

The Paschal Mystery

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who ... destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in Heaven and things on earth. ~ Ephesians 1:3, 5-10

THE TERM “PASCHAL MYSTERY” takes us back into the Old Testament. The word “Paschal” comes from the Hebrew word *pasch*, or “passover.” The Passover was the defining event that led to the liberation of the Israelites from their slavery to the Egyptians. God “passed over” the Israelite homes, whose doorposts were smeared with the blood of a perfect, sacrificed lamb, but took the lives of the firstborn of the Egyptians. This terrible act of God’s justice caused Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt (see Ex 12:1-31).

The word “mystery” in this context refers to something knowable, that is, known to us by God’s rev-

elation, but which is beyond our full understanding. St. Paul writes that “*the mystery was made known to me by revelation*” (Eph 3:3). But even though we can be made aware of divine things, in no way does this mean that we can completely understand them, because they come from God, who is infinite and whose ways are beyond our comprehension.

The term “Paschal mystery” refers to a new Passover — the liberation of all humanity for all time from the slavery of sin by the Son of God, “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (Jn 1:29) doing his Father’s will in a plan of salvation actually carried out as part of human history. The Paschal mystery,

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The Paschal mystery is the triumph of Christ in a world torn by sin and suffering

then refers to the saving events of Christ's Passion, death, burial, descent into Hell (that is, the abode of the dead), Resurrection, and Ascension. When

St. Paul refers to the mystery which God "*set forth in Christ*" (see beginning verses above) or "*God's mystery, of Christ*" (Col 2:2), he is referring to the Paschal mystery. When we profess in the Apostles' Creed that Christ "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried ... descended into Hell ... rose again ... [and] ascended into Heaven" we are referring to the Paschal mystery. Because these events accomplished our salvation, Holy Week, the Solemnity of Easter, and the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord constitute the highest holy season in the Church's liturgical year.

Every Sunday is itself a celebration of the Paschal mystery, as is every holy sacrifice of the Mass. In these events, the Church is mindful of Christ's words: "*Do this in remembrance of me*" (Lk 22:19).

Sin

The Paschal mystery encompasses three major elements: sin, the Father's love for us, and the life and work of Jesus Christ. Original sin and all subsequent transgressions of humanity deliberately upset the plan of God. He originally intended us to enjoy his creation and to spend our unending sojourn on earth in peace and his companionship. But Adam and Eve chose to disobey the Father's only prohibition. They sinned (see Gn 3:1-7). In so doing, they lost all that God had planned for them and for us. The relationship between God and humanity had been broken, tenure in the Garden of Eden was terminated, preternatural gifts were surrendered, supernatural life was ended, continued life on earth was burdened with travail, sorrow, difficulties, conflict, temptation, and the withdrawal of the friendship of God, and death with an uncertain after-life became inevitable (see Gn 3:14-19, 23-24). No matter how we describe sin and its consequences, it is humanly impossible to comprehend its grievous-

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ness, its horrendous gravity, its impact on all humanity and on God. Not only was Paradise lost, but Heaven itself was now closed. By sin, our first parents had brought about their own condemnation. By sin, Adam and Eve had destroyed their own happiness, and that of their children. By sin, we had torn ourselves from the arms of God.

The Father

Yet our God is a God of love. He *is* love (see 1 Jn 4:8). In the immensity of his love, God had created us and, apparently, no matter what we did, God would not cease to love and care for us. And so, notwithstanding the enormity of sin and the repugnance of a humanity corrupted by

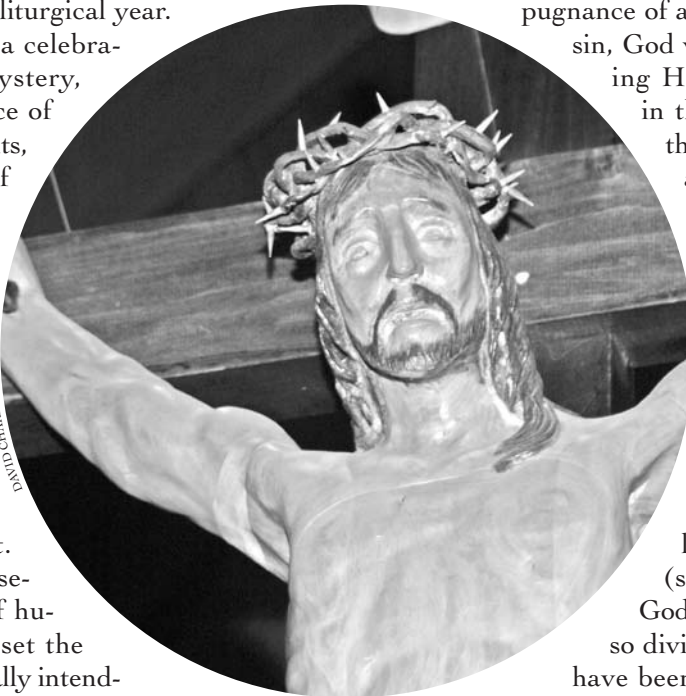
sin, God would salvage us. During Holy Week, the Church, in the Exsultet, shouts out these unbelievable words about original sin: "O happy fault!" O happy fault that the Father used as a reason to plan the salvation, the eternal redemption of his beloved creatures.

