UNDERSTANDING THE *EXULTET*

By CLIFFORD HOWELL

MEDIATOR between God and men, great high priest who has passed right up through the heavens, Jesus Christ the Son of God designed . . . to re-establish between men and their Creator the order that sin had upset, and so bring back to their heavenly Father . . . the unhappy progeny of Adam infected with original sin'.

With these striking words the late Pope Pius XII opened his great encyclical on Christian Worship. They bring us at once to the heart of the matter, since it is only because the 'Mediator between God and men' did, in fact, carry out his design that we have any Christian worship at all; moreover, the application to men's souls of what he did to 'bring back to their heavenly Father the unhappy progeny of Adam' is the reality underlying the chief form of Christian worship, – the liturgy. It is what the liturgy does to them that transforms the 'unhappy progeny' into men who 'rejoice with exceeding great joy'.[1] 'In the celebration of the liturgy . . . the work of our redemption is continued and its fruits are communicated to us';[2] 'each and every offering of this memorial sacrifice carries on the work of our redemption'.[3] The liturgy, then, is a fount of Christian joy.

Early Christians realized this vividly. We know but little about their liturgical assemblies beyond the fact that they 'broke bread in this house or that . . . with gladness and simplicity of heart praising God';[4] and we know that the customary day for their communal worship was 'the first day of the week'[5] which they called 'the day of the Lord'.[6] It was so called because it was the day on which Christ rose from the dead, the day on which St. Peter proclaimed to the Jews: 'God made both Lord and Christ *(Kyrios kai Christos)* this Jesus whom you crucified'.[7]

The Christians wanted to have regular meetings to rejoice with

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[1] Mt 2,10. [2] *Mediator Dei* n. 31. [3] Secret: Ninth Sunday after Pentecost.
[4] Acts 2,46. [5] 1 Cor 16,2; Acts 20,7. [6] Apoc 1,10. [7] Acts 1,36.

one another in the consciousness that they had been redeemed by Christ; they wanted to remember their Lord, and to thank God for all they had received through him. Sunday, the 'Lord's day', was a day of triumph, of exultation, of surpassing joy and gratitude when they assembled to celebrate the victory of Christ. And they celebrated it by enacting that mysterious rite which he himself had given them for the precise purpose of perpetuating his memory – that of which he had said 'Do this in memory of me'. This rite was soon called – and still is called – the Eucharist, the Thanksgiving. No matter what its liturgical form, in essence it is instinct with joy, and belongs with especial appropriateness to the day of joy, the Lord's day.

Quite early in the Church's history one particular Sunday came to be celebrated with outstanding solemnity – that one which corresponded in date with the events commemorated. This was Easter, which for generations was the only feast of the Church; every other Sunday was an echo of it, a 'little Easter'. And the Easter celebration, primarily a rejoicing in Christ's resurrection, was regarded also as a celebration of man's resurrection in Christ, man's redemption by Christ. It became the foundation feast of the Church, which brought to mind the basic facts on which the very existence and life of the Church rested. During the third century it became expanded, spread out over the preceding days, until finally it grew to embrace an entire week – that which we call Holy Week.

There are two elements in what Christ did to redeem man; he suffered and died, and then he rose again. And so the expanded Easter festival had two aspects – one sad and one joyful. The main celebration was during the night between Saturday and Sunday; this was the turning point in the sacred drama, the transition from death to life, from sorrow to joy; this was the real Passover, for which all the rest was but preparation.

And at the very beginning of it we find a unique liturgical rite which strikes the keynote of paschal joy. We might compare it to something more than a mere keynote; it is a whole glorious first movement in a symphony of joy, wherein the Church proclaims her exultation, peals it forth like a fanfare of trumpets, develops it as a noble theme, states it now tenderly, now majestically, but always triumphantly. This rite is, of course, the *Praeconium paschale* – the proclamation of Christ's victory and man's salvation expressed in the incomparable song of the deacon – the *Exultet.*

Precisely when this rite was introduced into the Paschal Vigil we

do not know, but there is evidence that it can be traced bac at least as far as the third century. It is generally agreed that, from the beginning, it pertained to the deacon to sing it, and that he composed a fresh text each year. He was not, of course, free to sing just anything he liked: as regards its form, what he wrote should be a *benedictio* in the biblical sense of that word (a grateful enumeration of God's benefits); as regards its content, it should deal with the great themes of the fall of man and his redemption by the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.

