

Basics of Catholicism

Over the past couple weeks, we've been exploring the central practice of the Catholic Faith, the Eucharist. To conclude this discussion, we will focus on an important concept about the Eucharist: the Paschal Mystery. This is a phrase that Catholics should be familiar with, and hopefully this article is not the first time you've heard those words. The Paschal Mystery and how it relates to the Mass is vital to understanding what it means to be a Christian and a member of the Body of Christ.

So, the obvious question to begin with: what is the Paschal Mystery? To put it simply, the Paschal Mystery is Our Lord's sacrificial death on the Cross and Resurrection from the dead. The Paschal Mystery is the work that Our Lord came to Earth to accomplish. Through His sacrificial death on the Cross, Our Lord gave His life to atone for the sins of all humanity. Through His Resurrection, He showed us the glorified body that we will have one day, a body freed from the effects of mortality and sin.

The Paschal Mystery is obviously an important concept within Christianity, as it's the means by which salvation has been opened to fallen humanity. As we say at Mass in the third Memorial Acclamation: "Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection, you have set us free." Sin binds us and brings death into the world. Through Our Lord's Paschal Mystery, we are unbound from the chains of death and are freed to unite ourselves with God both here on Earth and for all eternity in Heaven.

To help understand the importance of the Paschal Mystery, we need to look back into the Old Covenant and those elements that foreshadow the sacrifice of Our Lord. The word "paschal" originates in Hebrew as "pesah", which we know in English as the Passover. In the original Passover sacrifice before the Exodus out of Egypt, unblemished lambs were sacrificed and the blood of the lambs was put on the doorposts and lintels of the Israelites. The lambs themselves were cooked, and every Israelite was to eat of the sacrifice. Through this sacrifice, they would be saved from the Angel of Death who came to kill the firstborn of the Egyptians. (Exodus 12:1-22)

Once the Israelites had entered into the Promised Land of Israel, they were to celebrate the feast of the Passover every year. These Passover celebrations were performed in much the same way as had been done during the original Passover, recalling and reconnecting themselves to the both the Passover in Egypt and the Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land. This recalling was more than just a remembering that the Passover occurred, but rather was a re-presenting of the original Passover, a making the Passover present to them once again.

The lambs were brought to the Temple in Jerusalem and sacrificed in common, showing the unity of the Israelite people. They were then sent back to each family's home for the Passover supper. This practice of sacrificing the Passover lamb continued up to Our Lord's time, and only ceased when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, about 40 years after Our Lord's Death and Resurrection.

Our Lord told His disciples, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17) Much of the Old Covenant foreshadows and prepares the people of Israel for the coming of Jesus. In fact, there are many people, events, and things in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) that are types, or images, that show connections between the Old and New Covenants. The Passover lamb is one of those types, in that it prefigures the sacrificial death of Our Lord. This is why one of the titles that is frequently given to Our Lord is "Lamb of God". As we say three times at every Mass, "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world..."

Just as the Israelites ate from the Passover lamb to enter into the Passover sacrifice, we are to eat of the new Passover Lamb. By receiving Our Lord in Holy Communion during the Sacrifice of the Mass we are entering into the Paschal Mystery. St. John Chrysostom, one of the great Eastern Church Fathers, compared the Passover of the Old Covenant with the Eucharist in this way:

"In those days, when the destroying angel saw the blood on the doors he did not dare to enter, so how much less will the devil approach now when he sees, not that figurative blood on the doors, but the true blood on the lips of believers, the doors of the temple of Christ."

The people of Israel who received from the Passover lamb passed through death and the Exodus into the Promised Land and the earthly Jerusalem. We Christians who receive Our Lord in the Eucharist hope to one day pass through death into the eternal Promised Land of the New Jerusalem in Heaven.

Just as the Israelites viewed their annual celebration of the Passover as re-presenting the first Passover, we believe that the Sacrifice of the Mass is the original sacrifice of Our Lord re-presented to us. The Mass is not a new sacrifice every time, but rather the one and same sacrifice upon the Cross presented to us once again through time and space. When we receive Our Lord in Holy Communion, we are receiving the same Body which hung upon the Cross and Blood which was poured out for our salvation.

