



The Holy See

EASTER VIGIL

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Saint Peter's Basilica
Holy Saturday, 11 April 2009*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Saint Mark tells us in his Gospel that as the disciples came down from the Mount of the Transfiguration, they were discussing among themselves what “rising from the dead” could mean (cf. *Mk* 9:10). A little earlier, the Lord had foretold his passion and his resurrection after three days. Peter had protested against this prediction of death. But now, they were wondering what could be meant by the word “resurrection”. Could it be that we find ourselves in a similar situation? Christmas, the birth of the divine Infant, we can somehow immediately comprehend. We can love the child, we can imagine that night in Bethlehem, Mary’s joy, the joy of Saint Joseph and the shepherds, the exultation of the angels. But what is resurrection? It does not form part of our experience, and so the message often remains to some degree beyond our understanding, a thing of the past. The Church tries to help us understand it, by expressing this mysterious event in the language of symbols in which we can somehow contemplate this astonishing event. During the Easter Vigil, the Church points out the significance of this day principally through three symbols: light, water, and the new song – the Alleluia.

First of all, there is light. God’s creation – which has just been proclaimed to us in the Biblical narrative – begins with the command: “Let there be light!” (*Gen* 1:3). Where there is light, life is born, chaos can be transformed into cosmos. In the Biblical message, light is the most immediate image of God: He is total Radiance, Life, Truth, Light. During the Easter Vigil, the Church reads the account of creation as a prophecy. In the resurrection, we see the most sublime fulfilment of what this text describes as the beginning of all things. God says once again: “Let there be light!” The resurrection of Jesus is an eruption of light. Death is conquered, the tomb is thrown open. The

Risen One himself is Light, the Light of the world. With the resurrection, the Lord's day enters the nights of history. Beginning with the resurrection, God's light spreads throughout the world and throughout history. Day dawns. This Light alone – Jesus Christ – is the true light, something more than the physical phenomenon of light. He is pure Light: God himself, who causes a new creation to be born in the midst of the old, transforming chaos into cosmos.

Let us try to understand this a little better. Why is Christ Light? In the Old Testament, the Torah was considered to be like the light coming from God for the world and for humanity. The Torah separates light from darkness within creation, that is to say, good from evil. It points out to humanity the right path to true life. It points out the good, it demonstrates the truth and it leads us towards love, which is the deepest meaning contained in the Torah. It is a "lamp" for our steps and a "light" for our path (cf. *Ps* 119:105). Christians, then, knew that in Christ, the Torah is present, the Word of God is present in him as Person. The Word of God is the true light that humanity needs. This Word is present in him, in the Son. Psalm 19 had compared the Torah to the sun which manifests God's glory as it rises, for all the world to see. Christians understand: yes indeed, in the resurrection, the Son of God has emerged as the Light of the world. Christ is the great Light from which all life originates. He enables us to recognize the glory of God from one end of the earth to the other. He points out our path. He is the Lord's day which, as it grows, is gradually spreading throughout the earth. Now, living with him and for him, we can live in the light.

At the Easter Vigil, the Church represents the mystery of the light of Christ in the sign of the Paschal candle, whose flame is both light and heat. The symbolism of light is connected with that of fire: radiance and heat, radiance and the transforming energy contained in the fire – truth and love go together. The Paschal candle burns, and is thereby consumed: Cross and resurrection are inseparable. From the Cross, from the Son's self-giving, light is born, true radiance comes into the world. From the Paschal candle we all light our own candles, especially the newly baptized, for whom the light of Christ enters deeply into their hearts in this Sacrament. The early Church described Baptism as *fortismos*, as the Sacrament of illumination, as a communication of light, and linked it inseparably with the resurrection of Christ. In Baptism, God says to the candidate: "Let there be light!" The candidate is brought into the light of Christ. Christ now divides the light from the darkness. In him we recognize what is true and what is false, what is radiance and what is darkness. With him, there wells up within us the light of truth, and we begin to understand. On one occasion when Christ looked upon the people who had come to listen to him, seeking some guidance from him, he felt compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd (cf. *Mk* 6:34). Amid the contradictory messages of that time, they did not know which way to turn. What great compassion he must feel in our own time too – on account of all the endless talk that people hide behind, while in reality they are totally confused. Where must we go? What are the values by which we can order our lives? The values by which we can educate our young, without giving them norms they may be unable to resist, or demanding of them things that perhaps should not be imposed upon them? He is the Light. The baptismal candle is the symbol of enlightenment that is given to us in Baptism. Thus at this hour, Saint Paul speaks to us with great immediacy. In

the Letter to the Philippians, he says that, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, Christians should shine as lights in the world (cf. *Phil 2:15*). Let us pray to the Lord that the fragile flame of the candle he has lit in us, the delicate light of his word and his love amid the confusions of this age, will not be extinguished in us, but will become ever stronger and brighter, so that we, with him, can be people of the day, bright stars lighting up our time.

