

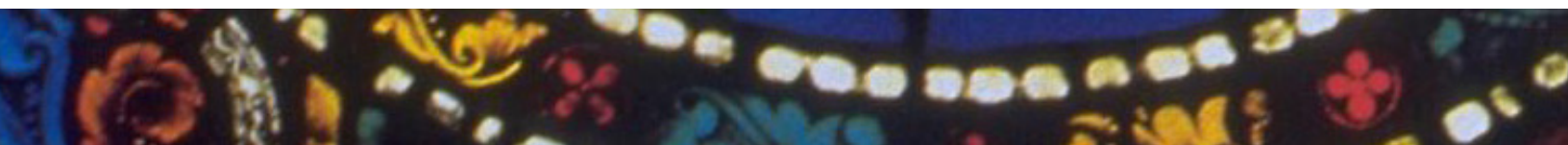
Last Supper (ca.
late 12th c.);
Chartres Cathedral
(France);


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LIVING THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

BY TIMOTHY MATOVINA, PH.D.






Editorial Note: This article stems from a presentation at the annual study week of the Southwest Liturgical Conference convened in Albuquerque (January 2013).

“. . . think of yourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.”

This passage comes from a familiar text, the Epistle proclaimed at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday (Rom 6:3-11). The significance of that reading for understanding the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s Death and Resurrection is underscored not only in the Church’s liturgy, but also in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The Paschal mystery has two aspects: by His Death, Christ liberates us from sin; by His Resurrection, He opens for us the way to a new life. This new life is above all justification that reinstates us in God’s grace, ‘so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life’” (CCC, §654, quoting Rom 6:4). Moreover, in the Mystery of Faith of the Eucharist, we proclaim “Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection, you have set us free” (option C).

These beautiful quotes reveal that the Paschal Mystery is not only a truth about Christ. It is also our spirituality. Dying and rising is the pattern of our life in Christ, dying to sin and death and arising to new lives of holiness and discipleship. We are to imitate Christ’s Death and Resurrection by receiving the Spirit of God who makes us more “dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.” This article will reflect on the Paschal Mystery we celebrate in the Eucharist and its transformative power in our daily lives.



“Dead to Sin”

Our enslavement to sin is rooted in the human condition of spiritual blindness, the inability to perceive how to satisfy our deepest desires for joy, for peace, for inner happiness. As St. Paul testifies, so often we are at war within ourselves (cf. Rom 7:14-25), enthusiastically chasing worldly pursuits and remaining oblivious to the most profound desires inscribed in our souls. The Paschal Mystery we celebrate in the Eucharist beckons us to see beyond the blindness of sin and to recognize our deepest hunger is for communion: with God, with our neighbor, and with ourselves.

Of course, we cannot truly love others unless we also love ourselves as a creation of God. Thus an essential step toward living in communion is to be in communion with our inner selves, our deepest hungers and desires. Jesus reveals this truth in His encounter with the woman who is healed from an affliction with hemorrhages (Mk 5:25-34). The physical healing of the woman who touches His cloak is marvelous, but Jesus does something even more amazing for this woman. Besides bodily pain, her malady had separated her from those around her. She would have been considered impure. Perhaps some even concluded that her illness resulted from her own sin, a divine punishment for a hidden wrong. Worst of all, after years of such torment she easily could have come to believe in her own unworthiness. Jesus's very first word to her addresses an unspoken hunger to be healed of such self-loathing. He calls her “Daughter.” Others had labeled her infirm one, impure, sinner. Jesus reveals her true identity: daughter of God. I can imagine the woman's life began anew at that very moment in which Christ transformed her understanding of who she was before God. Like this woman, our entering into the Paschal Mystery enables us to die to the sin of self-loathing so we can more freely love ourselves as children of God and in turn love God and our neighbor.

