

## ***The Meaning of Holy Week***

The first Holy Week was the most important week in the life of Jesus Christ because it brought to a perfect fulfillment the purpose of the Incarnation, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity assuming a human nature to bring about our redemption. Therefore Holy Week should be the most important week in the entire year for each one of us. We should spend these precious days in prayer and reflection. Let's examine the biblical narratives.

### **Setting the Stage**

1. *Place* – The entire Passion took place in and around Jerusalem, the capital of Palestine.
2. *Time* – Probably in the year A.D. 30, during Passover Week, from the 9th to the 16th of the Jewish Month Nisan (March-April). Every Jew over the age of twelve was obligated by Jewish Law, if physically able, to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, so the city was crowded with pilgrims.
3. *Political Conditions* – The Jewish nation was under the domination of Rome. When Rome conquered a land, they placed their government over the one that was already in place, trying not to totally upset the people and their cultures and traditions. The Roman official was Pontius Pilate. St. Matthew identified Pilate in terms of his military power as “governor” (27:2), but his official title was Prefect. He held this post from A.D. 26 to 36. By all accounts Pilate was weak, cruel, and corrupt. Ultimately Vitellius, the governor of Syria under the reign of the perverted emperor Caligula, sent him to Rome in disgrace. The early Church historian Eusebius stated that soon after his return to Rome Pilate killed himself, disheartened by misfortunes and the loss favor from the emperor. It was a sad end to a man who put success, power and the emperor before God. In the world of sin there is no real love, just as there is no pity in hell.

The Jewish religious establishment consisted of the High Priest, Caiaphas, and the Council of 70 elders, called the Sanhedrin. Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas. However, Luke tells us that Annas was the real power behind Caiaphas and the one responsible for his appointment (Lk 3:2). Five of his sons, a son-in-law, and a grandson held that post. In Acts 4:5 we learn that Annas himself held the office. Instead of being a hereditary lifetime position, the high priesthood had sunk to a commodity to be bought from Roman governors. Annas' hatred for Jesus stemmed from his corruption. He was a profiteer who extorted his wealth from the nefarious temple trade Jesus condemned and disrupted.

“It was Caiaphas, the high priest, who had given council to the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people” (Jn 18:14; See also: Jn 11:49-51). Innocence and justice was lost to sin during Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin. Any sense of principle was thrown away. The sole law was expediency! Matthew stressed that both the chief priests and the Sanhedrin conspired unscrupulously with “false testimony” (Mt 26:59). When men depart from God's law, it is only a matter of time before any crime, even murder is rationalized.

4. *Developments* – Jesus had been preaching the Kingdom of God, working miracles, and finally claiming to be the Messiah. He was becoming so popular that the High Priest and his cohorts saw in Him a serious threat to their privileged authority over the people. The recent raising of Lazarus from the dead caused many Jews to believe in Jesus. The Jewish leaders even thought to kill Lazarus, but they were determined to kill Jesus. However, as a conquered nation, they could not put anyone to death. Only the Roman Governor had the power to condemn a criminal to death.

### **PALM SUNDAY**

Beginning with Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, St. Matthew brings to a climax the theme that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David, and the fulfillment of the Davidic promises. Jesus, the Lord of history, came to Jerusalem to claim his kingdom and to judge Israel.

Jesus began his procession from Bethphage, which means the "house of figs". Bethphage was east of Jerusalem between Bethany and Jerusalem. St. Thomas points out that Bethphage was a mile distant from Jerusalem. That made it an ideal residence for the Levitical priests who were forbidden to travel more than a mile on the Sabbath.<sup>1</sup> Jesus, the new Adam (1 Cor 15:22, 45; Rom 5:14), entered the holy city from the east to repair the damage caused by the sin of the first Adam who was driven to the east when he was cast out of the garden of Eden (Gen 3:24). This was symbolically significant because the Jews believed that the original Garden of Eden existed in the place where Jerusalem and the Temple stood.

The rabbis of the first century taught that the Messiah would come either as a conquering hero on a white steed, or as a king on a donkey.<sup>2</sup> They believed he would come on an ass if the people's hearts were closed, but on a horse if their hearts were repentant.

Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem had the desired effect. He "stirred" (Mt 21:10) the city. The Greek, *seio*, is quite a bit stronger than "stirred". In the Bible this word was used to describe an earthquake. In this passage it has the meaning of an emotional and spiritual upheaval that almost reached riotous proportions. The Messiah has come to the old Jerusalem to lead his people into the new Jerusalem, his Church.

The scene Matthew portrayed recalled Solomon's coronation. Jesus rode a colt and Solomon rode David's mule (1 Kgs 1:32-40). Both entrances were accompanied by a crowd celebrating (1 Kgs 39-40). In both cases Jerusalem was in a state of turmoil and excitement (1 Kgs 1:45).

Jesus' coming will force everyone to take a stance, to make a choice. It is always that way. The issue confronting individuals and nations is simply this. Are we going to do things God's way or our way? Will we be obedient or disobedient? Will we embrace the *whole* gospel message, or will we pick and choose forming our own religion? Earlier Jesus declared: "He who is not with

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<sup>1</sup> *Summa*, VI, Part II, p. 704.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew speaks both of a she-ass and a colt, which refers to a young horse or ass (21:2, 6). St. Jerome sees in the two beasts symbols of Israel, the donkey, and the Gentiles, the colt.

me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters” (Mt 12:30). Once he entered Jerusalem Jesus confronted the religious establishment in the temple itself.

