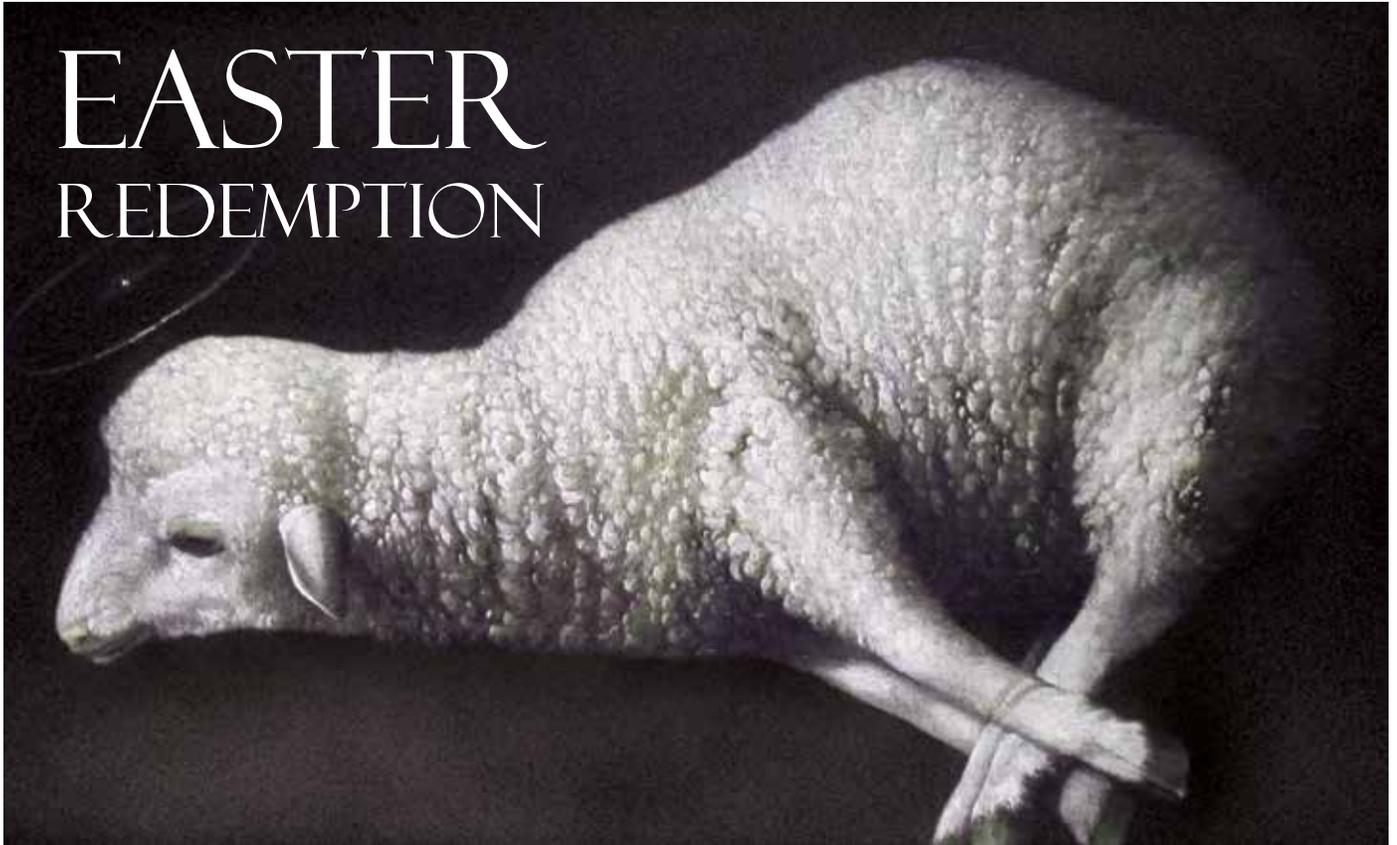


EASTER REDEMPTION



Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Lamb of God* c. 1635-40

THE GREATEST FEAST OF Christianity, without doubt, is the Resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ, from the dead. It was the very first and, for a while, the only feast celebrated by the early Church. It was faith in the Resurrection of Christ that made a Christian. If you believed that, everything else would follow. It was and is so important that the Pagans who heard Saint Paul preach in Athens thought he was promoting *two* “foreign divinities” — Jesus and the Resurrection (Acts 17:18). At the heart of our faith in Christ’s resurrection, however, is faith in our **redemption**.

