

The Paschal Mystery

In the liturgy of Holy Week, we commemorate Christ's passion, death and resurrection

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When I was in seminary, a professor exhorted me and my classmates not to separate “the component parts” of the paschal mystery, which consists of Christ’s suffering, death, resurrection and exaltation. Rather, these events are united and stand at the center of our faith (see *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 112).

In order to understand what is meant by the “paschal mystery,” let us first look to the Old Testament. The word “paschal” comes from the Hebrew word meaning both “the passing over” and “passage.” In the story of the Exodus, the dramatic departure of the people of Israel from Egypt, the angel “passed over” the homes marked by the blood of the sacrificed, paschal lamb, sparing the lives of the Israelites who then made the arduous passage from slavery to freedom. The Israelites’ celebration of this event would not only be the recollection of a historical event but a living memorial.

This first *Pasch* anticipated the definitive deliverance from sin that Christ, the Lamb of God, would win for us by shedding his blood (see 1 Cor 5:7). United to Christ in baptism, we are to pass with Christ from the death of sin to the new and eternal life.

FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

In embracing his mission to save us, Jesus entered the city knowing he would face accusations of disregarding the law of Moses and of blaspheming by “making himself equal to God” (*Compendium*, 113-114; Jn 5:18). At a deeper level, he grasped that he was about to pour out his life in sacrificial love.

Paradoxically, Christ stood before his accusers as the fulfillment of the law of Moses — indeed, as the new Moses, who definitively interpreted the law and the prophets.

As the Son of God who assumed our humanity, Jesus was the fulfillment of all that God had promised his people. Yet, God fulfilled his promises in such an unexpectedly marvelous way that Jesus was thought to be a blasphemer instead of the Savior (*Compendium*, 116).

It does not do, however, to impute the guilt for Jesus’ death solely to those who historically brought about his death. On the contrary, we are all sinners and Christ died because of our sins. As Christians who have experienced the love of Christ, we bear even greater responsibility when we fall into sin (*Compendium*, 117).

At the same time, we marvel at the loving initiative of the Father in sending us his Son (*Compendium*, 118). As St. John puts it, “In this is love: not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). St. Paul writes, “But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Was this not the goal of the Incarnation? Jesus assumed our humanity so that it might be the very means of our redemption.

If it is important for us not to separate the events of the paschal mystery, it is also important for us not to isolate the paschal mystery from the rest of Christ’s life. “The entire life of Christ was a free offering to the Father to carry out his plan of salvation” (*Compendium*, 119). Jesus, God’s incarnate Son, fulfilled his mission by announcing the kingdom, confirming his proclamation with miracles, and then by taking upon himself our sins. In dying, he underwent the experience that most epitomizes our estrangement

from God and from one another. By rising, he not only showed us the path to reconciliation but also enabled us to walk that path, thanks to “the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5). This is how we must understand the great events of salvation that are re-presented and celebrated during Holy Week.

LOVE ‘TO THE END’

On Holy Thursday, we find ourselves in a certain sense at table with Christ and the Apostles. On the eve of his suffering and death, Jesus signifies and makes truly present the total gift of self he will make in his new definitive *Pasch* (*Compendium*, 120). Taking bread and wine, he says: “This is my body which is given for you” (Lk 22:19). “This is my blood...which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28). This is no mere sentimental gesture. When Jesus adds, “Do this in memory of me,” he commands the Apostles not only to recall what he had done at the Last Supper but also to reenact that same mystery of love (see Acts 2:42). Thus St. Paul teaches, “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). Here is the very origin of the Mass and the priesthood, given to us by Christ “on the night before he died.”

In looking upon the crucified we consider the lengths to which God’s love went to save us. This is what St. John calls love “to the end” (Jn 13:1).

With majestic simplicity the liturgy of Holy Week moves from the warmth of the upper room to the garden where “Jesus accepted the duty to carry our sins in his body, ‘becoming obedient unto death’” (*Compendium*, 121; Phil 2:8). Jesus’ agony, like the entirety of his suffering and death, unmasked “the mystery of iniquity” and the enormity of our sins (2 Thes 2:7). As we behold the “author of life” in agony, we should resolve not to go along with the trivialization of sin, which is all too common today.