## **MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK**

### **Anointing at Bethany (Jn 12:1-12)**

The “nard” (Jn 12:3) Mary used was an aromatic oil that was also called spikenard. It came from northern India in sealed alabaster boxes. We learn that “the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.” These words recall a line from the Song of Solomon: “While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance” (Song 1:12). This is insightful because the Song of Songs uses words of passionate marital love to describe God’s love for his bride, the Church, and her love for him.

Judas pegged the price of this ointment at “three hundred denarii” (Jn 12:4). This sum was equivalent to a workingman’s wage for one year. If the average wage for one year in the U.S. is \$30,000 that sum helps us translate the cost of the nard in modern terms. Judas knew the price of material things, but he did not know the price of his soul! Do we know the price of our soul and cherish it? The irony is that Judas subsequently sold his soul for “thirty pieces of silver” (Mt 26:15), an amount equal to a tithe in relation to the value of the nard.

The great cost of the nard expressed Mary’s immense love for Jesus. Steve Ray suggests that this “perfume may have represented Mary’s life savings.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout the centuries Christians have spent large sums of money on their churches because they wanted to give God their best. God, of course, does not need our money, but he does ardently desire our hearts. What can we do to give our best to Jesus by surrendering our hearts? What attachments hold us back?

Mary understood that Jesus was the Temple without price. Her actions proclaimed, “I yield my whole being to you, everything.” She possessed the loving heart of the bride in the Song of Songs: “Your name is oil poured out; therefore the maidens love you” (Song 1:3). Like the bride in this beautiful poem, Mary serves as a type of the Church. Jesus said that she “performed a good service” (Mt 26:10) for me, that is, she exhibited the total response to love that each of us is called to give Jesus.

John informs us that Judas objected to Mary’s action because he was a thief, “not that he cared for the poor” (Jn 12:6). This expression is the same phrase St. John used earlier about the hireling who “cares nothing for the sheep” (Jn 10:13). The hireling “flees” (Jn 10:13) when danger threatens. Judas will become a traitorous spy and traitor in collusion with the priests. On Holy Thursday he will flee the upper room in the darkness of sin to betray Jesus. In stark contrast to Mary, Judas loved money not Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> *St. John’s Gospel*, p. 239.

## **Cleansing the Temple**

All Gentiles were forbidden to enter any of the inner courts of the temple, which were reserved exclusively for specified classes of Jews. The penalty for violating these regulations was death. Nevertheless, there was an immense outer court where Gentiles could enter and pray. Because many Jews came to the temple from great distances, they needed to purchase animals for sacrifice, or pigeons or doves if they were poor (Lk 12:6; Lk 2:22-24). The Sanhedrin approved four market places for conducting this necessary business. All were placed outside the temple in the area of the Mount of Olives.

However, when Caiaphas became high priest he allowed this trading to move into the court of the Gentiles within the temple. This created two abuses. First it perverted the Court of the Gentiles into a raucous marketplace. This repelled Gentiles from coming into the temple to pray to the true God. Mark's Gospel, which was written for a Gentile audience, quotes Jesus as declaring: "My house shall be called a house of prayer *for all nations*" quoting Isaiah 56:7 (Mk 11:17).

Secondly, the business was conducted dishonestly. Pilgrims were cheated in two ways. Filthy Roman money could not be used in the temple so it needed to be exchanged for ritually pure temple money, often at an unfair exchange rate or an exorbitant commission. The sale of animals was another opportunity for fraud. Prices were often elevated and defective animals were sold. Thus, citing Jeremiah 7:11, Jesus accused the sellers and moneychangers of making the temple "a den of robbers" (Mt 21:13).

Jesus' bold cleansing of his Father's house was a declaration of his dual sonship. He is the Son of God, and the Son of David. His actions fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi: "and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord. Then the offering of Juda and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years" (Mal 3:1-4).

## **TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK**

### **Jesus Curses the Fig Tree (Mt 21:18-22)**

Why did Jesus curse the fig tree? Was he short tempered? Did he forget to have his morning cup of coffee or skip breakfast? Let's consider the facts. Jesus was hungry. He saw a lush looking fig tree that had no fruit, but "it was not the season for figs" (Mk 11:13). Then Jesus cursed the tree and it withered. How does this make any sense? Why would the Holy Spirit inspire Matthew and Mark to relate it?

In the Old Testament the fig tree was frequently used as a symbol of the Hebrew people.<sup>4</sup> Adam and Eve covered their nakedness with fig leaves after the fall (Gen 3:7). The identification of the forbidden fruit with the apple is connected with artistic representations during the middle ages. It is based on a pun around the two words *malum*, “apple,” and *malus*, “evil,” or “evil deed”. The apple, the *malum*, represented the *malus*, the evil deed.

Cursing the fig tree was a parable in action. Israel was like the fig tree in that it looked lush, but it bore no fruit. When God looked into the hearts of his people he found evil. Therefore God will bring down covenantal judgment on his wayward children.<sup>5</sup> The cursing of the fig tree was an ominous signal that Jesus was calling down covenantal curses.

It is not a reach to apply this parable of action to contemporary Catholicism in the U.S.A. Until the mid 1960’s the American Church looked robust and healthy. However, that were two deep-seated cancers that was sapping our vitality: pride and the resulting neglect of prayer and genuine piety. Forty years after the rebellion over contraception it is evident that many American Catholics neither know nor live their faith. They are cultural Catholics who pick what is convenient and discard what goes against the grain. Some prominent Catholics even publically foster and propagandize sinful behavior that contradicts the teaching of the Church. Covenantal judgment is already upon us in the form of “immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery (literally, the taking of drugs), enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like” (Gal 5:20-21) – evils that St. Paul calls the “works of the flesh” in contrast with “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:19, 22-24). He concluded: “those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:21). It could get worse in our country. That is why it is so important that each of us daily make the full commitment – *totus tuus*, “totally yours”.

