

# **Initiation and Paschal Mystery: Death to New Life**

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## **[Appalachian Spring]**

Aaron Copland's ballet *Appalachian Spring* debuted in Washington DC on October 30, 1944. Around that time my father left with the 43rd Infantry Division of the US Army from Walkworth, New Zealand, where he had been on maneuvers, to Aitape, New Guinea. By the following August he was in Luzon, the Philippines, and that's where he got the news about the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Dad never talked much about the war. He lamented the loss of life, especially some friends; 75 million people died in World War II; 226,000 of them on those two fateful days in Japan. Afterwards, Dad was happy to be going home to New Orleans. Within two years he met and married my mother. Along with other veterans, my father appreciated his new life because he had seen the face of death.

When you hear *Appalachian Spring* today, you probably think about peaceful scenes along North America's humble, eastern mountains. It's hard to imagine that lovely music composed against the backdrop of those global throes from death to new life that we know as World War II. We'd rather welcome spring than war.

The National Association of Pastoral Musicians has asked me to speak to you about "Initiation and Paschal Mystery: Death to New Life." Your 2020 convention program describes it this way: "Those who minister in the field of Christian Initiation derive great satisfaction from accompanying believers on their journey of faith toward the Catholic Church. But why is dying and rising part of this experience? Can't we just focus on welcoming, and not on the paschal mystery - whatever that is?"

The mystery of death and life forms the central belief in Christianity. We call it the paschal mystery: "paschal" pertaining to the passion, death and resurrection of Christ; "mystery" pertaining to the wonder we experience before those events, revealed by God, incomprehensible to us humans.

This talk divides into three parts: First some biblical foundations, second the rites of initiation, and third applying the paschal mystery to all of us Christians. You'll be hearing a lot about baptism this week. My task is to lay a foundation so that you can see how the rites of initiation are more than rites of welcome. They are an invitation into death and new life.

### The Paschal Mystery and Scripture

The resurrection of Jesus has its greatest impact on you once you meditate on the death of Jesus. If he did not die, he could not have risen; there would have been nothing to rise from.

You remember how Charles Dickens begins *A Christmas Carol*: “Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge’s name was good upon ’Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.” When Marley’s ghost appears, its impact comes from the certitude that Marley was dead.

The gospels too are keen to tell us that Jesus had died. After the crucifixion, when the soldiers approached Calvary to break his legs and speed his death, they discovered Jesus had already died (John 19:34). John says he got this from the testimony of an eyewitness (19:35). After Jesus rose, he showed the marks of his death. Most famously he invited Thomas to touch death, to thrust his hand into the wounds (John 20:27).

He had shown the same marks to the disciples in Jerusalem on the evening of the resurrection, right after the journey to Emmaus, when he revealed himself to two disciples interpreting the scriptures and then breaking bread. When they recognized Jesus, he vanished (Luke 24:13-35). But suddenly he appeared back in Jerusalem. He announced to the disciples there, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, not at all peaceful, and, as if they were ancestors of Ebenezer Scrooge, they thought they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus was no Marley. He said, “Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.” As he said this, he showed them his hands and his feet (Luke 24:36-40). To prove his resurrection he showed the disciples scars.

In Acts of the Apostles on the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed this blend of death and resurrection also in Jerusalem. He said, David died and was buried; they could all visit his tomb. Jesus died and was buried, but God raised him, the one whom they had crucified (2:29-36).

Catholics traditionally have seen the mass through the lens of the death of Christ. The Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy repeated this teaching: “At the Last Supper, Our Savior instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood, by which the Sacrifice of his Cross is perpetuated until he comes again” (47). To this day, we celebrate mass at an altar of sacrifice, near which stands an image of the crucifixion. When the priest incenses the altar, he also incenses the cross. One interprets the other.

“Paschal mystery” is a theme that rocketed out of the same document. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy also said that Christ accomplished the wonderful works of God “principally by the paschal mystery of His blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and the glorious ascension” (5). Up to that

## **Initiation and Paschal Mystery: Death to New Life**

point in history, many Catholics had assumed that Christ accomplished the wonderful works of God principally by his passion and death. A crucifix adorns every church and typically every home. Catholics observed the penance of Lent more than the joy of Easter. No Easter devotion remains as popular as the Stations of the Cross, which traditionally ends with the burial of Christ, not the resurrection (although some stations now add it).

The council affirmed the traditional teachings, but it opened them up in a way that helped Catholics envision the entire paschal mystery - not just the death of Jesus, but also his rising to life. In receiving communion, you hear the words, "The Body of Christ." We don't say, "The Body of Jesus," as if you were biting into some of the flesh just unpinned from the cross on Calvary. It is the Body and Blood of Christ that you receive, the risen Christ. Not dead flesh, not a cadaver, not a ghost, but the risen One whom we no longer call by his earthly name alone, Jesus, but by his heavenly title, Christ.

