

Franciscan Missionary Union
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April, 2010

Easter [April 4] is just days away, but do not forget the Easter Triduum: Holy Thursday (Apr 1), Good Friday (Apr 2) and the Easter Vigil (Apr 3). There is no need to encourage you to come to services on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, but please try to participate on Holy Thursday and the Easter Vigil. There is a tradition in the Church to observe the Paschal Fast from the Mass of the Lord's Supper till after the Easter Vigil. That may seem hard, but it can be a fruitful experience along with prayer. Then, when Easter comes, we need to keep proclaiming that Christ is risen to everyone we meet and in all the things that we do. April 24 is Good Shepherd Sunday, a day we are called to pray for vocations to ministry in the Church. On April 16, the Franciscans celebrate the anniversary of the approval of the First Rule of St. Francis by Innocent III. On this day, Franciscans gather and have a renewal of vows ceremony to inspire anew their commitment to following the way of Francis. Please keep all Franciscans in your prayers, especially that many young people come to the Order. There are a few feasts to remember, especially April 25, the feast of St. Mark the Evangelist, April 28, the feast of St. Peter Chanel and companions, the martyrs of the Oceania, and April 29, the feast of St. Catherine of Siena, a doctor of the Church. April 19 is the anniversary of the election of Pope Benedict XVI. It is good to keep him in your prayers. You all make it possible for our missionaries to proclaim Easter in very real ways to people who often find it hard to hope. We are so grateful and we constantly remember your intentions in our prayers. **May the Risen Lord fill you with Easter Joy!** This is the 72nd monthly meditation. Six Years! Hope they continue to be useful.

Proclaiming the Joy of the Resurrection

Fr. Russell Becker, OFM

The celebration of the Resurrection is the center of the Christian life. Each Christian tradition celebrates in a different yet similar way. Often the Orthodox Church celebrates Easter on a different Sunday than the Roman Church because they follow a different calendar. This year is one of the times when we both celebrate Easter on the same day. Their celebration of Easter is a wonderful way for us to look at the Mystery of Easter from a little bit different perspective and get some deeper insight into the Mystery.

In middle of the night between Holy Saturday and Easter dawn, the Orthodox gather for Resurrection matins. Before the people gather for the celebration, they prepare their special foods that they will use to end the lenten fast and celebrate Easter. They also extinguish all the candles they have burning in their homes before their icons. They bring the foods for blessing and they will also bring new light home from the service.

The people assemble in the church in silence and total darkness waiting for the service to begin. Suddenly, the bishop emerges through the doors of the icon screen carrying a lighted candle. The silence and the darkness are broken as the bishop invites the entire assembly to come and receive light from *the Light that never fades*. The flame from the bishop's candle is passed throughout the assembly until everyone is holding light. Then banners, icons, flowers and swinging censers emerge from the corners of the church. A huge procession is formed with all the people singing and responding. As the procession moves outside, it walks around the church, sometimes even through the neighborhood. When the procession arrives at the entrance to the church, the Gospel of the Resurrection is proclaimed. The church bells ring and everyone sings the Easter anthem: ***Christ is risen from the dead, by death he conquered death and to those in the grave he granted life!*** The anthem is repeated often. During this time the crowds turn and greet one another with the tradition Easter greeting: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

When the assembly comes back into the church they find it ablaze with light, filled with the scent of perfume and incense and beautifully decorated with flowers. The chandeliers of the church are set swirling in motion. They swing and sway signifying that the whole cosmos is dancing with joy. Nothing can stand still. The sense of intoxication is extreme. God is in the midst of the people! The texts of the songs alternate between the resurrection anthem and invitations given to all creation to join in the celebration. Mountains are invited to clap their hands; the oceans to leap like deer; and the morning star to join the people in singing. During this time the Easter Homily of St. John Chrysostom is also read to the assembly, it is a remarkable presentation of meaning of Easter, poetic, exciting and forceful. (It is included on a separate page.)

When the ceremony ends, everyone is greeted by the bishop and the people return home with the new light to dispel the darkness of their homes and the blessed food to carry the celebration on and on and on.

The celebration of the Feast of Feasts helps to make visible a reality we often forget. We become accustomed to life, lose a sense of the beauty around us, lose a sense of God acting on our lives, lose a sense of our potential. Easter celebrations help us awaken to the specialness of our life, to the beauty around us, to God's invitation to us and to what he enables us to be.

The invitation is to life. The image of the Creator, in which we are made, is called forth. The God who delights in creating wants us to share in the work of creation. The God who raised Jesus from the dead, raises us to new life.

In the Resurrection there is no secular and sacred, all is holy. All experience, human and non-human, are identified again as divine. Our consumer attitude toward creation has tried to bury God's presence and beauty in creation. Our self-centered preoccupation with personal salvation has tried to bury the communion we have with all life. Our lack of daring and boredom with life have tried to bury the creative talents God has shared with us. Holy men and women, artists and prophets, know this power, but now it is uncovered for all. New opportunities are given to each of us to join the Creator in the continual creating of beauty; justice, peace and love. The creator, the artist and the mystic in each of us can shine forth.

The Easter icon is not an image of Christ rising from the grave, the Easter Icon shows the descent into hell: Christ has broken the chains of death and he is raising Adam and Eve from their tomb and all our ancestors. Resurrection included all.. The message of new life is very clear.

Easter is about graves and empty graves. Humanity has spent a good deal of its time burying its people, its hopes and its possibilities. Easter reminds us that God still offers us new opportunity. No matter how often we throw opportunity into the grave, the Lord will open the graves we dig and ask us to take a chance and not be afraid.

St. Isaac of Nineveh, who lived in the seventh century, said the real sin is insensitivity to the Resurrection in each of us that we might join God in carrying on the work of creation. Will this power offer us a time of joy, or will we be insensitive to it and settle for a time of sadness and despair? This question is posed to us at Easter each year. Will we accept the invitation to life, to creativity or will we cast all into the grave and roll a stone in front of it? This is the challenge of Easter. Take the challenge, it is a great gift won by so great a price. Proclaim the joy, use the power for Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Reflection Questions

1. How can you discover the joy of Easter in your life and share it with the people close to you?

2. How does Easter help us to be witnesses to life and creativity?

3. Jesus suffered died and rose for our salvation. What can we do to show our gratitude.

4. St. Augustine said that a Christian should be an "Alleluia!" from dead to toe. When was the last time you were an Alleluia?

5. Easter is the Mystery which restores creativity to creation. Sin had weighed it down and tempted us to use creation poorly and badly. Celebrate Easter by being more creative. Make something good happen for you and for those close to you and thus for God.

6. Read the Easter Homily of St. John Chrysostom. Does it help you to be more sensitive to the Resurrection?

Please remember our friar missionaries who celebrate birthdays this month:

April 4: Fr. Dac Tran, O.F.M. (Home Missions)

April 11: Fr. Berard Hanlon, O.F.M. (Brazil)

May God bless them with peace, energy and happiness!

Please keep our missionaries and former missionaries who are ill in your prayers:

Fr. Ignatius McGeedy, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Robert Nee, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Aloysius Siracuse, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Finian Riley, O.F.M. (Africa)

Fr. Peter Sheridan, O.F.M. (Home Missions)

Fr. Stanislaus Widomski, O.F.M. (Japan)

May God give them health, strength and peace!