

THE GREATEST OF DAYS

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IF ALL THE FEASTS of the Christian calendar, Christmas seems to have won the hearts of all with the soul-warming appeal of joy and good will. There is no one so foolish as to doubt the greatness of the feast of the Nativity, commemorating as it does the temporal birth of the Son of God to a Virgin at Bethlehem. It was the beginning of Redemption. The fault would be perhaps in misunderstanding the reasons for its greatness, and, consequently, distorting its proper meaning and its peculiar glory. Sentiment and reminiscence would have us proclaim Christmas the greatest of feasts. The mind of the Church, expressed in her doctrine and liturgy, is clear in indicating that, just as the Nativity was the beginning of a work which would only be completely perfected with the Resurrection, so the feast of Christmas finds the perfection of its greatness and glory in the feast of Easter. St. Augustine insists on the importance of Easter when he points out, "As the Mother of God differs and is distinguished from all the other Saints, so the feast of Easter is the greatest of all feasts. It is as if it were the mother of all others, regulating and hallowing them."¹ It is this union of all others, including Christmas, under the first place of Easter which gives meaning and perfection to all. Christmas is a great feast for men because it is the first step to the heights of glory to be found in the Resurrection.

If truth is beauty and freedom, and, if in its treasures are to be found the sources of all delight, then it only remains for those who seek happiness and appreciation to conform themselves in mind and heart to the truth so zealously guarded by truth's custodian, the Church. The measure of the greatness of Easter, and, through Easter, of all other feasts, will be the conformity to the idea and appreciation which the Church has concerning the feast of Easter. In the supernaturally determined judgment of our Holy Mother, the feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, is the day above all days, truly the "day which the Lord has made," that in which all

¹ Cit. by Haering, Dom Otto, O.S.B. in *Living with the Liturgy*, Benziger Bros., N. Y. 1930., p. 86.

Christians, together with their Church, should take the greatest joy. It is the solemnity of solemnities.² It is the crowning point of beauty and excellence to which all others lead and from which all majestically descend.

EASTER IN DOCTRINE

Though this appreciation of the greatness of Easter may have been blunted by sentimentality or improper notions and convictions, which are too often the unconscious by-product of modern thought, the soul of the Christian should be closer to his Lord on this feast than on any other. Through the Resurrection, God saw fit to bring to completion His great work of infinite benefit to man. In the beginning God had made man and had destined him to a life of eternal happiness in heaven. It was a perfect work, all the delicate shades and shadows blending beautifully to form the whole tapestry of creation. Then man abused God's gifts and sinned. The cloth was rent, the harmony destroyed. Not wishing that God should see the shame and ugliness of sin, man hid himself; but the eye of God's Justice sought him out and drove him from the Garden of Eden. From life there came death, a death of the body and that of which bodily death is only a sign and an effect, the more terrible death of the soul.

But the love of God knew no bounds. Even sin could not hold back the floodgates of divine Mercy. God sent His Son to redeem the world, to make right the wrong, to bring life again from death, to reunite man to his Father. "For since by a man came death, by a man also comes the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made to live."³ By the redemption, from the victory of Calvary to the exaltation of the Resurrection, man lives again. Through a spiritual regeneration, a new life of grace is won for the soul, a life which is but the foretaste, a seed, of the glory that is to come. Even the body will receive, through the regenerated soul, a new and nobler life. When Christ will come to judge the world, the company of the just will then be complete. "For . . . your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, your life, shall appear, then you too will appear with Him in glory."⁴ If Christ had not died, if there had been no Good Friday or Easter Sunday, faith would avail nothing, hope would end in despair, and charity would be impossible. The importance of Easter is attested to by the Apostle, ". . . if Christ be not risen, vain is your faith, for you are still in your sins."⁵ While it is

² Roman Martyrology for Feast of Easter.

³ I Cor. 15, 21-22.

⁴ Col. 3, 3-4.

⁵ I Cor. 15, 17.

true that the Nativity brought God to man, the Resurrection brings man back to God. It is the Resurrection, then, that is the fountain of unsurpassable delight to which God would lead all who love Him in the purity of their hearts. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard; neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love Him."⁶

EASTER IN THE LITURGY

The importance of the feast of Easter in the eyes of the Church can be seen in the way she celebrates the feast through the drama of her liturgy. With holy impatience the voice of the Church breaks forth a full day before the coming of the great feast itself. On Holy Saturday, the solemnities begin in darkness—a darkness symbolic of error and sin. There begins the ceremony of the blessing of the Paschal Candle, which is a figure of Christ, the light of Truth, and the Flame of Love. In the midst of darkness, the Church sings a song of joy. "Let the . . . angels rejoice . . . let the trumpets proclaim the victory of so great a King. Let the earth rejoice . . . that the darkness that has overspread the whole world is driven away by the splendor of the eternal King." With the Wisdom of the ages, the Church, glimpsing the innermost purposes of the Holy Will of God, cries out, "O truly necessary sin of Adam which the death of Christ has blotted out! O happy fault that has merited such and so great a Redeemer!"

Originally these ceremonies were held during the night before the great feast instead of during the morning preceding. This would explain why the words "O blessed night" are found in the chant. Even so, it is truly a blessed night in which "heaven is united to earth." "O truly blessed night which alone deserves to know the time and the hour when Christ arose again. . . . The sanctification of this night blots out crimes, washes away sins, and restores innocence to sinners and joy to the sorrowful."

When the Blessing of the Paschal Candle has been completed, the priest and his ministers go in procession to the baptistry for the second blessing, the blessing of the Baptismal font. The Church, quick to see the value of the death and resurrection of her Founder, hastens to prepare the means He prescribed in order that His children might partake of the benefits He so dearly won. Through Baptism, all men may die with Christ and, with Him, rise again to a new life of grace. "For we are buried with Him by means of Baptism unto death, in order that, just as Christ has risen from the dead . . . so we may also

⁶ I Cor. 2, 9.

walk in the newness of life.”⁷ Thus the victory of Christ becomes a double victory. The baptized have a part, a real part, in Christ’s personal triumph. His victory is the cause and the joy of their own.

With the Litanies, the Church calls upon all the saints of heaven to help her in her hymn of thanks to God for His benefits. At last, in the *Gloria* of the Mass, her joy finds voice. When the initial words have been intoned, the bells of the Church, which have been silent under the pall of penance since the Mass of Holy Thursday, ring out their song of happiness, calling all the world to rejoice and be glad because God has manifested His glory. He has had compassion on His people. He has risen from the dead. “We give Thee thanks because of Thy greater glory.” The bells are silent but the joy finds further expression. The first full-hearted, though hesitant, notes of the *Alleluia*, come from hearts which are almost speechless in the hope of the glory of the Risen Christ.

The Mass of Holy Saturday is concluded by solemn Vespers, which are sung as a part of the Mass itself. The Magnificat antiphon sets the scene for the revelation of the Resurrection which will come to full light in the Mass celebrated at sunrise on Easter morning. In the Introit, the voice of Christ is heard proclaiming the victory which He has won, “I arose and am still with you, Alleluia.”

No power has been able to defeat the purposes of God. All the forces of darkness, all the legions of Satan, have waged terrible war against Him but have been brought to naught. His love has won the day for His children. “This is the Day which the Lord has made; let us be glad and rejoice therein. Alleluia! Let God be praised!”

⁷ Rom. 6, 4.