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The Paschal Mystery and Christian Baptism

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First Sunday of Lent

Sunday Readings for February 26, 2012 for Cycle B:

Gn 9:8-15; Ps 25; 1 Pt 3:18-22; Mk 1:12-15

THE PASCHAL MYSTERY AND CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

Lawrence E. Frizzell

What images come to mind as we begin the season of Lent? How do we reflect on the relation between Ash Wednesday, with its solemn reminder of our mortality, and Holy Week? As with every season of the Church year, we focus on the person of Jesus with special attention to his death-and-resurrection. This is the Paschal Mystery, the transition from death to a fuller life for Jesus, bringing liberation from humanity's enslavement to sin and Satan. To understand this mystery of faith, we look back to the Passover (Pascha in Aramaic), celebrating the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery.

Although images of our childhood penances and "sacrifices" may form an important aspect of past Lenten experiences, these are secondary. "The Lenten season has a twofold character: it recalls baptism or prepares for it; it stresses a penitential spirit" (Vatican Council II, Sacred Liturgy #109). How is baptism related to the death-and-resurrection of Jesus?

By baptism people are plunged (*baptizo* in Greek) into the Paschal mystery of Jesus; they die with him, are buried with him, and rise with him (see Romans 6:4); they receive the spirit of adoption as children, by virtue of which we cry: Abba, Father (Romans 8:15) and thus become those true adorers whom the Father seeks (*Sacred Liturgy* #6).

The Church blesses water for this sacrament at the Easter Vigil and brings new members into the Church at this time in order to emphasize the roots of this sacrament in the Paschal Feast.

It is the desire of this Council that the Liturgy of the Lenten and Easter (Paschal) seasons be restored in such a way as to dispose the hearts of the catechumens to celebrate the Paschal Mystery at whose solemn ceremonies they are reborn to Christ in baptism (*Decree on Missionary Activity* #14).

The central importance of water for human life makes it a beautiful symbol for spiritual cleansing and rebirth. Because for Christians this new life comes through Christ's death, the fact that water can threaten our life becomes an aspect of the sign. Thus the first two readings referring to the Deluge alert us to the Lenten theme of baptism and prepare us to renew our baptismal promises in the Easter Vigil.

Human sinfulness and need for redemption are themes that permeate the biblical tradition, second only to the doctrine of God's infinite goodness and mercy. The accounts of the Deluge in Genesis chapters 6-9 draw attention to God's judgment on the wicked and stress Noah's cooperation with divine commands as well as his righteousness. Just as human crimes bring death to animals and plants, so does Noah's stewardship provide for the survival of all forms of terrestrial life. After the Flood, God pledges through an everlasting covenant never again to

destroy bodily creatures by water. The sign of this promissory bond with creation will be the rainbow. The war bow of divine threats is hung pointing upwards, no longer a menace to the earth. For St. Peter and other early Christians the marvelous deliverance of Noah, his wife and family in the Ark prefigures baptism. Through cleansing waters we are associated with the new and everlasting covenant in Christ's resurrection. Thus we enter the new ark which is the Church, still in the perilous seas of human existence but assured of a safe pilgrimage to the haven of peace willed by God for all his creatures. Bearing the ashes that witness to human mortality, we ask that this Lent will deepen our faith in Christ, who shared our sufferings so that he might lead us to God the Father (1 Peter 3:18).