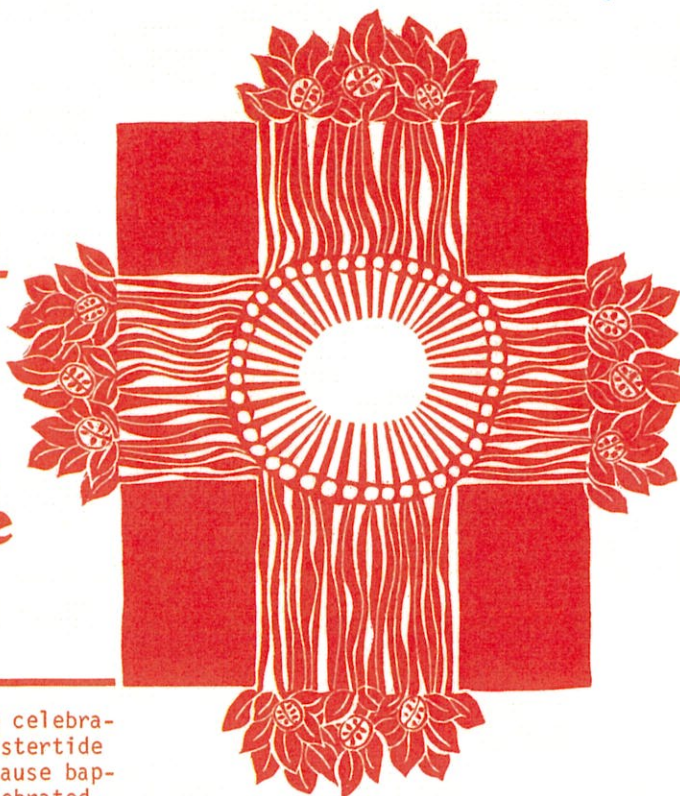


# MYSTAGOGY

## Reflecting on the Easter Experience



The Spanish philosopher Unamuno once remarked that there are many who believe in the idea of God, but few who believe in God. His comment prompts us to wonder about the resurrection: did the first Christians believe in the resurrection, or did they not rather believe in the Risen One. To believe in the resurrection, to be of the firm opinion that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead, is not the same as having faith in the One who was victorious over death. Similarly, the celebration of Easter needs to be considered not so much as a remembrance of Jesus's resurrection, but as an experience of God's power, which was at work in Jesus, raising us, too, from the dead. In truth, it might be said that the celebration of Easter is the celebration of the Church's participation in the resurrection of Jesus. Nearly fifteen hundred years ago, a Roman deacon named John described the neophytes returning to the basilica from the baptistery, dressed in white and glistening with oil and water, as "images of the resurgent Church." It is to the resurgent Church, to this resurrection in our midst, that we are witnesses, as the events of the early morning, on the first day after the sabbath, are replayed in our own communities.

Easter is essentially connected with baptism, not only baptism with Easter: whenever baptism is celebrated, it *is* Easter! Hence the otherwise extraordinary provision in the RCIA that baptism be preceded, whenever it is celebrated, by the Lenten scrutiny masses, and that it be followed, at whatever

time of the year, by the celebration of the masses of Eastertide (RCIA #40). This is because baptism, whenever it is celebrated, is a participation in the pascha of the Lord: baptism plunges us into the Easter mysteries, makes us an Easter people. This recognition that death and resurrection are basic to the Christian life, not merely an annual festival of remembrance, underlies the art of mystagogy.

### We have passed from death to life...

Alfred North Whitehead said that death is not an event of life: it is merely the end of life. But John Dunne, in his book, *Time and Myth*, reflects on Whitehead's saying and wonders whether it is true. What if death were an event of life, he asks. What if it occurred not at the end of life, but in the midst of life? How would it make us see life differently? This is no idle question, for Paul wrote to the Romans:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might walk in newness of life... You are to think of yourselves as dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What would it be like to have died? Evidence of such books as *Life After Death* suggests that people who have "died" and come back to life live rather differently afterwards than they did before. If Christians are those who were "buried by baptism into death," this is no matter for idle curiosity. Perhaps we should at least think of ourselves as people in whom death has already taken up its home. Ingrid Bergman lived for seven years after she had found she had incurable cancer and shortly before her death she said: "I have accepted it. Victims who don't accept their fate, who don't learn to live with it, only destroy what little time they have left." This is a bold statement, almost Christian in its sentiments. Christians are those who have accepted death, who live with it, who redeem the time.

