



SESSION 7

He Suffered under Pontius Pilate



Ecce Homo, Antonio Ciseri

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To see in the Old Testament a prelude to Christ's work of redemption
- To understand how Jesus, as fully human and divine, restored our friendship with God through his sacrificial death
- To discover in Father Emil Kapaun the shape of a life animated by Christ's suffering and death
- To appreciate the restorative power and love that God reveals in Jesus' death on the Cross

STEP 1: Begin

OPENING PRAYER

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, inebriate me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O good Jesus, hear me.
Within Thy wounds, hide me.
Separated from Thee, let me never be.
From the malignant enemy, defend me.

At the hour of death, call me.
And close to Thee, bid me.
That with Thy saints I may be praising
Thee, forever and ever.
Amen.

— Anima Christi (*Soul of Christ*)
prayer, by Saint Ignatius of Loyola

INTRODUCTION

The Paschal mystery has two aspects: by his death, Christ liberates us from sin; by his Resurrection, he opens for us the way to a new life. This new life is above all justification that reinstates us in God's grace, "so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (CCC 654, citing Rom 6:4)

Newness of life—who wouldn't want that? But what does it take to attain it? So often in our human experience, death and resurrection go hand in hand. Without sacrifice, a hoped-for victory would be unobtainable; but without the hope of victory, sacrifice would be meaningless. Together, sacrifice and victory lead to many possibilities.

In the Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus Christ, we find this same logic at work in a new and previously unimaginable way. God himself enters into the human dynamic of sacrifice and victory to offer up his life for the sake of the ultimate victory: triumph over death and restoration of humanity with Christ. This fullness of life in communion with God is what each of us longs for. Attaining it requires the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. These mysteries form the heart of the Paschal Mystery—the redeeming work that Christ did for us. The fruit of this work is filial adoption, becoming Christ's brethren by becoming children of God through grace.

Why do we call it the Paschal Mystery? And did Jesus really have to suffer and die for our salvation? If he suffered for us, and we're supposed to be like him, what does this mean for our Christian lives?

After considering Jesus' identity, we now take time to consider the high point of Christ's saving actions: the Paschal Mystery. We'll discover everything that Jesus did for our salvation and realize the full meaning of efficacy in the Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of God's beloved Son.

STEP 2: Learn

SETTING THE STAGE

Pilsen, Kansas—drive an hour northeast of Wichita and you might find your way into Pilsen. With a population of only sixty-five inhabitants, Pilsen is home to a beautiful brick church, St. John Nepomucene Catholic Church, which was erected in the early twentieth century. Here, a young boy named Emil was formed, by word and sacrament, in his faith. He went on to become a priest and to serve heroically as an Army chaplain in the Korean War. The source and inspiration of Servant of God Emil Kapaun's heroism was the sacrificial love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Cross is a universal sign of Christianity. Do we take it for granted? Do we really understand its meaning and why God chose the Cross as the instrument of our salvation? To see Jesus' Cross with new eyes, we have to contemplate his sorrowful death and his glorious Resurrection as the very heart of the Paschal Mystery, his saving work on Earth. In this mystery we find the fulfillment of God's loving plan of salvation, begun in the Old Testament and continued in his Church today.

Leader

The divine dimension of redemption is put into effect not only by bringing justice to bear upon sin, but also by restoring to love that creative power in man thanks also to which he once more has access to the fullness of life and holiness that come from God. In this way, redemption involves the revelation of mercy in its fullness.