Redemption is a word that we hear a lot in our day. Unfortunately, most of the time it seems to refer to coupons. It is worth asking, though, what exactly do we mean by the word? When we speak of being redeemed by the blood of Christ, what are we talking about? The word did not originate with Christianity; we find it throughout the Old Testament, especially where precepts of the Mosaic Law are concerned. In

every case, however, the meaning is the same: Something or someone is *bought back* by another.

In the Book of Exodus we find the most famous example of Old Testament redemption: the Passover Lamb. By the blood of this lamb, sprinkled on the doorposts and lintels of the Israelites’ homes in Egypt, God spared their first-born sons when He took the lives of all the first-born sons of the Egyptians (See Ex 12). This image of redemption by the blood of a lamb would foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Indeed, even the way that the lamb was roasted, in a cruciform arrangement, would find its fulfillment in Christ.

In the New Testament, we also see a good example of redemption, even before our Lord was led away to be crucified on Golgotha. In all four Gospels, we are told that there was a notorious prisoner being held by Pontius Pilate, Barabbas by name. We can almost be sure that the cross that our Lord carried was intended for him. The Gospels speak of the two other

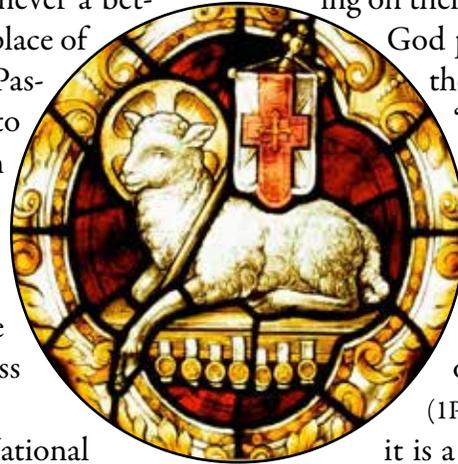
men who were crucified with Christ as “thieves” and Barabbas as a “robber” but these words, apart from being synonymous, meant more than simply pickpockets or muggers in the original Greek. The word used is *Lestes*, which goes beyond mere thievery to outright brigandage and rebellion. In addition, we are told more than once that Barabbas was a murderer, which would fit the profile. That said, you can imagine his surprise when the people asked for his release instead of that of Jesus of Nazareth. Surely, there was never a better example of one man dying in the place of another. Of all the characters in the Passion narrative, Barabbas was the first to know something of the redemption that Christ would bring. How did he respond? We are not told. Hopefully, he changed his ways. Hopefully, he became a devoted follower of the One Who took his place on the cross that Friday afternoon.

During a radio broadcast to the National Catechetical Congress in Boston in 1946, Pope Pius XII said, “Perhaps the greatest sin in the world today is that men have begun to lose the sense of sin”—a message repeated more than once by more recent Roman Pontiffs. That being the case, the second greatest sin surrounding us seems to be the loss of the sense of our **redemption**. The two go hand in hand.

From the time of Moses until the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Jews had a stark image of the price of sin and redemption. Every man, woman, and child witnessed the death of animals offered in sacrifice for their redemption from various sins and faults. It made sin and redemption tangible, something that gradually faded away in the centuries that followed the destruction of Jerusalem. Among these, the image of the Passover Lamb remains even to this day. Yet, even back in the time of Moses, when the Passover was instituted and God spared the Israelites by the blood of the lamb, leading them out of Egypt with many signs and wonders, it was not long before they

forgot about their redemption.

Reading the book of Exodus, it is clear that, although God’s Chosen People left Egypt, Egypt did not leave God’s Chosen People. No sooner did they encounter hardships and difficulties than they began to murmur and complain, longing for the comforts and familiarity of their lives in Egypt. How quickly they forgot the misery of their slavery! Long gone is their complaint to Moses about the hardships that Pharaoh was inflicting on them. Long forgotten are the miracles that God performed in rescuing them, as well as the promises He made to bring them into “a land flowing with milk and honey.”



