

The Threat of the Paschal Mystery

Introduction

In my early years in the Society of Jesus I came to learn many different and useful Latin phrases that could easily and aptly be applied to any situation. But, there was one saying that the older fathers used that I found not only curious, but downright puzzling. They would simply say, "Quidquid recipitur," and smile wisely as if nothing further need be said. In answer to my queries concerning the meaning of this maxim, they would merely volunteer: *Quidquid recipitur per modum recipientis recipitur*, "Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the one receiving." This did not help and so I just let it go. But, this saying has reappeared in my awareness as I've explored the meanings of the paschal mystery and liturgy in my own experience. It has come to highlight for me the significance of the Church's work in liturgy of receiving, encountering, and being transformed by the paschal mystery. So, the very human act of meeting and receiving this mystery will serve as the focus of this article.

The Paschal Mystery

Readers of this column will already be familiar with an on-going project to define the paschal mystery and to demonstrate its presence in the Eucharistic liturgy. These columns illustrate a growing conviction that the Church must come to a more profound knowledge of and encounter with this mystery in our contemporary worship. This column, in like manner, will continue to explore the relationship between the paschal mystery and the liturgy by taking into account the *reception* of the mystery by the assembly. Two assumptions organize this presentation: First, the liturgy deals with life and death matters because it proclaims and expresses the paschal mystery. Secondly, and to put it simply, the paschal mystery serves as a threat to the security, ambition, need for control, and prideful pretence of every Christian who

enters into the Eucharistic liturgy.

The term "paschal mystery" describes a many splendored reality. It is both an ecclesiological and a Christological reality:

It is an abbreviation for the Christ mystery, that is, it encompasses the mystery of the incarnation, the public ministry, the passion, death, resurrection, ascension into heaven, the sending of the Spirit, and the promised second coming. It implies *salvation* as prefigured in the Hebrew Scriptures, the *gift of life* through Christ, and *the beginning of the Church in its sacramental life*. The paschal mystery is what every Christian liturgy celebrates, for the Christ mystery is the central wellspring of salvation for all human beings.¹

Further, the paschal mystery portrays the Trinitarian life of God into which all are invited. This life of the Trinity can be characterized as a continual outpouring of love between the divine persons toward each other and for the sake of humanity. As the Church enters into this dynamic flow of love in the liturgy, it participates in the eternal response of the Son toward the Father as grounded in the Spirit. Finally, the term, "paschal mystery," directs our attention to the lived Christian life, characterized by surrender to God and dying to self as part and parcel of our mission to the world.

The Christian encounter with the paschal mystery is always a personal encounter as the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy tells us,

Christ is always present in his church, especially in liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass both in the person of his minister... and most of all in the eucharistic species... He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church. Lastly, he is present when the church prays and sings...²

¹ Joseph E. Weiss, "The Paschal Mystery and the Liturgical Year," *Liturgical Ministry*, 99 (Spring, 2000), 99. Italics are mine.

² Austin Flannery, ed., *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 7 in *The Basic Sixteen Documents. Vatican Council II. Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996), 120-121. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (1975 edition; GIRM 2000, no. 27) echoes same notion in no. 7: "In the celebration of Mass, which perpetuates the sacrifice of the cross, Christ is really present in the assembly itself, which is gathered in his name, in the person of the minister, in his word, and indeed substantially and unceasingly under the eucharistic species."

It has become almost commonplace to speak about the four presences of Christ in the liturgy, but it is still important to draw out what that means in the act of worship itself. First, it means that Christ is present to the Church and the liturgy serves as a vehicle for this encounter.

Robert Taft, SJ focuses this sense of the *personal* quality of the encounter with the paschal mystery saying, "Liturgy is not a thing but a meeting of persons, the celebration and the expression of an experiential relationship: our relation to God and to one another in Christ through the Spirit."³ Therefore, in our speaking about the paschal mystery it is important to hold this in mind: it is not a thing, but a person. Taft reminds us that "... our liturgy does not celebrate a past event, but a present person, who contains forever all he is and was, and all he has done for us."⁴

To sum up, then, the Church encounters the paschal mystery in and through liturgy. That is to say, the Church encounters the one God who manifests the action of the divine presence as redeeming love continually poured out for humanity's sake. Thus, the paschal mystery is essentially Trinitarian (outpouring love for the other), redemptive⁵ (Christ's life, death, and resurrection), personal (the Risen Christ is present to believers through the liturgical life of the Church), and lived out (self-denial, surrender, and mission).