In the Book of Revelation John was instructed to write letters to seven churches. Each letter had a three-fold emphasis. They focused on challenges each church was facing, they recapitulated specific stages of salvation history, and they looked to the future. The last of the letters was addressed to the church in Laodicea, which represented Pharisaical Judaism. Jesus said to this church, “Would that you were cold or hot” (Rev 3:15)!

Often that expression “cold or hot” is identified with lukewarmness in the sense that this church was lacking in fervor. Not so! Jesus declared that their behavior was so putrid he will vomit them out of his mouth (Rev 3:16). Their boast was, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,” but Jesus judged them quite differently, “you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev 3:17). We need to pray that our country will not be so judged.

Are we to believe that in 2,000 years there has not been a single Christian with mountain moving faith? Of course not. We need to understand that in verse 21 Jesus is speaking

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<sup>4</sup> Jdg 9:11; Jer 24:2-3; 1 Kgs 4:25; 2 Kgs 18:31; Song 2:13; Is 36:16; Jer 8:13; Hos 9:10; Joel 1:12; 2:22; Mi 4:4; Hab 3:17; Hag 2:19; Zech 3:10.

<sup>5</sup> Is 34:4; Hos 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7, 12; Mic 7:1-7; Jer 8:8-13.

prophetically. In the generation that followed the Resurrection, the Apostles preached the word of God inflamed by the Holy Spirit. Tragically, the Jewish nation as a whole remained hardhearted. Like Jesus the Apostles were persecuted and killed. Their faith cast "that mountain," Jerusalem and its temple, into the "sea" of Roman legions in 70 A.D. (Mt 21:21). Prayer and conversion is our atomic weapon to prevent a similar fate from falling on our country.

### **Jesus Delivers Three Parables**

1. **Two Sons** (Mt 21:28-32) Jesus concluded with these words:

"Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him" (Mt 21:31-32).

2. **The tenants** (Mt 21:33-46)

This parable builds on the previous parable of the two sons, which identified the leaders of Israel as unrepentant sinners. Now the emphasis is on the terrible consequences of hardened sinfulness. The parable is rich in Old Testament imagery.

God is the "householder" (Mt 21:33). Israel is the "vineyard" (Mt 21:33): "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it" (Ps 80:8). The great care with which the householder nurtured his vineyard (Mt 21:33) finds a touching echo in Isaiah. "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleaned it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it" (Is 5:1-2). The "very fertile hill" is a reference to Jerusalem.

The reaction of the religious leaders revealed their spiritual blindness. Absentee landlords were common in the Israel of Jesus' day. As a result there was considerable unrest among the tenants. Therefore it is probable that the chief priests and the elders initially identified themselves with the householder not with the "tenants" (Mt 21:33-35, 38, 40) as Jesus intended. It is doubtful that they correctly grasped Jesus' allusion to Isaiah 5:1-7. This explained their unsuspecting denunciation of themselves: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants" (Mt 21:41). Their trumpeted condemnation reflected their appetite for vengeance rather than their concern for justice. Like the unforgiving servant who had the enormous debt of 10,000 talents wiped away, they show no mercy and would exact the last penny (Mt 18:23-35).

The "servants" (Mt 21:34, 36) represented the Old Testament prophets (Amos 3:7; Jer 7:25; 25:4; Zech 1:6). The "fruits" (Mt 21:34), which the servants were sent to collect was a reference to the good works that God demands of all men.<sup>6</sup> Speaking through the prophet

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<sup>6</sup> To develop a biblical understanding of the importance of good works, that is, what we do in submission to God's will, examine the following New Testament passages: 2 Cor 9:8; 11:15; Gal 6:4; Eph 2:10; Col 1:10; 1 Thess 1:3; 1

Isaiah God lamented, “he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it” (Is 5:2-4). The Father answered his own question by sending his only begotten Son, whom they will kill after they first throw him “out of the vineyard,” (Mt 21:39). The word “afterward” in verse 37 would be better translated as “finally” or “last of all”. Jesus is the Father’s final attempt to capture our hard hearts.

The chief priests and Pharisees finally realized the censure of this parable was directed at them after Jesus cited Psalm 118:22-23. Men without integrity always fear the multitude. Therefore they were afraid to arrest Jesus. Originally Psalm 118 applied to David, the least of Jesse’s sons who was rejected by the powerful King Saul and his own son Absalom, but was vindicated by God. Subsequently, the messianic implications of the psalm were recognized. Peter will also cite this psalm in his speech to the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:11).

The “nation producing fruits” (Mt 21:43) is a reference to remnant Israel and the Gentiles who will be formed into God’s new family, the Church. St. Peter described this process in his first letter. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God [the language of God’s covenant family], built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually [literally “in the Spirit”] into a dwelling place for God” (1 Pet 2:4-10; cf. Eph 2:19-22). However, if the members of the Church kill by sin the life of the Son infused in their souls, the kingdom will also be taken away from them.

### **3. Two Groups of Wedding Guests (Mt 22:1-14)**

In this third judgment parable Jesus unfolds a story about a royal wedding into an allegory of salvation history, which begins with the invitation of the Jews and ends with the judgment of Christians. The wedding feast itself highlighted God’s covenant. The Father is the king. Jesus is the Son. The first set of servants are the Old Testament prophets who invited the guests, the Hebrew people, to participate in the wedding feast, that is, they were called to be faithful to the covenant. However they refused to participate. They chose, instead, to be unfaithful. Therefore, the king sent other servants, John the Baptist and the Apostles, to announce “everything is ready” (Mt 22:4), that is, the Son has arrived. Because these servants were mistreated and killed, the king “sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city” (Mt 22:7) - Jerusalem. Using foreign armies to punish Israel was a familiar Old Testament theme (Is 10:5-11; Jer 4:5-12).