“It is safe to say that the best way to live our redemption is to be conscious of it.”

What can we learn from this? We have been redeemed, Saint Peter tells us, “not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1Pet. 1:18-19). Hence, if we are ungrateful, it is a far greater sin than was that of the Israelites who grumbled in the desert against Moses, or rather, God, Who freed them. “You are not your own,” writes Saint Paul, “You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1Cor. 6:19-20). How, then, should we live our redemption, and glorify God as we make our way to the Kingdom of Heaven, the **true** Promised Land?

It is safe to say that the best way to live our redemption is to be conscious of it. The more we recall this, the more it will permeate our lives and actions. Our belief in, and gratitude for, Christ’s death and resurrection will affect our attitudes towards life and death, towards good and evil. For instance, suffering takes on a whole new dignity seeing that Jesus, God-made-man, did not hesitate to suffer and even die out of obedience to His Father’s Will. He shows us that suffering is not the worst thing that can happen to us; the worst thing that can happen is estrangement from God, from His friendship and grace. He also shows us that neither suffering nor death has the last word. Saint Paul, taking

this to heart, exclaims: “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1Cor 15:55).

The English Mystic, Saint Julian of Norwich, was shown what Christ’s victory over the Evil One meant. She wrote:

“I saw our Lord scorn [the devil’s] malice and despise him as nothing, and he wants us to do so. Because of this sight I laughed greatly... for I understood that we may laugh, to comfort ourselves and rejoice in God, because the devil is overcome. ... for I saw that on Judgement Day he will be generally scorned by all who will be saved, of whose salvation he has had great envy. For then he will see that all the woe and tribulation which he has caused them will be changed into the increase of their eternal joy. And all the pain and the sorrow that he wanted to

bring them into will go forever with him to hell.” (Showings, Chapter 13)

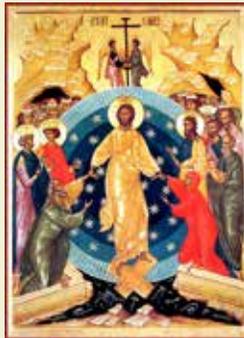
In the death of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the devil overreached himself. Having gained power over man through Adam’s sin, he exceeded it in justice when he sought to kill Christ, Who was sinless and did not deserve to die. Through Christ’s Passion and Resurrection, we share in His victory; we have power over the wiles of the devil, and access to the Kingdom of God. Our hope in Christ will not leave us disappointed! As we celebrate our Lord’s Glorious Resurrection from the dead, may we take the joy and hope of this season to heart. May it permeate our lives and fill our hearts with gratitude. Christ is risen, and life can never be the same for those who are redeemed by Him.



Praying for Forgiveness

Only hours before celebrating the glorious feast of the Resurrection, the Maronite Church prays the Prayer of Forgiveness, a unique liturgy that concludes Passion Week. As can be guessed, the focus of this prayer is on forgiveness. It is a poignant ending to the Lenten season and a final preparation for the joy of Easter.

At the beginning of Lent, the Divine Liturgy for Ash Monday includes a reading from the second epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians that reads in part, “We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20). This is repeated in the final hours before Easter during the readings of the Prayer of Forgiveness; the theme of reconciliation being so central to Lent and Easter. Why? Because Christ came to reconcile us to God by offering His life for us: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).



Yet, as Our Lord taught us, in order to find forgiveness from God for our trespasses, we must forgive those who trespass against us. This can be a daunting task and one that requires the assistance of God’s Grace. Throughout the season of Great Lent, the goal of the prayers, fasts, and almsgiving has been to prepare the way for that Grace to enter into our hearts and, with it, to grow in a Christ-like love. At the end of the Season, the liturgy raises the questions: Are we bearing any grudges towards anyone? Is our conscience clean before God? It is a last call to appear before the Risen Lord at the Easter Vigil with spotless wedding garments.

As we know, forgiveness is not a one-time affair, but something meant to be ongoing. Hence the need for frequent confession and a daily examination of conscience. Only then can we live out our reconciliation with God and one another in peace and true joy. ❖