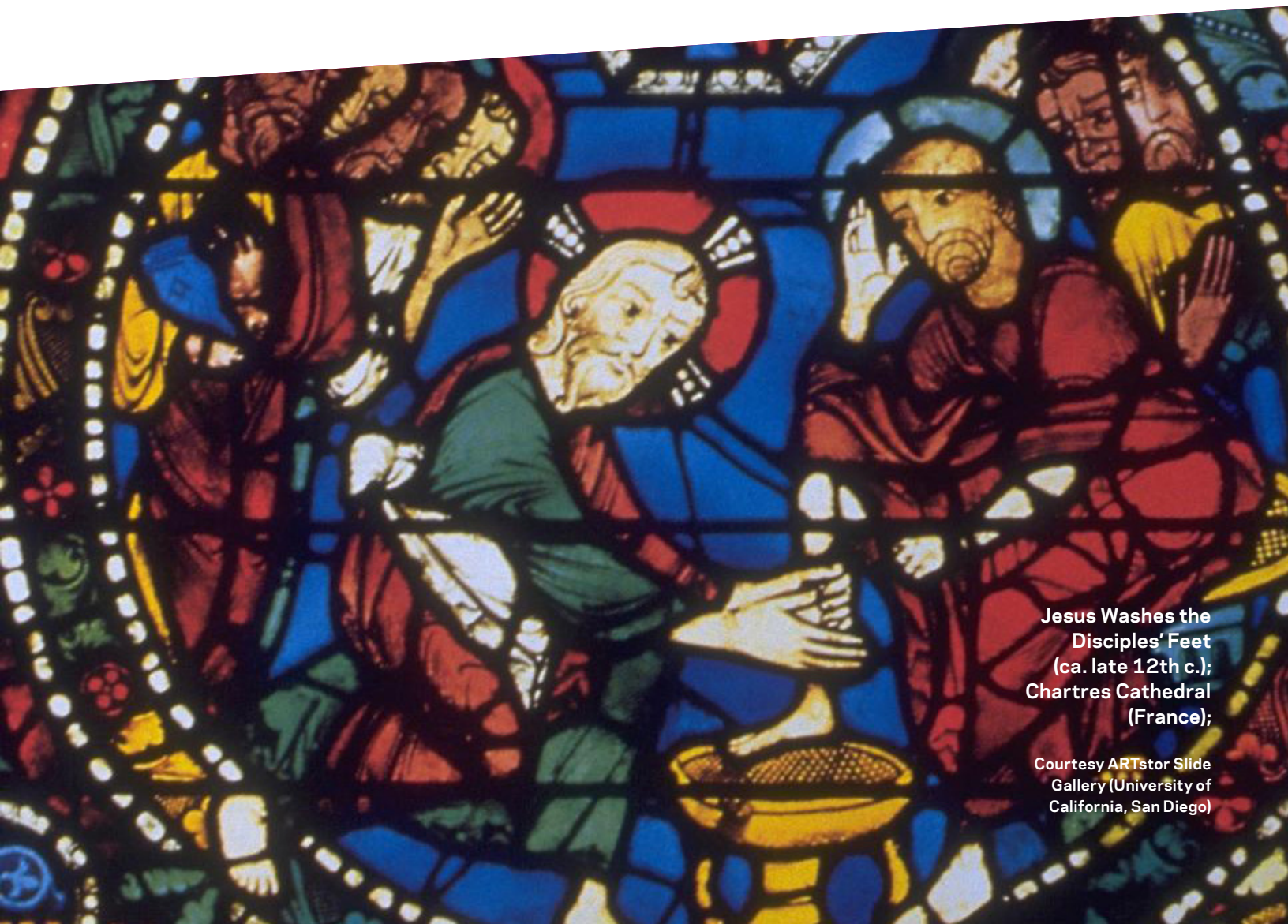
One of the worst effects of our sinfulness is our inability to see Christ in our sisters and brothers. Worse still is how often we try in vain to bolster our own low esteem through demeaning one another. Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel reminds us of these human faults through a story he tells about a lawyer traveling on a train. Much to his chagrin, the man was unable to get a first class ticket. His annoyance turned to disgust when he boarded the economy class car and saw the pitiful humanity assembled there. The only seat he could find was next to an elderly man in a disheveled coat. He sat facing away from the man to avoid all contact, then brusquely escaped from the train as soon as it reached his station.

