THE TASTE OF VICTORY

A RETREAT GUIDE FOR EASTER

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INTRODUCTION

Retreat Overview

The liturgical season of Advent lasts four weeks — almost six if you tack on the days from Christmas through Epiphany. The season of Lent lasts six weeks. And the liturgical season of Easter lasts... *seven* weeks: from Easter Sunday through Pentecost Sunday. Of all the special liturgical seasons, Easter is the longest.

What do you usually do for Advent and Christmas? Certainly you usually do something — after all, they are special liturgical seasons. What do you usually do for Lent? No doubt you think about that question every year as Ash Wednesday draws closer.

But what about Easter? What do you usually do for the liturgical season of Easter? If you are like most Christians, you probably don't have any personal or family traditions to help you live the Easter season to the full.

Even though it's the longest of the special liturgical seasons, which would seem to indicate that is the most important of them all, most of us forget about Easter after Easter Sunday. And that's a shame.

Easter is seven weeks long for a reason. It's because Easter is the time when we celebrate Christ's victory. And that victory was so stupendous that the Church gives us seven weeks to enjoy the celebration, and to let its power and grace nourish our souls.

In this Retreat Guide, "The Taste of Victory," we will take advantage of this usually-overlooked opportunity to savor the taste of Christ's Easter victory.

- In the first meditation-starter, we will simply take time to savor the first Resurrection appearance recorded in the Gospels — that of the women who went to the tomb hoping to anoint a corpse, and returned from the tomb having embraced God.
- In the second meditation-starter, we will turn our attention to the most dominant flavor in the taste of this Easter victory: joy. And we will see what the difference is between Christian joy and worldly pleasure.
- Finally, in the conference, we will savor the rich flavor of the many symbols involved in the ritual of Catholic baptism — the sacrament that brings the victory of Easter into the souls of sinners.

Before we dive in, take a few moments simply to enjoy the presence of God, who is with you right now, eager to speak to your heart, glad that you have taken some time to spend with him in quiet prayer.

Thank him for the many blessings he has given you, and ask him for the graces you need to grow spiritually, and especially for the grace to experience more fully than ever before, the joyful taste of Christ's Easter victory.

FIRST MEDITATION

The Text: Matthew 28:1-10

Let's begin this meditation-starter with a leisurely read-through of Matthew 28, verses 1-10 — the first post-Resurrection appearance of Jesus described in the Gospels.

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing was white as snow. The guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men.

Then the angel said to the women in reply, "Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.' Behold, I have told you."

Then they went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce this to his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them on their way and greeted them. They approached, embraced his feet, and did him homage. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.

– Matthew 28:1-10

Now let's go back through these sacred words, taking them verse by verse, calmly savoring whatever God wants to show us for his glory and our growth.

FIRST MEDITATION

Matthew 28:1 — God Remembers Our Good Efforts

In verse one, St. Matthew tells us:

> *After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.*

Two things jump out at us here. First, the names of these two women, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." The other Mary is the mother of James and Joseph, some of Jesus' relatives; we know this from other passages in the Gospels.

St. Matthew kept track of these two women throughout his narration of the Passion, and referred to their names multiple times. He showed them watching the crucifixion, from a distance. He showed them accompanying Joseph of Arimathea, who took charge of having Jesus buried in his own tomb near Calvary.

And when Joseph was finished with the burial and left the graveyard, the two Marys actually stayed there, and Matthew tells us what they were doing: "But Mary Magdalene and the other Mary remained sitting there, facing the tomb" (Matthew 27:61).

Now, after the crucifixion is over, while the rest of Christ's followers have retreated into hiding, afraid of being arrested themselves, these two women make their way back to the tomb, hoping to finish the proper anointing of Jesus' body — something they couldn't do on Good Friday, because they were in such a rush. And they are the first ones to whom the resurrected Lord appears.

St. Matthew seems to be fascinated with these two women. Why? It's something to think about. To me, the lesson is simple.

In spite of the danger and confusion that swirled around Our Lord's Passion, these women stayed faithful. They continued to believe in him. They tried to comfort him as he was being crucified. They helped bury him. They didn't abandon him, as so many others — including the Apostles — did. And Jesus just can't wait to reward them, so he appears to them.

