

Exulting in Easter, part 1

As we rejoice in this 50 day celebration of Easter (which outdoes our 40 day fast of Lent), I would like to spend some time reflecting with you on the *Exultet*, that ancient and beautiful prayer that is consecrated over the Paschal Candle (i.e., the Easter Candle) at the Easter Vigil to bless and consecrate it. This candle, which represents Christ as the Light of the world, burns at all Masses throughout the Easter Season, as well as at all Baptisms and Funerals throughout the year. Like most Latin songs, the *Exultet* receives its title from the first words of the song:

Exult, let them exult, the hosts of heaven,
exult, let Angel ministers of God exult,
let the trumpet of salvation
sound aloud our mighty King's triumph!

Be glad, let earth be glad, as glory floods her,
ablaze with light from her eternal King,
let all corners of the earth be glad,
knowing an end to gloom and darkness.

Rejoice, let Mother Church also rejoice,
arrayed with the lightning of his glory,
let this holy building shake with joy,
filled with the mighty voices of the peoples.

Consider the following about these first three stanzas of the *Exultet*. First, as this is basically the beginning of the liturgy at the Easter Vigil, it sums up the theme of the season: Exult, be glad, rejoice because Jesus Christ is risen! What is to rejoice? These three stanzas sum it up: all of creation. First is mentioned the spiritual realm—the angel hosts and ministers of God. They are rejoicing over the Resurrection because, living in the eternal light of God as they do, they already see the final “trumpet of salvation” being sounded (see 1 Thes. 4:16 and Rev. 11:15) at the return of Christ the King as He comes to destroy Satan and sin at the consummation of the world. Second comes the earthly realm of our universe. Now it is not the waters of death that flood the earth as at the time of Noah, but the glory of Christ (which, by the way, is also the water of life in Baptism). In the Resurrection, there is an end to “gloom and darkness” because, as the Prophet Isaiah says, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who lived in a land of gloom a light has shone” (9:1). Third and finally, the Church is called upon to rejoice. Why separate the Church out? It is because she is the union between the earthly and heavenly; she is the Bark of Peter, the New Ark, within which are found all who will be saved. In the end, all which is not redeemed and reborn within the womb of Mother Church, whether human or sub-human, will be lost in the remaking of the world. In the end, there is only the Church. Of course, we do not mean that

only those who belong to the institutional Church on earth will be saved, for we hope for the salvation of many (through Baptism of Desire) who seem to be outside her in this life. But we mean that, in the end, only those who are part of the true and eternal Church, members of the Body of Christ, will be saved—for “There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12). This is why she is “arrayed with the lightning of [Christ’s] glory,” transfigured just as He was (see Matt. 28:3). This is why she is filled with the Holy Spirit of Christ to the point where the prayer of her members shakes the very building, just as the Holy Spirit did at the beginning of the Church (see Acts 4:31). She is most affected by the Resurrection, for it is she who rises—it is we who rise—in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is our joy in this Easter Season: the Resurrection. We will continue to reflect on this great hymn of joy next time.

Exulting in Easter, part 2

We continue in this joyful season to reflect on that great chant of the Easter Vigil, the *Exultet*. Today, we come to an interesting little section of the chant—the part that may only be sung when the *Exultet* is proclaimed by a deacon (or a priest). The brackets indicated this reserved section.

[Therefore, dearest friends,
standing in the awesome glory of this holy light,
invoke with me, I ask you,
the mercy of God almighty,
that he, who has been pleased to number me,
though unworthy, among the Levites,
may pour into me his light unshadowed,
that I may sing this candle's perfect praises.]

[Deacon: The Lord be with you.

People: And with your spirit.]

Deacon: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them up to the Lord.

Deacon: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: It is right and just.

It is truly right and just,
with ardent love of mind and heart
and with devoted service of our voice,
to acclaim our God invisible, the almighty Father,
and Jesus Christ, our Lord, his Son, his Only Begotten.

How did it become the deacon’s job to chant this prayer over the Paschal Candle? I’m not an expert, but I think it’s because the deacon is the proclaimer of the word. The *Exultet* is the only

text in the liturgy that is incensed besides the Gospels themselves. So, after the priest blesses the Paschal Fire and prepares the Paschal Candle with the Alpha, Omega, the year, and five grains of incense for the five Wounds of Christ, it belongs to the deacon to proclaim this ancient and venerable prayer. Because the *Exultet* is a prayer of offering and consecration, it is supposed to be sung by someone in Holy Orders. (Every priest, you know, is also a deacon. He has to be ordained to the Diaconate before he is ordained to the Priesthood.) But the reference to “the Levites” shows that this prayer has been sung by the deacon from ancient times.