A large crowd that the lawyer recognized as fellow Jews was waiting there. He strained to see what famous person would exit from the first class cars. But those passengers all disembarked and the crowd still remained. Finally the old man who had been next to him got down from the train. People in the crowd began to rejoice. Some wept. He asked one of the bystanders who the man was. The incredulous response was that he must be the only Jew in the country who did not recognize the famous Rabbi.

These words pierced the lawyer's heart. He had read the Rabbi's works of spiritual wisdom since his youth. How could he have failed to identify him? Immediately he pushed through the crowd and knelt before the Rabbi to beg his forgiveness. But the Rabbi told him he did not need his forgiveness, since he had not recognized him and thus he had not offended the Rabbi. Rather, he had offended the poor. So the Rabbi invited him to seek real reconciliation. He instructed the lawyer to travel the length of the train route and kneel before every poor person who boarded the train to beg their forgiveness. And he promised the lawyer that, if he did this, he would return home a new man.

We Christians can recognize our own Scriptures in Wiesel's story. As the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 teaches, we are called to see God in every person, especially the most vulnerable and forgotten. We are to die to the sin of judging others by appearances and mentally dividing our fellow human beings into the categories of the significant and the insignificant, those who are worthy of our attention and respect and those who are not. The world cultivates our desire to reject others whom we perceive as different or lesser than ourselves. But the Paschal Mystery shatters this sinful tendency. It relentlessly beckons us to die to the illusion that we can alleviate our feelings of low self-worth through our imagined superiority to our neighbors. It teaches us that we are not above our neighbors, but fellow sinners gratuitously redeemed.

Jesus underscored all of this when He taught us the Great Commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves. Note that Jesus does not say love your neighbor and negate yourself, but love your neighbor *as* yourself. We cannot love God whom we cannot see if we don't love our neighbor whom we can see, the Apostle John reminds us (1 Jn 4:20), and we cannot love our neighbor if we don't properly love ourselves as creations made in God's own image. Sin is our failure to love God, neighbor, and self; the Paschal Mystery we celebrate in the Eucharist (and in all the sacraments) initiates us into the life of God that gives us the grace to become more and more "dead to sin."



**Jesus Washes the
Disciples' Feet**
(ca. late 12th c.);
Chartres Cathedral
(France);

Courtesy ARTstor Slide
Gallery (University of
California, San Diego)

“Living for God in Christ Jesus”

In order to be transformed from the death of sin to be alive for God in Christ Jesus, we must proclaim the Paschal Mystery in words and deeds of reconciliation, evangelization, charity, and justice. One wonderful example of this is presented in the theatrical production of the Victor Hugo novel *Les Misérables*. Jean Valjean, the main character of the story, is labeled a criminal after serving years of hard labor for the mere infraction of stealing a loaf of bread to feed his hungry nephews. He wanders from place to place, unable to find work or a means to start his life anew. Knocking on a door one evening, a bishop receives him at his dinner table and then invites him to be his houseguest. In his desperation Jean Valjean takes some of the expensive dinnerware from the bishop's cupboard and steals away into the night. A policeman catches Valjean and triumphantly marches him back to the bishop's house to prove his guilt. But the bishop thanks the magistrate for returning Valjean to him, explaining that in his haste to depart he had left other precious items behind. Left alone with a shamed Valjean, the bishop invites him to take all the dinnerware and use the proceeds from selling them to start a new life. He only asks one thing in return: he tells Valjean to remember always that with these cups and plates “I have bought your soul for God.” The rest of *Les Misérables* could be aptly described as Valjean's pathway to becoming a saint.