Jesus will also remember all of our efforts to be faithful to him, to accompany him through suffering and rejection and failure, and he will eagerly give us a taste of his victory, when the time is right, just as he gave it to the two Marys.

The second thing St. Matthew makes sure to point out to us is that the appearance of the Resurrection happened early on the morning of the day after the sabbath.

The sabbath, for the Jews, took place on Saturday. So the Resurrection, the first Easter, took place on a Sunday. Sunday was the first day of the week, for the Jews. The early Christians saw this as more than just coincidence. It was on the first day of the week that God began his work of Creation.

Through the Resurrection, Jesus also begins the New Creation, the Redemption, on the first day. He brings the past to a close, and launches a new era of salvation. This is why Christians moved their weekly celebration of the Lord's Day from Saturday to Sunday.

Sunday, the day of the Resurrection, the day of the New Creation, the New Day of hope for eternal life and salvation — *this* is the Lord's Day. And this is why the Church gathers in a special way every Sunday to celebrate the Lord and his victory over sin and suffering.

The early Christians had their Sunday Mass as close to sunrise as possible, turning every Sunday of the year into another celebration of Easter. They were known for that, for their Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist. It set them apart in the early years of Christianity; and it still sets us apart today.

This is why Sundays matter so much, even today, and why it is a mortal sin to purposely miss the gathering of God's family around the Risen Lord at Sunday Mass.

FIRST MEDITATION

Matthew 28:2 — The Angel and the Earthquake

In verse two, Matthew tells us:

> *And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it.*

St. Matthew is the only Gospel writer to mention the earthquake. It mattered to him, because it symbolized the end of one age of history and the start of another. The age that was ending was the one that had begun with the Fall, and the exile of the human family from the Garden of Eden. From that time on, the human family had been under the rule of evil.

But that age is over now. Now the age of Redemption has begun. Jesus has conquered the powers of evil by taking everything they could dish out — betrayal, abandonment, injustice, torture, humiliation, and death — and still coming back.

Just as an earthquake changes forever the seemingly unchangeable shape of the earth's landscape, so Christ's resurrection changed forever the seemingly unchangeable shape of human history. It unleashed holiness and an entirely new kind of hope, which will be embodied through the centuries in the life and the saints of the Church.

As the women witness the earthquake, they also witness the appearance of the angel, who descends, approaches, rolls back the stone, and sits on it. The angel rolled back the stone to show that the tomb was empty. Jesus had already risen from the dead.

The angel sits on the stone as if to emphasize how paltry and weak were the powers of this fallen world that tried to destroy and bury Jesus, the incarnation of God's love for mankind. The stone symbolizes everything that tries to separate us from God and his love.

The Lord is much more powerful than all of those things.

When we feel like we are stuck behind stones like that, we need to invoke the Lord, and beg him to send his angels to roll them away.

FIRST MEDITATION

Matthew 28:3-4 — Otherworldly

In the next two verses, St. Matthew shows how the Resurrection is an otherworldly event, a divine invasion of our earthly realm. He writes:

> *His [the angel's] appearance was like lightning and his clothing was white as snow. The guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men.*
>
> – Matthew 8:3-4

Those guards were not wimps; they were tough guys, rough-and-tumble guys. But the presence of the angel, the presence of the super-natural, unmans them.

Sometimes I think we allow ourselves to become too used to Jesus. It's good that he is close to us, and that he lowers himself to our level. And yet, He is still God — the all-powerful, the eternal, the magnificent.

Part of what gives Easter its particular flavor of victory is the taste of reverence that surrounds these unheard of events.

FIRST MEDITATION

Matthew 28:5-7 — The Resurrection Is Announced

The angel ignores the stupefied guards, and addresses the women, the ones who loved Jesus and are searching for him.

In the next three verses, Matthew records the angel's short speech:

> *Then the angel said to the women in reply, "Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.' Behold, I have told you."*
>
> – Matthew 28:5-7

"Do not be afraid!" Such a common phrase in the Gospels, throughout the entire Bible! Isn't it true that God's interventions in our lives, or his possible interventions, often spark fear in our hearts?

We are children of Adam and Eve, and so, as Pope Benedict XVI once put it,

... we all carry within us a drop of the poison of that way of thinking, illustrated by the images in the Book of Genesis... The human being does not trust God.

