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THE MASS OF EASTER SUNDAY

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DAY by day the Church in her liturgy unfolds the sublime history of the Saviour before our eyes, so that in the course of the year we have viewed anew the whole panorama of salvation. She begins with Advent, which recalls to our minds the long period of waiting, hope, and expectation of the Redeemer to come. Christmas presents to us the Infant Saviour, come to teach the profound lesson of humility. Epiphany recalls the revelation of the Redeemer to the nations, and the Sunday following shows us the youthful Redeemer returning from the temple to labor at Nazareth. As He grows to manhood and begins His public mission, the liturgy invites us to accompany Him, to listen to His exalted teaching, to witness the countless miracles and works of mercy, and finally to follow Him to Calvary while He offers the supreme sacrifice.

The Church follows Christ in her liturgy not only amid the triumphs of life and along the sorrowful journey of His Passion and Death but as well in His glorious Resurrection. She rejoices in the great victory of the sacrificed Christ over death and sin; she rejoices in the fact that Christ rose for us and that we are to share in all the blessings of His victory and glorious Resurrection.

Easter is called in the liturgy the Queen of Feasts, the Solemnity of Solemnities. It is the feast of joy. Constantly the liturgy of the day reminds us that "this is the day which the Lord hath made, let us be glad and rejoice therein."¹

"I arose, and am still with thee, Alleluia," cries out Christ in

¹ Gradual of the Mass. The translation used in this paper is that of the English *Dominican Missal*, by Rev. Bruno Walkley, O.P.

gratitude to His Heavenly Father in the opening words of the Introit of the Mass. It is as though He were saying: We were united when as man I walked the earth, You were with me in the tomb, and now that I am risen I am still Your only-begotten Son and We are united in glory. The priest and choir repeat the joyful words, making them their own as they recall their own rebirth by Baptism, which raised them up to a new life. In the early centuries this sacrament was conferred on adults only on the eves of Easter and Pentecost, and the Easter liturgy refers to it continually. Truly the neophytes could apply these words to themselves as they sang, "I arose" to a new life, a life of grace, "and am still with thee," for only a few hours had elapsed since they had been "born again of water and the Holy Ghost."² Over and over again we hear them cry out in their joyful strain, Alleluia, Praise be to God! We are risen to a new life but neither deserve nor claim any praise for ourselves, only asking that every one join us in praising the Lord.

In the prayer or collect the Church speaking for the whole assembly addresses words of thanksgiving and petition to the Father: "O God, who through thine only-begotten Son hast this day overcome death and opened unto us the gates of everlasting life: grant that the vows thou inspirist us to form, thou wouldst thyself help us to fulfill." It is indeed a day for rejoicing. The gates of Heaven closed centuries before by Adam's fall have been opened to us. Until now only the Angels had enjoyed the splendors of Heaven; to-day this abode of happiness is open to the saints of the Old Law and to us, through Christ's victory over death. In the latter part of the prayer, "grant that the vows thou inspirist us to form, thou wouldst thyself help us to fulfill," the Church again refers the work of our entrance into a new life not to ourselves but to the grace and inspiration of God. We have a share in the attaining of eternal life, it is true, for the vows are "our vows," and God respects our free will. Yet even here we are taught to seek divine assistance that these vows may be fulfilled.

With the idea of resurrection, a rising to a new life, continually before her mind, the Church in the Epistle admonishes us in the words of St. Paul: "Purge out the old leaven that you may be a new paste, as you are unleavened." The meaning of this figure was clear to the Jews, accustomed to eat the Pasch with unleavened bread. By leaven St. Paul would have us understand habits of malice and wickedness. It is of these that the Church would have us free our-

² John iii, 5.

selves, by the sacraments of Baptism and Penance. To-day it is to those who already have been washed by the living waters of grace that the Church addresses herself. "Let us feast" she continues, "not with the old leaven . . . but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." No longer may we take delight in the sinful ways of the world. Putting aside our evil habits, we must walk in sincerity and truth in the light of the risen Saviour, "the Way, and the Truth, and the Life."³

As a refrain to the Epistle, the Response or Gradual reminds us again, "This is the day which the Lord hath made: let us be glad and rejoice therein." Then once more the Church sings out her invitation to join in the joyous spirit of Easter: "Give praise to the Lord, for He is good: for His mercy endureth forever." The Lord is good and merciful indeed. He has obtained for us release from our sins in this life and opened the way to eternal happiness. "Alleluia, Alleluia. Christ our Pasch is sacrificed," concludes the response, and here we find the reason for our boundless joy. The figurative pasch, the prophetic pasch is terminated, and the true lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, has opened Heaven. The time of figures and symbols has passed and the reality has come.

