

Pastoral Perspective

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

For Death, an Alleluia

The Church, during these years of her painful renewal, has become more and more an Easter Church. Emphasis on celebration of the liturgy and joy in the Christian life has given evidence to our faith in the Risen Lord. And this is not surprising since we, as people of faith, inevitably find the answer to our struggles with the hard and painful questions of life in the hope of the Easter message of the resurrected Christ.



Nowhere is this more clearly evident than in the funeral rites of the Church. Since I have been privileged (I dare say!) to celebrate several funerals in this Easter season, the mysteries of human death and divine resurrection jump more clearly into focus. Each funeral is a celebration of Easter all over again, for in the face of death we dare to sing an "Alleluia!" because of the faith we bear.

Christians are realistic. Our funeral rites, so strong in their paschal character, are not a religious form of escapism; we do not deny death. Rather, Christians feel what all human beings feel when confronted with the loss of a loved one: there is grief, confusion, loneliness, emptiness, even anger. Our lives are disrupted by this force that is beyond our control, beyond our planning and so totally senseless.

In face of all this, however, Christians are not gloomy; in fact, a gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms. While acknowledging the overwhelming feelings of the time of a loved one's death, the Christian proclaims a faith in Christ and in the power of His resurrection. Through tears, the Christian can sing the Easter song. This is because we have been embraced by Christ in Baptism, and so are called to embrace the human experience of death with faith and hope in the resurrection. We do not escape from facing death, but we walk into it with eyes open and heads held high because we know that beyond it we are joined with God in an endless sharing of divine life.



An angel greets the women who have come to the empty tomb of Jesus to anoint his body. "He is not here, for he is risen, as he said," the angel said.

The Mass of Christian Burial captures this paschal faith so very well. Commending the dead to a merciful God and offering the support of Christian hope to the gathered community gives witness to a faith in the future resurrection of the baptized. The death and resurrection of Christ is proclaimed as the central pattern of the Christian life. Having passed from death to life in Baptism, the faithful Christian passes through death to life in fellowship with the saints, to await the final coming and resurrection. And in between these two passages, our life is a constant dying and rising with Christ, so that our final day in this life is the dawn of endless joy.

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For this occasion there are no longer any black vestments and gloomy moods. Instead, there are the white pall that signifies our Christian dignity as a new creation in the Risen Lord, the Easter candle that proclaims the faith of this community in the power of the resurrection, and joyful singing that announces our hope in life eternal. For, "in Him, who rose from the dead, our hope of salvation dawned. The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality." "When at last we die, your loving kindness calls us back to life in company with Christ, whose victory is our redemption." (Prefaces for Christian Death I and V)

Easter lives with us, then, a year long. As God, the merciful Lord, calls us home from this life to himself, we celebrate and proclaim the life we have in His risen Son. For God's faithful people, "life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death, we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven."

Belonging to the Church

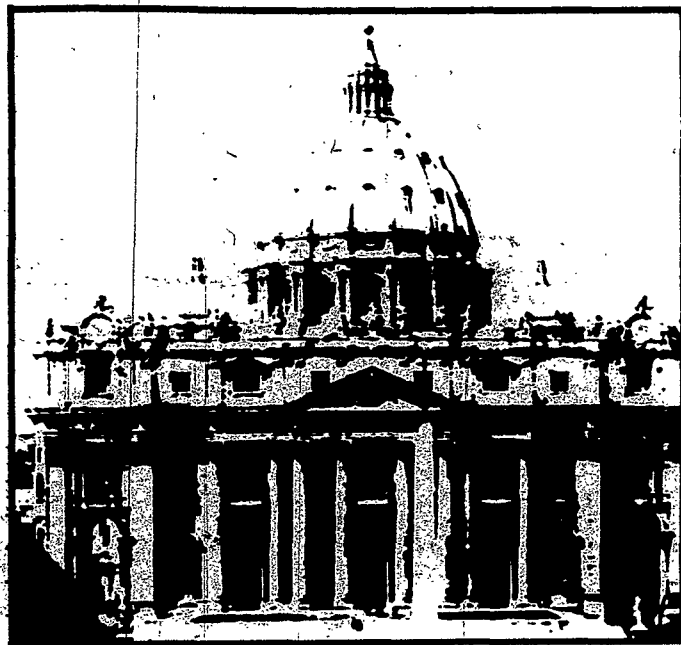
Following is the address of Pope Paul at the general audience on March 29.

In our intention, and certainly in yours, is the desire to discover and to celebrate the bond which unites us, which makes us members of one new People. In his People everyone is what he is, by nature, by ethnic and national origin, by civil formation, by language and by interest and his own particular activity. But everyone is called to an equal dignity, everyone is raised to a superior, spiritual and real society, which, without confusing them, bestows on them a human-divine citizenship; everyone is himself in an ineffable communion with all those who share the same faith and enjoy the same divine gift, grace, and at the same time make up a marvellous unity, which is called "the Church," the one and catholic Church.



Greetings to you (members) of this religious Family, which was born on Pentecost day, formed from the most diverse nations (as is said in the famous account of the Acts of the Apostles, in which all those present of diverse origin and formation are the first to be amazed to hear a common language understandable to all). Such is the Church, which St. Augustine defines as the faithful People, scattered all over the world.

And how beautiful it is, how easy it is to perceive that at a meeting such as this the so-called "marks" of the Church, that is the exterior aspects of her mysterious being, stand out, like irradiating lights, for those whose spiritual eye is attentive! Who does



not perceive as apostolic the essential derivation of the Church, to which we belong? It is the apostles who are our founders, the witnesses to the divine constitutional plan of the Church, our apostolic Church, which does not owe her origin and her reason for existence to any other source. And if this is so for this mark, apostolicity, which we well know that each of us can claim here, do we not feel at the same time an exalting emotion in knowing that we are joined in the true Church, one in the faith, in the essence of her Spirit, in her union with God, and catholic, that is universal in her body, in her human composition? And behold, then, from this Church, one and catholic, there springs a fourth mark which concerns her in the divine gifts of which she is the depository and dispenser, and in the purposes which

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guide her complex affairs; that is, holiness, which constitutes her promised crown, that of the Church of the Saints, all the more desirable the more she is exposed to human weakness.

Do we not find great spiritual comfort in the thought, in the awareness of belonging to our Church, one holy, catholic and apostolic? Must we not thank the Lord for having given us the good fortune of thus being sons of his loving kindness? And do we not feel a deep and perhaps also poignant desire to be in our moral reality equal to the duties of our Catholic vocation? And finally shall we not love even more our brothers who are still separated from us, in the wish and in the hope of being able to have them with us in the fullness of truth and of grace?