In the Old Covenant, there were three levels among God’s ministers, but all of them came from the Tribe of Levi. There was the single High Priest, who would correspond to the Bishop in our New Covenant ministers, and whose job it was to offer the most important sacrifices and enter the Holy of Holies once each year. There were the Priests, who also offered sacrifices for the people and who would correspond to the Priests of the New Covenant (who, however, offer only the one, eternal Sacrifice of Jesus Christ). Both the Priests and the High Priest in the Old Covenant had to be from not only the Tribe of Levi, but also the family of Aaron, Moses’ brother and the first High Priest. Finally, all the other male Levites who were not of Aaron’s family acted as singers, gatekeepers, etc., in the Tabernacle and (later) the Temple (see 1 Chron 23:26–32). These are referred to as the Levites and correspond to the Deacon of the New Covenant. As to the prayer itself, after inviting everyone to rejoice (last week’s article), the deacon begins by asking for God’s mercy. This is how we begin every Mass, in fact, using the Penitential Rite, and is really how we should regularly begin prayers in general, recognizing our unworthiness and asking God for mercy. The *Exultet* then moves into a dialogue that we are all familiar with—it’s the same dialogue that begins the Eucharistic Prayers during Mass, and is the part of the prayer known as the Preface. The purpose of the Preface is to recall the reasons that we have for giving thanks to God—which is, after all, the very meaning of the word “Eucharist.” And indeed, the entire *Exultet* is a kind of Preface, reviewing all of those reasons that we have to rejoice and give thanks to God for what He has done for us in Jesus Christ. Finally, I might mention that when the *Exultet* says that this is to be done “with ardent love of mind and heart / and with devoted service of our voice,” it is reminding us of the proper way to pray. The most important part of praying is to have that true “love of mind and heart,” that internal disposition. This is the primary meaning of what Vatican II calls “active participation.” From that internal disposition follows the external singing (or lecturing, being an EMHC, ushering, etc.). If it isn’t happening in our hearts, though, then we’re just going through the motions, which is not active participation. How’s that for a lesson from an old hymn? More thoughts to follow next week!

Exulting in Easter, part 3

We continue in this joyful season to reflect on that great chant of the Easter Vigil, the *Exultet*. Today, let us reflect on the next two stanzas. First we sing of Christ:

Who for our sake paid Adam's debt to the eternal Father,
and, pouring out his own dear Blood,
wiped clean the record of our ancient sinfulness.

This stanza contains the core of our faith about what Jesus' death and resurrection accomplished, namely, canceling out the debt of the Original Sin and reconciling us to God. However, I would like to elaborate a little on this language of "debt." The idea of comparing the damage done by the Original Sin to a debt that we owe God and are unable to repay is a very old analogy and a very good one. Jesus Himself uses such language in some of His parables (e.g., Matt. 5:25-26; 18:21-35). It reminds us of how there is no ingenious work, no charitable deed, no dread sacrifice, truly nothing that we can do on our own that will heal our relationship with God. The debt is infinite; we are finite. The debt analogy also works well because you can inherit a debt, even though you may not be personally responsible for it. This is how Original Sin works—you and I are did not personally commit the Original Sin, but everyone who shares in the human nature of our first parents is held liable for this sin.

Having said all of that, this analogy, like every analogy, falls apart at some point. And it is important to understand where the analogy breaks down. When we say that we owe God a debt that only Jesus could pay, it may make it sound like God is cruel, or at least stoic. After all, couldn't the Father just forgive us the debt instead of requiring His Son to suffer a painful death to satisfy divine justice? Doesn't God love us? The answer, of course, is that there is only one sort of 'payment' that God wants: us. Unfortunately, we no longer have the ability (before Jesus) to give ourselves back to God. The reason the Original Sin broke our relationship with God is because it broke *us*, it damaged the nature of the human person. We must be fixed, healed, taught to live again, if we are going to be reunited with God. And that is what Jesus came to do. That, I think, is the proper understanding of the debt analogy, which is both ingenious and limited. On to the next stanza:

These, then, are the feasts of Passover,
in which is slain the Lamb, the one true Lamb,
whose Blood anoints the doorposts of believers.