And yet, isn't the message of the Resurrection precisely that we *can* trust God? He died for us; he has risen for us; in him we have all we can ever desire or need. The angel then shows the two Marys that he knows what they are doing, when he says, "I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified."

The crucifixion, the most horrible sin mankind has ever committed, has become a title of honor for Jesus. Our Lord is "Jesus the Crucified," God the savior, who took upon himself the full weight of evil and sin, so as to destroy it.

The Church will never let us forget this supreme expression of God's love. Every place of worship, in fact, where the Eucharist is regularly celebrated, is required to display a crucifix.

But the crucifixion wasn't the end of the story! The angel goes on to announce that the tomb is empty, Jesus has risen from the dead, and he wants to meet with his followers.

This truly is the Good News, the Gospel, the brand new event that transforms everything. No other religious leader in the history of humanity has even claimed to rise from the dead — not Buddha, not Confucius, not Mohammed.

Only Jesus has died and risen, and so only in Jesus can we hope for eternal life. This is his great victory: finally, good triumphs over evil. If Jesus hadn't risen from the dead, he would have been just one more good guy who finished last.

But by rising from the dead, he makes all the fairy tales come true, he gives hope to history, he conquers an everlasting Kingdom. And once the angel fulfilled his duty to announce the Resurrection, he gives these two disciples a mission to spread the word, to pass on the message.

Isn't this what Christianity is all about? Experiencing the power and the beauty of God's merciful love, allowing that love to conquer our discouragement and hesitancy and give us new life, and then to boldly give to others what we have received.

The taste of victory can't be fully enjoyed unless it is generously shared.

FIRST MEDITATION

Matthew 28:8 — Overwhelmed with Joy

How did the two Marys respond to this announcement? Matthew describes it precisely:

Then they went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce this to his disciples.

– Matthew 28:8

They didn't waste any time trying to figure everything out; they launched out on their God-given mission. And how did they feel? "fearful yet overjoyed."

Have you ever wondered how those two things can go together? Have you ever been greatly afraid and full of joy at the same time? The fear has an element of reverence, of awe.

They recognize that they are on holy ground, that the divine realm is bursting in upon their lowly, humble earthly realm. And they weren't expecting that; they hadn't understood Jesus' own prophecies about his resurrection.

But at the same time, the news itself fills them with great joy: it means that the hopes, the dreams, the promise of a new life with meaning and everlasting purpose have not disappeared in the dust of the crucifixion! The story continues — marvelously.

On those rare occasions when we attend Mass and aren't tired, distracted, or preoccupied, sometimes we too feel the awe and the joy that the two Marys felt on that first Easter.

The awe comes from knowing that in every Mass heaven invades earth anew; and the joy comes from discovering afresh that God is thinking of me, and that he wants to stay with me in the Eucharist, to be with me, forever.

FIRST MEDITATION

Matthew 28:9 — Jesus Can't Wait

Full of awe, full of joy, not knowing what to think, the women rush off to tell the other disciples, but they don't get very far before another surprise stops them in their tracks. St. Matthew describes what happened:

> *And behold, Jesus met them on their way and greeted them. They approached, embraced his feet, and did him homage.*
>
> – Matthew 28:9

I have often wondered why Jesus waited to appear to them. Why did he send the angel first, if he knew that he himself would show up just a few minutes later?

Maybe the two Marys had to make an act of faith in the Resurrection before he was able to let them see their Resurrected Lord. Maybe Jesus wasn't planning on showing himself to them at all, but when he saw them running back to the Apostles, so full of faith and hope and love, he just couldn't hold back, and he had to come to them.

Whatever the reason, "Jesus met them on their way," and that Gospel phrase can fill us with comfort and confidence. Jesus will always meet us on our way.

As we go through our journey of faith, trying to fulfill our Christian mission each day, just as the Marys were trying to fulfill theirs, Jesus will never abandon us; he will always be with us; he will always give us whatever light, strength, or encouragement we need: "Jesus met them on their way."

And their response to this dramatic development is just what ours should be: they approached, they embraced his feet, and they worshipped him.

This is the same response that the Three Wise Men had when they were filled with joy at the sight of the star and found Jesus with Mary in the house at Bethlehem (see Matthew 2:1-12).

Is it our response? How often does the victory of God's mercy over the fallen world bring us to our knees and lift our hearts in adoration? How often should it? This too is part of the taste of victory.

