

Risus Paschalis: Easter laughter.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet and talk with you at your Diocesan Convention. Kathy Broz offered me the opportunity to speak, with freedom to select the topic. I have decided to speak with you about joy.

In the late 15th century, a practice began in Bavaria called Risus Paschalis, or Easter laughter. The priest would deliver an Easter homily that included a humorous story, causing the people to fill the church with the sound of laughter on Easter Sunday morning. It was an effort to create a liturgical response to the joy that fills the hearts of the followers of Christ from their participation in the Easter gift of Jesus Christ. Apparently, it got out of hand, requiring the intervention of Pope Clement X (1670-1676) and later the Bishops of Bavaria and was suppressed. That laughter died, but I hope to resurrect it in some fashion today by filling your heart with delight at the wonder of our Easter triumph in Jesus Christ.

The laughter of the children of God is not without scriptural basis. Genesis recounts the story of Sarah, the wife of Abraham, who laughed when she first heard the promise of the angel that she would conceive in her old age and bear Abraham a son. When the child Isaac was born, the laughter of disbelief turned into the laughter of delight in the blessing and goodness of God. Genesis (21.6-7) records her words, *Sarah then said, "God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear of it will laugh with me. Who would have told Abraham," she added, "that Sarah would nurse children! Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."* It was a remarkable event, beyond the power of nature--a woman of 90 giving birth to a child. It was a miracle of God's power, the fulfillment of His promise. Sarah's response was delightful laughter and joy.

The word laugh in the Gospels is found in St. Luke's presentation of the beatitudes, where Jesus said, *blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh* (Lk 6.22); and, *woe to you who laugh now, for you will grieve and weep* (Lk. 6.26). It is also used in the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter, but in this connection, the people who heard Jesus prophesy that the daughter was not dead but sleeping, laughed him to scorn and in this sense, laughter expressed ridicule (cf. Lk 8.53).

As we see from these texts, laughter in the scriptures expresses joy or disbelief. And while the gospels never present a picture of Jesus laughing with his disciples, nor even of his disciples laughing, we do have several instances in the gospels where joy is used to express the wonderful works of God. For example, the joy of St. John, leaping in the womb of his mother at his first encounter with the Messiah during the visitation of Mary (Lk. 1.44); the angel's greeting to the shepherds which included the words, *I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people* (Lk 2.10); the joy of the Magi in finding the holy family in Bethlehem (Mt. 2.10); the joy of the 70 disciples on their return from the mission given them by Christ to cure the sick and proclaim the kingdom (Lk. 10.17); and, the joy mentioned in Matthew and Luke following the discovery of the Lord's resurrection (Mt. 28.8; Lk. 24.41).

St. John the Evangelist uses the word joy in two different places within his gospel, the first time to express the delight in the heart of John the Baptist. In chapter 3, the evangelist relates the story of John's disciples witnessing Jesus' growth in popularity. They question the Baptist about this. John told them: *The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens for him, rejoices*

*greatly at the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease* (Jn 3. 29-30). The bridegroom has come. John's job of proclaiming the coming of the Messiah has reached fulfillment and his heart is filled with joy.

The other use of the word joy is found in the last supper discourse of the Lord, in chapters 15, 16 and 17. In Jn 15. 10-12, Jesus tells his disciples, *As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.*

Christ desires to share His joy with His disciples and the joy of Christ is complete joy. Remaining in Christ's love is the way to joy which is gained by following His commandments, and particularly His commandment to love as He loves. Joy is therefore the fruit of love, that is, the fruit of union with Christ and others.

In Jn 16. 20-24, Jesus said, *Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy. When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world. So you also are now in anguish. But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you. On that day you will not question me about anything. Amen, amen, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you. Until now you have not asked anything in my name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.*

Separation from Christ is sorrow. Union with Christ is joy, and He makes this possible for us. This joy, once gained, can never be taken by force or coercion. Christ offers His followers this gift: if they allow Him to be their God, their joy will be complete.