The second symbol of the Easter Vigil – the night of Baptism – is water. It appears in Sacred Scripture, and hence also in the inner structure of the Sacrament of Baptism, with two opposed meanings. On the one hand there is the sea, which appears as a force antagonistic to life on earth, continually threatening it; yet God has placed a limit upon it. Hence the book of Revelation says that in God's new world, the sea will be no more (cf. 21:1). It is the element of death. And so it becomes the symbolic representation of Jesus' death on the Cross: Christ descended into the sea, into the waters of death, as Israel did into the Red Sea. Having risen from death, he gives us life. This means that Baptism is not only a cleansing, but a new birth: with Christ we, as it were, descend into the sea of death, so as to rise up again as new creatures.

The other way in which we encounter water is in the form of the fresh spring that gives life, or the great river from which life comes forth. According to the earliest practice of the Church, Baptism had to be administered with water from a fresh spring. Without water there is no life. It is striking how much importance is attached to wells in Sacred Scripture. They are places from which life rises forth. Beside Jacob's well, Christ spoke to the Samaritan woman of the new well, the water of true life. He reveals himself to her as the new, definitive Jacob, who opens up for humanity the well that is awaited: the inexhaustible source of life-giving water (cf. *Jn 4:5-15*). Saint John tells us that a soldier with a lance struck the side of Jesus, and from his open side – from his pierced heart – there came out blood and water (cf. *Jn 19:34*). The early Church saw in this a symbol of Baptism and Eucharist flowing from the pierced heart of Jesus. In his death, Jesus himself became the spring. The prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of the new Temple from which a spring issues forth that becomes a great life-giving river (cf. *Ezek 47:1-12*). In a land which constantly suffered from drought and water shortage, this was a great vision of hope. Nascent Christianity understood: in Christ, this vision was fulfilled. He is the true, living Temple of God. He is the spring of living water. From him, the great river pours forth, which in Baptism renews the world and makes it fruitful; the great river of living water, his Gospel which makes the earth fertile. Jesus, however, prophesied something still greater. He said: "Whoever believes in me ... out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water" (*Jn 7:38*). In Baptism, the Lord makes us not only persons of light, but also sources from which living water bursts forth. We all know people like that, who leave us somehow refreshed and renewed; people who are like a fountain of fresh spring water. We do not necessarily have to think of great saints like Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and so on, people through whom rivers of living water truly entered into human history. Thanks be to God, we find them constantly even in our daily lives: people who are like a spring. Certainly, we also know the opposite: people who spread around themselves an atmosphere like a stagnant pool of stale, or even poisoned water. Let us ask the Lord, who has

given us the grace of Baptism, for the gift always to be sources of pure, fresh water, bubbling up from the fountain of his truth and his love!

The third great symbol of the Easter Vigil is something rather different; it has to do with man himself. It is the singing of the new song – the alleluia. When a person experiences great joy, he cannot keep it to himself. He has to express it, to pass it on. But what happens when a person is touched by the light of the resurrection, and thus comes into contact with Life itself, with Truth and Love? He cannot merely speak about it. Speech is no longer adequate. He has to sing. The first reference to singing in the Bible comes after the crossing of the Red Sea. Israel has risen out of slavery. It has climbed up from the threatening depths of the sea. It is as it were reborn. It lives and it is free. The Bible describes the people's reaction to this great event of salvation with the verse: "The people ... believed in the Lord and in Moses his servant" (*Ex 14:31*). Then comes the second reaction which, with a kind of inner necessity, follows from the first one: "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord ..." At the Easter Vigil, year after year, we Christians intone this song after the third reading, we sing it as our song, because we too, through God's power, have been drawn forth from the water and liberated for true life.

There is a surprising parallel to the story of Moses' song after Israel's liberation from Egypt upon emerging from the Red Sea, namely in the Book of Revelation of Saint John. Before the beginning of the seven last plagues imposed upon the earth, the seer has a vision of something "like a sea of glass mingled with fire; and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb ..." (*Rev 15:2f.*). This image describes the situation of the disciples of Jesus Christ in every age, the situation of the Church in the history of this world. Humanly speaking, it is self-contradictory. On the one hand, the community is located at the Exodus, in the midst of the Red Sea, in a sea which is paradoxically ice and fire at the same time. And must not the Church, so to speak, always walk on the sea, through the fire and the cold? Humanly speaking, she ought to sink. But while she is still walking in the midst of this Red Sea, she sings – she intones the song of praise of the just: the song of Moses and of the Lamb, in which the Old and New Covenants blend into harmony. While, strictly speaking, she ought to be sinking, the Church sings the song of thanksgiving of the saved. She is standing on history's waters of death and yet she has already risen. Singing, she grasps at the Lord's hand, which holds her above the waters. And she knows that she is thereby raised outside the force of gravity of death and evil – a force from which otherwise there would be no way of escape – raised and drawn into the new gravitational force of God, of truth and of love. At present, the Church and all of us are still between the two gravitational fields. But once Christ is risen, the gravitational pull of love is stronger than that of hatred; the force of gravity of life is stronger than that of death. Perhaps this is actually the situation of the Church in every age, perhaps it is our situation? It always seems as if she ought to be sinking, and yet she is always already saved. Saint Paul illustrated this situation with the words: "We are as dying, and behold we live" (*2 Cor 6:9*). The Lord's saving hand holds us up, and thus we can already sing the song of the saved, the

new song of the risen ones: alleluia!

Amen.

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