Because the original guests proved to be unworthy, the king ordered his servants, the Apostles and their successors, to invite “as many as you find” (Mt 22:9), which is a reference to the Gentiles. His command, “Go, therefore” (Mt 22:9) will be formally given again after the

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Tim 5:10, 25, 6:18; 2 Tim 2:21; 3:17; 4:14; Tit 1:16, 2:7, 14, 3:8, 14; 1 Pet 1:17; 2:12; Rev 2:2, 5, 9, 13, 19, 23, 26; 3:1-2, 8, 25; 9:20; 14:13; 18:8; 20:12-13; 23:12.

Resurrection shortly before Jesus ascended to the Father (Mt 28:19-20). The relationship of unbelieving Jews to the Gentiles was announced by Paul and Barnabas to the Jews in Antioch, “It is necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first. Since you reject it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles” (Acts 13:46).

However, some of these newly invited guests failed to put on their wedding garment, that is, the good deeds that flow from a living faith. In the Book of Revelation John described the wedding garment worn by the just: “and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure – for the fine linen is the *righteous deeds of the saints*” (Rev 19:7-8). The idea that membership in Christ’s Church was made up of a mixed bag of good and evil was consistent with the parable of the weeds among the wheat (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43), and the catch of bad fish among the good (Mt 13:47-50). The king will command that those without their wedding garments to be bound and cast into the outer darkness of hell.

The parable ended with the sobering catchphrase: “many are called, but few are chosen” (Mt 22:14). This was a warning against complacency that reaffirmed Jesus’ message during the Sermon on the Mount. “Enter though the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Mt 7:13-14).

This saying confronts us with the mysteries of free will and grace. We are powerless of ourselves to do anything that merits eternal life. But when we lean on Jesus we can do all things (Phil 4:13). God always respects the freedom he gives us. He never forces.

## **SPY WEDNESDAY**

The name spy Wednesday comes from Judas’ agreement to look for a suitable opportunity to betray Jesus. In a last attempt to discredit Jesus, the religious leaders set three traps.

### **1. Paying Taxes (Mt 22:15-22)**

The length to which the Pharisees will go to discredit Jesus is revealed by the rare Greek word translated as “entangle,” which is a term that described snaring animals during a hunt. Their hatred for Jesus also propelled them to conspire with the Herodians,<sup>7</sup> who supported Herod and his evil dynasty, and courted favor with Rome.

This band of schemers addressed Jesus as “teacher” (Mt 22:16) revealing their lack of faith. They feign friendliness as they begin with flattery by publically admitting that Jesus courageously speaks the truth. Therefore he was not influenced by popular opinion. Their strategy was to paint Jesus into a corner that would force him to candidly answer their question. Then they cunningly spring their trap, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not” (Mt 22:17)?

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<sup>7</sup> The New Testament does not say much about the Herodians. See: Mk 3:6; 8:15; 12:13; Lk 20:20.

The Jews were exceedingly nationalistic. They hated the Romans and their taxes. If Jesus publically supported the Roman tax, the Pharisees could denounce him to the people. On the other hand, if Jesus affirmed it was unlawful to pay the tax, the Sadducees could report him to the Roman governor. In that eventually the Romans would imprison Jesus for sedition – a sure death sentence.

Clever schemes by deceitful men are transparent to Jesus. Jesus unmasked their duplicity by identifying them as “hypocrites” (Mt 22:18). Exposing their dishonesty afforded them an opportunity to repent. Unfortunately, they were filled with “malice” (Mt 22:18) and had no interest in truth. The moral issue of paying taxes was irrelevant to them.

Then Jesus said to them, “Show me the money for the tax” (Mt 22:19). By that simple statement Jesus began to unravel their devious plot. The trap was sprung, but the trappers were caught in it. They were preoccupied with money and taxes. However, money was so unimportant to Jesus he does not have any. Their possession of a denarius demonstrated their willingness to use Rome’s money in their business transactions, just as the nefarious temple trade expressed their eagerness to acquire it. Implicit in these actions was their silent acceptance of Rome’s imperial system and the economic climate it fostered. Jesus irrefutably drew this conclusion when he stated simply: “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mt 22:21). The conclusion was clear. If they were willing to use Caesar’s money to their advantage in business, then they should be willing to pay taxes to Caesar when he demands his tribute.

Jesus was not content to foil their maliciously conceived trap. His love always reached out to those who hate and persecute him. So he added an important lesson, “and [render] to God the things that are God’s” (Mt 22:21). This shifted the focus from the mundane level of civil authority and money to the supernatural. The burning issue was giving God the obedient love due him. “When they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and went away” (Mt 22:22). They marveled because Jesus so easily thwarted their trap, but there was no indication they opened their hearts and amended their lives. They retreated into more plotting.

Fundamental to the discussion about taxes and civil authority are competing worldviews regarding the true power broker in the world. The demonic perspective looks to economic and political systems, resources, productivity, technology, and military might because they displace God. Jesus presented a very different understanding. He declared give “to God the things that are God’s” (Mt 22:21). In other words God is the true power broker who controls the destiny of men and nations. Caesar had his coin. He put his image on it. God has his coin. He puts the image of the divine Son on it. We are the coin that bears the image of God.