Up to this point we have been advancing a description of what liturgy is and does. This essential aspect of Liturgical Theology is what Msgr. Kevin Irwin calls *Theology of the liturgy*.

This term describes what Christian liturgy is and what it does in terms of actualizing the reality of Christ's paschal mystery for the Church, gathered and enlivened by the Holy Spirit. Through the liturgy contemporary believers are drawn into the paschal mystery and experience redemption through it.⁶

³ Robert E. Taft, S.J., "What Does Liturgy Do? Toward a Soteriology of Liturgical Celebration: Some Theses," in *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, 2nd revised and enlarged edition, (Rome: Edizioni Orientalia Christiana [Pontifical Oriental Institute], 1997): 243.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵ Weiss, p. 100: "The paschal mystery is what every Christian liturgy celebrates, for the passion-resurrection of Christ is the central wellspring of salvation for all human beings of every age."

⁶ Kevin W. Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology*, (Collegeville: A Pueblo Book / The Liturgical

This approach describes, and to an extent, prescribes what the liturgy 'proclaims and celebrates,' how the paschal mystery is 'expressed' in the liturgy, and how believers 'must, should, need to, and are required' to live out that mystery.

The Real Presence of the Assembly Revealed in the Paschal Mystery as Threat

But, what if we step back and consider the situation anew by asking several questions. Since the liturgy serves as a vehicle for the personal encounter between Christ and the Church, does the Church – do the members of the Church – either experience or discover the possibility of a sort of mutuality here? In other words: How does this encounter become real for human beings?⁷ How might it resemble a human encounter?

Notice that the model most often employed for describing the liturgy is the *proclamation – response model*. It focuses on how the Church employs prayers, gestures, and symbols to proclaim the paschal mystery and how the people respond in terms of their own prayers and gestures. And, what happens when we take this personal presence of Christ seriously in terms of the relationship he establishes with members of the congregation? What happens when we apply the same sort of notion of the personal to the *real* presence of the people at liturgy? We then look at the liturgical relationship as *address – response* in a way that takes highlights the people's *personal* response in addition to their ritual response and its attendant meanings.⁸

Press, 1994), 46.

⁷ The questions intend to serve as a faithful response to the admonition found in the Liturgy Constitution: "Pastors of souls must, therefore, realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, their obligation goes further than simply ensuring that the laws governing valid and lawful celebration are observed. They must also ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by it." See Flannery, *CSL* no. 11, 123.

⁸ At this point in the discussion we really enter into the arena of spirituality – how Christians cope with an experienced gap between "what is and what should be." I would like to recognize the contribution of Fr. Larry Gillick, SJ to this discussion who insists that 'living religiously in this new millennium means holding this tension between what is and what should be.'"

Further, an important objection may be lodged here: won't people become even *more* narcissistic if they are invited

The claim put forward here is that real people receive the paschal mystery as both a blessing and a threat because it deals with life and death, salvation and surrender. But, since space is limited here, our focus will fall upon the paschal mystery as a threat.

The paschal mystery will be shown to be a threat to human pride and independence, to human security, and to human wisdom because it is essentially Trinitarian, it invites participants to self-denial, and it opens people to God's saving action in Christ. Three questions directed to you, the reader, will guide our further reflection. First, consider this, please: How do you like it when you discover that you are not the center of the universe and that all creation does not revolve around you? Take your time. Second, How do you like it when you encounter your mortality and realize you will in fact die and leave everything and everyone behind? Third, after answering the first two questions, how easy do you find it to be loved by God now? If you answer like most people to whom these questions have been addressed, you will have some sense that the paschal mystery is a threat.

The Sacrifice of Praise Threatens Human Sovereignty

The paschal mystery threatens each of our own claims for absolute sovereignty⁹ in the universe – the illusion that we can control other people, events, outcomes, and even God – because the liturgy draws us into the life of the Trinity. Our theological tradition tells us that this life flows from one divine person to the other in an abundance of love poured out. Christ Jesus the Son continually offers himself to the Father, 'emptying himself' as he did when he took upon himself our human form (Phil. 2). The Spirit???

to focus on their response to God? Indeed, it is a probability. However, if people don't state offer their response to the paschal mystery, we risk Pharisaism. It is a thin line to walk.

⁹ It has become a rather pedestrian exercise today to reel off the standard critique of our North American culture – consumerism, individualism, racism, sexism, and the like. Not that these aren't real aspects of our lived experience. But, for a solid critique of the dynamics the undergird the building up of culture, this writer recommends Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, Free Press Paperbacks, 1973). His reinterpretation of Freud places the fear and denial of death at the heart of the human exercise of culture building.