FIRST MEDITATION

Matthew 28:10 — Words of Command

Jesus doesn't let the two Marys stay very long in adoration; after a little while, he calls them to action.

> *Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."*
>
> – Matthew 28:10

But I don't think he does this rudely. I always picture him helping them to stand up and looking into their faces with a smile — what other expression could be on his face when he says, "Do not be afraid"?

And then he gives them a share in his mission, reaffirming the task laid upon them by the angel. He instructs the women to pass on the message of the Resurrection to the Apostles, but he doesn't call them his disciples, his apostles, or even his followers: rather, he calls them his brothers.

This is the first time in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus calls them that Something has changed in his relationship with his followers after his Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Two things, actually, have changed.

- First, Jesus has now experienced everything about the human condition: he has suffered in every way imaginable during his Passion, and he has descended into the frightful darkness of death. Now Jesus is fully our brother; he has been through the valley of darkness, just as all of us go through it at some point during our earthly pilgrimage. How his heart must rejoice to be able to assure us now that nothing we suffer can separate us from him, who suffered everything for our sake!

- And second, Jesus has finally repaired the damage done by original sin. Now the floodgates of grace have been opened, and through that grace, believers now share the very life of God — we have become children of God, and brothers and sisters of God's Son.

This too is included in the taste of Christ's victory over sin, death, and evil.

FIRST MEDITATION

Conclusion & Further Reflection

Take some time now to bask in the bright light of the Resurrection, to feel the powerful earthquake of God's love, to let your hearts be filled with awe and joy, to kneel at the feet of the Resurrected Lord, and to feel the warmth of his smile upon your face.

Hear him tell you: "Do not be afraid!" And let him give you anew your task, your mission in his Kingdom.

Jesus wants you to tell him what's in your heart, and he wants you to find out what's in his.

1. When have I experienced most intensely the Taste of Christ's Easter Victory? Savor that memory and thank God for that experience.

2. How would the world — and my life — be different if Jesus had not risen from the dead?

3. How much does the way I celebrate the Lord's Day every week reflect the victory of Easter? What could I change to reflect it better?

But if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some among you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then neither has Christ been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then empty [too] is our preaching; empty, too, your faith... if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all.

– 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, NABR

Peter proceeded to speak and said: "You know what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree. This man God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead"

– Acts 10: 34a, 37-41 NABR

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his mercy endures forever... In danger I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free. The LORD is with me; I am not afraid; what can mortals do against me? The LORD is with me as my helper; I shall look in triumph on my foes. Better to take refuge in the LORD than to put one's trust in mortals... I was hard pressed and falling, but the LORD came to my help. The LORD, my strength and might, has become my savior... The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. By the LORD has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice in it and be glad.

– Psalm 118: 1, 5-8, 13-14, 22-24, NABR

SECOND MEDITATION

Easter's Name Is Joy

What is the primary sentiment of Easter? Without a doubt, it's joy. Joy is the melody of the Easter liturgy, of the entire Easter season.

Just think of the Prefaces we pray during the Mass on Easter (the Preface is the prayer of thanksgiving that introduces the Eucharistic Prayer).

The priest is free to choose from five different Prefaces when he celebrates Mass during the Easter season. Each one of them highlights a different aspect of the Easter mystery. But then, every single one of the Prefaces finishes with this phrase: "Therefore, overcome with Paschal [Easter] joy..."

That is the heart of Easter — being overcome with Paschal joy, the joy of Christ's definitive victory over sin, evil, and despair.

Here is how the Fourth Preface for the Easter Season puts it:

> *It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, at all times to acclaim you, O Lord, but in this time above all to laud you yet more gloriously, when Christ our Passover has been sacrificed. He never ceases to offer himself for us, but defends us and ever pleads our cause before you: he is the sacrificial victim who dies no more, the Lamb, once slain, who lives for ever. Therefore, overcome with paschal joy, every land, every people exults in your praise and even the heavenly Powers, with the angelic hosts, sing together the unending hymn of your glory…*

Joy is the mark of Easter, the joy of everlasting victory over the enemies of God and man. Easter's name, indeed, is joy.

SECOND MEDITATION

The Nature of Christian Joy

But what is joy? It's one of those words that we think we understand, until we ask ourselves what we really mean by it. Joy is a kind of pleasure, an experience of delight, satisfaction, and jubilation.