Currently, a great battle wages between those who adhere to these radically different points of view. Those who follow Jesus must prudently use all the natural means at their disposal: persuasion, political involvement, lobbying for just causes, and education. Christians must be active in changing society. However, the indispensable weapons are spiritual, not activity. The

primary instrument of transformation is prayer, because it calls and relies upon God's invincible power. In regard to the importance of prayer the *Catechism* makes an extraordinary insightful observation: "We pray as we live, because we live as we pray. If we do not want to act habitually according to the Spirit of Christ, neither can we pray habitually in his name. The 'spiritual battle' of the Christian's new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer."<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Questioning the Resurrection (Jn 22:23-33)

The Sadducees were priestly aristocrats who only accepted the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They also rejected oral tradition as having any binding authority. In addition they repudiated the resurrection of the dead, a future life, and the belief in angels and demons. With the humiliation of the Herodians, the Sadducees laid their trap for Jesus.

Their question centered around the Levirate<sup>9</sup> Law although the point of contention was the resurrection. If an Israelite died without a son, his surviving brother was required to marry the widow in order to continue his brother's line through the first son born of that marriage (Duet 25:5-10). Not only did this rule protect the widow, but it also assured that the deceased husband's property and name would be passed on.

The Sadducees were well aware that Jesus taught the resurrection of the dead. So they presented a hypothetical situation of seven brothers six of whom married the one brother's widow in order to fulfill the Levirate Law.<sup>10</sup> "In the resurrection, therefore, to which of the seven will she be wife? For they all had her" (Mt 22:28). They believed this situation demonstrate the absurdity of the resurrection. It is reasonable to suppose this identical question had been successfully used in their debates with the Pharisees who had no adequate reply. Therefore they had every confidence that Jesus could not solve the puzzle.

What we observe here was the fallacy of proud intellectuals who rely on *their* insight, *their* understanding, *their* conclusions, *their* school, etc. as the basis of *their* explanation of the mysteries of God. Even in the case of the greatest human intellects it is analogous to attempting to pour the Pacific Ocean into a bucket. Diligent study and academic accomplishments are aids, but the indispensable source to the deep and true knowledge of God is a profound union with Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Because these proud men shut God out and turned in on themselves, God speaks to the "little ones". In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Jesus told Teresa of Avila: "It is because men and theologians will not listen to me that, despised by them, I come like a beggar to talk of what is in my heart with poor, humble women, and to find rest in their company."<sup>11</sup>

The Sadducees, like the Pharisees and their henchmen the Herodians, were not seeking truth. Their intention was to propose an unsolvable difficulty to discredit Jesus' wisdom. However,

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<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 2725.

<sup>9</sup> "Levirate" comes from the Latin word *levir*, which means husband's brother.

<sup>10</sup> This hypothetical scenario may be an allusion to Tobit 7:11.

<sup>11</sup> Marcelle Auclair, *St. Teresa of Avila*, pl 115.

Jesus always sought the lost sheep. He gave them a double dose of what they desperately needed, but do not want – truth. “But Jesus answered them, ‘You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God’” (Mt 22:29). Jesus elaborated on these two points in the reverse order.

### ***The Power of God***

The Sadducees were the materialists of their day. They rejected both the supernatural and the spiritual. They believed that the teaching of the Torah were merely figurative human ways of expressing the ethical values of that time. Their narrow mindset did not contain an afterlife or a resurrection. Even conceding its possibility would be accompanied by the frightening consequences of their bad choices. Only the present existence was real to them.

Jesus pronounced that the puny dimensions of their understanding do not limit God’s power. Yes, there will be a resurrection. It will be the completion of a transformed human existence, not a retreat to the earthly life they experienced. Thus, humans will become “like angels” (Mt 22:30), that is, they will have radically changed spiritualized bodies. In this context marriage as such has no existence because the purpose of marriage no longer applies.

The primary aim of marriage is the procreation and formation of children. Once immortality is achieved there is no need to procreate to renew the human race. Similarly, the second aim of marriage, mutual love and support, is no longer necessary nor would it have any meaning, because in heaven everyone is utterly absorbed in the love, joy and happiness achieved in union with the heavenly bridegroom.

### ***The Scriptures***

Jesus used a rabbinic argument to correct their false interpretation. Jesus did not quote from the prophetic books because the Sadducees rejected them. Instead he quoted Exodus 3:6,16 when God revealed himself to Moses. Jesus asked them “have you not read what was said *to you* by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living” (Mt 22:31-32). By affirming that God spoke “to you” (Mt 22:31), Jesus asserts the inspiration of the text and its living dynamic character. By asking, “have you not read” (Mt 22:31) Jesus exposed their utter inability to interpret a passage they would undoubtedly have memorized.

Jesus’ biblical argument established that the basis of the resurrection is mankind’s covenantal relationship with God, not an abstract philosophical argument. In revealing himself to Moses, and through Moses to all men, God identified himself in terms of his enduring relationship with these great patriarchs. He *is*, not *was*, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ex 3:6, 16), because they live in him. Their relationship continues because they continue to exist even though they were physically dead and buried.

Some might argue that Jesus’ response proved immortality of the soul, not the resurrection of the body. That is not the case because the Jews of Jesus’ day recognized that the two concepts were inseparably connected. They understood that a human was incomplete without his body.

St. Matthew does not record the reaction of the Sadducees, but the crowd was “astounded” (Mt 22:33). There was an interesting corollary to this passage. The Sadducees who denied the resurrection and the Pharisees who believed in it would soon conspire to murder Jesus on a cross, an event that would lead to the definitive verification of his claims, the Resurrection.