– Pope Saint John Paul II, *encyclical letter, Dives in misericordia (Rich in Mercy)*, no. 7

I. The life of Father Emil Kapaun, a Servant of God, was animated by the Paschal Mystery of Christ

II. Salvation History: God's works in the Old Testament point ahead to Christ's work of redemption

- A. The word "Paschal" comes from the word for the Jewish feast of Passover
- B. Jesus' self-offering happens during this feast in Jerusalem and brings the Passover to its fulfillment
 - 1. Jesus is the new lamb of the Paschal Sacrifice
 - 2. From the Last Supper to the Crucifixion, Jesus willingly becomes the sacrificial victim
 - 3. He atones for our sin and merits for us a return to communion with God the Father
- C. Christ's Passion and death, his glorious Resurrection, and his Ascension into Heaven all form one mystery: the Paschal Mystery
- D. Catholic life revolves around this mystery and participates in it, especially through the sacraments

III. Pilgrimage: Father Kapaun was an ordinary boy who grew up to be an extraordinary witness

- A. Every saint, canonized or not, is "another Christ"
- B. Father Kapaun's heroism in war was the fruit of seeds planted in his ordinary life on the farm
- C. As a prisoner of war, he attended to the physical and spiritual needs of the prisoners around him
- D. Through his life, service, and death, Father Kapaun showed forth Christ to those around him

IV. Catechesis: Christ's saving death

- A. What does Christ's death have to do with me?
 - 1. The divine dilemma: God's justice requires our death, but his goodness seeks life
 - 2. Christ solves this by turning death into the means of eternal life
- B. Why does God use death as the means to life?
 - 1. Death, the punishment for sin, afflicts all of humanity
 - 2. By dying, Christ, who is life itself, applies the cure directly to our wound
 - 3. The Resurrection shows how Jesus triumphs over death, by curing and defeating it
 - 4. The Cross shows us the depths of God's love: he goes to the greatest lengths to save us and draw us back to himself

V. Lectio divina: Psalm 22

- A. The psalm begins with a lament but ends with trust and praise
- B. Jesus is the fulfillment of this psalm and of King David's prayer
- C. In prayer, we should have the honesty and trust of the psalmist

WORD MEANING:

Salvation

The forgiveness of sins and the restoration of communion with God after the Fall. We cannot accomplish this on our own; but God himself, through the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ, gives us the grace that unites us to him and incorporates us into his Church.

Try...to increase your knowledge of this Mystery of Redemption—this knowledge will lead you to love—and love will make you share through your sacrifices in the Passion of Christ. My dear children—without our suffering, our work would just be social work, very good and helpful, but it would not be the work of Jesus Christ, not part of the redemption.

— Saint Teresa of Calcutta, *General Letter to the Missionaries of Charity Sisters*, July 1961

STEP 3: Engage

- 1) Call to mind or look up the original story of the Passover from Exodus 11–12. What details of this story help illuminate Christ's sacrifice on the Cross?

The story of the first Passover is situated in the broader context of the story of Moses and the Exodus. Examples from this larger framework might be helpful (for example, the contrast between a first encounter with God at the burning bush and a now-familiar conversation with the Lord prior to the Passover celebration), but the focus should settle on the Passover itself. Naturally, the Passover lamb and its role come to mind. The efficacy of the blood of the lamb to stave off death will likely be a major point. But beyond this, other details can foster our appreciation for Christ's sacrifice as a tremendous gift of love. How, for example, did the Egyptians feel upon losing their firstborn children? In contrast, what relief and gratitude would the Hebrew families have felt when their children were spared? What feelings of fear and awe would also have been in play? To what extent ought we also to share in the feelings of both groups? By highlighting such dimensions of the story, we can deepen our understanding and our gratitude.

Leader

- 2) We might find it puzzling that young Emil Kapaun had a great love for Jesus' suffering. What is the place of physical suffering or mortification (i.e., renouncing some legitimate pleasure or accepting some

discomfort for the sake of growing in holiness) in the Christian life? What can we learn from the bravery and generosity of Father Kapaun?

Leader

Different people will have different degrees of comfort with the idea of sharing in Christ's suffering. Some answers may express skepticism toward young Emil's actions or even toward the idea of denying oneself.