But what causes it? Catholic philosophy and theology have a long and rich tradition exploring this topic. St. Thomas Aquinas makes a distinction between pleasure and joy. He calls joy a spiritual pleasure.

Pleasure, according to St. Thomas, is the experience of satisfaction and contentment that we have when we come to possess something good that we desired. When dessert finally rolls around and I get to eat that brownie, I experience pleasure, a material pleasure.

Joy is a pleasure of a different kind. Joy is that deep spiritual pleasure that comes from possessing not material goods, but spiritual goods. When I know that I am loved, for example, I experience joy, even if the person who loves me is nowhere around me. That knowledge of being loved is a spiritual good, something without material limitations, and so it produces a spiritual pleasure; that's joy.

Easter gives us joy, because it gives us the most valuable spiritual possession we can have: the sure hope of eternal life. Easter shows us that, if only we stick close to Jesus Christ, nothing that happens to us in this life can keep us down; as bad as things may get, we have eternal life with Christ to look forward to — all of our Good Fridays will be swallowed up in the definitive victory of Easter Sunday.

That knowledge, which comes to us through our faith in Jesus Christ, fills our hearts with an unquenchable hope, and gives undying purpose to our lives, the purpose of deepening our friendship with Christ and helping others do the same. Easter, the victory of Jesus over sin, suffering, death, and evil, is the greatest spiritual reality the world has ever known — and it's all ours; that's why the taste of Easter Victory is the taste of Easter Joy.

SECOND MEDITATION

The Power of Christian Joy

It's interesting to note that one of the major differences between material pleasures and spiritual pleasures — joys — is that spiritual pleasures don't wear out. This is simply because spiritual goods don't wear out.

When I eat a brownie, there comes a time when the brownie no longer exists, and so the pleasure fades. But when I know that I am loved by God, that I am promised a dwelling place in his heavenly mansions, those things don't wear out. This is why the saints — and all Christians who are mature in the faith — can continue to experience true joy even in the midst of temporal and material sufferings.

One of my favorite examples of this comes from the remarkable testimony of the Servant of God, Cardinal Francis-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, who passed away in 2002.

Just six days after he was named coadjutor Archbishop of Saigon, South Vietnam fell to Communist controlled North Vietnam. Soon thereafter, the future Cardinal was arrested by the Communist authorities. For the next thirteen years, the Communists tried to break his faith, moving him between re-education camps, prisons, and solitary confinement.

When he was finally released, he was permitted to go and visit Rome, but after leaving the country, he was never allowed to return — he died in exile, at the age of 74.

While the future Cardinal was in solitary confinement, he began to form relationships with the team of guards assigned to watch over him. In spite of the deep personal sufferings he experienced in those years, he couldn't stop his Christian joy from affecting those guards.

Here's how he described it in a memoir written years later.

When I was put into solitary confinement, I was initially entrusted to a group of five guards, two of whom always accompany me. The wardens change them every two weeks, so that they do not become "contaminated" by me. Later they decided not to change them anymore, otherwise they would all be contaminated!

At first, the guards do not speak to me, they respond only with "yes" and "no." It is truly sad; I want to be kind, courteous with them, but it is impossible; they avoid speaking with me. I have no presents to give them: I am a prisoner, even all my clothes are stamped with big letters "cai-tao," that is, "re-education camp." What am I supposed to do?

One night, a thought comes to me: "Francis, you are still very rich. You have the love of Christ in your heart. Love them as Jesus has loved you."

The next day I began to love them, to love Jesus in them, smiling, exchanging kind words. I begin to tell stories of my travels overseas, how people live in America, Canada, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, France, Germany... the economy, the freedom, the technology. This stimulated their curiosity and pushed them to ask me about many, many things. Little by little we became friends. They want to learn foreign languages, French, English... My guards become my students!

The atmosphere of the prison is greatly changed; the quality of our relationships is greatly improved. Even up to the police chiefs. When they saw the sincerity of my relationship with the guards, they not only asked me to continue helping them study foreign languages, but they also sent new students to study with me.

– quoted from "Five Loaves and Two Fish"
by Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan

That's the power of Christian joy: It can turn a prison into a home, a concentration camp into a school, and enemies into friends.

It is a sign of the Easter victory, a victory that keeps rolling back the powers of darkness and conquering new territory for Christ, generation after generation.