In the course of time some of these *praeconia* were written down, used again, adopted by other deacons, and became accepted liturgical texts.[1] Several were in use until the Middle Ages, but only one has survived into modern times – that which was incorporated into the missal of Pius V and is known to us as the *Exultet.*

In some old manuscripts the *Exultet* is given a subtitle: *Beati Augustini episcopi euam adhuc diaconus cum esset edidit et cecinit feliciter'.*[2] Until recently this tradition of its Augustinian authorship was generally accepted, but in 1946 Abbot Capelle advanced the theory that it was written by St. Ambrose.[3] Further studies by Dom Bonifatius Fischer[4] and others have supported the Abbot's conclusions which are now widely held, even if not proved beyond all doubt. At any rate it is quite certain that the text is of the fourth century, and is therefore one of the most venerable items of liturgy which we possess.

It is a hymn to the risen Christ symbolized by the burning paschal candle, couched in lyrical terms of the utmost beauty, yet filled with a profound doctrinal content. It was certainly not written with the express purpose of instructing the Christian people in the meaning of the paschal mystery; its primary aim is to arouse their gratitude to God and to fill their minds and hearts with joy. While doing this, however, it sets forth the basic truths of our faith with admirable cogency and is thus, in fact, a rich mine of doctrine.

For in offering to the people motives for joy, it reminds them of all the main facts of the history of our salvation, dwelling on several biblical events in which God's love for man and his infinite wisdom

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[1] Klaus Gamber: *Älteste Eucharistiegebete der lateinischen Österliturgie* in the symposium *Paschatis Sollemnia* (Herder-Freiburg 1959).

[2] 'By the holy bishop Augustine, who wrote it and sang it beautifully whilst still a deacon'.

[3] *L'Exultet pascal oeuvre de saint Ambroise. Studi e Testi* 121 (1946) 219–246.

[4] *Ambrosius der Verfasser des österlichen Exultet? Archiv fur Liturgiewissenschaft* II(1952) 61–74.

are clearly discerned. This it does, not by logical exposition, but with a freedom, exuberance and poetic licence which are far more effective than mere logic. Men, after all, are not just discarnate intellects; they have emotions and feelings which, if properly stimulated and directed, can aid them powerfully to grasp truth and to react to it with their wills. Emotions, however, are psycho-physical in nature; they involve bodily reactions which cannot be prolonged without causing weariness, and cannot be frequently aroused without diminishing sensibility. It would be intolerable if the liturgy were often to entail passages charged with highly tensioned emotional content; that is why normally it is somewhat restrained in style. Easter, however, occurs but once a year, and, as the most important of all feasts, as the climax of all celebrations, it affords a suitable opportunity for the exceptional appeal to the emotions which we find in the *Exultet*.

To understand this inspiring song we must reflect a little on the paschal candle which is the formal object of its praise. Primarily the candle symbolizes the risen Christ – and that in a manner far more eloquent than any statue or painting. But it has a secondary meaning too, related to the Old Testament Pasch, a type of the New Testament Pasch now being celebrated. We will look first at this secondary meaning.

When in Egypt the children of Israel were not yet formally that Chosen People which God had promised to raise from the seed of Abraham. They were but the material for it – not, at that time, a people at all but only a disorganized mob of slaves with no leaders, no rights, no laws, no constitution. From their exterior slavery God freed them, thereby foreshadowing what he would do later to free mankind from the interior slavery of sin. Through the darkness of the night the Israelites were led out of Egypt by a column of fire[1] – and it was to the waters of the Red Sea that they were brought. Passing through those waters they attained freedom from their slavery to Pharoah, and by the covenant sealed in sacrificial blood on Mount Sinai they became God's Chosen People. And now, at the Vigil, we see a column of fire – the lighted candle – going forward in the darkness. It, too, leads the people to waters – the waters of the font. All who pass through those waters are freed from their slavery to Satan and, by the New Covenant sealed in sacrificial blood on Mount Calvary, become God's Chosen People of the New Testa-

[1] Exod 13, 22.

ment. It is this parallel which endows the paschal candle with its secondary symbolism, referred to in the *Exultet.*

But primarily the paschal candle refers to Christ and, in the first instance, to Christ as the Light of the World. The lighted candle is treated as if it were a person. It is welcomed by the congregation at the church door; it is given the honours proper to a person of importance (a thurifer walking in front). Obviously the person indicated is Christ, for the deacon thrice proclaims this with his cry of '*Lumen Christi*', which all answer by genuflecting (another sign of honour to a person) and by singing '*Deo gratias*'.