In the face of such skepticism, recall the more fundamental point that the Gospel is "good news," and it brings with it promises of happiness and joy, even in this life. At the same time, however, the Christian life will always be marked by the Cross, since Christ's own life involved a Cross and our lives are to be conformed to his. Even more—and this gets at one of the main points here—we suffer from the lingering effects of Original Sin; so to bring our appetites and will in line requires practicing self-denial in a variety of ways. For those who are more familiar and comfortable with this truth, the discussion may center around accepting both the sufferings that befall us and the need intentionally to discipline ourselves and our appetites. In both cases, grace continues to operate, of course, but we also have a role to play. Ideally some answers will move toward seeing that it isn't as much about the quantity or degree of suffering as it is about (a) accepting our sufferings and offering them up joyfully, and (b) practicing some form of penance and mortification regularly. The ultimate measure, however, will always be love: does our practice of self-denial bring about greater love and generosity, or does it turn us in on ourselves, leading us to extremes, to a secret pride, to gloominess, and the like? Father Emil Kapaun's bravery and generosity in the POW camp illustrate well how love is the final measure of the fruitfulness of our suffering and self-denial.

- 3) How can we avoid thinking about God the Father as being vindictive when we consider the grim reality of the Cross?

Leader

As the very term "Paschal Mystery" suggests, the Old Testament provides helpful images and starting points. Answers that bring up the Passover itself can help point to continuity in God's wise plan of salvation. The Passover, along with stories like that of Abraham and Isaac or of Joseph's fall and rise, can help us to see that God teaches his people about the consequences of sin and the role that sacrifice plays in dealing with those consequences. It remains unexpected that God himself would enter into the world in order to offer the ultimate sacrifice of his only-begotten Son. But this act, rather than being vindictive or vengeful, is one of loving sacrifice for the sake of overcoming sin and death; it is preeminently an act of justice and mercy. Because Jesus is both man and God, he can suffer the consequences of sin to the fullest and turn that into a triumph over sin and death. At the same time, God draws close to us in our suffering by taking it upon himself and sharing that burden with us. In short, answers to this question ideally lead us to look upon the Cross with love and gratitude rather than shun it.

