The Paschal Mystery

GOD’S WONDERFUL PLAN

FATHER THOMAS RICHSTATTER, OFM
Each time Roman Catholics gather to celebrate the holy Eucharist, we’re invited to acclaim the “mystery of faith” at the very heart of the celebration. What is this mystery, this Paschal Mystery? And what are we doing when we proclaim our faith in it?

It might seem that the easiest way to answer this question would be simply to look up the words “paschal” and “mystery” in the dictionary or online to see what they mean. But in order to experience the rich meaning of this acclamation of faith, I invite you to look deeper.

**Analogy: marriage**

During the wedding ceremony, the priest or deacon asks the bride and groom several serious questions to which they respond, “I do.” These two words sum up and embody the essence of the marriage covenant. Yet, if I searched in a dictionary and found “I: pronoun, first person singular” and “do: transitive verb, to perform an act, to accomplish a task,” I’d know what these two words mean, but I’d still be far from understanding what marriage means.

The term “paschal mystery” is similar: the meaning is deeper and richer than simply the definition of the two words.

**Mystery vs. Plan**

Paschal mystery: two words, a noun and an adjective. Let’s start with the noun: mystery.

I suggest that we momentarily suspend the ordinary meaning of “mystery” (i.e., something we can’t understand, a puzzling secret) and turn to the Bible. When you hear the word “mystery,” think “plan.”

The inspired authors of the Christian Scriptures—the New Testament, wrote in Greek, the language in which their message would be most accessible to their contemporaries. Our word “mystery” (mytérion in Greek) is used to describe God’s wonderful plan for all that exists, for everything that God created. St. Paul, having gained insight into this wonderful plan, said, “Now, if the mystery of the Word made flesh a new light of your glory has shone upon the eyes of our mind, so that, as we recognize in him God made visible, we may be caught up through him in love of things invisible” (Preaching of the Nativity of the Lord).

**Preaching the Kingdom**

The Gospel writers show how this mysterious plan of God is revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus. God’s plan is for a world at peace, a world in which each individual can have life and life abundantly. We see Jesus reconfiguring, healing and embracing the marginalized and outcast.

Jesus presents a world in which God reigns, a world in which all people have worth and are loved by their heavenly Father. In God’s plan, we are truly brothers and sisters to one another and must care for one another. We’re commissioned to work to discover the causes of poverty, hunger, illness, disease, warfare, hatred, addiction, prejudice—all the evils which prevent God’s Kingdom from appearing in its fullness.

But the vision of the world which Jesus presented is very different from the world we know today. And even though the world of Jesus’ vision would be better beyond all imagining, there are always people who have a vested interest in keeping things the way they are. There are those who would lose power and influence if this new world were to be realized.

No one likes to relinquish power! In Jesus’ time, influential leaders stirred up the crowds to incite the Roman authorities to have Jesus put to death. But even in death, Jesus was the perfect lover.

**Death and Resurrection**

When a man and a woman give themselves to one another in marriage, they leave their fathers and mothers and former lovers and are joined to one another and “become one flesh” (Matthew 19:5). This coming together involves a certain death so that this new unity can be born. But the focus of the cross is not on the dying but on the becoming one flesh.

When we see Jesus dying on the cross, we can see a man suffering terribly at the hands of his enemies. But here also, as an example of marriage, focus on the becoming one, even in death, Jesus let nothing separate him from the love of his Father. As an ancient adversary expresses so beautifully: He “humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name” (Philippians 2:8-9). On the cross, we see the most vivid act of “the two become one flesh.” In this perfect act of love, Jesus is taken up into the life and love of his Father. The resurrection is the Father’s response to all that Jesus said and did.

In their role in God’s plan (mystery)

We have a wonderful, amazing plan! The more I think about and study it, the more I want just to step back and say, “Wow!” But it’s not enough simply to appreciate the beauty of God’s plan. It’s crucially important that we each do—see how our lives fit into God’s plan and how our lives endure all of us—every creature—all that exists.

When building a house, the contractor frequently steps back from the work and looks at the blueprint, the plan, to see how the house will fit into the larger scheme of things. We should do something similar each Sunday as we celebrate the Eucharist:

*Take a step back from our daily tasks and routines and try to see our lives in the context of this larger perspective, God’s plan. How do our work, our daily tasks, our plans—fit into God’s plan?*

**The adjective: paschal**

In Acts 13:48, St. Paul declares: “Paschal lamb” is a Latinized form of the Hebrew word Jesus, the Passover lamb for our purpose here, I suggest that when you hear “paschal,” simply think “pass over.” And here again we look to the Bible for the context of “pass over.” The great pass over in our history occurred when our ancestors, God delivered from oppression and slavery in Egypt and were enabled to pass over the Red Sea into a land of freedom (see Exodus 1:1–15:21).