This kind of consciousness bears fruit in a radically different way of living and looking. A young woman, dying in a hospice at the age of twenty-one, asks to be lifted up from her pillows so that she can see the rose blooming outside her window. Afterwards, she gratefully lies back and dies in peace. The same sense of being able to enjoy without having to possess, the same joy in simple things, characterizes the life of the disciple: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body,



what you shall put on. For life is more than food, the body more than clothing..."(Lk.12:22) The Lukan context for this saying of Jesus is significant: a series of contrasts between true and false religion, sayings on faithfulness to Christ, on monetary rights, on the accumulation of wealth. We might wonder what the proximity and acceptance of death would do to our habitual attitudes towards time, money, security, power, ambitions, possessions. If we had really passed through death, instead of being stuck this side of it, we would be unbelievably free, for we would have absolutely nothing to lose. The fear of death accounts for so much of what we do, for it is ultimately the fear of losing everything we have come to rely on, and trust in. But for those who have been through death, all is lost and there is nothing more to lose: no more grief, no more fear, no more clinging.

The purpose of Sunday in the Christian life is to serve, not as a day of obligation, but as a day of freedom. It used to be called the "eighth day," a day outside the circle of the week; it is time out of time, it is life-after death. Eastertide, or Pentecost, has the same meaning. Its images are all images of life lived after death, even in this world.

The purpose of mystagogy, then, is simply this: to help the newborn, the recently dead, to walk in newness of life. They have to be allowed to discover their new-found freedom. Just as we do not give infants lectures on how to walk, or offer courses on the theory of mobility to paraplegics, so mystagogy is not a matter of providing a course of lectures. It is much more like what we do when we encourage a child to take its first steps: we encourage it to take the risk of letting go. Children learn to walk by letting go of dead objects and staggering towards another person, trusting they will be caught and swept up if they stumble and fall. Neophytes, likewise, learn to walk towards the Stranger on the shore. Like Peter and John, they have plunged into the water at catching a glimpse of the One they thought they recognized. They struggle to the shore and realize it is the Lord as they eat and drink with him after his (and their) resurrection.

Thus the question for the neophytes in the time of mystagogy is simply this: How are we to live with

Christ who is risen, while we yet live among the undead? They will learn the answer to that question by looking to the community for help -- but too often we do not know what they are talking about. We are too busy living the life of the undead, living as people who have not yet accepted their fate. As Ray Kemp says: Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.

## Because we love the brethren...

The angel asked the women: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

There is a double experience here: good news and bad news -- or, rather, the good news appears first to be bad news. The bad news is what confronts them most obviously: the empty tomb, the hollowness of it all, the sense of loss, of distracted grief, of aching absence. The earliest resurrection accounts are full of strange language: "they were afraid, yet full of joy"(Mt). "They ran from the tomb distressed and terrified"(Mk). "Fear," "amazement," "terror"(Lk). The truth had to be faced: Jesus -- the familiar master, the beloved friend, teacher, healer, comforter, point of reference, sure anchorage -- was gone. Emptiness. Instead, there was only the promise: "I will send you another paraclete," i.e. friend, counsellor, advocate.

Jesus had been made a life-giving Spirit. His presence to his own is no longer in the flesh -- tangible, comforting, reliable -- but in the Spirit. This is a different kind of presence, bereft of immediacy, concreteness, objectivity. We cannot turn to him and weep, as Peter could; or recline on his breast, as John did; or have him sit down at our table and share our food, as Peter's mother-in-law did. All that is over. We cannot turn to him to arbitrate our quarrels, resolve our questions, calm our fears. All we can do is turn to his Spirit-filled body, his Church.

But the Church is not a substitute for Jesus, not a transition-object: it is a very different sort of presence. The constant danger is that human religious authorities will try to "stand in" for the historical Jesus, filling in for him in his absence as infallible oracles -- as if the death of Jesus had never occurred, as if he had found a substitute in new authority figures instead of being present in the whole community in his Spirit.

Neophytes, like all of us, have to come to terms with that. Jesus is gone. We have his Spirit animating the faithful, gathering the Spirit, raising the dead to life. We have the breaking of bread and the stories and the believers. Jesus is present to us now in a radically different way, not through his physical body, but through his mystical body, the community of the faithful. This means that his presence is but intermittently glimpsed and is hidden from human eyes. It is visible only to a wisdom which is not of this world, for his presence is the presence of one who has passed through death and is recognizable only to those who have died with him.

The Easter experience of the first witnesses of the resurrection was thus two-edged. It was an experience of absence as well as presence, of loss as well as recognition, of anguish as well as joy. So, too, with those who experience death and resurrection in the Easter sacraments: they experience not only joy, peace, and happiness, but also fear, a sense of absence and a feeling of disillusionment. It is necessary to face this shadow side of Easter, for it is part of being a disciple of the risen Christ. The shadow side of resurrection takes various forms: having one's enthusiasm rebuffed as immature and egotistical; experiencing the elder brother syndrome among ungracious  
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# MYSTAGOGY

## Reflecting on the Easter Experience

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members of the community; finding that the initial excitement wears off, boredom sets in, life returns to normal; discovering that the old life patterns are not entirely dead, the new self in Christ not fully assimilated; a growing feeling that it might all have been an illusion, a nine-day high; discovering that the reality of the Church is not what one had naively expected it to be; learning to fail, to surrender the claim to be holy, to be close to God.

