

Question for family discussion:

How has Jesus led us as Christians out of bondage?

THE LAST SUPPER

Jesus was celebrating this same Passover meal the night before



He died. He took the symbols and words of liberation and applied them to himself: He was now to be the Lamb whose blood is shed to save his people from the captivity of sin and death. He was making a NEW COVENANT with the people of God and drawing us into communion with Him through the Eucharist. We share his life by partaking of his Body and Blood during Mass.

Each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we enter into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Savior.

A passage from the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* from Second Vatican Council gives a brilliant summing up:

Therefore, "Our Savior at the Last Supper on the night when He was betrayed instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood so that He might perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the centuries till His coming. He thus entrusted to the Church, His beloved spouse, a memorial of His death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal meal in which Christ is eaten, the mind filled with grace and a pledge of future glory given to us" (Chapter 9:3a).

Question for family discussion:

How does the Eucharist change us?

The Seder Meal

(Passover Supper) Roots of our Catholic Mass

by Terry A. Modica



The Passover Supper is a ritual meal that has been very important to the Jewish people for more than 3,000 years, and it is very important to us Christians because of the Jewish heritage of our faith.

BACKGROUND

Even though the Passover ritual is associated with Judaism, we as Catholics are able to better appreciate our Liturgy of the Eucharist if we understand its roots in Judaism. The Passover is an important event of liberation that's central to both religions. The Seder meal gives us the opportunity to learn more about our Jewish background and become more aware of unity with our Jewish brothers and sisters.

The story of the liberation of the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt is written in the Book of Exodus, chapters 12 and following. The Passover meal commemorates this event as well as the Covenant that God made with the Israelites.

Here's the story: It begins with Joseph (who was well known for his many-colored coat). When he was at the height of his power in Egypt as the Pharaoh's right-hand man, his family and kin all settled in Egypt and became prosperous there.



Unfortunately, many years after Joseph died, he was forgotten by the Egyptians. The growing population of Hebrews were oppressed and enslaved and suffered utmost misery. Then the Egyptians decided to kill all the Jews. Every male child was to be cast into the Nile River.

One of these babies was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter. His name was Moses. He was raised as an Egyptian, but he was aware of the suffering of his fellow Jews. When he was much older, God appeared to him in the burning bush to give the task of leading his people out of slavery.



Again and again Moses went to the Pharaoh to say that God had commanded the Israelites to go forth from Egypt. Each time, Pharaoh refused, and so terrible plagues were sent upon the land.

The worst plague was the death of every first-born creature, both human and animal, and Pharaoh finally relented.

During this final plague, the first-born of the Israelites were saved from death thanks to the blood of the lamb.

THE PASSOVER MEAL

God directed, through Moses, that every family should take a perfect, one-year-old lamb, kill it in sacrifice, and sprinkle its blood upon the door of their house. They were to eat the lamb with unleavened bread, because there was no time for the bread to rise. They had to eat the meal dressed and ready to leave on a long journey.

God warned that His destroying angels would slay the first-born in every Egyptian household, but they would PASS OVER the houses that had been marked with the blood of the lamb. This became a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God whose blood, shed on the cross, saves us from eternal death.

After the Jews escaped from Egypt, the Egyptian soldiers chased after them. God helped His people PASS OVER the Red Sea by parting the waters, but the soldiers drowned, ending the danger.

BLESSED WINE is used four times to represent the four-fold promise God made to the Israelites in Egypt. These promises are: "I will bring you forth; I will deliver you; I will redeem you; I will take you." (Read Exodus 6:6-7)



The third of these three cups is the cup of Redemption representing the blood of the Paschal lamb. It's this one over which Jesus said, "This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new covenant which will be shed for the forgiveness of sins."

It's also called the Cup of Blessing. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ" (1 Cor. 10:16). In Catholic Mass, the wine becomes the Blood of Christ when it's consecrated by Jesus through the priest.

The Israelites killed their lambs close to the doors so that the blood would run into a depression at the base of the door. When they painted the door on the top frame, the door was "sealed" on all four sides with the blood of the Lamb.

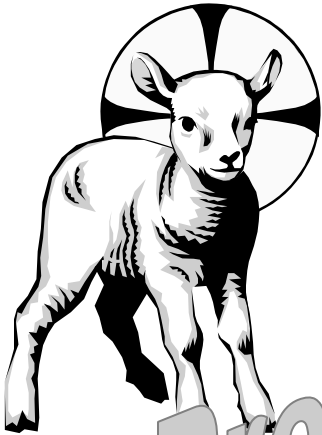
We now understand this picture of the suffering Messiah: blood above where the thorns pierced His brow, blood at the sides from His nail-pierced hands, blood below from His nail-pierced feet.

The Israelites escaped death because of the blood-sealed door, and they escaped slavery by leaving Egypt through these doors. Jesus said, "I am the door: if any man enter in he shall be saved" (John 10:9).

