

## CHAPTER 1

### *On the Holy Mysteries*

*Inquirer: The Church speaks of the Mysteries.<sup>1</sup> What function do the Mysteries have in the Church?*

ELDER CLEOPA: The Mysteries are a divine work, which were instituted by the incarnate God, with Whom, in a visible way, the believer participates in divine and invisible grace.

The seven [principal] Mysteries of the Church of Christ are the following: Baptism, Chrismation, the Divine Eucharist, Repentance or Confession, Ordination to the priesthood, Marriage, and Holy Unction.

Before we describe their importance, let us briefly note certain aspects of the meaning of the number seven in Holy Scripture, for this number points to a host of things and acts in the Old and New Testaments.

1. The Greek word *μυστήριον* has been translated as "Mystery" throughout this book, rather than as "Sacrament." The term "Mystery" better expresses the fact that the faithful are initiated by visible signs and ceremonies into things invisible and Divine. —ed.

Thus, for example, God “rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made” (Gen. 2:1-2), and God ordered Noah to take into the ark before the flood seven pairs of all clean animals and fowl (Gen. 7:2-3). Likewise, He forewarned him that within seven days the flood would strike (Gen. 6:17). In the seventh month and on the seventeenth day of the month the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat (Gen. 8:4). It was on the seventh day also that Noah sent forth from the ark the dove, which, upon returning, had an olive branch in her beak (Gen. 8:10). Pharaoh dreamed of seven fat-fleshed and seven lean-fleshed cows as well as seven fruitful ears of wheat, and seven unfruitful (Gen. 41:17-24). God told Moses to place a golden candlestick in the Holy Place and to place upon it seven oil lamps for lighting (Exod. 37:23). Likewise Moses was ordered by God to tell the Israelites to count seven weeks, and on the fiftieth day to conduct a feast (Lev. 23:15-16). Before celebrating Pascha they were to eat unleavened bread for seven days (Exod. 12:19). In addition to the gifts they had arranged to offer, on the same day they were to offer seven lambs (Lev. 23:15-18).

After they had counted “seven sabbaths of years” (that is, forty-nine years), the fiftieth year was a year of sanctification and remission [of sins] (Lev. 25:8-10). On account of her grumbling, God punished Mariam, Moses’ sister, with leprosy for seven days (Num. 12:7-14). God decreed to Joshua, son of Nun, that he should compass the city of Jericho seven times with seven trumpets, and on the seventh pass should blow the trumpets seven times, and that then the walls of the city would fall (Josh. 6:1-16). On the seventh day the sanctification of Aaron and his children by God was brought

about through Moses (Lev. 8:33-35). The Prophet David hymned and praised the Lord seven times a day (Ps. 118:164). The Prophet Jeremiah prophesied that the Hebrews would remain in captivity in Babylon for seventy years (Jer. 25:11-12). The Prophet Zechariah saw seven lamps with seven pipes (Zech. 4: 1-12). Sampson cut seven ropes, and likewise had seven plaits of hair from which he took his strength (Judg. 13-16).

There were seventy men who translated the Old Testament during the reign of Pharaoh Ptolemy of Philadelphia (283 BC). Naaman the Syrian washed himself in the Jordan seven times and was cleansed of leprosy (2 Kings 5:13-14). Cain was chastised with seven punishments by God for the murder of his brother Abel (Gen. 4:15). Seventy and sevenfold were the punishments meted out to Lamech and his wives (Gen. 4:24).

Subsequently, in the New Testament, the Saviour taught that we should forgive seventy times seven (Matt. 18:22). Seven are the spirits that stand before God and the throne of His majesty (Rev. 1:4). Seven are the golden candlesticks "in the mist of" which the Saviour walks, and seven the stars which He holds in His right hand (Rev. 2:1). Seven were the Churches to which the Holy Evangelist John was directed to write his epistles, and seven the plagues of the Apocalypse (Rev. 15:8). The book which the Evangelist John saw in the hand of God had seven seals (Rev. 5:1-4). Seven, likewise, were the spirits of God which were sent across the face the earth (Rev. 5:6). Seven, too, are the deadly sins. The characteristics of the Lamb of God are also seven: power, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, glory, and blessing (Rev. 5:12). Finally, seven are the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In a mystical sense, "Mystery" is even used to describe the incarnation of God the Word, as Holy Dionysios the Areopagite says in one of his writings: "The mystery of the incarnation of God the Word remains forever a mystery, for neither in word nor with the intellect does it become comprehensible. Rather, no matter how much one describes it, indescribable it remains, and as much as one understands it, unfathomable it stays."

The teaching of the Holy Gospel is likewise said to be a mystery, as in the statement of the Apostle Paul, "How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery..." (Eph. 3:3). It is the mystery of faith, as the same Apostle says in his epistle to Timothy: "And we confess that great indeed is the mystery of godliness" (1 Tim. 3:16). We also call the Resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ a mystery, as well as the resurrection of the dead, the Second Coming of the Lord, and much else.

However, when we speak of the Mysteries of the Church we mean the seven Mysteries, which are sacred rites established by the Saviour Christ Himself, through which we participate invisibly in salvific grace.