### **The Paschal Mystery and the RCIA**

The death and resurrection of Jesus would have been miracle enough. But God has done something further. God invites each of us into that mystery through baptism. Our baptismal liturgy follows biblical patterns.

In Acts of the Apostles, Philip met a studious Ethiopian in a chariot (Acts 8:26-39). The African read to Philip this passage from Isaiah: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter." He asked Philip, "I beg you, about whom is the prophet saying this? About himself, or about someone else?" Then, Philip proclaimed Jesus to him. The Ethiopian asked, "What is to prevent my being baptized?" Today the answer would be more complicated. But life was simpler then, the Ethiopian had already spent considerable time coming to faith, and Philip was an apostle. So, Philip baptized the man on the spot - and then Philip vanished. Like the Emmaus story, this one takes place on a journey, turns on a question, leads to an exploration of the scriptures, reaches a climax in a sacramental encounter - eucharistic in one and baptismal in the other - and concludes with the mysterious disappearance of the catechist, who entrusts the mission to those who have now heard the good news. In this case, through baptism, the Ethiopian experienced death to his former ways and new life in Christ.

St. Paul describes this in his letter to the Romans. "We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

Both Philip and Paul applied the paschal mystery of Jesus to believers. We can only understand how if we first confront this: Jesus died. He was as dead as a door-nail. And he rose. Everyone who is baptized rises because they die to a former way of life.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults says, "Baptism recalls and makes present the paschal mystery itself, because in baptism we pass from the death of sin into life" (Christian Initiation: General Introduction, 6).

## **Initiation and Paschal Mystery: Death to New Life**

At the Second Scrutiny you may hear this: “Lord God..., by the death and resurrection of Christ you have cast out the darkness of hatred and lies and poured forth the light of truth and love.... Enable [these elect] to pass from darkness to light and, delivered from the prince of darkness, to live always as children of the light” (RCIA 168B). Offered after the gospel account of the man born blind, this prayer presents the death and resurrection of Christ as the paradigm for the enlightenment of the elect.

At the Easter Vigil, those to be baptized renounce Satan and then proclaim belief in the Trinity, especially in the Son of God, “who was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father” (RCIA 225). As the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says, by baptism they “are plunged into the paschal mystery of Christ: they die with Him, are buried with Him, and rise with Him” (6).

Confirmation immediately follows baptism. The RCIA says, “The conjunction of the two celebrations signifies the unity of the paschal mystery, the close link between the mission of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the connection between the two sacraments through which the Son and the Holy Spirit come with the Father to those who are baptized” (215).

Placing confirmation beside baptism, the liturgy shows how the death and resurrection of the Son lead to the sending of the Holy Spirit - not just on the first Pentecost but with every initiation. Mystagogy follows so that “the neophytes together... grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the eucharist, and doing the works of charity” (RCIA 244).

On Pentecost Sunday the preface affirms this: “bringing your Paschal Mystery to completion, you bestowed the Holy Spirit today on those you made your adopted children.” The outpouring of the Spirit on the newly baptized completes the Son’s death and resurrection.

Back at the Easter Vigil, the prayer over the offerings and the prayer after communion both refer to the paschal mysteries in the plural: not just the resurrection of Christ but also the initiation of new Christians. The neophytes, like all of us, have known about darkness and light, loss and redemption, doubt and faith. They experience new life because they have first experienced death.

At a Christian funeral, we know that the deceased has participated in the death of Christ; now we pray that the deceased will share in the resurrection. We use blessed water, a white pall, and the paschal candle to recall the baptism of the deceased and the hope of future resurrection.

Sometimes when new people express interest in our church we focus on the welcome - the rising, if you will, without thinking about the dying. If Catholics of the past can be faulted for focusing too much on the cross, we in the present don’t want to focus too much on the resurrection. Both death and resurrection need each other. If people are finding new life in our church home, it probably follows a heartfelt and difficult journey of faith. The RCIA is not just about

## **Initiation and Paschal Mystery: Death to New Life**

welcoming, but strengthening the spirit of those who know they need to die to something in the past and rise anew with Christ.

### **The Paschal Mystery and Us**

We learn of Christ's death and resurrection through the bible. We witness its fruits through initiation. There is one more application: All Christians experience the same paschal mystery day by day. Its pertinence did not end with our baptism. It continually sustains our life.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says, "for well-disposed members of the faithful, the liturgy... sanctifies almost every event in their lives; they are given access to the stream of divine grace which flows from the paschal mystery of the passion, death, the resurrection of Christ" (61).

Dying and rising is our bread and butter. Parish ministry continually deals with loss and redemption, complaints and compliments, angry former members and happy new members, unemployment and acceptance, expulsion and welcome, and, literally, death and new life. We Christians live the paschal mystery every day.

The RCIA says that all the faithful are to help prepare the catechumens by reflecting on the paschal mystery with them and renewing our own conversion (4). This presumes that we know about the paschal mystery, and we do.