SECOND MEDITATION

Conclusion & Further Reflection

Easter's name is joy, the joy of knowing that no matter what happens, as long as we are united to Christ, we will share in his everlasting victory.

During the Last Supper Jesus himself explained to the Apostles that through his passion, death, and resurrection — and the transforming grace that would flow through them — he wanted to give them the gift of joy, a joy that no one could ever take away from them. He said,

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete

– John 15:11

Take some time now to admire this gift that comes to us through Easter, to simply gaze at the wonderful reality of Christ's victory and to taste its goodness.

Reflect on how fully you have received this gift up to now, and what may be inhibiting you from experiencing it more deeply. And don't be afraid to ask for the grace of renewed joy, for the grace to taste Christ's victory once again, if that's what you need.

1. When was the last time I felt "overcome with Paschal joy"? What triggered it? If I have never felt that, what is holding me back?

2. How clearly do I understand the difference between pleasure and joy? Can I come up with some of my own examples to illustrate that difference? Which one do I pursue more actively, pleasure, or joy?

3 Think about the people you know who, like Cardinal Van Thuan, exude Christian joy. Thank God for them, and ask God for the grace of a deeper faith, hope, and love, the true fountains of our joy.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

– Philippians 4:4-7, NABR

For though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit appears on the vine, though the yield of the olive fails and the terraces produce no nourishment, though the flocks disappear from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD and exult in my saving God. GOD, my Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet swift as those of deer and enables me to tread upon the heights.

– Habakkuk 3:17-19, NABR

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is God from of old, creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary, and his knowledge is beyond scrutiny. He gives power to the faint, abundant strength to the weak. Though young men faint and grow weary, and youths stagger and fall, they that hope in the LORD will renew their strength, they will soar on eagles' wings; they will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint.

– Isaiah 40:28-31, NABR

Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad because of her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in her joy, all you who mourn over her — so that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink with delight at her abundant breasts! For thus says the LORD: I will spread prosperity over her like a river, like an overflowing torrent, the wealth of nations. You shall nurse, carried in her arms, cradled upon her knees; as a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; in Jerusalem you shall find your comfort.

– Isaiah 66:10-13, NABR

CONFERENCE

When We Were Baptized, the Universe Changed Forever

The day we were baptized, the universe was radically altered. We might think that it had been radically altered the day we were conceived, since on that day a new person with an everlasting spiritual soul had come into being. But at our conception, that everlasting spiritual soul of ours still had some serious problems. Its most serious problem was its being destined for eternal separation from God.

That sounds shocking, and it is, but we can fully appreciate the joy of baptism only if we fully appreciate what it saved us from, namely the flames of frustration that burn forever in Hell. That's where we were headed, because we were born into a fallen race, one that had been conquered by the devil in the original sin of its first parents.

They trusted the devil more than God, using their freedom to abandon God instead of to love and serve him. As a result, they cut themselves and all their descendents off from friendship and communion with God, putting the whole human family under the devil's power.

So on the day we were conceived, it's true that a new person came into existence, but it was a person destined for eternal destruction, which would be a real tragedy for us as individuals, but wouldn't radically alter the rest of the universe.

This original condition of every human soul before baptism is explicitly acknowledged during the baptismal ceremony. After the Liturgy of the Word, the rite of baptism calls for a prayer of exorcism, in which the priest calls on God to free the un-baptized soul from the power of the devil.

The prayer of exorcism summarizes not only the meaning of baptism as the door to communion with God and membership in the Church - the family of God's adopted children — but also the meaning of life itself, which, for Christians, is nothing more (and nothing less) than a difficult and dangerous journey to heaven and a battle against the forces of evil — but that journey and that battle are also joyful, because we don't have to go it alone; Jesus, with his Easter victory, has paved the way ahead of us and travels the road with us.

One of the approved forms of this initial prayer of exorcism goes like this:

Almighty God, you sent your only Son to rescue us from the slavery of sin, and to give us the freedom only your sons and daughters enjoy. We now pray for these children who will have to face the world with its temptations, and fight the devil in all his cunning. Your Son died and rose again to save us. By his victory over sin and death, cleanse these children from the stain of original sin. Strengthen them with the grace of Christ, and watch over them at every step in life's journey.

