic towards the poor and the oppressed. But mere sympathy towards the local does not serve the purpose; that is, its total disconnectedness from the bulimic loom. The church ought to get rid of such situation. This disengagement will be actualized only through the awareness of its members; the awareness that leads the faith community to think that they are part and parcel of the "*reign of the awakened*," that was envisaged by Jesus.

The point that we have to keep in mind here is that, we cannot reduce the church or the awakened body of Christ into a mere social organization; rather it is much more than that. It is the outcome of the kenotic praxis of Jesus. In other words, it is the sole expression of the Pascal mystery of Jesus. Its function is unique, because it is a commune in tune with the triune image of God; the image that portrays a community that believes in the notion of "turn to relationship,"<sup>3</sup> and it is this sense of relationship that brings the hidden mystery of God self to the fore.

Today we cannot experience and concretize the unfolding mystery of God by un-mirroring the pluri-fabric of the current world. The profound theological meaning of the God of the Christian world obtains meaning only through the legitimization of every singular site in the world of humans. The reading of Stanley J. Grenz on ecclesiology sheds more light on this conception. For him plural expressions that exist in a Christian community not only provide identity to the participants but also it fetches in deep theological significance; the significance that affirms their share in envisaging the divine goal to the humans who share the image of triune God.

He states, "In a world characterized by the presence of the plurality of communities, each of which gives shape to the identities of its participants, the Christian community takes on a new and potentially profound and

theological importance as the people who embody a theological vision that sees the divine goal for humankind as that of being the bearers of the image of the God who is triune.”<sup>4</sup>

Hence, from here we get the lead to think that, in the present context we can comprehend the meaning of the divine mysteries by authenticating the aspirations and concerns of the local ecclesial bodies; the bodies that embodies the divine spark in it. In this article we will try to explore this concept. It is by believing and affirming the due space to the local unknown entities we justify our faith in the triune God and God’s mysteries that are unfolding each moment by moment in the human world.

### **Thinking Locally: Is it mere a trendy talk?**

The present circumstance that has been enveloped by the grand narratives of the so called guardians of the cultures, contexts and religions ridicule the indigenous narratives as an empty jargon without meaning. The guardians who find their comforts in the tight vaults of the grand expressions conceive the local bodies and their uniqueness as a threat and deviant. To cover-up their ignorance and inability to read the science of the times the Meta-lovers stigmatize the local as *beelzebubic* (because the local narratives exceeds the rigidity of the standardized version of the Meta stories) and momentary. And it is a known fact that such disregarding remarks on the local realities stem from the petty empty arrogance of the feudal mindset.

When mere superiority claims dominates a religion, culture, language or governance rigidity emerges. And once the same rigidity becomes the tool to promote its agenda in a society, it eventually distorts the natural design of the divine. That is, it destroys the spirit of interdependence and correlation among the creatures. In fact such human agenda which upholds repression as the means to control the legitimacy of the little stories of the local not only subjugate the fragile realities of the universe but also it underrates the power of the creator.

Walter Brueggemann's reflection on the static religion sharpens our thoughts at this juncture. According to him any form of serious authoritarianism in a religion tames God's abode and vision in accordance with the fancy mood of the ruler. In other words rigidity distorts the true meaning of God in a religion. He suggests that, "the establishment of a controlled, static religion, in which God and His temple have become part of the royal landscape, in which the sovereignty of God is fully subordinated to the purpose of the king"<sup>5</sup>

What we learn from here is that the Grand expressions bring the homogenizing trend to the fore and such a move would further affirm the reign of Meta claims in which the local and its concerns will be wiped -out. Hence, what we see in the reality is that, either in a social realm or in a religious sphere the local claims have become a nuisance to the people who are obsessed with the allure of power. But for the people who belong to the *border thinking* (agenda of the God's rule) marginal claims and spaces become the platform of new thinking and new hope.