As the Church is drawn into the life of the Trinity it joins this movement of Christ in the Spirit pouring himself out in praise and love to the One who is Above All Things. We see this expressed most clearly in the Eucharistic Prayer¹⁰. Thus, the Church unites itself to Christ saying, essentially, "You are the One, not me! You are the Source, the One to be worshiped, not me!" In one sense, then, the Church lives out the first commandment in this joyful, doxological acknowledgment of the primacy of God and its forsaking the worship of all other gods. This truly is the *sacrifice of praise*.¹¹ But, how simple is it really to forsake all other gods? What might it mean, therefore, when we take into account the *personal* reality of being drawn into this movement of divine profession of self-emptying love?

Don't most of us struggle with being the center, the source, the one worthy of all worship and glory? "It's about *me*, not about you!" is our battle cry. What follows? Competition, envy, independence, rivalry, holding grudges, feuds, strife, and wars – you know, daily life. So, as we highlight possible ways in which many people could receive and interpret this 'stance' before God, we see that the Church's entry into this aspect of the paschal mystery appears to threaten our sense of sovereignty. Doesn't it make sense, then, that resistance to the primacy of God appears in the proclamation of, indeed in the very *entering into*, the sacrifice of praise when we consider it as an address that needs to be answered on a personal level? Of course. Such resistance appears because we are merely human beings who prefer to command our own destinies and demand the approbation and acclamation of others.

¹⁰ GIRM, no. 54: "Now the center and summit of the entire celebration begins: the eucharistic prayer, a prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification. *The priest invites the people to lift up their hearts to the Lord in prayer and thanks; he unites them with himself in the prayer he addresses in their name to the Father through Jesus Christ. The meaning of the prayer is that the entire congregation joins itself to Christ in acknowledging the great things God has done and in offering the sacrifice.*" Italics are mine.

¹¹ See no. 2643 in CCC: "The Eucharist contains and expresses all forms of prayer: it is the 'pure offering' of the whole Body of Christ to the glory of God's name (see Malachi 1:11) and, according to the traditions of East and West, it is *the sacrifice of praise*." Italics included. See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Mission Hills, CA: Benziger Publishing Company, 1994), 636.

The Word of God and Our Baptism Threatens Human Security

The paschal mystery threatens our security, especially manifested in the very human illusion that we are immortal and can build a 'lasting city on earth.' We can locate this threat in the liturgy by underscoring probable responses to the Liturgy of the Word and in the Rite of Baptism (CSL p. 120)

It is obvious that the Word of God consoles, blesses, and strengthens the Church. One could easily create a list of tender and poignant selections of Scripture proclaimed during the Liturgical Year that would be quite extensive. They are always welcome gifts to the weary heart. At the same time, however, there are other passages proclaimed during the same Year that indisputably confirm the saying of Scripture that,

Indeed the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.¹²

In order to refresh our memory, a brief catalogue of challenging words from Scripture follows here. Stop when you have had enough.

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... (Matthew 5:3)
- Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad... (Matthew 5:11f)
- So, when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go; first be reconciled with your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23f)
- If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away... if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away... (Matthew 5:29f)
- But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also... (Matthew 5:39)
- But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven... (Matthew 5:44f)
- Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. (Matthew 6:1)

¹² Hebrews 4:12-13 as found in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

- Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up treasures in heaven... (Matthew 6:19f)
- Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father... (Matthew 10:34f)
- If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:24f)
- If you wish to be perfect, go sell your possessions, and give them to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. (Matthew 19:21f)

What is it like for you, the reader, to hear such a formidable word? You must agree that such passages *do* invite us into the paschal mystery as a lived reality in our lives. And yet, might you also recognize yourself in one or other of these personal responses: "Can we talk about this?" "It's not natural to live that way!" "You talking to *me*?" "I believe, help my unbelief..'" "I'd really *like* to live like that, but..." Is it not the case, then, that the human encounter with this challenging part of the paschal mystery draws out such very human responses and leaves us "naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account?" Christ's summons to his followers to die to self certainly can be experienced as a welcome call to freedom. But when that same command meets our own fear of loss, a strong and ardent resistance often arises in most people.

