The Paschal Mystery

The Paschal Mystery is a core doctrine of the Church, one of the essential beliefs of all Christians. Though all doctrines are important, it can also be said that some doctrines define the very heart of the Christian faith. The Paschal Mystery is one of those doctrines, making it similar to the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. Thus when we help students to understand the meaning of the Paschal Mystery, we give them an essential foundation for their faith.

This is the definition of *Paschal Mystery* in the glossary of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

> Christ's work of redemption accomplished principally by his Passion, death, Resurrection, and glorious Ascension, whereby "dying he destroyed our death, rising he restored our life" (1067; cf. 654). The paschal mystery is celebrated and made present in the liturgy of the Church, and its saving effects are communicated through the sacraments (1076), especially the Eucharist, which renews the paschal sacrifice of Christ as the sacrifice offered by the Church (571, 1362–1372). (P. 891)

This short background article expands on this definition, explores the "how" of the Paschal Mystery, and considers the ways believers participate in it.

Exploring the Etymology

A simple consideration of the linguistic background for the terms *paschal* and *mystery* reveals many things about this doctrine. *Paschal* is the English adjectival form of the Greek word *pascha*, which is derived from the Hebrew word *pesah (*or *pesach)*, which means "passover." The *Pesach* or Passover is the Jewish Feast celebrating the Israelites' deliverance from slavery in Egypt (see Exodus, chapter 12), focusing on the Tenth Plague and its results. In the Tenth Plague, the angel of death struck down the firstborn males of the Egyptians (humans and animals) but "passed over" the homes of the Israelites, sparing their firstborn. This led to the Israelites' release from their Egyptian captivity, beginning a major new chapter in the story of salvation history. The angel of death recognized the homes of the Israelites because they were marked by the blood of a sacrificial lamb (also called the paschal lamb).

The Passover is an important foreshadowing in God's plan of salvation. There are many parallels between the Passover and Christ's saving work. In both cases the people are under foreign domination: Egyptian and Roman. In both cases God raises up a savior to lead them to freedom: Moses and Jesus Christ. In both cases the people are given a new code of life: the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. In both cases they are saved by the shedding of innocent blood: the Paschal Lamb's and Christ's. In both cases the savior leads the people from one state to another: from being slaves in Egypt to being free in the Promised Land and from being slaves to sin to being free from sin.

There is one important difference between the Passover and the Paschal Mystery: In the Passover salvation is incomplete and limited to the Israelites, but in the Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ, salvation is fully accomplished and universal, for all people and all time. By calling Christ's saving work the **Paschal** Mystery, we are reminded that God's plan of salvation has long been at work, and though hidden and incomplete in the events of the Old Testament, it has been fully revealed and accomplished through Jesus Christ.

As a theological concept, *mystery* is often misunderstood. For many people the word *mystery* calls to mind something that is secret, irrational, or fictional. This understanding of *mystery* is consistent with the second definition of *mystery* in *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.* But the mysteries of faith—for example the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the Paschal Mystery—are not secrets, irrational, or beyond

explanation. A correct understanding of the mysteries of faith is consistent with *Webster's* first definition of *mystery:* "A religious truth that one can know only by revelation and cannot fully understand" (p. 822).

Correctly understood then, the mysteries of faith share several characteristics. First, they are mysterious in the sense that we cannot discover them through human reasoning or scientific exploration. But this does not mean that they cannot be known or understood—God has revealed these truths to us, particularly through the Scriptures and Tradition. They must be accepted in faith, and once accepted, their meaning and purpose is understood by the believer. Second, they are mysterious precisely because they are religious truths. Religious or spiritual truths are not limited by or contained solely within the physical world so they cannot be proven or disproven through scientific experimentation. Words cannot precisely describe these truths, so we must use the language of metaphor and symbol when talking about them. Third, they are mysterious in the sense that we know them incompletely in this life. Their meaning is so rich that their full understanding is beyond the capability of the human person. By calling Christ's saving work the Paschal **Mystery,** we are reminded that it has been revealed by God (not by human beings) and that although we can know a great deal about it, we will not fully know understand the Paschal Mystery in this earthly life.

Describing the Effects of the Paschal Mystery

Simply stated, the Paschal Mystery is the doctrinal teaching that God saves us from the consequences of sin—both Original Sin and our personal sins—through the saving work of Jesus Christ. However, this simple definition leads to numerous valid and complementary descriptions of the Paschal Mystery. This is one reason the Paschal Mystery can be confusing to students. Let's look at the most common of these complementary descriptions.

One common description starts by considering the consequences of sin. The Scriptures and Tradition reveal that the primary consequences of sin are death (see Genesis 2:17, Romans 6:23) and eternal separation from God (see Matthew 25:41). Thus one way of describing the Paschal Mystery is the process through which Christ's work saves us from death and from eternal separation from the Holy Trinity. Or, to describe it in positive terms, the Paschal Mystery is the process through which Christ's work makes everlasting life possible for all people and brings us into full and eternal union with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Another way of describing the Paschal Mystery is centered on the theological concepts of Heaven and hell. Because *hell* can be defined as "the state of being eternally separated from God" and *Heaven* can be defined as "the state of being in complete, eternal union with God," a popular description of the Paschal Mystery is that it is the process through which Christ saves us from the "fires of hell" so that we might enjoy the glories of Heaven.