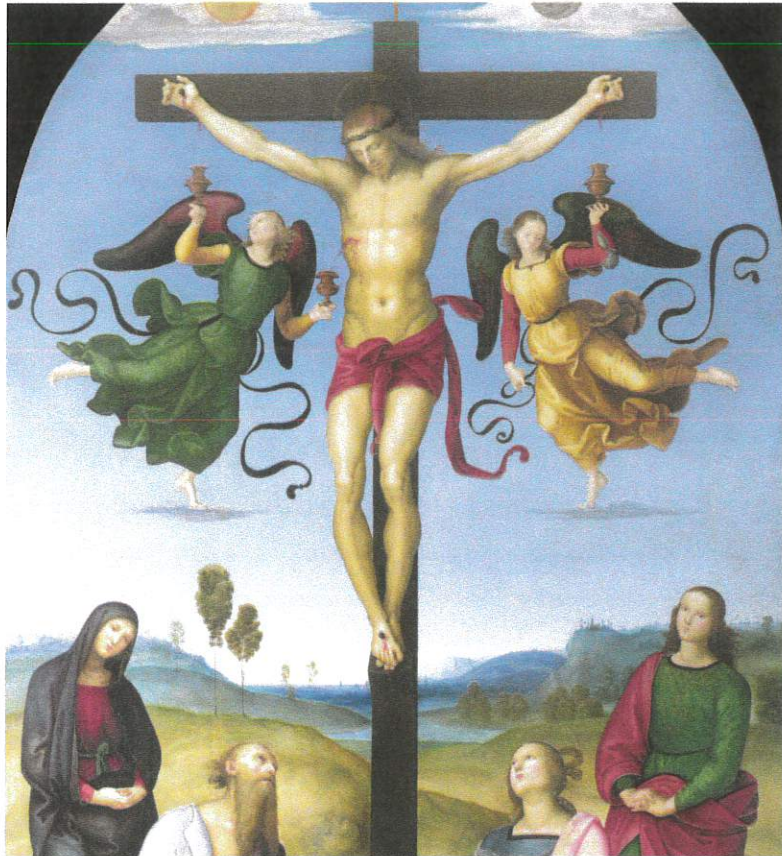
STEP 4: Conclude

The newness of life that Saint Paul writes about is something we all long for. But we cannot simply acquire it once and for all. Instead, we “walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4), as Saint Paul tells us, and this journey requires our action and participation. Our action is a response to Christ’s saving action in the Paschal Mystery. He invites us into the newness of life that he won for us and empowers us to respond affirmatively, in both word and deed.

CLOSING PRAYER

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world. For the sake of his sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

— From Saint Alphonsus Liguori,
Stations of the Cross

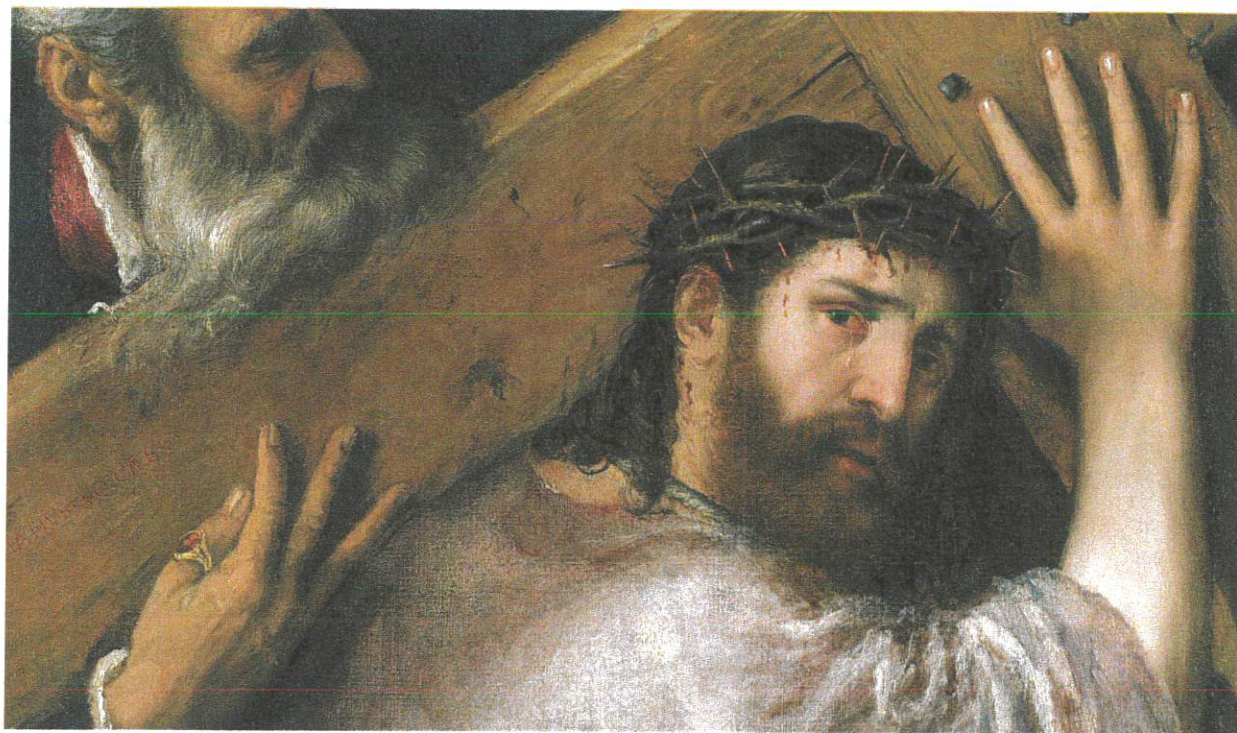


*The Crucifixion with the Blessed Virgin Mary,
Saint John the Evangelist, and Saints, Raphael*

MEMORY VERSE

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

— 1 CORINTHIANS 15:3–4



Simon Helping Jesus Carry the Cross, Titian

CALL TO CONVERSION

All three synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—share one especially powerful and succinct verse about discipleship: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24 and Mark 8:34). Luke’s Gospel adds one word to the speech: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me” (Luke 9:23, emphasis added). What does it mean to take up our cross daily?