The prayer makes pretty clear what happened at our baptism, and what happens at every baptism: Christ's victory over sin, death, and evil, is planted like a flag in our hearts, and becomes our victory over sin, death, and evil.

And the rest of the rich symbolism of the baptismal ceremony continues to expand on that same message.

CONFERENCE

Renouncing Satan

The exorcism prayer is followed by another pre-requisite for baptism: the baptismal promises, which take the form of renouncing sin and Satan and professing faith and loyalty to Christ.

Sin is rebellion against God, and a soul that is in the state of sin cannot at the same time be a vessel of God's grace. So the Church requires a renunciation of sin before calling God's Spirit to take up residence in someone's soul.

Un-baptized adults make this denunciation themselves, but infants depend on their parents and godparents to make it for them — much as Jairus' young daughter was miraculously raised to new life through her father's intercession, as St. Mark narrates in Chapter 5 of his Gospel — and then to teach them about Christ and the Church so that when they reach the age of reason they can renew it freely on their own.

The words used in this renunciation make its seriousness clear. All of the various formulas involve an explicit, personal reference to Satan, the devil, the leader of the fallen angels.

In one formula, for instance, the priest asks the parents and godparents:

Do you reject sin so as to live in the freedom of God's children? Do you reject the glamour of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin? Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?

Another formula gets even more specific:

Do you renounce Satan, and therefore sin as the negation of God, evil, as the sign of sin in the world, error, as the blotting out of truth, violence, as contrary to charity, selfishness, as lack of bearing witness to love?

These questions show how seriously the Church takes baptism, how seriously the Church takes sin and the devil, and how serious is the commitment that goes along with the grace of baptism.

The simple prayer of exorcism and the no-nonsense baptismal promises clearly express why the day of our baptism made such a considerable cosmic splash.

- On that day our everlasting spiritual soul was rescued from original sin's slavery to the devil.
- On that day, Christ's Easter victory became our Easter victory; his Resurrection became the promise of our resurrection.
- On that day, the waters of baptism brought the very life of God into our souls, making us into children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ, and active members of his Church.

Such is the astonishing dignity of a baptized soul.

CONFERENCE

The White Garment

The liturgy expresses this spiritual rebirth by clothing the newly baptized in a white garment.

The priest explains its meaning like this:

You have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven.

It is a very human thing to express your personal identity in the clothes you wear.

By giving the newly baptized a white garment, the Church adopts this custom to show that a baptized soul has taken on a new identity, the identity of Christ himself, who is reigning now in heaven, clothed, as the Book of Revelation describes, in a white robe.

White symbolizes glory, heaven, newness of life, and the fact that our souls have been cleansed from sin by the blood of our Savior.

CONFERENCE

The Light of the Easter Candle

The garment eloquently expresses the newness of life enjoyed by a baptized soul, but the liturgy uses another symbol to express the dynamism, the vitality of that life: the baptismal candle.

While one of the godparents lights the child's baptismal candle from the burning Paschal, or Easter, Candle — a symbol of the dynamism and force of Christ's resurrection — the priest proclaims: "Receive the light of Christ."

That Paschal Candle symbolizes the Old Testament pillars of fire and cloud that led God's people safely out of their slavery in Egypt, through the Red Sea, through the wilderness of their Exodus, and into the Promised Land.

And of course the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud in the Old Testament foreshadowed Christ himself, who rose from the dead in order to lead us out of the slavery of sin and into the Promised Land of grace.

Every year, the Church blesses this Candle during the Easter Vigil, proclaiming Christ's Lordship over every corner and space and time.

All of that symbolism, all of that power, is invoked by lighting the baptismal candle from the living flame of the Paschal Candle: through baptism, we become members of God's people, pilgrims on our way to the Father's House, living flames of grace lighting up the world.

Once the baptismal candle is lit, the priest continues:

This light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. This child of yours has been enlightened by Christ. He is to walk always as a child of the light. May he keep the flame of faith alive in his heart. When the Lord comes, may he go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly Kingdom.

When we were baptized, therefore, a divine flame sprang up in the depths of our soul; the very life of the resurrected Christ became the soul of our soul.

CONFERENCE

The Waters of Baptism

But the most powerful symbol of what happened on the day of our baptism, when we were born again, as Jesus himself puts it in the third chapter of John's Gospel, is the water itself.