The Holy Scripture tells us that, "Jesus is the stone rejected by you builders which has become the cornerstone." (Acts4:12). Here these words serve us a significant tool to explain the prominence of the repressed local reality in a better manner. That is, Jesus was brutally tortured and killed on the cross as an outlaw by both the religious and political authorities, but God projects Jesus as his only begotten Son. He becomes the source and summit of God's own agenda.

Like that under the pretext of the word universal, the hegemonic minds reject the stories of the local as unwanted tale of the misfits. But in and through the spirit and in truth of God we learn that, the local bodies are the effective medium through which God speaks to the human world. Therefore thinking locally is not a momentary exercise but rather it is an effective initiative to reach God and God's love to the faith community and to the world at large.

### Unfolding Mystery of God in the Multi-Local Space

By and large all the religions define God as the embodiment of love. If God is love then God's very self is a free gift to humanity. We cannot disengage love from gift. These two elements are the two sides of the same coin. It is a fact that true love exceeds all boundaries, barriers, concepts, ideologies and images. It purely pulsates in the realms of acceptance, interdependence, relationship, openness and learning. Hence no system can claim the monopoly of God's love, but rather it is very much active and alive in all the realities of this universe. Such conception should not be neglected as a postmodern theory of deconstruction. But this is a tangible reality that we face every day.

James J. Bacik readings on the *mystery* of God help us to understand this reality in a better way. He says, "God is equally near and can be found in every conceivable existential situation. ... There is no exclusive sphere of religious experience; on the contrary the whole world is potentially revelatory."<sup>6</sup> In a pointed note we can say that God as love moves within all movements of every human event that brings forth newness and hope. Here God becomes an event, which we realize through the person of Jesus.

Hence God of the Christian faith is an event through which the believers come in contact with their own weakness and strength, aspirations and concerns, and vision and mission. And emphatically they learn the significance of the *other*, who defines the meaning of their own existence, which is nothing but the all-encompassing spirit of God. In brief, this God is not an exclusive event but rather an inclusive event; an event (Incarnation of the Son of God) that took the form of flesh (John 1:14). It is this mystery that brings forth the radical involvement of God in the human history gives birth to a local inclusive body on the day of Pentecost, which is nothing but the local, "church... a community gathered around Word and sacraments."<sup>7</sup> Charles E. Van Engen thoughts on *Glocal church* illuminate us more here at this point. For him, the body of Christian faith (church) comes to term with the mystery of God by asserting itself as an inclusive body rather than exclusive. He explains that,

The Christian church was not anything like the exclusivist, introverted, secret mystery religions of the day. Rather, Christianity from the very earliest times, as in Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2), perceived itself as a radically inclusive religion that aimed to proclaim its message and act extend its fellowship to both men and women, slaves and free, Romans, Greeks, Jews, barbarians and all persons who would receive it.<sup>8</sup>

This inclusive approach is completely sacramental because it authenticates the necessity of all the local potential of the faith community in order to conceive the mystery of God. It is this mystery that gives an impetus to the faith community to carry out the mission of God in this society. Hence the faith community is not only community that serves the mere structure that has been erected in the name of Jesus' Páscal event, but its prime work is to serve the mystery of God. This means, to perform the truth of God; in the Augustinian sense of *facere veritatem*. In other words, as Christians "Human beings are created not to serve religion, but to serve the mystery of God and the values of God's reign."<sup>9</sup>

And from here we get the lead to think that in order to serve the mystery of God the Church of the Word has to take a deep plunge into the day to day life of the ordinary and local human affairs. It is this deep plunge of the body of the Word and sacraments that become the spectrum of the messianic-praxis. It is true that God's mystery cannot be fully comprehended by ordinary human mind, but the same mystery is very much hidden in the every spark of this cosmos. For instance, the personalities that we come in contact through the Holy Scripture, such as Moses, David, Prophets, Mary and the disciples of Jesus are the authentic expression of God's Mystery. God unfolds God's own agenda, which has been hidden as the mystery in this universe, come to the fore through the ground realities, which means through the dusty realities of the world of the margins. They are namely: the poor, fishermen, shepherds, craftsmen, sinners, daily-waged, oppressed and the repressed other.