In this encounter the bishop gave Valjean what he himself had received, the transformation from sin and death to a new life for God. This is the heart of evangelization. It is living the Paschal Mystery in such a way that others are enticed to live it as well.

The Eucharist is the primary source for us to enter into the Paschal Mystery. Our call is to allow that mystery in which we participate to transform our consciences, our imaginations, our attitudes, our actions. I experienced

this in a powerful way several years ago when I was working on a congregational study of San Antonio's San Fernando Cathedral. One of the people I interviewed was then mayor of San Antonio. Though he was Baptist, he came to the weekday noon Mass at the cathedral on a regular basis. He mentioned several reasons for his dedication: the location of the cathedral across the plaza from his office, the beauty of this ancient church, the preaching he heard there. But what he most admired about San Fernando was the way the predominantly ethnic Mexican parish leaders welcomed anyone and everyone who came through the doors. He noted that San Fernando was the only place in the city where he could just as easily sit next to the head of the chamber of conference, a homeless person, a judge, a banker, a waitress, a laborer, or anyone else, and all would be received with the same respect and dignity. This experience contrasted with other places in San Antonio, which were permeated with “in” and “out” group dynamics. Elsewhere he was nearly always treated with special privilege, even among those who were political opponents but wanted to curry his favor. And he confessed that if some of the working-class or homeless people of San Fernando were to enter the more affluent congregation that he attended on Sundays, the ushers would probably ask them “can I help you?” in such a way that it would be clear they were not welcome.

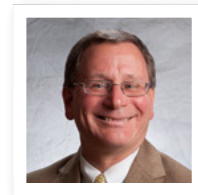
I don't think I've ever been prouder to be a Catholic than when I heard what the mayor said next: “I love San Fernando Cathedral because it is the one place in this city where we all meet on an equal basis as San Antonians. And I've got to tell you, though I'm a Baptist, sometimes when I get back to my office after noon Mass and lunch, I get down on my knees and ask my Lord to guide me so that I can make this city a little bit more like San Fernando Cathedral.”

Like Jean Valjean in his encounter with the bishop, the mayor found in the worship assembly of San Fernando a witness to the Paschal Mystery that urged him to live for God in Christ Jesus. He felt compelled to enact in the world what the San Fernando community had celebrated. The sin of our world teaches us the lie that we will find fulfillment in the debasement of others. The Eucharist redeems us from this falsehood. It is meant to fill us with a vision of communion that makes the false promises of the world pale in comparison.

Liturgical ministers should take careful note of what it means to lead the community of faith into the celebration of the Paschal Mystery. The challenge St. Gregory the Great set for liturgical ministers at the end of the sixth century in his famous treatise *Pastoral Care* is still our challenge today: “Those who carry the vessels of the Lord are those who undertake, in a reliance on their way of living, to draw the souls of their neighbors to the everlasting holy places.”

One final example of what it means to enter into the Paschal Mystery in the Eucharist. Several years ago I attended a 50th wedding anniversary celebration. At the end of the Eucharist, Doña Librada, the wife, thanked the guests for their presence. She mentioned that all of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren were present, as were eleven of her twelve children. The one missing was her son Cruz, who had called from prison the night before. Doña Librada told us that her heart was full of joy to see so many relatives and friends together and that such gatherings were her greatest comfort as she grew older. But, she added, her joy could not be complete because her son Cruz was not with her, and because “the heart of a mother feels most for the child who is absent.”

Doña Librada’s testimony expresses a profound understanding of the Eucharist as a prophetic fiesta. The Eucharist is the festive celebration of the eternal banquet for which we long. But it is also the prophetic reminder that the banquet is still yet to come. While we are called to gather in great joy as we partake in a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, our hearts must yearn for our sisters and brothers who are troubled or absent. The Eucharist is our participation in the Paschal Mystery. It is the source of the graced transformation that enables us to be more and more dead to sin, but alive for God in Christ Jesus.



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