When this happens, it is time for an Emmaus experience. The disillusioned neophytes go back to the Scriptures of the Easter cycle, discuss their meaning, as with a stranger, until they recognize him again in the breaking of bread. Significantly enough, the New Testament writings which accompany the Easter gospels are Acts, 1 & 2 Peter, 1 & 2 John and Revelation -- all books deriving from persecuted and suffering communities, profoundly aware of their weakness, sinfulness and vulnerability. Like the rest of the New Testament, they were written for people who have passed through death by people who had passed through death. Yet they, like us, were a people still in a remission, for whom the daily experience of dying and being raised up was an ever-present reality. "Because I daily rise from my sins," said Nicetus of Ramesiana, "I shall not be surprised at the resurrection from the dead."

The role of the Church is to support the newly-born, the newly-dead: "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren"(1 Jn.3:14). This means patiently de-briefing them after their Easter experience, hearing their testimony, contemplating the Scriptures as the key to it all, joining with them in the breaking of bread. And the mutual support continues throughout the journey of faith, the experience of resurrection recurs every year in the celebrations of the time of Lent and Eastertide. If there is a conclusion to the period of mystagogy, it is in the final consummation of

this life-in-death, the celebration of the Viaticum, the last of the Easter sacraments.

### We have seen the Lord...

"We are an Easter people," says St. Augustine, "and *Alleluia* is our song." That, however, has not always been our experience. In some ways we have been more of a Lenten people. Philip Murnion has characterized the ethos of preconciliar Catholicism as marked by the theme of "solidarity in suffering." A Catholic church was easily identifiable by its dolorous madonnas, its pietàs, its sometimes garish Stations of the Cross, and its portrayals of the suffering Christ. A common Catholic response to pains and setbacks of every kind was, "offer it up!" Even today, Lent has been revived, but we have not yet rediscovered the meaning of Eastertide: it is all over on Easter Sunday. There has been a profound recovery of the importance of the resurrection in Catholic life, and an exciting rediscovery of the role of the Spirit, both of which have contributed to a reaction against the more oppressive aspects of the stress on sin and suffering in the preconciliar Church. But something is still missing. As Gene LaVerdiere points out in a recent issue of *Chicago Studies*, these changes of emphasis have changed us, but they have not renewed us, for we have still not yet discovered what salvation is about. We have tended to emphasize the resurrection at the expense of the Cross, to want to affirm the goodness of life without discerning the evil that is in us, we want to be encouraged but never corrected.

It is now time to work at contemplating and discovering the intimate connection between death and resurrection, between the events of Good Friday and those of Holy Saturday, to recognize that the Easter Triduum is a single feast, from Thursday night to Sunday, prepared for by Lent, but extending for fifty days.

Similarly, we must find the courage to allow the catechumens to die. This is painful: it is hard to watch someone else suffer; our instinct is always to try to alleviate their pain, to prevent their death. But should we do that to the catechumens if we really believe that death is an event of life, that it is the only way to true life? Only if they die can they become witnesses to the resurrection. But to do that, we have ourselves to discover what it means to live after death.

Ray Kemp says that the only sign of the success of the catechumenate is the quality of the witness born by the neophytes. The *quality*, not the enthusiasm! They can tell us why the Christ had to suffer and so enter into his glory; about the cross and the tomb and the empty grave; about desolation and grief and the shattering of expectations, about fear and amazement and joy beyond measure. Such things are best spoken of not on an emotional high, but quietly and unassumingly, in simple response to those who ask. It is in the sober tones of witnesses who have looked death in the face and survived that the neophytes will be able to fulfill the mandate given in the RICA: to "enter into a closer relationship with the faithful and bring them renewed vision and a new impetus" (#39).

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the vitality of the Church -- i.e. the quality of our common life -- depends upon our understanding the difference between life *before* death in this world and life *after* death in this world. Without understanding that difference we shall misread the Scriptures and misunderstand the liturgy; we shall misunderstand the resurrection of Jesus and fail to recognize the workings of the Spirit... in short, we shall hardly be Christians. It is encounter with the newly-baptized each Easter which enables them and us to appreciate better our experience of life-after-death in the Body of Christ. They will be to us symbols and proof of the resurgent Church and we shall be able to say not merely that we believe in resurrection, but "we have seen the Lord!"