Christ, when on earth, had said 'I am the light of the world; he who follows me can never walk in darkness'.[1] Now those who follow the great candle are not walking in darkness – its light shows them the way. Majestically it is borne ahead, hero of the occasion, shining focal point of every gaze, the sole lightgiver – as was Christ whom it personifies. But soon all, both clergy and faithful, will have derived light from it – as did the apostles and disciples from him who came to enlighten every man born into this world.

The candle is, moreover, a symbol of the risen Christ. For it bears in its body the marks of the wounds, or incisions, interpreted by the prayer 'By his holy and glorious wounds may Christ the Lord guard and keep us'. It is also marked with the Cross, the instrument and sign of Christ's victory; and with Alpha and Omega and the digits of the current year of salvation, to remind us of him who through 'all time and all ages' has 'glory and dominion for all eternity'. Borne into the sanctuary and placed in the centre for all to see, the candle is solemnly incensed (another mark of honour to a person); the people stand in reverent admiration holding their lighted candles in their hands; there is a moment of expectant silence, and then the voice of the deacon is uplifted in eloquent and triumphant praise.

It is no dry thesis that he sets forth, no meticulously worded statement or carefully constructed argument which he expounds. The *Exultet* was not composed to demonstrate a proposition or to establish a conclusion against opponents. It is a lyrical outpouring of praise and thanks, a warm torrent of gladness filled with faith and love, intended to make the people *feel* that Christ is in very deed their glorious and risen Lord who conquered death and hell and opened for them the gates of heaven. And yet, though not written for the purpose of instructing, the *Exultet* is in fact highly instructive.

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[1] Jn 8,12.

'*Exultet jam angelica turba caelorum*', the deacon sings; '*exultent divina mysteria*'. What or who are these 'divine mysteries' drawn into the rejoicing? Some translators have thought that the phrase is in apposition with the *angelica turba*, and is just another way of referring to the angels. Thus Fr. O'Connell and Mr. Finberg, in the missal which they edited,[1] translate the *divina mysteria* as 'the unknown beings who surround God's throne'. This is certainly a possible interpretation. But a more satisfying idea has been put forth by Père Roguet, O.P., of the *Centre Pastorale Liturgique* of Paris.[2] He cites Professor Christine Mohrmann, one of the greatest living authorities on early Church Latin, as proving that in ancient texts the word *mysteria* is often used for *ministeria*.[3] For the *ministeria* – the services – of the liturgy are, in fact, the 'divine mysteries'. *Ministeria*, however, can be taken in the sense of *ministry*, that is, of those who perform the ministries. We have a similar usage in English: if we speak of the 'Ministry of Labour' or the 'Ministry of Pensions' we mean, in fact, the officials who are occupied with those services to the public. So here the *ministeria* are the sacred ministers – to be more exact, the deacons – who are privileged to proclaim on earth the joy of the angels in heaven. The enigmatic phrase *divina mysteria* becomes thus a meaningful parallelism instead of a somewhat pointless duplication. 'Exult, ye heavenly choirs of angels (who carry out the heavenly liturgy); exult, ye deacons (who carry out the earthly liturgy)'. It is all of a piece with the entire prologue, concerned as it is with a very fundamental aspect of liturgy – the 'togetherness' of clergy and people in liturgical prayer. '*Laetetur mater ecclesia . . . magnis populorum vocibus haec aula resultet*' – the deacons are to call the Church and all her people to rejoice together. The members of the community now gathered for the purpose are addressed as '*fratres carissimi*'; the deacon refers to himself as but one of many *intra levitarum numerum*, and asks the *adstantes*, those who stand now in the radiance of the paschal candle, to join him – *una mecum* – in praising God's mercy. So here, at the very opening of the *Exultet*, we are instructed as to the true nature of liturgy, and helped to realize that it is 'the worship of community of Christ's faithful'.[4] It is not only the sacred minister who is the agent in liturgy; clergy and faithful act together.