### 3. **Greatest Commandment** (Jn 22:34-40)

To the modern reader this question hardly seems like a very challenging “test” (Mt 22:35). Yet, the same Greek word was also used in Matthew 4:1 when Jesus was “tempted” by the devil. This intimated the diabolical element in this trap. The Pharisees used a lawyer, that is, a professional theologian trained in the law, to ask a question that they believed had no satisfactory answer.

Not only did these scholars study and debate the law endlessly, they carefully counted them. The total came to 613 commandments. Of these 365 were positive and 248 were negative. Each one was carefully scrutinized and memorized. In addition, pious Jews would meditate on one of the 365 positive commandments on each day of the Hellenistic calendar. The 248 negative commandments corresponded to the number of the bones in the human body as determined by the science of that day. It was believed these commandments provided a guidance that led to spiritual soundness of body and bones, that is, the whole person.

Scholars of the law had debates regarding the relative importance of these 613 commandments. Which, for example, of the 365 positive commandments was the first and, therefore, should be commemorated on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year? Which of the 248 negative commandments was the central and, therefore, should be associated with the skull, the most important bone in the human body since it housed the brain? The Pharisees debated this subject endlessly with no acceptable resolution. Therefore they believed that regardless of the commandment Jesus chose, they could successfully tie him up in inconclusive arguments from an indefensible position. What they proved was their absurdity and the blindness caused by their pride.

Jesus responded by quoting the Shema (Deut 6:4-5), which was they recited as their daily morning prayers. This prayer was formulated to stress ones total love of God. Amazingly, in numbering their 613 commandments the Pharisees had omitted the commandment to love God. In their narrow legalistic way of thinking they judged that God’s explicit command was too general to be counted. No wonder Jesus will shortly condemn them as hypocrites saying of them, “For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith... You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel (Mt 23:23-24)!

The Pharisees considered themselves to be the elite, the saints of Israel. They thought they were better than others. However, their religious observance was legalistic and external. They were the focus of its observance: *their* recognition, *their* profit, *their* viewpoints, *their* feelings, and *their* honored positions. There was no place for God in their hearts. By citing the Shema

Jesus attests that their arguments, about which of their 613 commandments was the most important, were trivial and misdirected.

After giving them an irrefutable response, Jesus cited the second commandment in importance because it was “like” (Mt 22:39) the first. Quoting Leviticus 19:18 Jesus said, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39). It was the common understanding of the Book of Leviticus that the term “neighbor” referred to fellow-countrymen. However, it is clear for Jesus’ acts and words that “neighbor” includes everyone, even enemies (Mt 5:41-48). These two commandments form the springboard of Jesus’ teaching. So Jesus concluded: “On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22:40). The Greek word *kremannumi*, which is translated as “depend”, literally means to “hang” as on a peg or on a cross.

During the Last Supper Jesus made total self-sacrificing love of others the one true method of identifying his disciples, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35). If we were put on trial for being a Christian how many of us could be fairly convicted if Jesus’ criteria were used to determine our guilt? Would that we could all be so convicted! In his first epistle, the apostle whom Jesus loved asserted, “If anyone said, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 Jn 4:20).

Let me cite an example of loving the neighbor. Niccolò di Toldo was only 23 years old when he was sentenced to death for being a Perugian spy. He was extremely bitter and angry that he was unjustly condemned and abandoned by his friends. He attacked the priest who came to reconcile him with God. Recognizing that this brother in Christ was in the greatest of all dangers, dying with hatred on his heart, Catherine of Siena arranged to be admitted into his cell, fittingly number 7, where he was changed to the wall like an animal.

She told him God was still his friend, but he only sneered and mocked at the idea. Nevertheless, she held her ground assuring him that his dead mother and the Mother of God were praying for him. Then she asked him how he thinks Mary felt when she saw her son’s torn body hanging on a cross in agony as his life ebbed away. She assured Niccolò that Jesus endured all this to save him. Then she told this bitter young man that Jesus prayed just as he had been praying.

When he blurted out, “I did not pray,” Catherine said, “Of course you did, I heard the prayer. Your raving and ranting said, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’” Niccolò gasped. Catherine had penetrated to his heart through his anger and fear. Eventually, she persuaded him to accept the will of God and confess the sins of his whole life to the priest he had attacked.

But before she left his cell his terror burst forth: “I’ll do it all. But don’t leave me alone...out there. Be with me when...when it happens. I...I can’t face it alone. For the love of God...be with me.” Catherine simply said, “I promise.”

On the appointed day Catherine returned to the cell to accompany Niccolò first to Mass and then to execution. He was so exhausted from anxiety that she needed to help him stand. After Mass he walked without her help, holding himself erect. He faltered a little at the sight of the guards, but Catherine assured him, "Courage, sweet brother. Soon you will go to the great marriage feast clothed in the blood of the Lamb." When they came to the place of execution outside of Sienna, Catherine knelt by the block and put her head on it as she prayed to Mary to welcome this son in paradise. Then she led him by the hand to the block. His face was radiant.

The executioner took up the great axe and the drums began to roll. "Think of the blood of the Lamb," Catherine whispered in the boy's ear. She caressed his head with her two little hands as the axe flashed down. Her white habit was no longer white, but the soul of Niccolò was with boundless Mercy.<sup>12</sup>

**Lenten Fact**

A plenary indulgence is granted for those who piously exercise the Way of the Cross, actually moving from station-to-station where they are legitimately erected and while meditating on the passion and death of our Lord.<sup>13</sup>

**HOLY THURSDAY** – *But if I washed your feet ... then you must wash each other's feet.* (John 13:14)

**Judgment of Israel**

During Holy Week Jesus judges Israel. These passages are well worth reading, because if God condemns his first-born son for their infidelity, he will condemn anyone.

