

***Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 17, 2024
Year of the Most Holy Eucharist
Reflection #12***

“And Moses called all the ancients of the children of Israel, and said to them: Go take a lamb by your families, and sacrifice the Phase (Passover Lamb). And dip a bunch of hyssop in the blood that is at the door, and sprinkle the transom of the door therewith, and both the door cheeks: let none of you go out of the door of his house till morning. For the Lord will pass through striking the Egyptians: and when he shall see the blood on the transom, and on both the posts, he will pass over the door of the house, and not suffer the destroyer to come into your houses and to hurt you. Thou shalt keep this thing as a law for thee and thy children for ever. And when you have entered into the land which the Lord will give you as he hath promised, you shall observe these ceremonies. And when your children shall say to you: What is the meaning of this service? You shall say to them: It is the victim of the passage of the Lord, when he passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, striking the Egyptians, and saving our houses. And the people bowing themselves, adored. And the children of Israel going forth did as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron.” (Exodus 12:21-28)

Last weekend, we began our initial reflection upon the institution of the Feast of the Passover which is found in Exodus 12. We studied the historical aspects of this feast; its beginnings found in nomadic herding cultures. We were reminded that God’s self-revelation, His Divine Plan for mankind and all creation, builds upon already established traditions familiar to His people. Our mission, this weekend, will consist of examining, through the eyes of the early Church, how Jesus’ Passion, Death and Resurrection provided a deeper meaning to what was already believed and practiced in the Passover.

Catholics, in our day, might assume attending the local parish Seder Supper would be similar to the Passover meal celebrated by Jesus, His apostles and disciples. Admittedly, I thought this to be true as well. The two differ because the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans around 70AD. Therefore, the preparation of the lambs cannot be fully repeated without the Temple. The sacrifice of the lambs in the Temple was necessary. As the Passover drew near, families would bring to the Temple an unblemished lamb. Following the same instructions given to their ancestors by Moses in Egypt, the lamb was sacrificed and none of its bones were broken. In the Temple stood an Altar of Sacrifice. Beneath this Altar was a drain. The victim’s blood would be washed away from the Altar, with water, exiting the Temple from a side port. As we mentioned last weekend, the lamb would be roasted upon a spit of wood in a “cross” shape. During the meal, 4 cups would be offered. The first cup, the Cup of Sanctification, recalls Israel’s time of slavery in Egypt. As this cup is offered, the bitter herbs are eaten and a hymn is sung. The second cup, the Cup of Proclamation, recounts Israel’s “Exodus” from Egypt. The third cup, the Cup of Blessing, speaks of Israel’s deliverance. During this cup, the roasted lamb and unleavened bread are eaten and a hymn is sung. The fourth and final cup, the Cup of Praise, celebrates Israel becoming a new nation and concludes with the words: “It is finished.”

On the night Jesus instituted the Eucharist, Saint Matthew records (Matthew 26:30) He and His Apostles left the meal after offering the third cup, the Cup of Blessing, and singing the required hymn. Saint Matthew further records (Matthew 26:39) while in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus praying: *“My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”* Saint John (John 19:14) sets the time of Jesus’ death as being the same time the sacrifice of the lambs would begin in the Temple: *“Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about the sixth hour.”* Jesus, without His bones broken, is crucified upon a wooden cross reminiscent of the spit of Passover lamb. Saint John tells us (John 19:28-30) that from the cross Jesus offered the fourth cup. *“After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’ A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of vinegar on hyssop [Remember, hyssop from Exodus 12:22] and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the vinegar, He said, ‘It is finished’; and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.”* Saint John (John 19:34) notes one final act that would remind the early Christians to associate the Sacrifice of Jesus as fulfilling the sacrifice of the Passover lambs: *“But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.”*

My dear family, the early Church fully believed the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus fulfilled what was foreshadowed in the offering of the Passover Lamb from Exodus. Furthermore, they would find other symbolic references to the life and death of Jesus present in the Old Testament. This would lead to an initial understanding, further defined as time progressed, that the Eucharist truly is the flesh and blood of the perfect sacrificial Lamb offered upon the Altar of Sacrifice, the Cross of Christ.