

# SUNDAY THEOSIS #1-57

## The Holy Mysteries

By Father Robert Slesinski

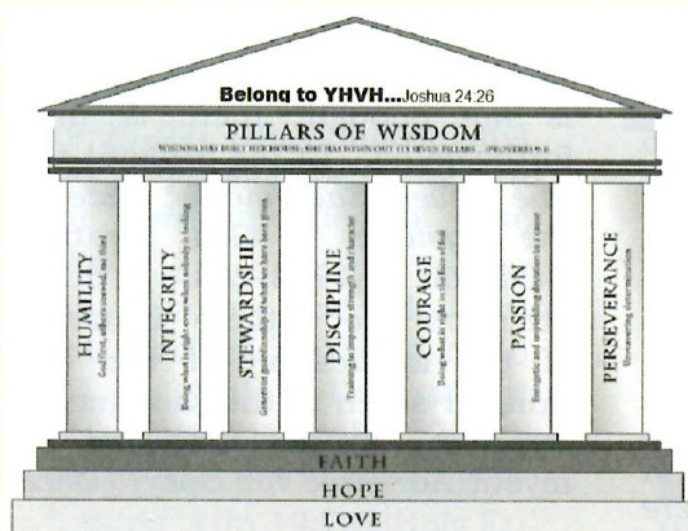
### Seven: A Holy Number

There are seven sacramental mysteries. Why are there not more or less? Certainly in the past other sacraments have been proposed like monastic tonsure. But the number seven remains resolute. Of course, one can immediately think of the seven days of creation (Gn 1:1–31, 2:1–4)—and, of course, the seven days of the week according to which we all live—and, then again, of the words of the Old Testament Book of Proverbs, “Wisdom has built her house, she has set up

her seven columns” (Prov 9:1), certainly seeming to prefigure the seven sacramental mysteries that undergird all ecclesial life and polity. The number seven thus enjoys a certain significance.

It suffices to cite a Biblical dictionary entry to reiterate this point, which reads in part:

*The significance of 7 in the Bible is fairly obvious; it means totality, fullness, completeness. At times it is multiplied by itself (7 x 7 or 7 x 70); this does not signify excess, but rather the removal of limit implied in totality. Thus Cain is avenged 7 times, Lamech 7 x 70 (Gn 4:24). There are 7 fat years and 7 lean years in Egypt Gn 41:2ff ). Samson’s hair is bound in 7 locks ( Jgs 16:13). In the fall of Judah 7 women attempt to marry one man (Is 4:1). Balak erects 7 altars for 7 victims (Nm 23:1). Ruth is better than 7 sons (Rt 4:15). The boy who is raised by Elisha sneezes 7 times and revives (2 K*





4:35). The Israelites march 7 days around Jericho (Jos 6:1ff). There are 7 pre-Israelite peoples of Canaan (Dt 7:1). The 6 days of creation followed by a 7th day of rest are the complete and perfect work (Gn 2:1–3). There are 70 peoples in the world (Gn 10) and 70 in the family of Jacob (Gn 46:27; Ex 1:5). The 7 elders of Nm 11 are actually 72, 6 for each tribe, and so too the 70 disciples of Lk 10:1. The number seven is important in ritual actions; this is observed in particular in the magical rites of Mesopotamia. There are 7 days of Mazzoth (Ex 2:15, 19). The number recurs often in the rites of ritual purification (Lv 12–15). Naaman must wash 7 times in the Jordan (2 K 5:10)...The same idea of fullness and totality is seen in the New Testament use of the number. The Sadducees propose a case of 7 brothers who married the same woman (Mt 22:25; Mk 12:20; Lk 20:29). The 7 loaves which are multiplied leave 7 baskets of fragments (Mt 15:34, 37; Mk 8:5, 8). The evil spirit who returns after exorcism brings 7 other spirits worse than himself (Mt 12:45; Lk 11:26). Seven demons were

expelled from Mary Magdalene (Lk 8:2). The symbolism of 7 is extremely prominent in Apc: there are 7 churches (1:4), lamps (1:13), stars (1:16), spirits (1:4; 4:5), seals (5:1), trumpets (8:2), serpent heads (12:3), plagues (15:1), and other examples...A refinement of the symbolism of the number is seen in Mt 18:21ff as contrasted with Lk 17:4. In Lk seven times, the number of totality and perfection, is stated as the number of times when forgiveness should be granted; Mt, however, multiplies 7 x 70 and signifies what is not so clear in the formula of Lk, that the perfection of forgiveness signified by 7 consists in the removal of any limit to the number of times, when one should forgive.

Now if this extended commentary is not enough, there is more forthcoming. In his brilliant text *The Seven Sacraments: Entering the Mysteries of God*, Stratford Caldecott (1953–2014) draws attention to other instances of the application of the holy number seven to the sacraments. Appealing to the thesis of the mystic Adrienne von Speyr (1902–



1967) in her work *The Cross: Word and Sacrament*, Caldecott stresses how she intuitively linked the seven last words of Christ on the Cross with the seven sacraments, the seven pillars constituting the Church, the Paschal mystery thereby being fully unfolded before us. It suffices to list them without any ado as the parallels enjoy their own intelligibility:

“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34) (Holy Reconciliation), Christ hanging on the Cross for the forgiveness of sinners before God.

“Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23:42) (Holy Anointing), a “second baptism,” as it were, comforting words to the good thief.

“Woman, behold your son. Son behold your mother” (Jn 19:26–27) (Holy Matrimony), Jesus’ Passion being akin to the consummation of marriage.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34) (Holy Orders) with Jesus praying Psalm 22, now the very psalm of priesthood.

“I thirst” (Jn 19:28) (Holy Eu-

charist), Jesus thirsting to give “living water” to others.

“It is accomplished” (Jn 19:30) (Holy Baptism), believers being baptized into the death of Christ, rising with him.



“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23:46) (Holy Chrismation) with the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, now descending upon the faithful, bestowing gifts sevenfold: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord.



But, as Caldecott further remarks, there are other sevenfold parallels to be noted like the seven archetypal miracles in St. John's Gospel, the seven "I am" sayings also therein, the seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer, and, as already noted, the seven days of creation.

Significantly, these other sevenfold parallels are interrelated, as Caldecott demonstrates, among each other, each sacramental mystery being associated with a particular day of the week, a miracle of Jesus, one of his sayings, one of his words on the Cross, and with a particular petition of the Our Father. The first sacrament treated by him is that of marriage, what with Jesus working his first miracle at a wedding at Cana in Galilee (Jn 2:1-11). Considering the fact that chapter one of the Johannine Gospel treats the first four days of Christ's public ministry after his baptism and on the third day after that, Jesus finds himself in Cana (Jn 2:1), we realize that it is on the seventh day of his ministry that a wedding is celebrated, a



Sabbath, as it were, which is "in Jewish tradition, fittingly called the day of God's 'wedding,' for it is the day God seals his relationship with the created world." Not to be overlooked also is the fact that there are six stone jars to be filled with water, a clear allusion to the six days of God's creative work before he rests on the seventh day, a festive day, the work of the six days being brought to perfection.

*To be continued ...*

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