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CELEBRATING THE HOLY EUCHARIST - REMEMBERING THE
PASCHAL MYSTERY

by
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✓ Some years ago, The Rev. Al Shands, my predecessor at St. Augustine's, Washington, D.C., wrote an article on worship in the Church in which he said that a family coming home from church used to be asked by the member who stayed home, "What did the preacher say today?" But now the question is posed, "What happened?" I'm going to be talking with you now about what happens in our worship -- especially in our eucharistic worship, our worship at Holy Communion, or the Holy Eucharist, the Mass, or the Lord's Supper (for these all mean the same thing).

What happens in our worship? If you think about that it says something about worship. It says that worship is not just a "sit and listen affair." Worship is action. We do worship. It is our response, our active response, to what God has said and done. Worship is the second word in the divine-human dialogue. God speaks and all that is comes into being. We say in response, "Thank you," and this responsive word and act is our liturgy of worship.

Note that it is not only not what the "preacher says," it is not even what the priest does. It is what all of us, clergy and lay people together, say and do in giving a response of thanksgiving that is our worship. Christian worship is a dramatic action -- a dramatic celebration and a dramatic remembering.

We've all asked at one time or another the old question, "Who's the celebrant this morning? Is it old Fr. so-and-so, or that new curate?" But that's not a real question. Why? Because neither old Fr. so-and-so nor the new curate can celebrate the eucharist. We all celebrate. Now good old Fr. so-and-so or the new curate might preside, but it is all of us gathered who celebrate. We are the celebrants.

What do we celebrate? We've all seen or heard of the button or banner or balloon which reads, "Celebrate Life!" Now that's a

marvelous idea, but when that phrase came into being it had to do with celebrating life in Christ Jesus; celebrating new life in Christ. I'm afraid that we've experienced negative reactions to the phrase, "celebrate life," for life in that phrase has been interpreted simply and wholly as a natural phenomenon. As such, life is a very mixed bag. Our natural life can be full, indeed plentiful, joyful. But our natural life is also full of sickness, and pain, and dying, and death. To say to someone in the pain of a troubled marriage or to someone who has recently lost a job, "celebrate life," is to be cruel and insensitive. We can't fly that balloon in those circumstances. But to say, "celebrate life" in the sense of life in Christ -- that's a possibility. Life in Christ does not deny, or repress, or minimize sickness, or pain, or dying, or death. Life in Christ owns these realities in the same manner in which life in Christ embraces joy and health and beauty and truth. For to celebrate life in Christ is to discover new life through death, to discover Easter through Good Friday.

✓ Christian worship is a dramatic action -- a drama of celebration of life in Christ and a drama of remembering. If we are to celebrate life in Jesus Christ, what are we to remember? We are to remember the Paschal Mystery. †

The Paschal Mystery, you say? Just the sort of obscure terminology you might expect from someone working at a seminary! But stay with me, please. For I hope to show you that the Paschal Mystery is not some remote, esoteric concept, but is in reality that which is central in our faith and life today, our ordinary day-to-day life and our life at the Lord's Table.

As I discuss this concept of Paschal Mystery, I want you to visualize with your mind's eye a time line, and there are four points on it. At one end is the exodus from Egypt by the ancient Hebrews, nearly 1300 years before Jesus. Next is the advent of the man Jesus, who was called the Messiah, the Christ, and especially the last few days of his life on earth -- the Upper Room, the Cross, the appearances to the disciples. The third point on your time line is the event of your own baptism, and finally, the time line has on it your most recent Holy Communion, the last time you celebrated the Holy Eucharist.

✓ Now what does the word "Paschal" mean? ✓ Let us go to the first point on your time line, the exodus from Egypt. Remember, it

was preceded by a contest between Moses and Pharaoh, and a series of plagues resulted. The last plague was the angel of death coming over the land of Egypt and killing the firstborn of the Egyptians, but "passing over" the Hebrew homes without harm. Why were the Hebrews spared? They had celebrated an ancient feast -- the Pesach -- and killed an unblemished lamb, and its blood on the doorposts of their homes protected their firstborn from the angel of death. This event gives Paschal its first meaning -- that of Passover, an event of deliverance. But Paschal also points to the passage from bondage in Egypt to freedom in a promised land. Jewish families today celebrate the great deliverance, the passage from bondage to freedom by sharing in a Passover meal with the symbolic shank-bone of lamb. The Jewish Pesach comes to mean not only the ancient meal but the celebration of the event of passage from bondage to freedom. The Jewish "Pasch" is the event of their salvation from the Egyptians.

Now let us jump forward on your time line nearly 1300 years to the time of Jesus. ~~X~~ Jesus is the new unblemished lamb. In the gospel according to St. John, John the Baptist proclaims, "Behold the Lamb of God." (John 1:36) ~~X~~

Christians apply the term "paschal" to the event of Christ's death and resurrection -- to Good Friday-Easter, to life in the new covenant, the covenant made in Christ's passage from death to life, from bondage in the grave to life "at the right hand of the Father." The Paschal Mystery is the Easter Mystery. Jesus is the new paschal lamb; through his blood, freely offered on the cross, humankind is once and for all delivered from the power of sin and death. This is the Paschal Mystery, the Christ event -- through his death, new life breaks into the world.