Finally, in Jn 17. 12-13, Jesus prayed to His Father in these words, *When I was with them I protected them in your name that you gave me, and I guarded them, and none of them was lost except the son of destruction, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you. I speak this in the world so that they may share my joy completely.*

The seventeenth chapter of St. John's gospel is called the Prayer of Jesus. It is an intimate expression of the heart of Christ to the Father, rejoicing and returning the gifts of the Father to Him, in particular, the gift of His disciples. Jesus realizes that His hour has come, the hour of glory, the hour of the paschal mystery. It is the love of the Father and the Son for the human family that has made this hour come, a love that includes the gift of His life for His friends. Jesus desires that His disciples find joy in this hour, the joy He knows in giving the world this gift of love, the work of redemption.

One can imagine the joy of the disciples at the discovery of the resurrection. The Lord had overcome death, as He had promised. He manifested His power over all creation by coming back to life and not only to life, but to them. He talked with them, walked with them, ate their food, breathed on them, fed them, explained what happened to Him, opened their minds to the Scriptures, and offered His hand and side for them to touch. His love for them is tenderly expressed in each of these

meetings. He forgave them for their doubt, restored their convictions, and clarified their mission in service to Him. The resurrection of Christ caused the disciples joy. His reunion with them fulfilled that joy.

While the historic event of the resurrection and the sight of Jesus filled the apostles with joy, a much deeper mystery had occurred, which later theology would call the paschal mystery. This is the mystery of the suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus which has for us two aspects: by His death, we are liberated from sin; by His resurrection, we are offered the way to a new life. This new life is a justification that reinstates us into the life of God's grace.

Let us look more closely at the problem of the human family that necessitated this gift and how the paschal mystery is the answer and cause of our joy.

The disobedience of our first parents separated God and the human family. We do not have an historical account of this event in the manner and discipline required by modern historical record keeping. However, we do have a theological account, which has the surety of truth since it is the revealed word of God. This account accurately reflects the nature of all sin, which is the temptation to "be like God." The cunning serpent deceived the woman and the man, and they disobeyed the command of God, which had serious effects: Adam became afraid of God; he experienced disorder within himself and with the woman; the punishment of God included banishment from the garden of life, suffering, hardships and toil for survival, with sin as a demon lurking at his door and requiring that he master it. The punishment of sin was death, not only physical death, but separation from God as well. The human person lost the perfection given in the original creation for communion with God.

This tragedy of sin and separation is restored by God in the Incarnation of His Son. The groundwork for this gift was laid 2000 years before and included the first recorded laugh in human history in the relationship between God and man. Sarah laughed from the power of God manifested over the limitations of nature. God had shown Himself faithful to His promise: He would give Abraham an heir, from whom would come a nation as countless as the stars of heaven.

It would be years before laughter was again recorded, but it began in earnest when another child of an aged mother leapt for joy. Later, laying eyes of the Savior of the world, John the Baptist would proclaim that his joy was complete. However, the fulness of joy found in the gospels is the joy that filled the heart of Christ on the night before He suffered. The love of God for His children was about to be manifested through the hour of Christ, the hour of man's redemption in what we would call the paschal mystery, the passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. By His death, Christ would liberate us from sin; by His resurrection, He would offer us the way to a new life. He would offer justification that would reinstate us into the life of God's grace. It filled the Savior's heart with joy, when, on that holy night He contemplated what awaited Him, He prepared the disciples for what lay before them, and He invited them to share it with Him. To find joy they must live in Him and love as He loves. Then, their joy would be complete, and no one would be able to take it from them.

True spiritual joy is found in union with the love of Christ. That is to say, true spiritual joy is found in sharing in Christ's paschal mystery. What we discover as we contemplate this truth is that the gift of sharing in union with the love of Christ, which is the paschal mystery, was given by Jesus to His disciples on the night

before He died. It came to them in the gift of the Eucharist. The Eucharist enabled them to share in the joy of the Lord and it is the Lord's lasting gift of the Eucharist that enables us today to share His joy. This is because the Eucharist is the sacrament of the paschal mystery.