The Cross is the ultimate sign of sacrificial love, manifesting of God’s willingness to give what is most precious and to suffer a great loss, for our sake. In what areas of your life are you slow to make sacrifices for those around you? The Cross is the ultimate sign of merciful love, revealing God’s willingness to stoop to the lowest position to lift us up. Are there people in your life to whom you hesitate or refuse to show mercy by giving yourself in some way to alleviate their suffering? The Cross is the ultimate sign of generous love, holding nothing back to restore us to God. Are there situations where you give meagerly rather than extravagantly?

Taking up our cross daily is a helpful reminder, and even a measure, of our discipleship. When we find ourselves unwilling to sacrifice, to lower ourselves, to give generously, usually just below the surface we are clinging to something. What do you cling to that you aren’t ready to sacrifice, that you don’t want to give up or give away? It might be something material, like money or items of convenience or comfort; or it might be something intangible or spiritual, like esteem or reputation. When we cling to these things, our hands and hearts are less available to love. Ask the Lord in prayer to reveal to you the things that prevent you from carrying your cross each day and the ways you can begin to overcome these challenges, starting today.

DIGGING DEEPER

What God did not want kept quiet in his scriptures, I must not keep quiet about either, and you must listen. The Lord's passion happened only once, as we know, for Christ died only once, a just man for the unjust (see 1 Pet 3:18). And we know, we hold as certain, we maintain with unshakable faith, that, *rising from the dead, Christ will never die again, nor will death ever again have the mastery over him* (Rom 6:9). Those are the words of the apostle Paul. Yet to ensure that we do not forget what was done once, it is re-enacted every year in our liturgical commemoration of it. Does Christ die every time his Passover is celebrated? No, yet the yearly remembrance in a sense makes present what took place in time past, and in this way it moves us as if we were actually watching our Lord hanging on the cross, but watching as believers, not mockers. Hanging on the wooden cross he was mocked; enthroned in heaven he is worshiped.

— Saint Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms, XXI (Sermon 2), 1*

In this homily, preached on Good Friday, Saint Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354–430) reflects on Psalm 21 (in the Latin edition, or Psalm 22 in most translations). He first turns to the words of Saints Peter and Paul, who affirm that Christ died only once and rose from the dead, never to die again. Then he turns to the liturgical practice of the Church, which remembers and reenacts this one-time sacrifice of Christ. Only later in the homily do we see the connection between these starting points and the psalm itself. Christ speaks the opening words of this psalm, this prayer, on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46).

Jesus makes the words and prayers of the Old Testament his own, and the Psalms come to fulfillment on his lips. The Church continues to make the words of Scripture her own, in her liturgical celebrations above all. It is a continuation of Christ's fulfillment of Scripture, since Christ continues to speak these words throughout history in his Body, the Church. The Church puts before us the celebration of the Paschal Mystery at each Mass, especially in the Holy Days surrounding Easter. At these moments, we stand before the mystery of the Lord's death and Resurrection, the one Paschal Mystery made truly present to us in the sacraments. Let us behold the pierced one with the eyes of faith, as Saint Augustine says; let us worship him in hope, and let us adore him in love.

FOR FURTHER READING

Matthew 26–28 and John 18–20

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 599–664

Saint Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, chaps. 3–5

Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*

Pope Saint John Paul II, encyclical letter, *Dives in misericordia* (Rich in Mercy)

Frank Sheed, *Theology and Sanity*, chaps. 16–19