Each year on Ash Wednesday one of the prayers for the blessing of ashes asks that we who are marked with them "may be worthy to come [at Easter] with minds made pure to celebrate the Paschal Mystery." At the Rite of Election, the homily is to encourage the faithful "to give good example and to accompany the elect along the path of the paschal mystery" (RCIA 129).

This idea first arose in Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. "The season of Lent has a twofold character: primarily by recalling or preparing for baptism and by penance, it disposes the faithful, who more diligently hear the word of God and devote themselves to prayer, to celebrate the paschal mystery" (109). It takes two eyes to see Lent: one focused on the elect whose spiritual formation is preparing them for baptism, and one focused on the faithful whose penance is preparing them for Easter.

This theme frames Lent: On the First Sunday, the preface looks forward to us "celebrating worthily the Paschal Mystery." On Palm Sunday the first rubric "recalls the entrance of Christ the Lord into Jerusalem to accomplish his Paschal Mystery," which the priest then describes as the Lord's "Passion and Resurrection." The purpose of observing Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord is "that, being made by his grace partakers of the Cross, we may have a share also in his Resurrection and in his life." We hear the Passion that day knowing that next Sunday we'll hear the resurrection.

The message repeats on Good Friday. One of the prayers over the people asks God to sanctify his servants, "for whom Christ..., by the shedding of his Blood, established the Paschal Mystery."

## Initiation and Paschal Mystery: Death to New Life

And, perhaps most significantly, at the Easter Vigil, we renew our baptismal promises, proclaiming our belief in Jesus Christ our Lord, who “suffered death and was buried, rose again from the dead and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” Throughout Lent we use two eyes: we accompany the elect on their sacred journey toward baptism, and we die to our sin and rise with Christ again. We do this by renouncing Satan and professing faith in God.

Each day of our lives we experience dying and rising. We sacrifice for those we love. We give our possessions to charities. We volunteer the use of the gifts we have received. Even when our motives are altruistic, they make us feel good because they reconnect us with what is most fundamentally human - love: dying to ourselves for the sake of others.

Through all of this we prepare for the end of our own lives. We meditate on the death and rising of Christ. We witness the dying and rising of new Christians. We follow Christ through the unending battle against sin so that we may share his glory. Death may come when we do not expect it, but in all these mini-mysteries, we prepare for our death, in hopes that God, who raised up Christ, will raise us up from death to new life.

### Conclusion

*Appalachian Spring* was not the first title Aaron Copland gave his ballet. Martha Graham and the Coolidge Foundation had commissioned it because they wanted an American ballet. So Copland debuted it in 1944 under the name: “Ballet for Martha.” This was not a catchy title. After the premiere, Martha Graham told Copland about a poem called “The Dance” by Hart Crane. She thought that two of its words better fit Copland’s music. Here’s how it begins:

The swift red flesh, a winter king—  
Who squired the glacier woman down the sky?  
She ran the neighing canyons all the spring;  
She spouted arms; she rose with maize—to die.

There the word “spring” refers to the season of the year, which most people imagine as they hear Copland’s ballet. But later in the poem the word reappears, not to describe a time of year, but a body of water.

I took the portage climb, then chose  
A further valley-shed; I could not stop.  
Feet nozzled wat’ry webs of upper flows;  
One white veil gusted from the very top.

O Appalachian Spring! I gained the ledge;  
Steep, inaccessible smile that eastward bends  
And northward reaches in that violet wedge  
Of Adirondacks!

Like the effects of baptismal water, a spring of water gusted and flowed, then bent like an inaccessible smile to the east until it reached north. You might say, the Appalachian Spring kept turning, turning till it came round right. You may

## Initiation and Paschal Mystery: Death to New Life

**not know Hart Crane's poem that ultimately supplied the ballet's title, but you probably know the Shaker hymn that Copland incorporated:**

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,  
Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.  
When true simplicity is gain'd,  
To bow and to bend we will not be asham'd,  
To turn, turn will be our delight,  
Till by turning, turning we come round right.

**In this talk I've spoken about the paschal mystery somewhat in the past tense. Christ died and rose. The elect died to their emptiness and rose in baptism. We the faithful died to our sins and rose with Christ last Easter.**

**But not all death is past. Some of it is very present. Some people today feel trapped in relationships, betrayed by their health, shorn of meaningful work, failed by their schools, abandoned by their children, powerless against storms, lost amid shattered dreams, alone in a multitude of faces wearing masks, at war in the armed forces or as collateral damage. Death is current. Wherever you experience it, you can also experience hope. As if you were an Appalachian spring, God may through pain bend you like a smile, turning, turning you until in mystery you come round right.**

**When we face death, whether every day or at the end, we submit to God in hope of new life. The collect for the Fifth Sunday of Easter puts it this way:**

Almighty ever-living God,  
constantly accomplish the Paschal Mystery within us,  
that those you were pleased to make new in Holy Baptism  
may, under your protective care, bear much fruit  
and come to the joys of life eternal.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit  
one God, for ever and ever.