This last statement, that the Eucharist is the sacrament of the paschal mystery, is the teaching of Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, published seven years ago today. This is a marvelous idea, and can help us understand how the Eucharist is the source of our Easter joy.

A sacrament, we recall, is an outward sign, instituted by Christ, which gives grace. We have always known the Eucharist is a sacrament, the sacrament of the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. What the Pope was teaching in calling the Eucharist the sacrament of the paschal mystery is that in the Eucharist we see, experience, and partake in the passion, death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus Christ. The Eucharist reveals the paschal mystery. The Eucharist effects-- that is, causes to take place--the saving grace of the paschal mystery.

It begins in the upper room, at what the evangelists describe as the Passover celebration of Jesus and His disciples. During this Passover ritual, that is, the sacred liturgy of the Jews which relived for them God's act of rescue from slavery to the Egyptians, Jesus took up the unleavened bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to His disciples, saying, "This is my body, given up for you." Later in the ceremony, Jesus picked up the cup of wine, gave His Father thanks and praise and handed it to His disciples saying, "Take this, all of you and drink from it; this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant; it will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me."

Jesus changed the Passover liturgy, taking the food that was part of the liturgy, the bread and the wine, and making it His body and blood. In the Jewish liturgy, the one year old male lamb was the sacrifice. On that night, Jesus made Himself the lamb that would be given up, whose blood would be poured out, not to free the human family from political slavery, but to free us from the slavery of sin and its punishment, which is eternal death and damnation. We Catholics believe that the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world would be sacrificed on the cross on Good Friday. We also believe that this sacrifice is anticipated on Holy Thursday, at this Passover ceremony, when the words of Christ clearly connect the gift of Himself under the form of bread and wine with the sacrifice He would offer on Calvary for the forgiveness of sin. To do this in memory of Him is to grant the power for us to celebrate His passion and death for the remission of sins, which we do in every Mass.

Clearly, the Eucharist makes present the passion and death of the Lord. It also includes His resurrection and glorification. We find this truth in the teaching given by Jesus in what we call the Bread of Life Discourse in the sixth chapter of St. John's gospel. This teaching includes these words:

*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never hunger, whoever believes in me will never thirst (Jn 6.35).*

*I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world (Jn 6.51).*

*Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day (Jn 6. 53-54).*

These teachings of Christ are to be taken literally, conveying precisely what He is describing: truly His body and His blood; truly to be eaten; truly achieving a share in eternal life, and truly accomplishing for those who partake future resurrection from death and the gift of eternal glory.

According to St. John, these teachings of Jesus were given in Capernaum, a year before the Lord's death, during the days leading up to the celebration of the Passover. Jesus was anticipating the Passover, teaching His disciples that the gift of His body and blood would be given to them, that it was essential for them to partake in this gift if they desired resurrection from death and eternal life. Taken with the actual words He used in the gift of the Eucharist that night regarding his passion and death, we see that all the elements of the paschal mystery are present here: the passion, the sacrifice unto death, the resurrection and glorification. The Eucharist is the sacrament of the paschal mystery. It makes present, it effects what it symbolizes, namely the saving grace of the passion, death, resurrection and glorification of Christ. It was this work that the Lord Jesus anticipated on the night before He died. It was in this work of love that He found His joy, and it was to share in this love that He invited the disciples, so that their joy might be complete.

While recognizing that we must never eat the Bread unworthily or we will bring condemnation upon ourselves, the Eucharist makes present the sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of sin. The Eucharist unites us with the risen Christ. The Eucharist offers us a share even now in the glory of God because we are in union

with the glorified Christ. Everything we need spiritually is provided in the Eucharist because it is the sacrament of the paschal mystery. It was this mystery that filled the heart of Christ with joy and thus becomes for us the cause of our Easter joy. I am forgiven. I possess eternal life. I will rise. I will share in the glory of the children of God. Echoing the words of Sarah, we should say, "God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear of it will laugh with me" in wonder and delight at the goodness of God.