The word "mystery" does not mean a puzzle yet to be solved, as in a Sherlock Holmes mystery. Nor does mystery mean a sacred rite as it did in ancient pagan cults where only an esoteric few were "in the know" and the secrets were kept from the profane multitudes. No, the Paschal Mystery is God's design for the salvation of the world. It is a mystery in the sense that it could not rationally be discovered by our wisdom. Even when uncovered, revealed, made known to us humans, it seemed to be foolishness. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world

did not know God through wisdom... But we preach Christ crucified... Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God." (I Cor. 1:20-24) In dying, we live. This mystery of God's saving history began in the Old Testament story and was brought to fulfillment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus revealed in the new covenant story. Through the Holy Spirit the fruits of this salvation history are nurtured and made part of our lives as we live in Christ. This is the Paschal Mystery which is remembered.

Christian worship is a dramatic action -- a drama of celebration of life in Christ, a drama of remembering the Paschal Mystery. But how do we remember? We remember the Paschal Mystery by bringing the past drama into the present through a reenactment, a re-presentation, of the drama. The modern mind thinks of memory as mentally drifting back to the former time, but the biblical mind thought just the opposite! To remember was to bring the past event into the present through reenactment. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." (cf I Cor. 11:24-25) The "doing" of it in the present is the act of remembering. As we break bread in his name and share the cup, the Paschal Mystery is remembered. The action of the community's corporate remembrance is an act of union with the life-giving power of Christ's death and resurrection, power present now in the midst of the Body which worships in thanksgiving. To understand sacrament as action, the dramatic action of remembering the Paschal Mystery, is the beginning point for good liturgy. What happened today? We celebrated life in Christ; we remembered the Paschal Mystery!

Now, take a huge leap forward on your time line, 1900-plus years to the date of your baptism. Don't remember it? Ah, some homework for you when you leave this meeting. For your baptism is an awe-fully important date. Baptism is the way we are signed on as members of the dramatis personae of this great drama. As with casting for any production, it is necessary to offer oneself for the part, but it is also necessary to be chosen. God chooses. He incorporates us into the dramatis personae. We offer ourselves, or in infancy we are offered. Unlike human dramatic productions, all are called, and there is a role, a part for all who offer themselves in response to the call. Also, unlike human productions, we are not just extras, anonymously milling about the stage as background for a few important characters who have names. Each of us is signed on with a name, a title role, and each of us is

front and center stage as we participate in the drama. John A.T. Robinson once wrote that is the Church's task

to present to the world -- or rather to let Christ present through it -- the drama, the finished act, of its redemption. That is what we as Christians are on the stage of this world for -- not merely to run through the tragicomic turn of the seven ages of man, but to present what Dorothy Sayers called "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged." This presentation is no mere playacting; it is a proclaiming, a making present of the Lord's death, of his whole redemptive act, till he comes, bringing it to bear in saving efficacy upon the here and now."

(John A.T. Robinson, Liturgy Coming to Life, (London: A.R. Mowlvay & Co., Ltd., 1960, p.60)

✓ Your baptism is (the third point on the time line. It is the event of your being signed into the company of players who are to represent, remember, the Paschal Mystery. In his death and resurrection, we pass from death to new life daily.

Consider now the fourth point on the time line, your last Holy Communion, the last time you celebrated the Holy Eucharist with the people of God. What happened? You celebrated life in Christ; you remembered, re-presented, re-called the Paschal Mystery. "How?" you ask.

Let's look at the simple structure of the drama of the service of Holy Eucharist.

There are three major parts:

First, The Word of God. You know, the Old Testament, the Epistle and Gospel and sermon, followed by the Creed. That was preceded by a "gathering," or prologue, which included a hymn perhaps, the collect for purity and maybe the Kyrie or Gloria in excelsis. But the first major part is the Word of God.

Secondly, there is the prayer section during which we pray for the universal church; our world, national and local communities, those who suffer and are in trouble; and the departed. We also offer confession and receive absolution.

But thirdly, we begin the drama, the action, of remembering, re-presenting, recalling the Paschal Mystery. In thanksgiving we, all of us gathered, celebrate our life in Christ responding to his words, "Do this in remembrance of me."

"What happens?" Four dramatic actions. As we examine them, note they follow the words, "Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples." (Matt. 26:26) (1) He takes; we offer. (2) That which is offered is blessed through the giving of thanks. (3) Every offering thus consecrated to God is broken, broken for distribution, but broken because all that gives life to the community first must be broken on his cross. (4) He gives; we receive in communion with him and through him with one another.