THE EMPTY CHAIR

At every Seder supper, there is a head table, where the Leader & Commentator sit. At this table, a special cup filled with wine is placed prominently in front of an empty chair. In parable, the Prophet Elijah visits every Jewish home and tastes of the cup set aside for him. It is a dramatic moment of the Passover meal when a child opens the door for Elijah. A sense of mystery is always associated with this part of the Seder.

THE ROASTED LAMB BONE represents the Passover (Paschal) Lamb, which faithful Jews would sacrifice in the Temple of Jerusalem centuries ago in gratitude to God for passing over the houses of the Children of Israel when the firstborn of the Egyptians were slain.



Jesus became the ultimate Passover Lamb. He was the innocent lamb led to slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). The Passover Lamb had to be perfect, because only that which is perfect can make atonement for our sins (Deut. 15:31), and Jesus is described by Peter as a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Peter 1:19). For the Passover, not one bone of the Passover lamb was to be broken (Exodus 12:10). Jesus' bones were not broken when He was killed.

The New Testament refers to Jesus more than 30 times as the Lamb of God. We even use that description of Him during our Catholic Mass!

EGGS remind us of the offering that Jews brought to the Temple in Jerusalem for religious festivals. It's also a symbol of the new life into which they were entering. Think of our Easter eggs!



MAROR are bitter herbs that remind Jews of the bitterness of slavery in Egypt, from which God delivered them.

HAROSET is a mixture of nuts, apples and raisins chopped and mashed together to resemble mortar. It's a reminder of the clay that the Israelite slaves used when making bricks as slaves of Pharaoh. It also symbolizes the joy and sweetness of deliverance.

KARPAS is a green vegetable to remind us of the goodness of God as He provides us with food from the earth.

Ever afterward, by celebrating the PASSOVER MEAL each year, the Jewish people have retold the powerful deeds of God who liberated them.

Each event is explained in detail when the youngest member of the household or group asks the four questions:

1. Why is this night different from all other nights?
2. Why do we not eat leavened bread tonight, but only matzo?
3. Why do we especially eat bitter herbs tonight?
4. Why do we dine tonight with special ceremony?

The answers are a reminder that God always liberates his followers from bondage.

The Passover supper holds the joy and solemnity of a shared meal, where food and wine and the presence of God are the great binding force of His beloved people.

Passover is:

- A celebration of the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery.
- A Festival of Deliverance not only for the Jews, but for all.
- A spiritual journey from darkness into light, which is also part of our lives today.
- For Christians, it's a connection to Christ's Last Supper and the New Covenant.

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH



Jesus and the Apostles and all the original Christians were Jewish. In fact, during the early years of the Church, a convert had to become a Jew to be considered a "full" Christian. First century Christians observed all of the Jewish traditions and customs and attended Synagogue. The Christian faith

was clearly seen as an extension of Judaism.

The Last Supper of Jesus was His last Seder, and in it He gave us the Eucharist.

We see how Jesus felt about the Seder in Luke's Gospel: "I want very much to eat this Passover Meal with you before I suffer." (Luke 22:15)



Let's look at the links between our Mass celebration and the Passover meal:

- We use unleavened bread during the Mass because only unleavened bread or matzo is allowed at the Seder.
- We have wine during the Mass because wine is an integral part of the Seder.
- At one point during the Mass our priest performs a ritual cleansing by washing his hands.
- The Seder is a meal of Penitence and Thanksgiving, recalling how God freed his people from their bondage in Egypt.
- Our Priest says, "Then Jesus held the cup and gave a blessing." Jesus probably said the same blessing, called the *Kiddush*, that we'll recite in the Seder before the wine is drunk: "Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine."

These are just some of the connections between the Mass and the Seder.

What to read:

Read the first reading from Holy Thursday (Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14).

Questions for family discussion:

1. What does this mean for Christians?
2. What in this story can we celebrate joyfully?
3. Why does it give a deeper meaning to our celebration of Holy Week?

THE SEDER FOOD

At Passover, certain foods are eaten, each with a special meaning.

MATZOS: unleavened bread reminds us that the people of Israel did not have time to let bread rise when they escaped from Egypt.



The matzos, or *aphikomen*, came into use after the destruction of the Temple to represent the Paschal sacrifice that was no longer possible. The rabbis decreed it to be a replacement of the Passover lamb. It's a token of the Coming Day of the Messiah - who would deliver the people from their oppression.

Early in the meal, the leader takes the middle of three matzos and breaks it. He says a benediction and distributes half to the others. The second half is hidden away. After the meal, the children search for the hidden matzo. When it's found, it's then unwrapped, broken and eaten. Like Jesus in the Eucharist, the bread was hidden but now is revealed.



It was this unleavened bread that Jesus broke and shared at the Last Supper. Its very appearance recalls the stripes and blows he bore for us, because it gets pierced in many places. Stripes and holes in the bread ensure that it does not become leavened during baking. (Read Isaiah 53:5 and Zechariah 12:10.)

Jesus is the Bread of Life, once hidden from the world but now revealed. For Christians, the three matzos depict the unity of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The middle matzo reminds us of the death of Jesus when it's broken, His burial when it's hidden (His burial), and His resurrection when it's revealed.