

## The Paschal Mystery in the Fathers of the Church

The Paschal Mystery Series of St. Patrick Church, Rittenhouse's Catholic Community

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April 25, 2023, Feast of St. Mark, Evangelist

1 Cor 15:1-11

Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap. writes, "There was a time in the life of the Church when Easter was, in a way, everything—not only because it commemorated the whole history of salvation from the creation to the Parousia, without having to share it with any other festival, but also because certain elements of the community's life took shape in the course of its celebrating Easter over the years: **the liturgy, for instance, but also typological exegesis, catechesis, theology, and even some of the canonical Scriptures.**"<sup>1</sup>

**The Liturgy:** sacraments, prayer, weekly celebration of Sunday, annual celebration of Easter (Quartodeciman controversy in the second century—Is Easter on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan, like the Jewish Passover, or must it be on a Sunday?)

**Typological Exegesis:** Typology goes back to the Greek word **τύπος** (typos), from a striking (cf. *tympany* as an English derivative from the Greek), impression, figure, image, type. The Old Testament has types (images or figures) that find their fulfillment or fullest expression for our salvation in Christ.

**Catechesis:** The faith is community through faith in Jesus Christ the Lord, crucified and risen for our salvation. In the early Church, catechumens commonly received the sacraments at the Easter Vigil.

**Theology:** Deepening of the catechetical faith through reflection on who it is that suffered and died for us and how that is saving for us. (Christ is one divine person in two natures, divine and human.)

**Canonical Scriptures:** The synoptic accounts as accounts of Holy Thursday night through Sunday morning, with preparatory material; John's account as a Pascha account; 1 Corinthians; 1 Peter; Revelation.

**The Paschal Mystery in the Fathers of the Church:** two ideas **Paschal Mystery** and **Fathers of the Church**

The phrase **Paschal Mystery** refers to the Pascha, a Hebraic term that means "passing over" or "Passover" originally in reference to Exodus 12:

But for you the blood will mark the houses where you are. Seeing the blood, I will pass over you; thereby, when I strike the land of Egypt, no destructive blow will come upon you. This day will be a day of remembrance for you, which your future generations will celebrate with pilgrimage to the LORD; you will celebrate it as a statute forever.

The remembrance of Jesus Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection fulfilled this Pascha. Today some Christians, like those of the early Church, commonly call Easter "Pascha" to retain that biblical sense.

The term Fathers of the Church refers to those who have the following four characteristics **A HOE**:

**A**ntiquity (beyond)

**H**oliness of Life

**O**rthodox Teaching

**E**cclesiastical Approval

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<sup>1</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, *Easter in the Early Church: An Anthology of Jewish and Early Christian Texts*, edited and translated by James M. Quigley, SJ, and Joseph T. Lienhard, SJ (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 1.

## Reflection on the Paschal Mystery in St. John Chrysostom, St. Leo the Great, and St. Patrick.

St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) from Chapter 4 in Andrew Hofer, O.P., *The Power of Patristic Preaching: The Word in Our Flesh* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2023).

Take, for example, the second to last of his popular ninety *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*. *Homily 89* concerns Mt 27:62–28:10, which features Christ’s resurrection. Chrysostom parallels the women at the empty tomb with his listeners, urging them to see how they too can experience Christ. The risen Lord greeted the women at the tomb with “Rejoice!” Those listening to John’s preaching can also receive the Lord’s greeting—in the liturgical mysteries and on the last day. Chrysostom preaches:

Perchance someone of you would wish to be like the women, to hold the feet of Jesus. You can even now. You who wish can hold not only his feet and his hands, but also that sacred head, when you receive the terrifying mysteries with a pure conscience. But not here only, but also in that day you shall see him, coming with that unspeakable glory, and the multitude of the angels, if you wish to be kind (*philanthrōpoi*); and you shall hear not these words only, *Rejoice* (Mt 28:9), but also those others, *Come you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world* (Mt 25:34).<sup>2</sup>

Here Chrysostom quotes Christ twice, first in the simple greeting of “Rejoice” to the women on the day of the resurrection, and second in Christ’s metaphor of the separation of the sheep from the goats based upon what people do for his little ones....

