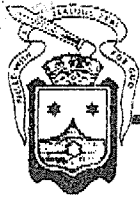


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Carmelite Spiritual Center

8433 Bailey Road * Darien, Illinois 60561 * 630-969-4141

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Life is Worth Giving

EASTER IS TRUE HIGHLIGHT OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

Although much more time, effort and money is expended on Christmas, the true highlight of our Faith as Christians is the celebration of the Lord's Resurrection at Easter. As St. Paul wrote many years ago, if the Lord hasn't arisen at Easter, then our Faith is in vain.

The origin of the term "Easter" has had a varied understanding and history over the centuries of our belief. Since the time of Venerable Bede (673-735), an English monk and historian who wrote the first history of England, the origin of the term for Christ's Resurrection has been thought by many to be derived from the Anglo-Saxon word "Eastre." She was the pagan goddess of Spring.

However, more recent studies point to the fact that the early Christians called Easter week "Hebdomada Alba" (white week) from the white garments worn by the newly-baptized Christians to symbolize their baptism into Christ and the Christian Community. The plural form "albae" was used in certain phrases for the octave of Easter when these garments were laid aside.

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This word was later misunderstood as the plural of "alba" which means "dawn" and then translated into the Old High German plural for dawn, "Eostarum." It is from this word that many scholars believe came our English word "Easter."

Preparation for Baptism

Whatever the origin of the word for Easter, the Feast of the Lord's Resurrection is celebrated in relation to the Jewish celebration of Passover which freed them from the time of bondage in Egypt.

However, for all those adults preparing to become Christians and receive the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist at the Easter Saturday Vigil Mass, the time before Easter, which we still call Lent, is a time of prayer and fasting in preparation for reception into the Church. This has been brought into consciousness very much by the RCIA (Revised Christian Initiation of Adults) in so many of our parishes since the introduction of the Rite at the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s.

Tales of the Resurrection

Over the 2,000 years since the Lord's Resurrection, many tales have been told in relation to the celebration of Easter.

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To some extent these stories remind us that too often in our Christian beliefs, the religious symbols of important and significant aspects of our Faith are overshadowed and, indeed, overwhelmed by non-religious secular presentations and celebrations. How often have we witnessed the Christ Child and his coming as the Messiah lost ^(the) in hoopla and sales drive of the secular celebration of Christmas.

Even the secular symbol of the Easter bunny often seems destined to overwhelm and even replace the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, at least in the minds and hearts of the general public and particularly the children. Often the Easter Egg Hunt seems to be more important than the true celebration of the Easter Eucharist.

But rather than simply lament, or battle, the prevalent use of this symbol, a gifted author by the name of Fr. Richard Lewandowski, who writes under the pen name of Fr. Richard Lewandowski, has created a charming and delightful children's story of a rabbit who not only views the great events of Holy Week but becomes in fiction the first living creature to witness Christ's Resurrection. The book, entitled "The First Easter Bunny," is a joy for adults to read, too.

Delightfully presented with color illustrations by artist Anne Schaper Englot, the book presents this major belief of the Christian Faith with a child-like simplicity.

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Such a presentation actually enhances the deep spiritual truth of this momentous event.

The tale is sure to capture not only the attention but the hearts and minds of Christian believers, young and old, and help them to relate to the central mystery of the Resurrection.

According to Fr. Lewandowski, he was "prompted to write the book after becoming somewhat concerned that the beautiful message of Easter was taking second place to the Easter bunny." As a result, he set about to rewrite the story of the Lord's suffering, crucifixion, death and resurrection as seen through the eyes of a fictional rabbit.

And in Fr. Lewandowski's ^{im}imaginative and original way, the book helps to tie such secular traditions as coloring eggs and hunting for them to Christianity itself. In this way, he masterfully redirects the focus of Easter back to its original meaning — "Jesus Christ is Risen!"

It is ⁽ⁱⁿ⁾ such ways that all Christians can focus on both the origin and meaning of this central belief of our Faith, and not surrender it to those who would make it simply another date on the secular calendar of celebrations which have lost their deepest meaning. (Fr. Kevin Shanley)