

## **We Celebrate the Paschal Mystery**

“Are you saved?” People who ask that question want to know if you have experienced that sense of release from sin which comes from knowing God’s personal love. The Hebrews, our ancestors in the faith, were the first to experience salvation as a people. Enslaved by Pharaoh, they obediently smeared the blood of a yearling lamb over their doorways to warn the Angel of Death that believers lived there. At the Red Sea, with Pharaoh and his army in hot pursuit, they watched anxiously as God sent a strong driving wind to dry up the marsh so they could cross safely. On the other shore, they danced and sang when Pharaoh and his army were caught in the marsh. Even today at Passover season, Jews sing for joy as they remember God’s saving action—then and now. God never ceases to free them from bondage.

In the year 30 A.D. during the Passover season, Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection permanently changed the meaning of the Jewish Pasch. Now, at every Eucharist, we celebrate the “new Passover”—our Paschal Mystery—remembering that Christ, the Lamb of God, suffered, died on the Cross, and rose from the dead. We believe that this sacrifice of love reestablished the original intimacy between God and humankind. We believe that Christ’s sacrifice saved all people, that He destroyed the power of death, and that He invites everyone to be fully united with God forever, as He is.

If we participate fully in the Eucharist, allowing the mystery of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection to touch us, head and heart, we experience salvation. If we open ourselves to the dying that still needs to happen in us—the dying to pride, prejudice, anger, etc.—and yield to the power of the Holy Spirit who is constantly working to change us, we participate in the Paschal Mystery. All worship is fundamentally a complex tissue of meaning—full actions and words which express our relationship to one another, to our world, and to God. The Paschal Mystery—this mystery of our salvation—is at the heart of worship.

## **We Are Transformed**

Every Sunday the “body of Christ” gathers at the celebration of the Eucharist to become more “The Body of Christ.” This is an awesome truth. All the actions, words, hymns, postures, sights, sounds, and even the silences of the liturgy have our trans—formation as their ultimate goal. Our task is to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, who changes us little by little.

As a worshipping community we do simple things—pray the words of the Mass with the priest, sing the hymns and responses, hear and reflect on the words of the scriptures, stand and sit and kneel together. In all of this the Holy Spirit is at work. As we proclaim our faith, as we remember what Christ has done for us, as we present our gifts of bread and wine, as we extend some sign that we want to be at peace with everyone in our lives, as we pray that the Father forgives us as we forgive others, the Holy Spirit is gradually drawing us, each and all, into an ever deeper realization of Christ’s words, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). We are being transformed.

Years ago, Kathleen Hughes wrote the story of Godfrey Diekmann, a Benedictine monk who spent his lifetime helping others come to understand and appreciate the Mass. One of his memorable

sayings was: "What good is it if the bread (and wine) is changed and we are not?" This short sentence holds the key to what we do at Mass. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit is changing us just as the bread and wine are trans-formed into the body and blood of Christ. At the end of the liturgy we return to the world, with its joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties. We who are becoming the "real presence" of Christ are sent to transform that world which God so loved into the Kingdom of God.

### **We Remember**

Amnesia breaks our connection to the past and therefore to personal identity. Remembering makes it possible to know who we are. When Moses told the Israelites, "You shall observe this [Passover] rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children" (Ex 12:25), he was guaranteeing that they would "remember" who they were—children of a living God whose saving deeds never end.

The opposite of amnesia is anamnesis, Greek for "remember." According to Luke and Paul, at the Last Supper Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance (anamnesis) of me," words reminiscent of Moses' command to the Israelites. At their gatherings, the first Christians "remembered" many of Jesus' meals—the abundance of bread and fish shared on the hillside, dinners shared with friends like Mary and Martha and enemies like the Pharisee who insulted Jesus with poor hospitality. They also "remembered" Jesus' teaching at these meals and finally His shocking action on the night before He died: taking off His robe, tying a towel around himself, pouring water into a basin, kneeling before each disciple to wash his feet, and then saying:

"Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:12–15).

Liturgical "remembering" is not merely recalling past events. It makes present the mystery we celebrate. When we "do this" in Jesus' memory, we gather as a faith-community, recall God's saving deeds in Jesus, prepare and share a sacred meal, and go out to serve others. In some way we mysteriously enter a no-time time and a no-place place where we meet the One who shows us how to live in our time and space. Allowing this mystery to happen in us means discovering that Jesus' words and deeds call us to "Live as I have lived—as a servant to all."

### **We Make Christ Present In This World**

Scripture reveals a God who is always with us. God walked with Adam in the Garden, spoke to Moses in the burning bush, and protected the fleeing Israelites with a pillar of cloud. God was present in the Holy of Holies and sent prophets to chide and guide His chosen people. Finally God's only Son, Jesus, lived, suffered, died, was raised from the dead, and promised: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). On Pentecost the Holy Spirit of Jesus came upon the Apostles, and they became the living church.

One fruit of Pentecost was that the Christians broke bread together (Acts 2:46). Ever since, the Church has never failed to gather for the Eucharist, and it is primarily in the Eucharist that we become most aware of Christ's presence. The *Constitution on the Liturgy*, par. 7 tells us:

- Christ is present in the assembly gathered in song and worship. In greeting one another, welcoming guests, and joining in the liturgy, the baptized community reveals the mystical body of Christ.
- Christ is present in the Word proclaimed and preached.
- Christ is present in the person of the presider, who, in his role as leader of the worshipping assembly, is the living symbol of Jesus among us.
- Christ is present in the sacraments, giving us new life, feeding, healing, forgiving, and transforming us.
- Christ is present especially in the consecrated bread and wine, our food for the journey and the source of our community life.

But it is not enough that Christ is present in the liturgy. Each of us must carry Him into the marketplace. In reflecting on life before his conversion, St. Augustine said: "You were with me, but I was not with you!" Without Christ we are lost. With Christ we are saved; and that salvation is revealed by the way we live. When we have experienced God's transforming grace, we begin to live the beatitudes (Mt 5:3–12). Then we are blessed, and we bring blessing to others—and those others recognize Jesus still present and acting in this world.

### **We Manifest the Gifts of the Spirit**

Before Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, he heard rumors about abuses in that community. Besides other problems, some people gifted with prophecy or speaking in tongues thought they were better than others not so gifted, and they were disrupting community meetings (Cf. chapters 12–14). They did not grasp the fundamental truth that, when the liturgical community gathers, each person offers their unique gift to build up what Paul calls the Body of Christ (Cor 12:12ff).

The word "liturgy" itself is a kind of metaphor which early Greek-speaking Christians understood well. In a secular context, *leitourgia* was public service. If, for instance, a wealthy man outfitted a company of soldiers or a less wealthy family swept the street in front of their house daily, they were both doing valuable public service for the community. This was their *leitourgia*.

"Liturgy" means something similar in a religious context. As the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* says:

"The full, conscious, and active participation by all the people in liturgical celebrations is the aim to be considered before all else, for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit" (CSL #14).

Clearly, true liturgy is not private devotion. It is in a very real sense “public service” where each person gives his or her gift for the sake of the whole. Every Christian needs to ask, “What do I have to offer?” The list of possibilities is long: Someone is called to preside, of course; but the community also needs people gifted as acolytes, cantors, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, musicians, readers, sacristans, and ushers. Besides these “up front” ministries, everyone needs to join the liturgical dialogue between priest and people, to sing, to contribute money, to create that air of hospitality which makes everyone feel welcome. All these gifts work together and depend on one another. Moreover, as each person manifests the gift God has given, the worshiping assembly reveals itself as the living, breathing Body of Christ present in this world both in worship and in service.