A third way of describing the Paschal Mystery focuses on the "what" of the Paschal Mystery—that is, the four events commonly used to describe it: the Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension. The Paschal Mystery reveals that Christ's Passion and death, in loving obedience to his Father's will, were necessary to bring to fruition God's plan of salvation, his Resurrection is proof and affirmation that God's saving plan has been fulfilled, and his Ascension enables the Church to continue to make salvation available to all people through the power of the Holy Spirit. So the Paschal Mystery is often simply described as Christ's Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension, a kind of theological shorthand. (There are variations of this formula; for example, the *Catechism* also refers to the Paschal Mystery as Christ's "suffering, death, and Resurrection" or even just as his "death and Resurrection.")

In the broadest sense, Christ's entire life is salvific—that is, all his words and actions reveal his Father's will and contribute to our salvation, and Christians strive to follow all his teachings. But the events of his Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension most clearly reveal and affirm his saving work. This is why the earliest creeds and proclamations of faith focus on these events. For example, see Peter's early speeches recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (2:22–24, 3:13–15, 4:10) and Paul's frequent references to Christ's Crucifixion (1 Corinthians 1:23, 2:2; Galatians 2:19, 3:1) and Resurrection (Romans 6:4–10, 1 Corinthians 15:12–24, Philippians 3:8–11). Paul poignantly states why the focus of the Paschal Mystery is on Christ's death and Resurrection: "If Christ has not been raised, then empty (too) is our preaching; empty, too, your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:14).

There are other ways to describe nuances of the Paschal Mystery, but these three concepts are central to understanding this mystery of faith: first, that through Christ's saving work we are saved from death and eternal separation from God; second, that through Christ's saving work we will share in his resurrected life and the glories of Heaven; and third, the essential core of the Paschal Mystery is found in Jesus' Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension.

How Does the Paschal Mystery Work?

The question, "How does the Paschal Mystery work?" is an innocent question that a teacher might expect to hear in the classroom. Modern minds, formed with an emphasis on the scientific process, expect that a teaching of faith as basic as this should have some kind of logical, verifiable, and observable answer. But as was mentioned previously, we are not dealing with a scientific truth; we are dealing with a spiritual truth. We can explain it through metaphor only. We can verify it through a life of faith only. We can observe it in the lives of the saints only. This doesn't mean that the Paschal Mystery is any less real than the law of relativity. (In fact, I would argue that it is more real!) But we must not expect to understand how it works as we could a math problem or a scientific proof. What follows is a very basic answer to the question, "How does the Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus Christ save us from sin and death?" Please keep in mind that there is much more that could be said on this topic.

The Scriptures and Tradition often use three metaphors in explaining how the Paschal Mystery accomplishes our salvation: redemption, justification, and adoption. These metaphors build upon Old Testament themes and reflect the cultural realities of the first Christians. The Apostles and Church Fathers used these cultural metaphors to explain to the people of their time their experience of Christ's saving power in their lives. We are somewhat removed from these cultural experiences, which is why they require some background explanation.

The metaphor of **redemption** is referred to in the *Catechism's* glossary definition at the beginning of this article, and it has to do with the cultural practice of slavery. Slavery was an essential part of the Roman Empire's economic system. Many slaves were people captured during wartime, but many slaves were people who sold themselves into slavery in order to pay off debts or just to survive. To "redeem" such a slave, one had to pay the price of that slave's debt to the slave owner and then the slave would be set free.

You can see how this practice can be seen as a metaphor for how Christ saves us. We have become enslaved to the world (or as Paul says "slaves to sin") through Original Sin and our personal sin. This is a debt that we cannot repay on our own power. But Jesus Christ takes our debt upon himself. Through his perfect obedience to his Father's will, he "redeems" us—that is, he pays off the debt incurred by Adam and Eve's (and our) disobedience to God. Redeemed by Christ we are now free from slavery to the world and

slaves to Christ (or as Paul says, “slaves of righteousness”). See Romans 6:15–23 for an example of this metaphor.

The metaphor of **justification** is also frequently used in the *Catechism* and is commonly associated with the cultural practice of blood sacrifice. The reasoning goes like this. By definition only a just person can be in intimate relationship with God—that is, in perfect communion with him. A person in a state of injustice (sinfulness) cannot be in intimate relationship with God; God’s perfect holiness simply doesn’t allow for such a relationship. Because we have all sinned (see Romans 3:23), in order to restore our right relationship with God, we must regain our “just” state. Many cultures, including the ancient Israelites, believed that this required a sacrifice to their god, and that sacrifice was usually the life of an unblemished animal (see Leviticus, chapters 4 and 5; the Israelites also practiced animal sacrifice for other reasons).