The Egyptians naturally, but not want to lose their slaves, and Pharaoh needed to be convinced to release them by a series of terrific, disastrous events. The final plague was the worst. “Thus says the Lord: After midnight I will go forth through Egypt. Rivers, streams in the land of Egypt, will dry up, from the threshing floors of Pharaoh which sets on his throne to the firstborn of the slave girl who is at the hamada, as well as all the firstborn of the animals” (Exodus 11:4-5).

But the Israelites were given instructions to prepare a special meal—a meal with lamb—and the blood of this lamb was to be placed on the lintel and the two doorposts of their homes. And God would pass over the homes marked with the blood of the lamb, and their firstborn would not die. These passover events are remembered annually in a Passover meal. “When your children ask you, ‘What does this rite of yours mean?’ you will reply, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice for the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Hebrews in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians, he delivered our homes” (Exodus 12:26-27).
Imagine the child Jesus asking this question of Joseph each year when, with Mary and their extended family, he remembered this pass over. As Jesus began his public ministry, his first followers—immersed in this Passover tradition—began to see parallels in the pass over of Jesus from his life here on earth, passing through death to risen life.

They came to see Jesus as that Passover lamb, saying, “[O] ur paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7). And they saw a parallel in the eucharistic meal, which remembers and celebrates this pass over of Jesus, with the ancient meal celebrating the Passover of the First Covenant. The Gospel of Mark invites us to associate the two meals: “On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, ‘Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?’” (14:12).

**Personal pass over**

But the word “paschal” will not add anything to “mystery” if all of the “pass over” events happened long ago and to someone else! Each of us must be in touch with the “pass over” moments in our own lives: The times God has saved me from…. The times God has led me to…. The times God has gifted me with…. Unless we can fill in the blanks, “paschal” will add little to our understanding of God’s plan.

**Eucharistic acclamation**

At each Eucharist, after we recall the Last Supper, the priest invites us to proclaim the “mystery of faith.” Our spoken or sung response is a summary statement of all that we understand of God’s plan—the Paschal Mystery.

When we acclaim: “We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again,” we affirm that Jesus’ death was the culmination of his life of loving union with his heavenly Father. This love is so strong that even death could not turn Jesus from proclaiming the Kingdom of love, God’s plan for the world, and that the resurrection is the confirmation of God’s seal on Jesus’ love.

When we acclaim: “When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your Death, O Lord, until you come again,” we recall how our participation in this eucharistic “pass over” meal marks us with the blood of the Passover lamb which saves us from death. We eat the unleavened bread of the Exodus, pass over from our shortsighted plans and enter into God’s plan—the mystery, the wonderful, mysterious Kingdom of God—for we are nourished by the very flesh of Christ, the mystery, the plan personified. We pledge ourselves to his mission, his vision of the Kingdom.

When we acclaim: “Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free,” we remember how the pass over of Jesus has saved us from the slavery of selfishness and enabled us to pass over into the freedom of God’s children, “escaping from the corruption that is in the world” and coming “to share in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

**Live the Mystery**

At the beginning of this article, I spoke of the “I do” of the wedding ceremony. This “I do” is affirmed on the wedding day and in the various ways the husband and wife continue to say, “I do,” throughout their married life. Loving couples have told me that their marriages grow and mature each time one of them responds, “I do,” to the question, “Do you love me?” Over time, the two words—“I do”—take on a richer and deeper meaning.

As we continue to grow and mature in our Christian lives, the two words—Paschal Mystery—take on richer and deeper meaning so that, at the conclusion of each Eucharist when we are commissioned to “Go in peace,” we can go out into the world as living sacraments of this Paschal Mystery.

---

**Thomas Richstatter, OFM, has a doctorate in theology from the Institut Catholique de Paris. A popular writer and lecturer, Father Richstatter teaches sacramental and liturgical theology at Saint Meinrad (Indiana) Seminary and School of Theology.**

---

**DIG DEEPER**

When have you had a “pass over” experience in your life (i.e., God saving you from …)?

- How do your work, daily tasks and plans fit into God’s plan?

- How can you be a living sacrament of the Paschal Mystery—making Jesus’ vision of the world a reality?

---

**KEEP THE FAITH**

Subscribe to Catholic Update today at Subscriptions.Liguori.org to receive one or more copies of each issue.

Copies of more than 250 past issues of Catholic Update are available, with discounts provided for larger purchases. See the complete list at Liguori.org/Catholic-Update.

---

IMPRIMATUR: AUXILIARY BISHOP JOSEPH R. BINZER, VICAR GENERAL, ARCHDIOCESE OF CINCINNATI, DECEMBER 22, 2011

Please share or recycle this Catholic Update.