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|----------------|--|
| Mt 23:1-12     | Jesus judges the scribes and Pharisees               |
| Mt 23:13-36    | Jesus evokes covenantal curses against the Pharisees |
| Mt 23:37-24:35 | Jesus judges Judaism                                 |

**Lenten Fact**

Those who are impeded from visiting a church, during the Stations of the Cross, may gain indulgences by piously reading and meditating on the passion and death of our Lord for one-half hour. Both Pope Paul VI, who approved a Gospel-based version of the stations in 1975, and Pope John Paul II, who wrote his own version, attests the continued importance of the stations in the devotional life of Catholics. The St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church website at <http://www.scborromeo.org> has a Virtual Stations of the Cross, complete with images of each Station and prayers that can also be used by those unable to physically attend a Stations of the Cross.

**Jesus Washes the Apostle's Feet**

In the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of St. Luke's Gospel 22 we discover the backdrop for the incident St. John records here. St. Luke informs us:

<sup>12</sup> Taken from *Lay Siege To Heaven* by Louis deWohl, pp. 207-221.

<sup>13</sup> *Enchiridon of Indulgences* No. 63.

“And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, ‘I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat of it until it is finished in the kingdom of God” (Lk 22:14-16).

St. Luke also tells us that while they were at table:

“A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (Lk 22:24).

The argument could be made that Peter was the greatest because Jesus appointed him as head of the apostles (Mt 16:18-19). The apostles wouldn’t have considered John as the greatest because he was the youngest, therefore the least. Their self-serving debate clearly showed how little they understood Jesus’ kingdom and their role in it.

Jesus, who was the greatest, gave them an important instruction on how they must conduct themselves in his kingdom:

“The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Lk 22:25-30).

Then Luke alone records Jesus saying to Peter:

“Simon, Simon [notice not Rock, Rock - Peter, Peter], behold, Satan demanded to have you [plural], that he might *sift you* [plural – all of you] *like wheat* (Job 1:6-12), but I have prayed for you [singular – meaning Peter] that your [singular] faith may not fail; and when you [singular] have turned again strengthen your brethren” (Lk 22:31-32).

Peter and the apostles will be severely tested like Job. The analogy is that of separating the chaff from the wheat. The devil’s strategy is to lead Peter to fail Jesus so the others will fail Jesus also. But Jesus stands by Peter and will support him even after he falls.

St. John will show that Peter, the greatest, learned to be the least.

**Jn 13:2-5** *And during supper* [It was the time when the Passover Lamb was slain for the Synoptic Gospels inform us it was the Feast of Passover (Mt 26:29; Mk 14:16; Lk 22:15)], *when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him,* <sup>3</sup> *Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,* <sup>4</sup> *rose from supper, laid aside his garments,*

St. John adds a touching note by using the same Greek verbs when he describes that Jesus “laid aside” his garments in verse 4, and “taken” them up again in verse 12. The same words were used for laying down and taking up Jesus’ life in Mt 10:17-18.

*and girded himself with a towel. <sup>5</sup> Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded.*

Jesus, who is unquestionably the greatest, performs the humble service of a slave. It was a powerful lesson to these men who were debating earlier which of them was the greatest. St. Mark reported Jesus saying:

“For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

Soon Jesus will give them the greatest lesson in humility and service by embracing the humiliation of the cross.

*<sup>6</sup> He came to Simon Peter; and Peter said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” [Jesus went to Peter first because Jesus appointed him as his Vicar upon earth.] <sup>7</sup> Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand.” <sup>8</sup> Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.” <sup>9</sup> Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”*

A few years ago I have had my feet washed on Holy Thursday. It was a very uncomfortable experience to have my pastor wash my feet. I would have very much preferred to wash his. So I can identify with Peter's instinctive reaction. However, personal discomfort and our ideas of how things ought to be done are far from the vital issue. No one can be Jesus' disciple on their own terms. God requires that we submit to his plan. This is the great evil of do-it-yourself religions and the proliferation of Christian denominations.

There may be an additional meaning here that can be missed. Jesus ordained the apostles on Holy Thursday when he said to them: “Do this in remembrance of me” *Touto poieite eis tan eman anamnesin* in Greek (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24).<sup>14</sup> In this passage the inspired authors used the Greek verb *poieo*, “do,” which is the equivalent of the Hebrew *asah* – “to offer sacrifice”. *Poieo* is a technical sacrificial term that means to “offer sacrifice.” It is used in this sense “over 70 times in the Old Testament.”<sup>15</sup> For example see: Exodus 29:38-39; Leviticus 9:7; Numbers 10:10 and Psalm 66:15. The words *touto poieite* have the meaning of “offer this,” or “sacrifice this.” Furthermore, the command “do” in Lk 22:19 is a present active indicative. It means to offer, “do,” repeatedly or continually.

In Exodus 30:20-21 God required that Aaron and the Levites wash their hands and feet before they enter the Tabernacle to offer sacrifice. Therefore we can see in Peter's reply, “not my feet only but also my hands and my head,” an acknowledgement of his sinfulness and his ordination priesthood in the new covenant.

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<sup>14</sup> Council of Trent, Session 22, Chapter 1.

<sup>15</sup> Jason Evert, “Is the Mass a Sacrifice?”, *This Rock*, September 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over; and you are clean, but not every one of you."<sup>11</sup> For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "You are not all clean."

The Greek verb "to wash" (*louein*) is used frequently in the New Testament to refer to baptism (Acts 22:16; 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:26; Tit 3:5).<sup>16</sup> Its use here connects the washing of feet with the Sacrament of Baptism.