This cultural practice helps us to understand the metaphor of justification. Sin—again both Original Sin and our personal sin—damages our “just” state and thus ruptures our communion with God. A sacrifice is required to restore us to that “just” state. But every sacrifice we offer on our own behalf is inadequate because our sin makes us impure and thus our sacrifices are impure (or “blemished”). To get us out of this catch-22 situation, God the Father sends his Son who, because of his sinlessness, is the pure and perfect sacrifice necessary for restoring our just state. Jesus Christ is both perfect priest and victim as he offers himself to his Father on our behalf. His Passion and death justify us and restore us to full communion with the Holy Trinity. See Romans 3:21–26 and Hebrews, chapters 5, 9, and 10, to see how two biblical authors addressed the metaphor of justification.

The metaphor of **adoption** is used in the New Testament letters by Paul and less frequently in modern theology. This is probably because our cultural understanding of adoption is different from the first-century cultural understanding. We think of adoption as adult parents going through a legal process to bring unrelated children into their family. But as far as we know, this type of adoption did not exist in Jewish or Roman culture—orphan children were simply brought into the care of extended families. But there was a legal process in Roman culture for the adoption of adults. Sometimes a childless couple would adopt an adult relative—a nephew or grandson, for example—and thus ensure the continuance of the family name and fortune. Adult slaves were also sometimes adopted. Keep in mind that many slaves were valuable members of the household and were treated like family. So some slaves chose to be adopted into their owners’ families if the owner was agreeable and the slave had no natural family to return to after his or her service was fulfilled.

Knowing this cultural practice can help one to understand how the adoption metaphor works with the redemption metaphor. Paul weaves these two metaphors together in Romans, chapters 6 through 8. First, he tells how Christ’s death has redeemed us so that we are no longer slaves to sin: “We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin” (6:6). Now Christ is our new “owner” and we “have become slaves of righteousness” (6:18). But this is not the end of the process. Being a slave to the household of God is such a wonderful experience that we want to remain in this household forever. And so we accept God’s invitation to be part of his family, moving from slave to adopted son or daughter: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, ‘*Abba,* Father!’ The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (8:15–17).

The thing common to all these metaphors is that human beings cannot and do not save themselves. It is Christ who saves us through his Passion, death, and Resurrection. He has redeemed us from our slavery to sin and restored our original justice so that we might live in full communion with the Trinity as adopted sons and daughters of God. But this does not happen automatically, nor is it simply a passive

experience on our part. We must choose to participate in the Paschal Mystery and avail ourselves of Christ's saving work.

Participating in the Paschal Mystery

The Paschal Mystery is not just about our own salvation; it calls us to continue Christ's mission, inviting other people to know God's saving power. Consider the Ascension, the final event in Paschal Mystery definition. Christ's Ascension marks the beginning of the mission of the Church. At his Ascension, Christ gives the Apostles their mission: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19–20). Soon after this, the Apostles receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit, empowering them for this mission and thus the saving work of Christ continues through the Church. Individual Christians participate in the Paschal Mystery through their own sacrifices and through the sacramental life of the Church.

Christ himself set the foundation for uniting our sacrifices with his for the sake of our salvation and for the salvation of others. He instructs his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24–25). But after we have been redeemed through our Baptism, we want to share the Gospel with others, even though doing so often requires some form of sacrifice. We might need to sacrifice comfort, popularity, or personal freedom. Or our sacrifice might be the pain of being rejected, misunderstood, or even tortured for speaking the truth and acting on it. The Church holds martyrs as exemplars of the Paschal Mystery because of the high price they paid in following Christ. We endure these sacrifices not on our own power, but by seeing it as an extension of Christ's Passion. In prayer we consciously unite our sacrifices—even the suffering we do not choose, such as the suffering caused by illness or accidents—with Christ's Passion and death.

There is a fine distinction to be made here. Taking up our cross does not mean that we earn our own salvation; that work is Christ's alone. But our willingness to endure suffering and even death to continue Christ's mission does earn us merit in the sight of God. We avoid egoism and give God his rightful glory by remembering that we can take up our cross only because God first reaches out to us and gives us the needed strength to do so.

The sacramental life of the Church is the superlative source for experiencing God's saving power and receiving the grace necessary to continue Christ's mission. In Baptism we are redeemed from our slavery to sin, and our original justice is restored. In Confirmation we receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit to continue Christ's saving mission. In the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, we are again freed from slavery to sin when sin has reentered our lives. In the Sacraments of Matrimony and Holy Orders, we receive the graces needed to continue Christ's mission of salvation in family life or as an ordained minister of the Church. And in the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, we receive God's healing power and the grace to unite our suffering with Christ's Passion.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist has a special place in our participation in the Paschal Mystery. In the Eucharist we receive Christ's Body and Blood, the same body and blood that was broken and poured out to redeem us. We receive the same Christ who was raised as the promise of our own eternal life with God. Our hearing of the Word of God and our reception of the Eucharist is both the sign and the reality of our full communion with God. The Eucharist makes Christ's Paschal Sacrifice present to us, so that we truly and actively participate in its saving power.

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