Therefore to ground the mystery of God here and now the church has to learn the authentic art of transcendence; the transcendence that leads to

the space of transformation, in which truth, justice and happiness prevail. To actualize this transformation, primarily the Catholic Church should transcend the sense of disparity between the local and the universal church. Here the former is not inferior to the later, and the later is not superior to the former. But the fact is, these two identities are correlated and interdependent. For Kevin J. Vanhoozer, the local church is the contextualized version of the Catholic Church and the Universal church illuminates the local to the world body of faithful. He illustrates, "The local church is perhaps best viewed as a contextualized performance of the Catholic church: the universal church made particular, visible, and concrete in a specific place and time; the people of God speaking and acting in a specific language and culture in creative fidelity to the gospel."<sup>10</sup>

It is this intense interdependence between the local and the universal church that brings forth the "*infinite newness*" of the divine into being. When this infinite newness is acknowledged as the expression of the unfolding mystery of God in every local unit of the church then rigid affirmation of homogenization disappears and the hidden unknown identities will get their due acclamation in the Christian world at large. Thus such co-relational effort builds the spirit of communion, which eventually communicates the meaning of transcendence to the human society and the faith community.

### **Conclusion: Grounding the Mystery Locally**

Communicating the sense of transcendence is a messianic work of the faith community that believes in the mystery of God. Our normal human mind connects the meaning of transcendence instantly with the metaphysical realm rather than the physical world in which we live. But the meaning of transcendence that we learn from the mystery of God tells us that, transcendence means reaching out to our own neighbors and stranger-other with the spirit of kenosis that we learn from our Lord Jesus.

Through conferring our unconditional giving, caring and genuine love we portray the significance of transcendence to the world. This means, it is by meaningfully involving in this tangible, and fragile physical world we identify the point of God's imminence. These elements are the telling expressions of sacrifice that qualifie transcendence. In other words, "Sacrifice is the remedy to a world devoid of transcendence."<sup>11</sup>

When self giving becomes the key element to ground the mystery of God in the local ecclesial bodies, the ideas such as competition, profit related success and rush losses its strength. The function of the body of the Word and sacraments cannot be equated with the "*game of gain*," but it is signified with the "**governance of grace**." In the space of grace, as a baptized member she/he cannot claim or assert his or her superiority over the other, because such assertion brings in destruction and blocks the ways and means of transcendence. In other words, "such self assertion is finally self defeating."<sup>12</sup>

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Overcoming self defeating is nothing but disapproving the negation of God's grace in oneself and in a community. And through such disapproval the faith community and its members will experience the traits of God's own self. This means, "My God is not a God who is hard, unreachable, insensible, stoical, incapable of suffering."<sup>13</sup> This God is ever-loving, compassionate, sensible, un-stoic, tangible, and ever-fresh and very much earth bound. In order to realize the impact of mystery of God or the source of *infinite newness* in the local bodies of the Word and the sacraments, these traits of God need to be translated. That means each and every trait of the divine must get the shape of flesh or to be incarnated in an authentic form. Finally it is through such incarnated approach the local church becomes the foundation of God's work. In other words by taking the form of flesh in the ground realities of the humans, especially in the sphere in which the oppressed lingers for life and liberation the church becomes a proclaiming, reconciling, sanctifying and unifying community of the Word.

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3. Stanley J. Grenz, "Ecclesiology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 252.
4. Stanley J. Grenz, "Ecclesiology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, 252.
5. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 28.
6. James J. Bacik, *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 29.
7. Stanley J. Grenz, "Ecclesiology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, 261.
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12. Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/ theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 14.
13. Juan Arias, *The God I Don't Believe in*, trans; Paul Barrett (Bombay: St. Paul's Publication, 1974), 111.