

## April Reflections

During the fifty-day Easter season, ending with Pentecost, the Church urges us to keep reflecting on the Paschal Mystery, while celebrating paschal gladness and paschal joy.

The meaning of the adjective “paschal,” so frequently heard in the liturgies of the season, is rooted in the Exodus experience of ancient Israel. The book of Exodus tells the story of how God freed the Israelites from their cruel fate as slaves in Egypt. Following Yahweh’s instructions, every Israelite family slaughtered an unblemished lamb and sprinkled its blood on the doorposts of their houses. The Lord went through the land, slaying the first born in every Egyptian home, while passing over the houses of the Israelites. This “Passover” convinced Pharaoh to let the Israelites go with their flocks and herds (12:1-36).

According to the other important background story in Exodus, God parts the waters of the Red Sea so that the fleeing Israelites can pass over on dry land, and then has the parted waters flow back on the pursuing Egyptian army, killing them all (14:1-31).

The Exodus, with its two “passing over” events, one connected with blood and the other with water, provides an imaginative framework for interpreting the story of Jesus. The Apostle Paul, addressing the community he established in Corinth, Greece, probably during the Jewish celebration of Passover in the year 56, wrote: “For Christ our Paschal lamb has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7). As the blood of the Paschal lamb saved the Israelites, so the blood of Christ saves us. John the Evangelist also draws on the Exodus imagery in his Passion account, which places the death of Jesus on Preparation Day at the time when the paschal lamb was slaughtered for the Passover celebration the next day

(19:31-33). The Book of Revelation begins its descriptions of the heavenly victory celebration with a paschal image: “I saw a Lamb standing, a Lamb that had been slain” (5:6).

The early Church continued to use Exodus imagery to interpret the Christ event. Around 165, Bishop Melito of Sardis (present day Turkey) preached an Easter homily on the Paschal Mystery that compared the incorruptible lamb, Jesus, to the corruptible lamb of the Jewish Passover. He went on to claim: “The sacrifice of the lamb, the celebration of the Passover and the prescriptions of the Law have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.” Other homilists extended this paschal comparison by noting that the Jewish Passover meal foreshadowed the Eucharist and that Easter is the Christian pasch.

The Fathers of the Church, like Ambrose of Milan in the West and Cyril of Jerusalem in the East, typically used the story of God saving the Israelites by allowing them to pass dry-shod through the waters of the Red Sea to teach that God saves Christians through the waters of baptism. Once again, the Exodus story with its paschal imagery provides an interpretive framework for understanding the Christian mystery of salvation.

During most of the second millennium of Christian history, more abstract explanations of Christian redemption tended to replace the vivid paschal imagery. The Second Vatican Council, however, in its “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” promulgated December 4, 1963, reversed this trend by retrieving the notion of the paschal mystery. The Constitution teaches that Christ redeemed humanity “by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead and glorious ascension” (n 5). From Pentecost onward, “The Church has never failed to come together to celebrate the paschal mystery” (n 6). The document refers to the Eucharist as a “paschal banquet” (n 47) and stresses “the paschal character” of the Sunday liturgy and of the whole liturgical year with its forty-day

Lenten season of penance and fifty-day Easter season of reflection on the significance of the resurrection (n 106-107).

Since the Council, successive popes have continued the conciliar emphasis on the paschal mystery. John Paul II expanded the context: “The Paschal Mystery of Christ is the full revelation of the mystery of the world’s origin, the climax of the history of salvation and the anticipation of the eschatological fulfillment of the world.” Benedict insisted on the centrality of the paschal mystery, calling it “the central fulcrum of our faith,” while Francis has given it a missionary slant by referring to the paschal mystery as “the beating heart of the Church’s mission!”

The contemporary retrieval of the paschal theme has had an immense influence on Catholic piety. In general terms, a paschal spirituality tends to be more balanced, integrated, and positive than the popular pre-Vatican piety that tended to be moralistic, fragmented and negative. A spirituality that reflects the teaching of the document on the liturgy is more rooted in scripture and liturgy than was the devotional Catholicism common before the Council. The paschal emphasis on the resurrection fosters a more joyful approach to the Christian life than a piety that focuses on the suffering and death of Jesus.

More specifically, a paschal anthropology sees the authentic human life as a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. As Vatican II teaches, Christ, who worked with human hands, made decisions with a human will, thought with a human mind and loved with a human heart, reveals the deepest truths about human existence (GS 22). He taught us the fundamental law of human growth: we must die to self in order to attain a richer life. The quest for greater maturity demands that we die to selfishness and to an ego-driven life. Jesus made the point with a simple image that the seed must

die and be buried in order to grow and bear fruit. He insisted that we must take up the cross of self-sacrificing love in order to follow him and share in his risen life.

Jesus himself lived this paschal pattern. He committed himself to the cause of God and humanity at great personal cost, including the misunderstanding of his family and rejection by his home town. Despite clear mortal danger, he went to Jerusalem where he was apprehended, tried and executed. His total self-sacrificing love, to the point of death on the cross, led organically to a richer, glorified life. This is the concrete paschal event that grounds and exemplifies the fundamental law of human life: that self-sacrificing love leads to enhanced forms of new life. The crucified and risen Christ does indeed reveal the deepest truths about human life.

Some Christians worry that this emphasis on self-sacrifice contains unintended negative consequences, especially for women living in patriarchal cultures. Detached from a solid theological frame, it could lead to a masochistic piety that values suffering for its own sake and celebrates victimhood, while promoting a self-effacing passivity. Actually, it is precisely the paschal dynamic, exemplified in the death and resurrection of Jesus, that enables us to appreciate self-giving love not as an end in itself, but as a means to a more fulfilled life. Christ, our Passover, not only reveals human life at its best, he challenges the distortions that impede authentic human development.

The paschal mystery, especially in its concrete historical origins, reveals a God of compassion who liberates the oppressed. The Exodus, which led to political, economic and social freedom for the Israelites, is essential to understanding the broad implications of the paschal mystery. Christians today have to contend with societal forces that want to restrict religion to the private realm of personal salvation and domestic harmony. Influential critics argue that religion, with its faith assumptions, has

no acceptable role in the public forum, while some believers implicitly support this view by setting aside their faith when entering the public realm of politics and economics.

Liberation theology, however, has led the way in refocusing on the Exodus as a central event in salvation history. The Exodus stands as an enduring reminder that God hears the cries of the poor and wills the liberation of captives. A paschal perspective directs our attention to the way Jesus reflected and deepened the social dimensions of traditional Jewish faith. In Luke's Gospel he associates himself with the task of preaching the good news to the poor and freeing those in captivity. By reaching out to those confined to the margins of society, Jesus teaches us that God reigns where inclusive justice prevails. In his passion and death, Jesus identifies himself with all those who feel estranged from human comfort and divine love. By raising Jesus to life, God proved himself faithful to the divine promise, while validating the whole project of Jesus to establish inclusive justice.

A paschal perspective on God includes a call to action. We have the task of participating in the mission of Christ to establish the reign of God in the world. A genuine paschal piety can never be confined to saving our own soul. As Christians, we are called to bring our faith to the public arena, doing our part to humanize our culture and establish a more just society. Through baptism, we participate in the life of the Spirit, who empowers us with special gifts to be used to promote the common good. We all have a unique contribution to make to establishing God's kingdom on earth. A paschal spirituality recognizes that God's cause is our cause and that our path to salvation includes working for justice and peace in this world.