This stanza takes us deep into our Jewish roots. What is Easter but the fulfillment of the Passover event and celebration of the Old Covenant? In the Old Covenant, the Passover lamb (an unblemished, male lamb) was slaughtered so that its blood could be smeared on the doorposts of Jewish houses. In Egypt, this blood kept the Angel of Death from destroying all of the firstborn sons among the Jews as was done to the Egyptians. Now we celebrate the Passover of the New Covenant, wherein Jesus Christ, the true Lamb of God, was sacrificed on the wood of the cross. His Precious Blood now anoints our doorposts, which is to say, our lips, when we receive Him in Holy Communion. Because of this, the Angel of Death has passed over us, not in a merely temporal sense, but in an eternal sense. Death is definitively conquered and thrown into the fiery lake of Hell, the Second Death (Rev. 20:13), for as Jesus says, "he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn. 6:54). Alleluia to the Paschal Sacrifice!

Exulting in Easter, part 4

We continue in this joyful season to reflect on that great chant of the Easter Vigil, the *Exultet*. In the next section of the chant, we come to a kind of panegyric on this very night of the Easter Vigil, with “This is the night” becoming almost a refrain:

This is the night,
when once you led our forebears, Israel's children,
from slavery in Egypt
and made them pass dry-shod through the Red Sea.

This is the night
that with a pillar of fire
banished the darkness of sin.

This is the night
that even now throughout the world,
sets Christian believers apart from worldly vices
and from the gloom of sin,
leading them to grace
and joining them to his holy ones.

This is the night
when Christ broke the prison-bars of death
and rose victorious from the underworld.

The first stanza refers to the Exodus from Egypt and the passage through the Red Sea, which is always seen as a type or prefiguration of how Jesus leads us out of death and sin through Baptism. As the prayer of blessing over the baptismal water says, God “caused the children of Abraham to pass dry-shod through the Red Sea, so that the chosen people, set free from slavery to Pharaoh, would prefigure the people of the baptized.” The second stanza continues the Exodus theme with the pillar of fire that led the Israelites by night through the desert for those forty years (becoming a pillar of cloud by day). The pillar of fire that lights the way prefigures Jesus, the Light of the World (and will also be applied later in the chant to the Paschal Candle itself). One sees how fluidly the *Exultet* moves from recounting salvation history to seeing its fulfillment in Christ since the pillar of fire is said to “banish the darkness of sin”—clearly something that Christ, not the actual pillar of fire, has done.

The third of these stanzas moves from looking back on salvation history to the present effects that Christ should have on our life: setting us free from worldly vices and sin, giving us grace, and joining us to His Church, His “holy ones.” And why is it that all of these verses demand that “this is the night,” that this is happening “even now throughout the world”? How can this eve of

Easter be the same night as these other events of ages past? Surely this is just being poetic, using symbolic language. But no! the point is that it truly is the same night. True, the rituals of the Easter Vigil symbolize these ancient moments in salvation history, but because Jesus Christ is the Eternal God made man, Son of the Eternal Father, His presence and actions are not bound to a specific time in history, but are transcendent and eternal. Our rituals are symbols, but they are sacramental symbols—actually making presence the very realities that they symbolize. This is the night! That is why it makes such a change in us. And not only are we really united to those past salvation events, but in Christ we are also united to those eternal events which still belong to the future from our perspective. This is what the fourth of these verses hints at. We share not only in the spiritual effects of Christ's harrowing of Hell and destroying of death, but we know that we shall share in the full effect of these things on the Last Day, when our bodies will be raised and the world judged and remade. Already Christ's ultimate victory makes a difference in us today, or, as we say at the Easter Vigil, tonight.

Exulting in Easter, part 5

Well, this Sunday is Ascension Sunday, and next Sunday is the last Sunday in the Easter Season, Pentecost. In other words, I'm running out of time, so instead of going through the entire rest of the *Exultet* chant, I will just pick out a couple of the most important passages that we have yet to cover. Let us consider the most famous and profound passage in the entire chant:

O truly necessary sin of Adam,
destroyed completely by the Death of Christ!

O happy fault
that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!

Wow, talk about questions! Why are we calling Adam's sin "necessary?" Are we saying that Adam was predestined to commit the Original Sin? Are we saying that God wanted Adam to fail his test so that He would have an excuse to send His Son? How can a fault be "happy," or how can a sin "earn" us anything good? I do not raise these questions in order to give you a simple answer. How God interacts with human free will is a mysterious thing. No less mysterious is why God, in His supreme knowledge, power, and goodness, would create a world in which sin and evil exist. The only simple answer to that last one seems to be that if God was really going to make us free, self-determining beings after His Own image, then He has to allow for the possibility of sin.

