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The Paschal Mystery

GOD'S WONDERFUL PLAN

A REDEMPTORIST PASTORAL PUBLICATION



THE LAST SUPPER, CARL BLOCH (1834–1890), WIKIPEDIA

Each time Catholics gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we're invited to acclaim the "mystery of faith" at the heart of the celebration. What is 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 to simply 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, we are invited to look deeper.

Analogy: Marriage

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

Paschal mystery is similar; the meaning is deeper and richer than simply the definition of the words.

Mystery = Plan

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

Let's momentarily suspend the ordinary meaning of "mystery" (that is, 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" (*mysterion* in Greek) is used to describe God's wonderful plan for all that exists, for everything that God created. Saint Paul, having gained insight into this wonderful plan, this good news, saw his mission "to bring to light [for all] what is the plan of the mystery hidden from ages past in God who created all things" (Ephesians 3:9).

The key to understanding God's plan is love (*agape* in Greek). What else would we expect from a God who "is love" (1 John 4:16)? And what do lovers do? They share their love in

ways that make love grow. Through their physical expression of love, a husband and wife create a child who is like them, has their DNA.

And if God were to create something, what would that be? Theologians and mystics such as St. Bonaventure and Blessed John Duns Scotus speculate that the reason the coeternal Son of God took flesh and was born among us was God's eternal decision to have a perfect lover. And that perfect lover is Jesus.

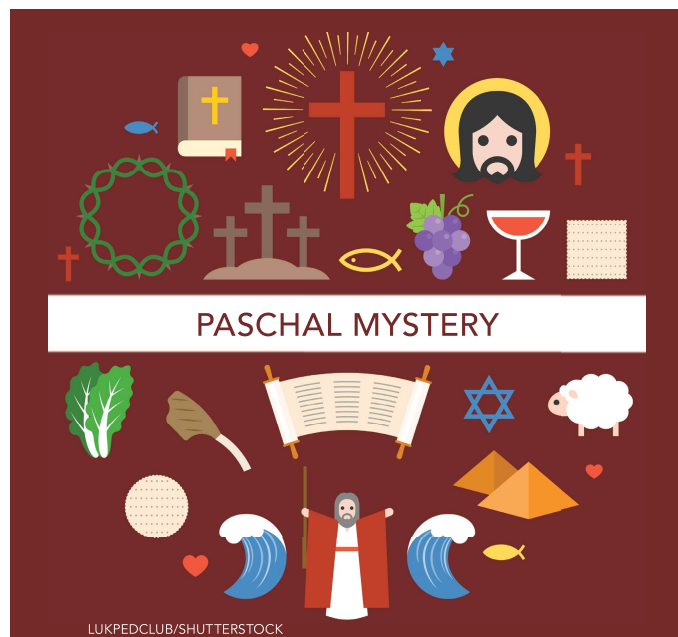
Consequently, Jesus is at the very origin of God's plan. He is "the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth.... He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:15–17).

The Divine Artist

An artist is often revealed in his or her work of art. We might see a painting and recognize, "That's a Monet," or hear a piece of music and know, "That's Bach!" Similarly, God's very self is revealed in his work of art, his plan for the world. (Remember to think "plan" when you hear "mystery.") We are told: "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days he spoke to us through a son...who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being" (Hebrews 1:1–3).

Jesus is the revelation of God's very self. He is the visible sign, the sacrament, of God. In Jesus we *see* who God is. "[I]n 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" (*Preface I of the Nativity of the Lord*).





Jesus' first followers came to see Jesus as that Passover lamb. And they saw a parallel in the eucharistic meal, with the ancient meal celebrating the Passover of the First Covenant.

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 have life abundantly. We see Jesus reconciling, 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 that prevent God's kingdom from appearing in its fullness!

But the vision of the world that 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 lives 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 couple 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 in the example of marriage, focus on the becoming one—for, even in death, Jesus let nothing separate him from the love of his Father. As an ancient hymn 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 becoming "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.

Our Role in God's Plan (Mystery)

What 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 of us—see how our lives fit into that plan. God's plan embraces 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 day's tasks 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 routine 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

What does *paschal* add to this mystery? It is a Latinized form of the Hebrew word *pesach*, Passover. But 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 in faith were 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 did not want to lose their slaves, and Pharaoh needed to be convinced to release them by a series of terrible, disastrous events. The final plague is the worst: "Thus says the LORD: About midnight I will go forth through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt will die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the

firstborn of the slave-girl who is at the handmill, 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 *pass over* 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 Israelites in Egypt; when he struck down the Egyptians, he delivered our houses’” (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, “Our 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 *mysterion*, 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.

DIG DEEPER

When have you had a “pass over” experience in your life (that is, God saving you from.... God leading you to.... God gifting you with....)?

•
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?