Continuing the joyful strain of the Gradual, the Church breaks forth into a beautiful Easter Sequence, a triumphant hymn of gladness:

Victimæ paschali laudes immolent
Christiani,
Agnus redemit oves: Christus inno-
cens Patri reconciliavit peccatores.

Mors et vita duello conflixere miran-
do: dux vitæ mortuus regnat vivus;

The holy paschal work is wrought,
The victim's praise be told:
The loving shepherd back hath
brought
The sheep into his fold;
The just and innocent was slain
To reconcile to God again.
Death, from the Lord of life hath
fled,
The conflict strange is o'er;
Behold! he liveth that was dead,
And lives for evermore;

These initial verses of the Sequence form the song of the children of the Church as they go triumphantly along the way, recounting the story of the victory. Coming upon Mary Magdalen unexpectedly on the way, they address her.

³ John, xiv, 6.

Dic nobis Maria, quid vidisti in via. Mary, thou soughtest Him that day:
Tell what thou sawest in the way.

And we hear Mary joyfully announce to them:

Supulchrum Christi viventis et gloriam vidi resurgentis:	I saw the empty cavern's gloom,
Angelicos testes, sudarium et vestes.	I heard the angel's story:
Surrexit Christus spes mea: praecedet vos in Galilaeam.	I saw the garments in the tomb.
	I saw His risen glory.
	Christ, my hope, arises: He
	'Fore you goes to Galilee.

Mary's words come as glad tidings and confirm the news of victory. We hear the animated crowd shout with gleesome voices as they resume their march:

Scimus Christum surrexisse a mortuis vere: tu nobis Victor Rex miserere.	We know that Christ hath pierced the grave:
Amen. Alleluia.	Then, Victor King, thy people save!
	Amen. Alleluia.

As the notes of the sequence die away, the priest prepares to read the Gospel. He reviews in the words of St. Mark the historic setting of that first glorious Easter morn. We see again the holy women who sorrowfully the Friday before had followed Jesus along the way to Calvary, returning now with sweet spices to the tomb. At the Sepulchre they are greeted by an angel in white. He speaks to them. "Be not affrighted; ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified: *He is risen*, He is not here. . . . But go, tell His disciples and Peter, that He goeth before you into Galilee: there you shall see Him as He told you." They need to go no further. The angel assures them that all is as it has been foretold: the Saviour is risen! They are to tell the gladsome news to the disciples, especially to Peter.

At this point the liturgy reminds us of the fulfillment of a prophecy. "The earth trembled and was still when God arose in judgment, Alleluia,"⁴ sings the choir at the Offertory in the words of the Psalmist. That great day of judgment has come. For Christ has satisfied for the sins of the world.

Our communion with the Risen Saviour—the feast to which we were invited in the Epistle, the Banquet at which we are to receive a pledge of everlasting life—is not far off. The Church in the person of the priest prays in secret for the people. She asks that our prayers

⁴ Ps. lxxv, 9 and 10.

and sacrifices may be acceptable and that our participation in the paschal mysteries may profit us unto eternal life.

In the sublime Easter Preface mention is made again of the Paschal Lamb "who by dying destroyed our death and by rising again hath restored our life." This same idea is found in the communion hymn, in which also we are invited once more to "feast with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." No more is the leaven of malice, sin, or corruption to enter into our feasting, but only the unleavened bread of Christian simplicity, truth, and love.

Although the note of joy is sounded continually throughout the Easter liturgy, the Church nowhere sums up the spirit of the feast more beautifully than in the concluding Prayer of the Mass: "Pour forth upon us, O Lord, the spirit of Thy charity; that those whom Thou hast fed with the Pascal Sacrament, Thou mayest in love make one in heart." She prays that the spirit of fraternal charity so evident at a time of rejoicing may unite in one heart and mind all those who have participated in the Sacrament of Love. We were made sharers of the brotherhood of Christ by the Incarnation, but it is in His glorious Resurrection that He has linked us together in one glorious immortality; for in the words of the Angelic Doctor: "It was not for His own sake that the Son of God became man, but that He might make us to be gods through grace."⁵

⁵ *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 37, a. 3, ad 2.

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