

Easter faith isn't for the head alone

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

We live between the "already" and the "not yet" — between the events of our redemption by Jesus Christ some 20 centuries ago and the definitive arrival of the Reign of God at the end of history.

Although that's a heavy theological paragraph, its meaning should be clear enough.

What we yearn for most deeply in life, we already have, but in a limited way. We've been promised more, and we hope for more.

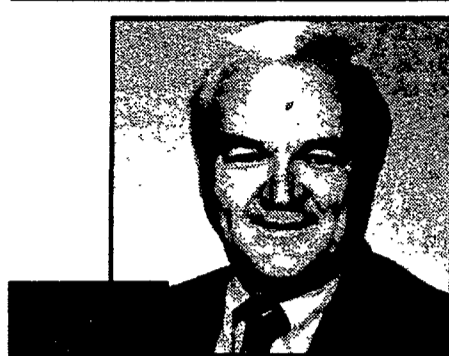
The object of the promise and the hope is eternal life, that is, the perfect fulfillment of all of our deepest longings as human beings: to be forever with those whom we love.

To some extent we already have this. We are blessed with the company of people whom we love, even if separated by the distance of many miles.

We maintain contact by telephone and by mail. We visit each other as circumstances allow.

Other loved ones are with us all of the time — so much so that we sometimes take their presence and their love for granted. It is usually when they are sick, or hurt, or unexpectedly absent from us that we realize anew how much they mean to us.

Sometimes that realization comes too late, as in the case of a sudden and unprepared for death. But every death, expected or not, is a kind of



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

crucifixion.

We comfort ourselves with the hope, rooted in faith, that we shall see our loved ones again, in a new life. We take to heart the words of the funeral liturgy that their lives are not ended, only changed. Just as ours, too, will be changed one day.

The process of physical deterioration that becomes a normal part of life in the middle and senior years has its spiritual value. It helps us to place things in a larger, more realistic perspective.

Nothing does that more effectively than the loss of a loved one, a close friend, or even a celebrity we've never met, but who had been a part of

our lives since childhood.

People deal with life's passages and inner mystery in different ways, but Catholics have a rich sacramental tradition to draw upon.

One of the most appealing features of that tradition is its abundant reservoir of symbols: the crucifix, statues, paintings, holy water and holy oils, ashes, candles, and so many other tangible objects.

But symbols are not limited to tangible objects. Stories, teachings, and people — including especially the saints — also function symbolically.

One symbol that is particularly appropriate to Easter and to this week's meditation is that of the paschal, or Easter, candle.

Like all rich symbols, its meaning and its capacity for disclosure are not limited to the moment and circumstances of its original use.

The paschal candle is blessed and lighted at the Easter Vigil. Thereafter, its stately presence in the sanctuary testifies to Christ's victory over death and to his promise of eternal life to all who "pass over" with him through suffering, death, and resurrection.

But the candle plays a key symbolic role, not only in the baptisms at the Easter Vigil, but at all baptisms throughout the year.

In every baptismal rite, the newly baptized is presented with a candle lighted from the Easter candle.

"You have been enlightened by Christ," the celebrant prays. "Walk al-

ways as children of the light and keep the flame of faith alive in your hearts. When the Lord comes, may you go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom."

The lighted paschal candle also plays a key symbolic role in funerals, with its placement at the front of the casket. However sad and emotionally wrenching the occasion, this, too, is an Easter moment.

For our belief and hope in the resurrection of the body is rooted always in our faith in the resurrection of Christ. For us, life is not changed, not taken away, by death because Christ has conquered death once and for all.

However, that belief in what is "not yet" is empty without some experience of what is "already." We accept the promise of resurrection and eternal life because we experience something of them already in the company of those whom we love.

But if those whom we love are also to have hope in the promise of resurrection and eternal life, they must experience our love for them here and now, just as the disciples experienced Jesus' love for them, after the resurrection, in conversation and in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:13-35).

All of which reminds us that Easter faith isn't for the head alone. It's for the heart and for the hands.

It's not a faith to be preserved through control. It is a faith to be lived through love.

Easter celebrates life's victory over death

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

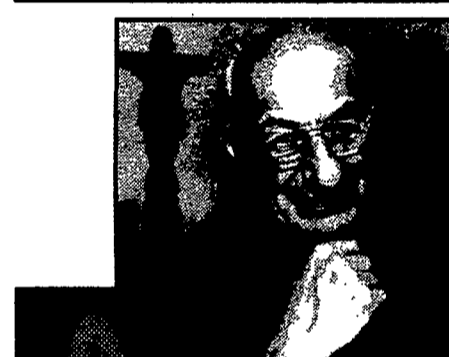
Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:1-9; (R1) Acts 10:34, 37-43; (R2) Colossians 3:1-4.

Disneyland, the world-famous amusement park in Anaheim, Calif., has a large sign at the entrance: "Disneyland — the happiest place on earth." I am sure millions of children have found it to be "the happiest place on earth."

We might say that Easter is "the happiest day on earth" as people around the world come out to wish one another a happy Easter. They dress happily, sing, celebrate Mass, and share the joy of the day with friends and family.

But is happiness to be found in a place or a day? We certainly all seek happiness. In fact, we Americans wrote the pursuit of happiness into our constitutional rights.

But what is happiness? Some philosophers identify happiness with the possession of money, honor or power. The Epicureans taught that it consisted in bodily health and pleasure. The Stoics claimed that it was



WORD FOR SUNDAY

to be found in knowledge, love and virtue. Evolutionists maintain that happiness is self-realization.

Alexander the Great conquered Egypt and most of India; at the age of 30 he was supreme master of all the world. In a pathetically tragic search for happiness, he threw himself into wild excesses. But he found no inner peace. "There are no more worlds to conquer," he exclaimed; and weeping,

he threw himself into a drunken debauch. Tired of living, he died.

Solomon sought happiness in wisdom, only to discover that "in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow." Then he tried pleasure but found in that no comfort. Then industry: he built houses, vineyards, had servants and great possessions. But lamented that all was vanity and vexation of spirit and that nothing was lasting under the sun.

St. Augustine sought happiness in the sins of the flesh. Thanks to the prayers of his mother, St. Monica, and the powerful sermons of St. Ambrose, he learned that "for Thyself Thou hast created us, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

Happiness is the possession of the good. The supreme good is God. The heart is triangular; the world is round: it cannot fill up the corners of the heart — only the triune God can. Happiness is the possession of life, love and truth. Easter celebrates the victory of life over death, of love over hate, and of truth over error. So Easter is a day of great joy. And that joy and happiness belongs to everyone

who possesses God.

Elizabeth Bayley Seton, the first native-born American to be canonized a saint, knew hardship both in her personal life and her work as founder of the Sisters of Charity. She lost her husband, worn out by business failures and consumption, and buried two of her three daughters in their early years.

Like every human being Mother Seton found life to be a mixture of light and darkness, but like any saint she saw all her experiences within the perspective of religion and that kept her buoyant even under great pressure. In 1813, when she was struggling to keep her social work going, she wrote to her friend Juliana Scott: "Sometimes I can hardly contain my interior cheerfulness."

Clement of Alexandria, an early church father, stated confidently, "You can always know a pagan by the ugly pleasures in which he indulges, and a heretic by his bickering and quarrelsomeness, and a Christian by his happiness."

May your Easter be happy, and it will be in relation to your closeness to the risen Lord.

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