

RCIA
The Paschal Mystery
Session 22

“Christ’s work of redemption accomplished by his passion, death, resurrection and glorious ascension, whereby ‘dying he destroyed our death, rising he restored our life’. The paschal Mystery is celebrated and made present in the liturgy of the Church and its saving effects are communicated through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, which renews the paschal sacrifice of Christ as the sacrifice offered by the Church.”

(#1067, 1076, 571, 1362 – 1372 Catechism of the Catholic Church)



THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

Paschal Mystery: *The term given the entire process of God's of salvation by which God redeemed humanity from sin in and through Jesus' life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension into glory. Christians enter into the Paschal mystery through sacramental initiation, and participate in it by faithfully living out the process of dying and rising that characterizes all life.*

The New Testament does not present the virginal conception of Jesus as a showcase miracle but rather as a hidden event. It needs God's revelation to be discovered and understood. God discloses this mystery only to a few people, just as the risen Christ is shown only to a limited number of witnesses. We find a profound similarity and continuity between the virginal conception and Resurrection: the first marks the beginning of the creation of the 'New Man', the second its consummation; both result from God's creative intervention in human history. The Holy Family is a unique phenomenon in the history of the world. Yet God wanted its existence for the sake of the whole world, so that it might become the model for all Christian communities.

The Baptism of Jesus by John: Since the early Church was so concerned to show the transcendent superiority of her Lord to the disciples of the Baptist, she could not have invented the story of Jesus' baptism by John. The story implies that Jesus subjected himself to John and might even suggest that at a certain point Jesus was John's disciple. Jesus' death and Resurrection shed more light on the baptismal scene. Just as his immersion into the water was the foreshadowing of his death, so his emerging out of the waters and the Father's words declaring Jesus his beloved Son anticipate his Resurrection by which Jesus will be constituted "Son of God in power."

According to Matthew, the one who rises from the waters is the new Israel, the true Son of God in whom the Father is well-pleased (in opposition to the old sinful Israel who has broken the covenant). According to Luke, the new Adam, the beginning of the new mankind arises out of the waters. Just as the old Adam received life from the breath or spirit of Yahweh, the Holy Spirit descends on the New Adam and will lead him during his public ministry up to the end of his life.

The Kingdom of God: At the time of Jesus the Jews expected the coming of the Kingdom either as a result of perfect obedience to the Law or of violent warfare. In Jesus' ministry the Kingdom has appeared, not as a result of Israel's conversion, but as a pure gift on God's initiative. It was no way merited; it does not presuppose but rather calls for conversion. In Jesus' message, a complete change of heart, and way of life, begins with accepting this invitation to God's banquet. Accepting the invitation includes the grateful acceptance of God's undeserved forgiveness of our sins and the adopting of God's forgiving attitude

towards those who sinned against us. If we do not imitate God's forgiveness towards those who have offended us, God will revoke the forgiveness of our own sins. Only by loving our enemy do we "prove" that we have understood and accepted God's love for ourselves who, as sinners have been God's enemy.

The Death of Jesus

We do not know when Jesus began to speak about his imminent death. However, the growing rejection of Jesus is paralleled by an increased emphasis in his preaching on judgment. This is not a sign of vindictive resentment but rather underlines the absolute seriousness of Jesus' offer of grace. Indeed, the more God' forgiving love is revealed in the ministry of Jesus, the more terrible the consequences of its rejection appear. The revelation of final, eternal condemnation is simply the other side of the definitive revelation of God's love in Jesus.

On the eve of his death, although it has become abundantly clear that His mission to Israel was a failure, Jesus announces his unshaken trust in his imminent entrance into God's Kingdom. But what role does Jesus attribute to his death with regard to the Kingdom? Aware that he was going to be betrayed and killed and aware of his failure to convert Israel, he was nevertheless so serenely certain of the imminent proximity of the Kingdom, how else could he have considered his death but as the ultimate service for the sake of the Kingdom. Giving oneself over to God through giving one's life for one's neighbor is the ultimate mystery of the Kingdom. First, Jesus alone is able to accomplish it, but then he calls all disciples to follow his example and participate in what he has done by partaking of eating "his body and blood". Even if we accept only a small number of gospel texts as historical, it appears that Jesus considered his imminent death as part of God's saving plan, in fact as his ultimate service, by which he was to enter the Kingdom and make others, share in it. Through the voluntary offering of his life, Jesus enters the Kingdom, but, at the same time, by this act of voluntary death, he makes the Kingdom present for his disciples. Jesus understood his death as fulfilling the Servant's offering of his life for the forgiveness of all sins.

Jesus Death is only the final act of his self-giving love that embraced the repentant sinner and rebuked the hardened self-righteous in order to save both from the coming doom. His solidarity with his sinful people, first dramatized by undergoing the baptism of John, now achieved its consummation when he died the sinner's death between two condemned criminals.

The shameful death of Jesus on the cross appeared even to his followers as a scandal, a stumbling block, which suggested that his claim was false and his mission a failure. Only the appearances of the Risen One could have convinced the disciples that the crucifixion had to be the way to the Resurrection and exaltation of their Master. Then, by receiving the Spirit of Christ and Christ himself in the Spirit, they began to understand the Scriptures. They discovered that Jesus death and Resurrection took place "according to the Scriptures."

The early Church immediately begins to see that the whole of the Old Testament, not merely a collection of "proof texts," actually announce Jesus as the Messiah. They see what happened had to happen in this way, because this fulfilled God's plan. Jesus' followers begin to identify the patterns of Jesus and his saving work in the major figures and events of the Old Testament. What would otherwise have remained an incomprehensible scandal, the "cursed death" of a false Messiah, appeared now in the light of its Old Testament types, as the event that has saved the world. All the promises God has made in the Old Testament find their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus the Messiah is Lord in the same sense as Yahweh is the Lord of his people and of the entire universe. While there is only one God, the man Jesus himself is God.

The full dimension of the plan of God becomes manifest only with the fall of mankind into sin and its redemption through Christ. The "moral structure" of the universe is not a sum of abstract principles concerning rewards and punishments. Sin necessarily causes self-alienation, alienation from God and from one's fellow human beings. The fall of mankind, and the resulting threefold alienation, was the occasion for God to show the ultimate depth of His Trinitarian love (perfect communion of Father and Son in the Holy Spirit.) Given over to mankind by the Father, the Son has freely taken upon himself the full burden of our alienation. He alone could fully experience this burden, the result of our sins; as the holy Son of God, he alone must have fully understood and suffered, beyond the scope of our imagination the evil of our sins. However, he redeemed us precisely by love. By carrying in himself our alienation to its climax on the cross, he has turned it into the most powerful expression of love that atones, praises and worships the Father in our place and for our sake. The love of the Son, reaching its full human expression on the cross, has become the source of our redemption and provides the key to understanding the various traditional themes. By means of this love, Christ offered himself as a perfect sacrifice and a perfect satisfaction for our sins. By this love he has overcome the power of the devil and freed us to begin a new life, in which we are empowered by his Spirit to share in his sacrifice, satisfaction, victory, and freedom.