Having taken upon himself our sins, Jesus the Lamb of God offered his



The 12th installment of Supreme Chaplain Bishop William E. Lori's faith formation program addresses questions 112-126 of the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Archived articles are at www.kofc.org.

life to the Father. It was not that God the Father was angrily demanding the death of his own Son in reparation for our sins. Rather, Jesus' obedience is the key to our reconciliation with God and with those whom our sins harm. In looking upon the crucified we consider the lengths to which God's love went to save us. This is what St. John calls love "to the end" (Jn 13:1). In giving up his life in obedience to the Father's

saving will, Jesus unleashes into the world a reconciling love that we are called to make our own. He asks us to take up our cross and to associate ourselves with his sacrifice of love in the joys and sufferings of life (see *Compendium*, 122-123).

As the Passion account from John's Gospel is read on Good Friday, we should open our hearts in gratitude. We see in the blood and water from Christ's

pierced side the fountain of the Church's sacramental life. We keep vigil with Mary at the foot of the Cross and are heartened when Christ gives her as our mother through the Apostle John. As Jesus truly dies and is buried, how we should be filled with wonder!

Seamlessly the sadness of Christ's death gives way to the joy of the Resurrection as Easter dawns upon us (*Compendium*, 126). ■

DISCUSSION/REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR COUNCIL USE

1. Why is it important not to separate the "component parts" of the paschal mystery, but rather to see Christ's passion, death and resurrection together?
2. In what ways do the events of the Exodus and Passover foreshadow our salvation in Jesus Christ? How does the Passover meal anticipate the Eucharist and the Mass?

3. If Jesus perfectly fulfilled God's promise of salvation to the people of Israel, why did they not recognize him as the Messiah? How are we, today, guilty of the death of Jesus?

4. Why is it important to meditate on the mysteries of Jesus' suffering and death? What do these mysteries teach us and how should this affect our lives today?

For additional questions, refer to the *Compendium*, 112-126.

LENT OFFERS SERVICE, FRATERNAL OPPORTUNITIES

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Lent offers many opportunities for your council to get involved with any number of church, fraternal or charitable activities. In addition to the ever-popular K of C fish fries, your council can organize an outdoor stations of the cross, deliver an Easter meal to the elderly, or take a cue from these active councils: [Above] Children search for eggs and candy during an Easter egg hunt hosted by St. Mary's Council 4458 in

Derby, Kan. Knights hid hundreds of eggs and candy around St. Mary's Church following 11 a.m. Easter Mass last year. [Left] Grand Knight Juan Manuel Alvarez del Castillo-Gonzalez of Fray Diego de la Cadena Council 2367 in Durango, Mexico Northwest, holds his granddaughter after receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday. Knights and their families prayed the rosary for the intentions of the Holy Father following the Mass.

CHRONOLOGY OF FATHER MICHAEL J. MCGIVNEY



March 1, 1882 — Present for the Knights of Columbus meeting to report on the developments in the Order

March 2, 1882 — James "Chip" Smith receives spiritual guidance from Father Michael J. McGivney

March 10, 1882 — Delivers the eulogy of close friend, Margaret Barry

March 11, 1883 — Preaches on the importance of the sacrament of confession

March 12, 1883 — Presides at the funeral of Dr. James P. Splain, seminary classmate from Our Lady of the Angels Seminary, Niagara Falls, N.Y.

March 16, 1939 — Rev. Msgr. John J. McGivney, supreme chaplain and brother of Knights of Columbus founder, dies

March 17, 1882 — Organizes what becomes a yearly dramatic presentation for his parishioners on the feast of St. Patrick

March 29, 1882 — The Connecticut State Legislature grants a charter to the Knights of Columbus, and Father Michael J. McGivney serves as supreme secretary

Encourage Knights to join the Father McGivney Guild at www.fathermcgivney.org

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