



YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST

APRIL THEME - THE EUCHARIST AND THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

By Msgr Kenneth Spence

Looking back to our roots

Pasch – from the Hebrew *pesach* – was originally the first great feast of the Jewish people. It commemorates the “passover” of the Israelite homes by the avenging angel who killed only the firstborn of the Egyptians (Ex 11:1-10). The Pasch was celebrated at sunset, when a lamb was sacrificed, roasted and eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. It was a dramatic reminder to the people of Israel of being freed from slavery by the intervention of God who saved them from the bondage of pharaoh. The feast of the Passover by divine providence did coincide with the events that have come to be called the Paschal Mystery – the Passion, Death and Glorious Resurrection of Christ Jesus. Thus the event celebrated at the Passover meal is itself the anticipation of the full deliverance won by Christ for the whole human race. It is expressed by the transformation of that ritual meal to the Eucharistic sacrifice which from the time of the early Church Fathers, was also considered as a symbolic type of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

The passion (or suffering) death and resurrection

THE PASSION

Of late “passion” has become something of a fashionable word; almost everything and everyone seems to “have a passion for” or “are passionate” about something. Clearly some expressions of this articulation of passion will be valid and at the same time some references trivialise its meaning. From the Latin root, *passio* means suffering or/and affection. Here we are brought face to face with this awful – in the true sense of the word – aspect of what we are called to meditate on, not only during Lent, nor only at the Triduum; but at every celebration of the Eucharist. As defined by the Church at the Council of Trent, in the Mass, “the same Christ, who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross, is present and offered in an unbloody manner.” The passion reveals the depth of physical suffering the Lord endured because of his great affection or love for each of us individually and also the whole human race. In the passion we are given a glimpse of loneliness, betrayal, denial, and even human fear – “*Father let this cup pass from me.*” Jesus is then virtually abandoned by almost everyone. The recent film of *The Passion of the Christ* also shocked and upset many people because of its violent aspect. Yet today our country and our people, indeed the whole world, is

afflicted with violence. The law which Imperial Rome prided itself to extend even to its conquered people, failed as the Roman governor knowingly condemned an innocent man to the most horrible death. Injustice is one of the sufferings of the Christ with which many defenseless persons continue to be afflicted on a daily basis. We who believe this share in his sufferings while he is there, as he promised, with us in all our sufferings.

DEATH

This is an inescapable human reality. Yet even while we give intellectual assent to its inevitability and inescapability, the human person is hardly ever really prepared for it. As a result, death is strangely taboo where frequently in this age the media vividly depicts images of death on television and in newspapers. Paradoxically, at the same time death is frequently sanitised and even language can be evasive – people “pass away”, are “no longer with us”, pregnant women “terminate” their unborn children, the aged are “spared suffering”. Again paradoxically alongside the culture of death exists a cult of health, fitness and eternal youth.

In the death of Christ a tableau on Golgotha is held up and fixed in time. We get a sense of what this really means for those who believe that his death has made a radical difference to the human race from the Preface of the Mass. The Preface of Passion Sunday prays:

“Though he was sinless he suffered willingly for sinners.

Though innocent he accepted death to save the guilty.

By his dying he has destroyed our sins.

By his rising he has raised us up to holiness of life.”

In the preface said in Masses of the Sacred Heart the prayer is:

Lifted high on the cross,

Christ gave his life for us,

So much did he love us.

From his wounded side flowed blood and water,

The fountain of sacramental life in the Church.

To his open heart the Saviour invites all men

To draw water in joy from the springs of salvation.

The Preface of Easter I prays:

He is the true lamb who took away the sins of the world.

By dying he destroyed our death;

By rising he restored our life.

That it was necessary for Christ to suffer and die and so to enter his glory is the gentle chastisement the disciples receive on the Emmaus walk with the risen Lord. Jesus says, “*You foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets*” Lk 24:25-26. John the Baptist had testified to Jesus by declaring him to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. At each Eucharistic celebration these very words precede the communion rite where in the veiled Eucharistic species the eyes of faith see this lamb, the sacrifice of which continues today to take away the sins of the world. He is spoken of in the Eucharistic prayer as the “acceptable sacrifice, which brings salvation to the whole

world". Although his death was plotted and orchestrated at one level it first had a divine rationale which the memorial acclamation proclaims.

"Lord by your cross and resurrection

You have set us free

You are the Saviour of the world."

Thus as the Eucharist is celebrated, all who faithfully participate also prepare for their own encounter with their mortality. When associated with the death of Christ, meaning of their suffering is achieved; hope in the face of death brings courage and the promise of a new life in and with Christ points us to sharing in his resurrection. This is what the season of Eastertide joyfully celebrates with the word. *Alleluia* , Hebrew for "praise Yahweh".

RESSURRECTION

In the pre-dawn dark Mary of Magdala and the other Mary (Mt 28:1-ff) go intending to complete burial rites on the dead body of Jesus. They are the first to face an empty tomb, linen cloths which had been used to wrap the corpse, and an angel of the Lord whose message is "He is not here, He is risen as he said." The descriptions of the Resurrected Christ is baffling as he clearly does not have the same physical appearance, yet they are certain it is he and once the veil of tears and doubts clear they recognise him. The Church continues to recognise the presence of the resurrected Christ in the Eucharist. Thus Vatican II states: "The Saviour instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his body and blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross through the ages until he should come again, and so entrusted his beloved spouse, the Church a memorial of his death and resurrection."