St. Leo the Great (d. 461) from Chapter 6 in Andrew Hofer, O.P., *The Power of Patristic Preaching: The Word in Our Flesh* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2023).

Because Leo so closely identifies Christ’s humanity with the humanity of the poor, we can especially see how his preaching of the cross and the resurrection is good news for the poor, so often excluded from social assistance. In the Roman Empire, poor non-citizens did not qualify for the dole and other public benefits. Leo provides a space wherein God’s mercy is at work for all who accept it in faith—regardless of an earthly citizenship. Christ’s victory in the paschal mysteries is for all but especially for those who know themselves to be weak and wounded. In a sermon preached on Wednesday of Holy Week in 443, Leo imagines what Christ’s words, “When I have been lifted up, I shall draw all to myself” (Jn 12:32), mean. Christ, in Leo’s sermon, speaks thus: “I will deal with the whole condition of humanity and will call back to integrity the nature lost long ago. In me will all weakness be abolished, in me will all wounds be healed.”<sup>3</sup> Can you imagine how the poor Christians of fifth-century Rome would receive that good news? In his Good Friday sermon from April 10, 453, Leo preaches, “To no one among the infirm has that victory of the Cross been denied.”<sup>4</sup> And he is preaching to all who look for mercy:

Has that taking on of our substance in the divinity—by which “the Word became flesh and dwelt in us”—left any person outside his mercy except an unbeliever? Besides, who is there whose nature is not one with Christ if Christ has received him by taking our nature and if he has been born again of that

<sup>2</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew* 89.3 (PG 58:784; Riddle, 527 [alt.]). The translation of humane for *philanthrōpoi* is misleading for Chrysostom’s preaching, as God is supremely *philanthrōpos*. Various philosophies and religions in antiquity used that term, which often meant beneficence. Titus 3:4, as should be kept in mind, uses the term *philanthrōpia* for the appearance of the Savior.

<sup>3</sup> *Tr.* 57.4 (CCL 138A, 336; Freeland and Conway, 246).

<sup>4</sup> *Tr.* 66.3 (CCL 138A, 403; Freeland and Conway, 288).

Spirit from which Christ was begotten? Who then does not recognize the stages of his own life in him? Who does not see that his taking of food, his rest in sleep, his anxiety in sorrow, and his tear of compassion made his form that of a servant?<sup>5</sup>

Leo also motivates his hearers to imitate God in his mercy. In his Good Friday preaching of 444, he quotes and meditates on a line from the great Philippian hymn that Paul records: “Perceive this also in yourselves, just as in Christ Jesus. Being in the form of God . . .” Leo then repeats the entire hymn, all the way to “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” Leo wants his people to understand this “mystery of great devotion” (1 Tm 3:16) in themselves. He preaches, “No rich person should reject his humility, no noble person should scorn it. Indeed, no human good fortune whatsoever may be brought to such a height that people might consider as shameful for themselves something which he, remaining God in the form of God, did not consider to be such.”<sup>6</sup> Leo then applies this Christological principle of compassion to his hearers:

Imitate what he did. Love what he loved. Since you have discovered the grace of God in yourselves, respond by loving your own nature in him. As he did not lose riches in his poverty, nor diminish glory in his humility, nor lose eternity in his death, so you, following in his footsteps to the same degree, scorn earthly things in order that you might attain to heavenly ones.<sup>7</sup>

In another sermon on Good Friday, Leo makes a striking statement of the continuity of the Lord’s passion: “Our Lord’s passion has been drawn out to the end of the world. He himself is honored in his saints, he himself is loved, he is also fed in the poor, he is clothed.”<sup>8</sup> Think about it: *Our Lord’s passion has been drawn out to the end of the world*. Leo carries this forward by calling to mind those persecuted for the sake of righteousness. He begins the sermon on the next day, Holy Saturday, with these words: “In the last sermon, most beloved, we brought up our participation in the Cross of Christ—not inappropriately I think—so that the very lives of believers might incorporate the Paschal Mystery in themselves, and so that what has been honored by a feast might be celebrated through our conduct.”<sup>9</sup> The deification that Leo proposes is one whereby Christ’s mysteries are lived out by the faithful—and especially by those who suffer.