Baptism incorporates us into Christ. However, as we trod through life we get more than our feet dirty with the selfishness of sin and all its attendant evils. So we need to be cleaned again, which is the continual need for conversion. Our life in Christ can never be put on cruise control. We must continually submit to Jesus' ministering to us. Only then can Christ's likeness operate through us so we can effectively minister to others: our spouses, children, grandchildren, friends, coworkers, and strangers. The great danger is an externalized religion that focuses on activity to the neglect of what is spiritual and interior. This leads to an evil characteristic common to Americans. We are busy, busy, busy. Therefore we are overworked and under prayed. Pope Leo XIII called it Americanism. This is the trap Peter fell into with the result that he denied his Lord.

There is a great lesson to be learned from a comparison of Peter and John. John, the mystic, is the disciple that Jesus loved. He is the one who was closest to Jesus at the Last Supper where placed his head on Jesus chest. When Peter wanted to know who was the traitor, her asked John and John asked Jesus. John was also closest to the high priest. Peter was dependent on John so he could get closer to Jesus during his trial. It was to the contemplative John that Jesus entrusted the care of his mother. John, the least of the apostles, was the only apostle standing at the foot of the cross. He didn't betray Jesus like Judas, deny him like Peter, or abandon him like the other apostles. Because he was the least he has the capacity to become the greatest. The Church desperately needs more contemplatives, beloved disciples like John who think of themselves as little.

After the resurrection John arrived at the empty tomb before Peter (Jn 20:2-10). However, because he was a true contemplative he deferred to the leader of the Church. He waited. Peter entered the tomb first. Peter represented the Magisterium. He was giving an official office as Jesus' Vicar, therefore he witnessed the empty tomb for the Church. John represents those who see with the eyes of faith and love.

What we observe here is a wonderful complementarity, not a conflict or competition. Men of action always need the support of the contemplatives, the men and women of prayer. Indeed, they must become men of prayer if they will be effective.

It was the contemplative John that recognized the resurrected Jesus standing on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias: "It is the Lord!" (Jn 21:7)! Peter, the head of the Church was dependent on

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<sup>16</sup> Ellis, *Genius of John*, pp. 213-214.

the faith and insight of the beloved disciple. Leaders in the Church always depend on the men and women of deep prayer who are profoundly in tune with their Lord.

During the “hour” of persecution the Church relies more on Johns, men and women of prayer, than it does on Peters, men and women of action. In the Church’s “hour” of abandonment, betrayal, and denial it is the prayerful contemplatives in love with Jesus that are the difference makers. They are the ones closest to Jesus as he is crucified in his mystical body. They are the ones who console the sorrowing Mother.

John Paul II wrote: “A new millennium is opening before the Church like a vast ocean upon which we shall venture, relying on the help of Christ.”<sup>17</sup> He proclaimed: “God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs.”<sup>18</sup> The Pope is not our umpire. He is a prophet calling the laity to dynamic faith in conversion, prayer and love. Only saints are the real difference makers. That was the lesson Peter needed to learn. It is the lesson we all need to learn.

*<sup>12</sup> When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? [That understanding would come with the advent of the Holy Spirit] <sup>13</sup> You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. <sup>14</sup> If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. [Jesus never just tells us what to do. He always exemplifies his instruction in his behavior. This in itself is an important lesson for us.] <sup>16</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. <sup>17</sup> If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.*

In the washing of feet of the apostles Jesus gave his self-centered, proud, and ambitious apostles an important lesson on becoming servants. It’s a lesson he gives to the whole Church.

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<sup>17</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, # 58.

<sup>18</sup> *Redemptoris Missio*, # 3.

## GOOD FRIDAY

### Lenten Tradition

The name *Calvary* comes from the Latin *Calvaria*, meaning "a skull." The Gospels tell us that the Jews called this place, *Golgotha*. In Greek, the first written language of the New Testament, *Golgotha* was translated *Kranios*, a word similar to "cranium" in the English language. The Jewish tradition is that Shem, Noah's son, before the Great Flood, dug up the skull of Adam. Adam's skull was reburied at a place called, for that reason, *Golgotha*. The early Christians were quite familiar with this Jewish tradition; St. Jerome refers to it in a letter from 386 A.D. So, Jesus, the New Adam, was crucified at the place of the burial of Adam. For this reason, you will see in Eastern Orthodox iconography a skull at the feet of the crucifix.

## SATURDAY OF HOLY WEEK

## EASTER SUNDAY

### Easter Trivia

In the Northern Hemisphere, Easter occurs in the spring, and coincides with pagan rebirth and fertility festivals. Eggs have been a symbol of new life and resurrection since ancient times. Rabbits have long been associated with the fertility of spring. When early Christians moved into pagan areas, they found it difficult to wipe out the old, ingrained customs. Instead, they absorbed and adopted the symbols, void of course from the original meaning.

The earliest custom of giving eggs at Easter time has been traced back to Egyptians, Persians, Gauls, Greeks and Romans. The Germans brought the Easter bunny to the Americas in the 1600s. Creating Easter baskets arose from the Catholic custom of bringing Easter dinner food to Mass to be blessed. The Easter lily (or Bermuda lily), now a symbol of the Resurrection, was first brought to the United States in 1919 by a World War I soldier named Louis Houghton, who brought the bulbs to Oregon and gave them to friends and family.

Pentecost was also called *Whitsunday*, "White Sunday," for the white garments worn by the neophytes (the catechumens baptized at the Easter Vigil). They wore their white garments throughout Eastertide (from their baptism until Pentecost Sunday).

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