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EASTER IS A TRIUMPH OF ETERNAL LIFE

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

In many ways the celebration of Easter is the focal point of our entire Christian Liturgical Year. It is true that, especially among those less religious, Christmas and its attendant shopping season consumes more time, energy and funds than other holydays and is an important part of the celebration of Christ's birthday — but Easter not only celebrates His birth but Christ's triumph of life over death and the promise of eternal life.

So these themes of Resurrection, Eternal Life, Redemption and Salvation are joined together in the joyful celebration of Easter. It is truly the focal point of Liturgy, and a great assurance of our own eternal life. In addition, it is the guarantee that our human death will not sever the bonds of love so carefully woven here on earth. These bonds will not be severed forever, and the loss of someone near and dear to us in this life does not mean a forever separation.

History of Easter

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Our English word "Easter" seems to have entered our language from its closest relation of the German language as "Ostern" or "Easter." Its counterpart among the Nordic-speaking peoples refers to the rising and lengthening of the presence of the sun following the darkness of winter. It also refers to the season of new birth.

Easter was originally used for the pagan "feast of new life" which was celebrated each Spring among the peoples of Europe and elsewhere. It is also thought that the word refers to the "East" from whence the sun rises each day.

And in many Catholic/Christian countries, the word "Pasch" or Paschal Feast is used to designate the celebration of Easter. The word is derived from the Hebrew language as "Pasch" (Pass-over). This Jewish feastday is a reminder of the Old Testament experience of the Exodus of the Chosen People and their deliverance from their life of bondage in Egypt. Over the centuries, religious leaders have presented to the Christian people the obvious parallel that exists between slavery in Egypt and the saving power of the Covenant with the Jewish people in the Old Testament and repenting for sin and believing in the Lord's Resurrection in the freedom of the New Testament.

Council of Nicea

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Christians understand that Easter must always be on a Sunday, the first day of the week in the new calendar of the world's existence since the birth of Jesus Christ, the era still known as A.D. ("Anno Domini"). Some scholars today, however, would have people refer to our present time as C.E. ("Common Era") as a more politically correct term. The date of Easter itself may vary by as much as 34 days between Mar. 22 and Apr. 25.

Be that as it may, until the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., both the Christian Easter and the Jewish Passover were celebrated at the same time. At the Council of Nicea, the current method of determining the date of Easter was established. The Feast of the Lord's Resurrection, then, is celebrated on the First Sunday following the first full moon of the Spring season (the Vernal Equinox) which begins on Mar. 21.

It is often thought that at time time many pilgrims needed the additional daylight to guide them on their yearly Easter festival and spiritual travels.

The Symbols of Easter

Over the centuries, many symbols came to be associated with the great feast of Easter Sunday, especially the "Lamb" which represents not only the sacrificial lamb of the Jews at Passover but the season of Spring and new life. In addition,

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this symbol took on an additional meaning as the "Lamb of God" often with a flag of victory displayed and used to represent the Risen Lord Jesus Christ.

The Easter Candle, ~~represented~~ representing light in darkness and also the sun, has been used for many centuries as a symbol of Jesus and his triumph over death, darkness and the evil of sin. This Easter (Paschal) Candle, blessed at the Easter Vigil services, is also used throughout the year at Requiem Masses to remind the faithful not only of Christ's victory over death but also the promise of resurrection and eternal life for all those who believe in Him.

Other symbols include fresh flowers as symbols of life, and especially lilies which are used to decorate altars and churches for Easter Sunday and the days following. Since the beginning of the 20th Century when it was brought from the Orient, the lily has been associated with the celebration of Easter as a symbol of innocence and purity.

Another prominent symbol of the season is the Easter Egg used to represent the Spring and the revival of the fertility of the earth, and also a symbol of the secret of life itself. To some ancient peoples, the egg represented the world. And in the Eastern parts of Europe, eggs were dyed red to represent the mystery of Christ's saving blood shed for all people.

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In addition, the caterpillar and the butterfly are also used to symbolize Christ's coming forth from the tomb and his resurrected life.

The Meaning of Easter

In all of this, the faithful need to reflect that the Resurrection of the Lord at Easter is so great an event that it must mean something very special to all. It means the promise of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and peace and joy in our Christian life. It is also the foundation of our Faith. As St. Paul said: "If Christ has not risen from the dead, our Faith in is vain."