The first action is that of offering. It's sad that for most of us the offertory connotes only an anthem sung by the choir. The musical offertory is meant to enhance, to underscore the offertory, the offering of ourselves through bread and wine. The self-offering of Jesus is re-enacted as we, his Body, offer ourselves to God through his once and for all perfect offering. This is no new sacrifice. It is a remembering of his once and for all time sacrifice.

How do we offer ourselves? Through bread and wine. Bread is the "staff of life." Without bread we die. But bread is also a symbol of the complexity of what we do with our life. We plow fields, sow seed, water, harvest, store, buy, sell, process, bake, buy, sell and buy again. Bread symbolizes our life and the inter-relatedness of our life with every other human life -- those as well off as we, and those who starve for want of bread.

Wine is a twofold symbol of joy and sorrow. It gladdens our hearts but can also cause great sorrow, even death. Wine, therefore, symbolizes the ambiguity of life as we experience it -- joyful and sorrowful, life giving and death dealing.

Bread and wine, ourselves, our lives, in all of their complexity and ambiguity, are offered through his offering of himself.

The second action is blessing. That which reaches the Lord's Table is blessed through a prayer of great thanksgiving. This is the prayer of the president of the eucharistic banquet, the bishop or priest. Only he can lead it. It begins with a preface which

lifts us up to God's presence, "joining our voices with angels and archangels." Then comes a recitation of the mighty acts of God in creation and redemption, followed by the recitation of the words of institution, those words spoken by Jesus at that Last Supper with his disciples in which he interpreted the events to come. Taking the bread he said in effect, "See this bread. It is I, my body. It's going to be broken. This cup is my blood, my life. It will be shed for you." (And it came to pass on a cross, the next day.) But he also said he'd be with us when we shared in this, not meaning merely going to church for bread and wine, but living our whole life as an offering to God through him, living, acting our part in the drama of the Paschal Mystery which is focused, summarized, realized in our act of giving thanks with bread and wine offered through him.

The great thanksgiving prayer continues with the calling of the Holy Spirit to sanctify, set apart, make holy the gifts offered and those who offer them. The prayer concludes with a doxology and a final "amen" of the people. It is followed immediately by the only words we can utter, those given us by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer.

The third action is breaking. That which is offered and blessed is broken so it can be distributed. The one loaf is for all peoples. The one Lord is Lord of all peoples. All will come to his great banquet, and for all to be fed, the one loaf must be broken. The "breaking of bread" was the name the early disciples gave to the meal in which they discovered his presence. (cf. Luke 24:35, Acts. 2:42)

In breaking the bread at the Last Supper, Jesus interprets the cross of Good Friday to his disciples. His body, this bread, is to be broken. In the breaking of bread in the eucharist, his cross is interpreted for our lives. We who remember the Paschal Mystery "die" and are raised to new life, joined with Christ in the act of breaking.

The fourth and final action is communing. Communion means fellowship or being together. Holy Communion is being together with God. It is the realization of our baptismal incorporation into his Body. This communion with God is the climax of the eucharistic liturgy. What more is there? This is God's kingdom, his rule, being born anew, now, in us! We are together with him in partaking of the consecrated bread and wine of the meal.

But Communion also is a moment of being brought together with one's neighbor and with oneself. Life in Christ is a corporate life. We do not come into his presence as an individual, alone in our righteousness or alone in our unworthiness. We come as one member of a community offering thankful praise. It is no one person who remembers him; all do. All do so as a corporate action, and all receive him as a community of the faithful. In him we are one with one another. (Surely each of us would like to eliminate a few "undesirables" from that motley group which goes forward to Communion, but the decision is not ours.) He has called us, each of us, into the cast of the drama. Communion is our act of realization of our allegiance to him and to one another.

Paradoxically, communion is also that time when I am most at one with myself. Although we all celebrate, we all remember together, the bread and wine is given to me as a unique, individual person. My name, given to me in my baptism when I am cast in this drama, is affirmed as I hear the sentence of administration which is in the singular, "given for thee (you)." A great paradox -- in this moment of fellowship with all others, I am most at one with myself!

Amen

He promised his disciples he would be with them, and we, joining our voices with those throughout the centuries, affirm a loud Amen! He is. We commune with him, with one another, and even within ourselves.

After communicating, we say a brief prayer of thanks for our participation in this mystery and look toward our life in the world. We receive a blessing and are dismissed. The eucharistic liturgy has ended until we gather again, offering our lives as we live them day to day.

We, as the ancient Hebrews, find ourselves in bondage and need of deliverance, a passage to the freedom of a new possibility for life. As Christians, we affirm that God was in Christ, and he was the perfect lamb, the Paschal Lamb, the Lamb of the new Passover, who brought about once and for all the passage from bondage to freedom, from death to life. In our baptism we are cast into the dramatic company of all those who are called to re-present this Paschal Mystery through doing Holy Eucharist in thankful response

to his command, "Do this in remembrance of me." In doing so, we are continually liberated from bondage and raised from those daily deaths we all experience, and we are given new life in him. To celebrate that reality is to celebrate life in Christ, to remember the Paschal Mystery.

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