Before we were baptized, the priest blessed the water, calling to mind all the Old Testament prefigurations that reveal baptism's immense power and significance:

- the waters over which the Spirit of God hovered at the moment of creation;
- the waters of the Flood that cleansed the earth from sin and saved Noah and his family, an image of the Papacy and the Church;
- the waters of the Red Sea, through which the People of God passed in order to be freed from slavery and oppression in idolatrous Egypt;
- the water that flowed from the rock to refresh the Israelites during their forty-year desert journey;
- the waters of the Jordan, in which Christ himself was baptized, showing his mysterious identification with every member of the sinful human race…

Even as a merely natural element, regardless of these and plenty of other biblical appearances, water eloquently expresses the rich meaning of baptism, as the Catechism makes clear:

- its clarity symbolizes the brightness of faith;
- its coolness symbolizes the calming of sinful passions accomplished by the coming of the Holy Spirit;
- its cleansing properties symbolize the washing away of all sin;
- its necessity for life of any kind symbolizes the reality of new, supernatural life that the baptized soul enjoys in Christ;
- its importance for a fruitful harvest and a stable community symbolizes the eternal peace and prosperity of the heavenly Kingdom.

All this, and much more, was evoked when we were baptized. It was the most important day of our life, the day when Christ's victory became our victory. It was a miracle, an astounding miracle.

CONFERENCE

An Astonishing Lack of Baptismal Awareness

But what's even more astounding is how little difference it makes in the lives of so many Catholics.

For many of us, baptism is little more than a social ceremony, a quaint tradition and a vague religious obligation that serves as a convenient opportunity for family get-togethers and nice pictures.

The fact that the universe radically changes at every baptism often gets lost in the ribbons and cake.

The priceless gift of grace can be forgotten, ignored, or squandered, and baptized children of God end up being indistinguishable from the un-baptized, equally dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure, popularity, and profit, as if they were merely citizens of this world, and not primarily citizens of Christ's Kingdom on their way to heaven and soldiers of the Church engaged in the ongoing battle between good and evil.

CONFERENCE

Keeping Our Baptism Fresh: Conclusion & Questionnaire

A tested tool to avoid falling into that trap is to renew our baptismal promises on each anniversary of our baptism: we can have baptism parties in the same way that we have birthday parties — after all, our baptism was our spiritual birthday.

Baptismal promises can also be renewed at the conclusion of spiritual retreats, or during special liturgical celebrations, as we do during the Easter Vigil. Individually, we can renew those promises on a regular basis:

- for example, every time we make the sign of the cross with water from the holy water fount in our parish church (that's one of the reasons it's there, by the way);
- or every time we visit a chapel and see the sanctuary light burning near the Eucharist, a light that can remind us of our baptismal candle;
- or every time we get dressed for Mass, we can intentionally put on clothes that will make us remember the white garment of our baptism, the garment which we promised to keep clean and spotless.

Easter was Christ's Victory Day, the day that the unconquerable Paschal Joy first appeared in the world. Every baptism is an extension of Christ's Victory Day into the life of another one of God's beloved children. If we can increase our awareness of the reality of baptism, surely we will be able to increase our experience of the joy of Christ's Easter victory.

You may want to take some time now to prayerfully reflect on the following ten questions, which are designed to help you listen to whatever God may be saying in the depths of your heart about how you can live Easter more deeply, enjoying more fully the Taste of Victory.

1. Remember the baptisms I have been to in the past. What struck me most about those ceremonies and why?

2. Why do many Catholics show little awareness of the real meaning of baptism?

3. Explain in my own words the connection between Christ's Resurrection and the sacrament of baptism.

4. Of all the symbols surrounding the ceremony of baptism, which one strikes me as the most powerful and why?

5. Why would God choose to welcome us into his family through a ceremony so full of *material* things: water, two anointings, candles, crying babies, godparents, etc…?

6. The ritual for baptism mentions Satan and the powers of evil multiple times. What do I think of that? How firmly do I believe in the reality of spiritual warfare (that there are evil forces at work in the world trying to distance me from God)?

7. Why do we celebrate birthday anniversaries?

8. Why don't more people celebrate baptism anniversaries?

9. In my own words, thank God for the miracle of my baptism.

10. From now own, what will I do to keep fresh my awareness of Christ's Victory and my experience of the joy that comes from sharing in it?

NOTES

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