In the prologue, moreover, the deacon gives the reason for all this

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[1] The Roman Missal. Burns and Oates, London. [2] *Maison Dieu* 49 p. 69.
[3] *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 1952, 274–281. [4] *Mediator Dei* n. 20.

joy. It is '*pro Regis victoria*', announced by the '*tuba salutaris*' – the *tuba* which another liturgical song describes as '*mirum spargens sonum per sepulchra regionum*', the great trumpet of Christ's return in majesty. Already the faithful are to hear, with the ears of their soul, this mighty trumpet due to sound at the end of time; they are to renew in their hearts the hope of that blessed salvation which they will receive to the full when their Lord 'sends out his angels with a loud blast of the trumpet to gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the earth to the other'.[1] Always they are to live in expectation of the *Parousia*.

And now the deacon explicitly draws the people into his song. He greets them and receives their response; he bids them raise their hearts *(Sursum corda)* and is assured that they have done so *(Habemus ad Dominum)*; he proposes to offer thanks to God *(Gratias agamus)* and hears their encouragement *(Dignum et justum est)*. And now he brings before their minds the whole doctrine of our redemption, sketched out in brief phrases. 'Our Lord Jesus Christ repaid Adam's debt for us to his eternal Father, and with his dear blood wiped out the penalty of that ancient sin'.[2] '*Detersit*' – wiped out – it is a genuine removal of sin, not a mere external imputation of justice: the 'dear blood' shed upon the cross is applied to the souls of men through Baptism, the other sacraments and the Mass, to restore and nourish that share in the divine life of which they had been robbed.

This wonderful redemption worked by Christ had been prefigured by numerous events, persons and things through God's intervention in human affairs before the Saviour came. Of these the deacon adduces three which are particularly instructive and helpful to a deep understanding of the mystery now being celebrated: the lamb 'whose blood hallowed the door posts of the faithful', the 'passage out of Egypt . . . dry-shod over the Red Sea', and the purging away of 'the blackness of sin by the light of the fiery pillar'.

How rich in didactic symbolism is that lamb of old! The Lord was to 'pass through the land of Egypt and smite every first-born thing in the land, man and beast alike',[3] and therefore, *per se*, the first-born of the Israelites too. But he deigned to accept the death of that innocent lamb *in place of* the death of the Israelites – they were saved vicariously, as we are by the death of Christ. The blood of

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[1] Mt 24,31.

[2] For the most part the translation quoted is that of Fr. O'Connell and Mr. Finberg, *op. cit.*

[3] Exod 12,12.

this lamb marked out the Israelites as the object of God's special love; and this is just what the blood of Christ does for the souls of the redeemed. That lamb, having been sacrified, was eaten by the family; the true Lamb of God likewise desires that his flesh be eaten by God's family when they share in the Mass, the re-enactment of his sacrificial blood-shedding.

And the passage through the waters of the Red Sea brought death to the Egyptians, but new life to the Israelites. The waters of Baptism are also death-bringing and life-giving; they bring death to the 'old man', the Adam-man, but life to the 'new man', the Christ-man or Christian. 'In our Baptism', wrote St. Paul, 'we have been buried with Christ, died like him, that so, just as Christ was raised up by his Father's power from the dead, we too might live and move in a new kind of existence'.[1] And just as the ancient fiery pillar led the men of old through the darkness of the desert to the waters of the Red Sea, so now the fiery pillar of the paschal candle leads the men of today through the darkness of the church to the waters of Baptism. After the waters, the fiery pillar led God's Chosen People of the Old Testament in their march through the desert towards the promised land. In like manner after Baptism he who is symbolized by the fiery pillar of the candle leads God's Chosen People of the New Testament in their journey through this life towards the promised land of heaven. 'This is the night which, at this hour throughout the world, restores to grace and yokes to holiness those who believe in Christ'. 'What dost thou ask of the Church of God?' asks the priest of the candidate for Baptism. 'Faith', he replies. 'Dost thou believe in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God . . .?' 'I do believe'. 'I baptize thee . . .' It is the great baptismal night, which celebrates not only the rising of Christ, but also the rising of mankind to new life.

Ardently the deacon sings: 'How wonderful the condescension of thy mercy towards us; how far beyond all reckoning thy loving-kindness! To ransom thy slave thou gavest up thy Son!' This contrast between slave and son is deeply moving if we reflect, as St. Paul did, that the slave was at the same time a rebel. 'It is hard enough', he wrote, 'to find anyone who will die on behalf of a just man, although there may be those who will face death for one so deserving. But here, as if God meant to prove how well he loves us, it was while we were still sinners that Christ, in his own appointed time, died for us'.[2]

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[1] Rom 6,4. [2] Rom 5,7.