The even stranger question that this idea of a "necessary sin" raises is whether the Incarnation of Jesus happened because of sin or not. What do I mean? Some theologians have speculated that even if Adam and Eve had not sinned, Jesus still would have become Incarnate. They argue that it was always God's intention not to leave mankind in our purely natural state, but to raise us to supernatural union with Himself in Jesus Christ. This is an interesting idea that makes for wonderful speculative theology. It's the kind of thing we priests and theologians can make into a brilliant doctoral dissertation or book to prove our academic prowess. But in the end, it is largely meaningless. The real point of calling the Original Sin "necessary" is to point out how all of the best things that we know about God were revealed to us as a consequence of the Fall. Why did Jesus become one with us, uniting our nature to His and so drawing us into a union with God that

is beyond our natural power? Because we were sinners who needed a redeemer. How did we come to understand the unimaginable mercy, kindness, and love of God? Because we were lost and broken, and He came to save us. It was necessary because it happened; it was necessary because God chose it.

This is why we cry out “O happy fault,” *O felix culpa*—not because there is anything good or desirable in any sin itself, but because God has surprised us and has brought us joy by turning evil on its head and using our very defeat as a means of triumph. This is Who our God is: not a God of arbitrary rules or even of strict justice, but a Father Who can bring wisdom out of every error, a Friend Who can laugh at our every foible, a Lover Who will do anything—Who will change reality itself, Who will lay down His very life—in order to save the one He loves. This is why we rejoice in Adam’s Fall: because in the light of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ we see how God has taken the greatest evil and turned it to the greatest good. We see how hope and joy are simply common sense for us Christians.

Exulting in Easter, part 6

As we conclude the Easter Season with the great Solemnity of Pentecost, I will conclude our reflection on the *Exultet* with a couple of key passages from the ending of the chant. We didn’t get to cover all of it, however, so I encourage you again to pray through it sometime on your own. At the end of the chant, having recalled the mighty wonders of God’s saving deeds and given Him all kinds of praise, the chant finally focuses itself on the great symbol of the Easter Season which has inspired this outpouring: the Paschal Candle.

On this, your night of grace, O holy Father,
accept this candle, a solemn offering,
the work of bees and of your servants' hands,
an evening sacrifice of praise,
this gift from your most holy Church.

The Paschal Candle is consecrated to God as a gift, an offering, an evening sacrifice (see Ps. 141:2). It is a gift not only from we human beings, but also of bees. The references to bees (there’s a second one later) reminds us that all of creation takes part in offering praise to God. The way in which bees and humans cooperate in producing candles for our worship reminds us that we are called to be the bridge between the rest of creation and God—to be kings and stewards, working to form all of planet earth into a “solemn offering” to God. More than that, bees symbolize the harmony and love, as well as the hard work, that community life should involve (you may remember that old typology lesson on the bee). As such, the bee challenges us each Easter to make our own ‘hive,’ Mother Church, into a place of harmonious love and constant labor for the good of souls.

Skipping a little, we come to this rather interesting phrase:

But now we know the praises of this pillar,
a flame divided but undimmed,

First of all, we find there the Paschal Candle explicitly called a “pillar,” which refers to the pillar of fire that let the Israelites in the Exodus. But why do we say that the flame is “divided but undimmed”? It took me a couple of years of hearing this and thinking about it to figure this out (maybe you already know). The reference is to all of the lit candles held at this moment of the

Vigil by all those in the congregation who have been enlightened by Baptism. The fire of those flames came from the Paschal Candle, lit from the Paschal Fire, and as such they are all one flame, in a sense. Yet, it is divided into one for each person. And, in fact, the amazing thing about fire is that when you give to someone else from your flame, you don't lose anything, but he or she does gain something. Fire is like charity, it grows in the sharing. Finally, we conclude:

May this flame be found still burning
by the Morning Star:
the one Morning Star who never sets,
Christ your Son,
who, coming back from death's domain,
has shed his peaceful light on humanity,
and lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

As always, our final thought is of what we still hope for—the Second Coming of Jesus Christ at the Final Judgment. The chant refers to Christ as the “Morning Star,” a reference from the Book of Revelation (22:16). However, both Revelation and 2 Peter speak of the morning star as something given to us as well (see Rev. 2:28 and 2 Pet. 1:19). For indeed, the light of the Paschal Candle, given to each one of us at our Baptism and symbolized by our baptismal candle, reminds us that we have become Christ. As long as we remain in a state of grace, Christ Himself lives in us and enlightens not only us, but uses us as lights in the world. This is the joy of Easter. This is what we should remember each time we look at the Paschal Candle. This is who we, as Christians, are called to be. Amen. Alleluia!