

A few thoughts on the Jewish Passover and the Catholic Mass

February 4, 2008

Let us begin with two excerpts from the Catechism:

1339 Jesus chose the time of Passover to fulfill what he had announced at Capernaum: giving his disciples his Body and his Blood:

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the passover meal for us, that we may eat it...." They went ... and prepared the passover. 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 it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.".... and he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." and likewise the cup after supper, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood."¹

1340 By celebrating the Last Supper with his apostles in the course of the Passover meal, Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning. Jesus' passing over to his father by his death and Resurrection, the new Passover, is anticipated in the Supper and celebrated in the Eucharist, which fulfills the Jewish Passover and anticipates the final Passover of the Church in the glory of the kingdom.

According to this fairly straightforward teaching, the Catholic Mass is the transformation and completion of the Jewish Passover.

The Passover celebrates a real, liberating event in the history of the Jewish people.

The Catholic Mass celebrates *more* than a real, liberating event
in the history of the Christian people.

The Catholic Mass celebrates the *mystery* of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus.

It is with the Mass, however, that Catholics and most Protestants part ways.

Most Protestants celebrate something that resembles the Last Supper,
and believe it to be an obedient "re-enactment" of the Last Supper,
which was a Passover meal.

Such Protestant celebration of the "Lord's Supper" is similar to the Passover meal,
for it recalls an event in the history of the Christian people.

¹ Lk 22:7-20; Cf. ☐ Mt 26:17-29; ☐ Mk 14:12-25; ☐ 1 Cor 11:23-26.

Such Protestant celebration of the “Last Supper” bears significance because

- it is a remembrance of the special meal that Jesus shared with the Apostles
- the bread and wine are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus, and symbols have a certain impact

(although “evangelical” Christians generally do not attribute much importance to symbols, and thus the celebration probably only has commemorative significance).

In such a mindset, the meal that Christians celebrate together brings blessing because it is done in obedience and Jesus blesses our obedience.

Catholics, however, are not re-enacting the Last Supper.

During the Mass, Catholics recall what was celebrated at the Last Supper only to reiterate what Christ instituted at the Last Supper, i.e. the Eucharist, and then actually celebrate it.

The Catholic Mass is supra-historical, i.e. it is *beyond history*.

The Catholic Mass renders present the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection.

The Catholic Mass is therefore not a remembrance of the Last Supper, a simple special moment in Jesus’ life with the Apostles.

The Catholic Mass celebrates the very mystery that Christ communicated a first time at the Last Supper, i.e. the gift of his body and blood, of His person.

The Catholic Mass is not a remembrance

in the sense of the Passover or the Protestant Lord’s Supper.

It is a *rendering present*, i.e. remembrance *in the divine sense*.

Now, the choice of the Passover is nonetheless very deliberate.

The Christian Tradition assumes, i.e. makes use of, originally non-Christian symbols and gives them new meaning by turning them towards the mystery of the God-man.

This happens most deeply with Jewish celebrations such as Passover.

What of the Passover is assumed? At least two things are assumed:

1. *Unleavened bread* is eaten to symbolize how the Israelites left Egypt quickly, without waiting for their bread to rise (cf. Ex. 12:15, 19). In keeping with Christ’s institution of the Eucharist at a Passover meal, unleavened bread is used². Is there a symbolic fittingness for this? Indeed: unleavened bread, i.e. bread without “alteration”, symbolizes the flesh, the body assumed *without alteration to either the humanity or the divinity*. Its use is therefore a question not of absolute necessity but of *fittingness*. Moreover, the symbol extends to us. Saint Paul says, “Clear out the old yeast, so that you may be a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened”. (I Corinthians 5:7)
2. The *Passover lamb* is of particular significance. In the Old Testament, a spotless lamb was the sacrifice to atone for sin. Isaiah 53 refers to the Savior as a suffering lamb. In the New Testament, John the Baptist called Jesus “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). Indeed: the paschal Lamb prefigures Jesus: “Christ, our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed” (I Corinthians 5:7).

² Note that we also use wheaten bread in keeping with the Passover custom.