Certainly, sin abounded, but grace in the form of the Father's love abounded far more (see Rom 5:20). Only God could have conceived of so divine a plan; only he could have been so magnanimous as to send his only Son. He gave of himself

to bring back, to restore as sons and daughters, the creatures he had created. He gave a Son to restore men and women to sonship (see Gal 4:4-5).

Christ Jesus

Christ's whole life is a mystery (see 1 Tm 3:16). His whole life is the mystery of redemption. Whatever Jesus did in his earthly life is a revelation of his Father's will: "*I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me*" (Jn 5:30). All that Jesus did, especially what he did at the climax of his life — his Suffering, death, burial, Resurrection, and Ascension — was exactly what his Father wanted from him for us. His life was an offering of himself to his Father in



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A First Communion with the Risen Savior

atonement for sin and to reconcile us to the Father. As Christ's institution of the Holy Eucharist was to be a memorial of his life of sacrifice in fulfillment of his Father's will, so, too, his redemptive Passion was the very reason for the Incarnation. Christ yearned to complete his redemptive work (see Lk 12:49; Jn 12:27; Jn 18:11).

Sin, not the Jewish leaders and the Romans, was the real cause of Christ's suffering and death (see Heb 12:3). At Gethsemane, his agony was so intense because Christ was the only one who could take on all the sins of us all (see 2 Cor 5:21). He was the innocent lamb, perfect and unblemished, who, as St. John tells us, was condemned to death on the day of preparation for Passover, at about the sixth hour (see Jn 19:14), at the very time that the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple. He knew, as he hung upon the cross, that we all were responsible for the nails that held him. Yes, all of us, Pharisees and elders, Sanhedrin and Romans, apostles and Gentiles, and each and every one of us contributed to his agony and death. He knew we were all included in his redemptive surrender when he declared, *"It is finished"* (Jn 19:30).

"We all were responsible for the nails that held him."

Christ *really died*. There was on the cross and in the tomb a dead Christ. On Calvary, for us and for his Father, his earthly, purely human existence ended. The Paschal mystery includes the death and burial, but also the glorious Resurrection — the proof that he who redeemed us was truly God. This was the crowning truth of his life, and is the definitive proof of our faith (see 1 Cor 15:14; CCC 651).

The final act of the Paschal mystery is the Ascension of the risen Christ into Heaven. Before his death, Jesus prays to the Father: *"Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made"* (Jn 17:5). At the Ascension, Jesus kept his own body and it was glorified and resides in Heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father (see Mk 16:19).

The body of Christ that rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven was the same body that was tortured and crucified. Once risen from the tomb, that glorified body could go and be wherever he willed (see Mt 28:10; Mk 16:12; Lk 24:13-31; Lk 24:36-43; Jn 20:19-20; Jn 20:26-27; Jn 21:4-14). His humanity was no longer confined to earth, but belonged to his Father's divine realm. His body was not to return to earth to die again, as was that of Lazarus (see Jn 11:43-44) and the daughter of Jairus (see Mk 5:40-42).

Through the Paschal mystery, Christ brings about our redemption and reconciliation with the Father. *"While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son"* (Rom 5:10), and *"in him we have redemption through his blood"* (see beginning verses above). Lastly, because Christ is *"the firstborn of all creation ... [and] all things were created through him and*

for him" (Col 1:15-16), everything is redeemed by him. The Paschal mystery reunites all

things in Christ, and places them under the Lordship of Christ.

What an astonishing wonder is the Paschal mystery! In this mystery we have clear evidence of the tragedy of sin, the infinite goodness of a God of pure love, and the willing obedience of a Son who sought only to do the Father's will. The Paschal mystery is a gift from God that gives us promise of forgiveness for our sins, of resurrection in glory of our souls and body, and an eternity of joy so great that *"no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"* (1 Cor 2:9).

(CCC 512-513, 571-591, 595-618, 624-628, 631-635, 638-655, 659-664)