Christ’s resurrection, then, causes much joy. Linking Christ’s rising from the dead to his solidarity with our feeble humanity, Leo proclaims, “We must rejoice a great deal over this transformation by which we are taken from earthly coarseness to heavenly dignity through that ineffable mercy of the one who descended to our state in order to lift us up to his.”<sup>10</sup> For Leo, because Christ has risen and ascended into glory, he is even more present to us now by his divinity.<sup>11</sup> How can we know Christ’s presence, especially when we experience the snares of the devil? Leo concludes a homily on the Ascension with these words:

Nothing is stronger, most beloved, against the wiles of the devil than the kindness of mercy and the generosity of love, through which every sin is either avoided or conquered. But the sublimity of this virtue is not gained until what is contrary to it has been broken down. What is so inimical to the works of mercy and charity as greed, from which root the seed of all evil comes? . . . Let us resist then, most beloved, this rankling evil, and strive after charity, without which no virtue can shine. Through this way

<sup>5</sup> Tr. 66.4 (CCL 138A, 404; Freeland and Conway, 289, [alt.]).

<sup>6</sup> Tr. 72.4 (CCL 138A, 445–46; Freeland and Conway, 319 [alt.]). Whereas the Empire excluded non-citizens who were poor, Leo excludes the non-believing poor—and he wanted non-believers, whatever their social status, to become believers.

<sup>7</sup> Tr. 72.5 (CCL 138A, 446; Freeland and Conway, 319).

<sup>8</sup> Tr. 70.5 (CCL 138A, 430; Freeland and Conway, 309).

<sup>9</sup> Tr. 71.1 (CCL 138A, 434; Freeland and Conway, 311 [alt.]).

<sup>10</sup> Tr. 71.2 (CCL 138A, 435; Freeland and Conway, 312).

<sup>11</sup> Cf., tr. 74.4.

of love, by which Christ descended to us, we also can ascend to him, to whom are honor and glory with God the Father and with the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.<sup>12</sup>

St. Patrick (in the fifth century): *Confession*

### 59

If I have ever imitated anything good for the sake of my God whom I love, I ask that he grant me to be able to shed my blood with these converts and captives – even were I to lack a grave for burial, or my dead body were to be miserably torn apart limb from limb by dogs or wild beasts, or were the birds of heaven to devour it. I declare with certainty that if this were to happen, I would have gained both my soul and my body. There is no doubt whatever that we will rise on the appointed day in the brightness of the sun, that is, in the glory of Christ Jesus our redeemer. We shall be like children of the living God and co-heirs of Christ and to be fashioned in his image, since it is from him and through him and in him that we are to reign.

### 60

The sun which we see rising for us each day at his command, that sun will never reign nor will its splendour continue forever; and all those who adore that sun will come to a bad, miserable penalty. We, however, believe in and adore the true sun, that is, Christ, who will never perish. Nor will they perish who do his will but they will abide forever just as Christ will abide forever. He lives with God the Father almighty and with the Holy Spirit before the ages began, and now, and for all the ages of ages. Amen.

### Reflection Questions:

How do the Fathers of the Church help us to think about the Paschal Mystery?

How do the Fathers of the Church help us to consider the Paschal Mystery in Scripture, in the liturgy, and in our lives?

What questions do you have about the Fathers of the Church, such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Leo the Great, and St. Patrick?

What would you like to remember and to share with others about this time together in mediating on the Paschal Mystery with the Fathers of the Church?

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<sup>12</sup> *Tr.* 74.5 (CCL 138A, 460–61; Freeland and Conway, 329 [alt.]).