In another instance now, consider the rather uncomplicated sacramental gesture of baptism by submersion. This ritual gesture does certainly proclaim that "all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death" (Romans 6:3) In this ritual bath, we die with Christ, are buried with him, and rise to new life with him. Christians are brought into a new life in Christ characterized by dying and rising. In our daily lives we are set on the Way to die to self and rise anew to God in Christ through the Spirit. But, can we just look for a moment at that part that says Christians walk a walk that proclaims a direction and intention to *die to self, surrender, deny oneself, take up one's cross*, and the like? What would it look like to hear the

announcement of our own pending death? What would it seem like to live with that awareness day to day, much less to choose it?

The groundbreaking work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*,¹³ though sometimes misused in pastoral situations and not beyond some critique itself, approached the dying in a novel manner. Rather than telling them what they should experience, she asked *the dying themselves* what they experienced. Her results are well known. Many who are dying respond to the awareness of their own death by identifying with one or other of the following: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.¹⁴ Each person, therefore, responds to the knowledge of his / her pending death *in the manner of their own receiving*.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from the above. First, in regard to the use of religious symbols and gestures in liturgy: as we take our symbols and ritual gestures seriously should we not consider that they not only will, but must speak to those parts of our lives that resist death? For example, it should not surprise us when a member of the Elect balks at baptism by submersion. This person who recognizes the power of the symbol, most likely from past experiences of near drowning, instructs us about the real meaning of this gesture. They are going to die and they will resist it! Second, should we not be more mindful of the way in which we preach or teach about self-denial, surrender, and carrying the cross? We cannot do this facily. As servants of the Word and Sacraments we need to know that through them Christ calls people to embrace loss and fear as an integral part of their discipleship. When each of us knows the cost of that discipleship, and especially knows the depth our own resistance to it, we will be able to

¹³ Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, M.D., *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, A Touchstone Book, 1969).

¹⁴ The pastoral misuse of this information saw each of these emotional responses as 'hurdles' to jump so as to attain acceptance. Rather, these are descriptive markers of the movement of grief. They allow the dying – or the family and friends of the dying – to at least discern and understand where they stand in the ebb and flow of powerful emotions.

speak this word more firmly and compassionately to the Church.

At this point the reader may well be wondering, "Why do we have to look at all this negative stuff?" "Is that all there is? Then who will save me from this wretched state?" *The reason to make a place for personal resistance in our discussions of the paschal mystery is that we can see more clearly the more personal aspects that the liturgy establishes between the Church and the Trinity uncover what is already there*

The Paschal Mystery Threatens Our Human Wisdom

The paschal mystery threatens that part of human wisdom that maintains the notion that a person must be pure, innocent, whole, faultless, and unassailably perfect in order to be worthy of the presence of God. When we make a place for personal, human reactions to its proclamation, celebration, and living out in discipleship, a very tender and vulnerable world is "laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." Thus, the paschal mystery draws forth fears about whether a person is truly loveable by God, whether rejection is the final word, whether one is at last abandoned to isolation and alienation. These are very dear and painful fears that many carry with them throughout their lives. But this is exactly where the saving and reconciling grace of God needs to go, isn't it? The gracious and grace-dealing presence of God needs to speak to the most vulnerable segments of our lives. We make those places in our lives more consciously available to God's grace as we continue in this personal dialogue with Christ, a dialogue that ultimately intends to catch us up into the movement of the life of the Trinity – outpouring love itself.

Really, the only other option is a sort of Pharisaism that is bound to pretence and fabrication.

Conclusion

As we continue to respect our religious symbols, to be faithful to proclaiming the Word, and to exploring the meaning of the paschal mystery as a lived reality, our contention here is that we need to attend to the Church's *personal* appropriation of this reality. It is true: "Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver." As we notice *how* people receive the paschal mystery, it becomes more evident that it is received as a blessing and a threat, a joy and a challenge. This essay has focused on that aspect of the paschal mystery received as a threat to human sovereignty, security, and wisdom. Our hope here is that some new light has been shed upon the profound weight and glory of this mystery. Our hope is also that new light has shone upon aspects of the Church's *personal* appropriation of this mystery.

Lord God, we praise you for creating man, and still more for restoring him in Christ. Your Son shared our weakness: may we share his glory, for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen. [Christmas: Mass During the Day – Opening Prayer]

Father, through our observance of Lent, help us to understand the meaning of your Son's death and resurrection, and teach us to reflect it in our lives. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen. [First Sunday of Lent – Opening Prayer]

Father, help us to be like Christ your son, who loved the world and died for our salvation. Inspire us by his love, guide us by his example, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen. [Fifth Sunday of Lent – Opening Prayer]