In extolling such a mystery of love mere ordinary words, mere statements of fact, are utterly inadequate. In her wonder at such a marvel the Church, through the mouth of the deacon, does not hesitate to express herself in pious hyperbole which is positively startling: 'O truly necessary sin of Adam, that Christ's death blotted out; O happy fault that merited such a redeemer!' St. Hugh of Cluny, indeed, was so disconcerted at what seemed to overstep the bounds of strict truth that, moved by the rationalistic outlook on theology current in his day, he felt it prudent to remove the offending words from the *Exultet* scroll used in his monastery! And yet, on reflection, we can see that those startling outbursts of lyricism are fundamentally true.

They do not really mean that Adam's sin was something good in itself; they do but point to the fact that God's wisdom brought out of something intrinsically evil a good which otherwise would never have been attained – the present economy of grace; and, moreover, that this redeemed state of man is even better for him than his state before the fall. The exclamations of wonder are really saying the same thing as St. Paul: 'The grace which came to us was out of all proportion to the fault. If this one man's fault brought death on a whole multitude, all the more lavish was God's grace, shown to a whole multitude, that free gift he made us in the grace brought by one man, Jesus Christ'.[1] All this has come to us through the *mira circa nos pietatis dignatio* of God, by whom the dignity of human nature, being wondrously established, has been even more wondrously restored. The Church reminds us of this in the collect which follows the first Lesson of the Vigil: '*Deus qui mirabiliter creasti hominem, et mirabilius redemisti*', and she returns to this same thought at the Offertory of every Mass when the priest mingles the drop of water with the wine.

Let us now return to the deacon and his song. He praises the night in which such marvellous things happened, and reminds us that marvels have not ceased. '*Hujus igitur sanctificatio noctis fugat scelera, culpas lavat*'. What is this *sanctificatio noctis?* Surely not just 'holiness', not '*sanctitas*'. '*Sanctificatio*' is something done – a *making* holy – in other words, the sacrament of Baptism. For, as the deacon sang earlier, 'This is the night which, at this hour throughout the world, restores to grace and yokes to holiness those who believe in Christ'. This Vigil is ordered towards Baptism as to its practical aim. It is

[1] Rom 5,15.

Baptism which 'banishes crime' and 'washes away sin'; it is Baptism by which 'innocence is restored to the fallen and gladness to the sorrowful'. In what way, though, can it be said that Baptism '*curvat imperia*'? If, with Père Roguet, we take *imperia* to mean *imperatores* (on the analogy of *ministeria* being the equivalent of *ministri*),[1] the phrase makes good sense. It refers to the rulers of the nations who, many times in history, have bowed their heads that the saving waters of Baptism might be poured on them. We think of Constantine, of Clovis, of Charlemagne and many other *imperatores* who, in bowing their heads for Baptism, subjected not only themselves, but sometimes also the peoples whom they ruled, to the reign of Christ.

Baptism used to be called '*photismos*', the 'enlightening', and the lighted candle which the Church offers to God during this night *(incensi hujus sacrificium vespertinum)* is the sign of it. The flame of this candle stands for the light of Christ; it symbolizes also the brightness of faith and the warmth of love which, like this flame, are not diminished but rather are increased by being shared. Before, this flame shone alone in the darkness of the church; now it has been passed on to all the clergy and people, with the result that the church is ablaze with light. Yet the original flame is as bright as ever. *Licet sit divisus in partes, mutuati tamen luminis detrimenta non novit.* So it should be, too, with the faith and love of Christians enlightened by Christ. Their candles now shine with the flame received this night from the Christ-candle; their souls live with the life received from Christ in Baptism, the *sanctificatio hujus noctis*. Their Christ-light, their Christ-life, they must now spread to others; the more they can share it with others, the more brightly will burn their own flame.

Anyone who is baptized at this Vigil receives a candle lit from the paschal flame; even if baptized at another time he is given a lighted candle at the end of the ceremony,[2] and bidden to imitate the Wise Virgins whose lamps were burning when the Bridegroom arrived. That means that he is to preserve in faith and love until he meets, at the *Parousia*, his glorified and victorious Lord. The community now celebrating the Vigil is likewise waiting for Christ's return. The deacon prays that the candle may continue to shed its light upon them all *(ad noctis hujus caliginem destruendam indeficiens perseveret)* –

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[1] *Maison Dieu* 49, p. 70.

[2] Here we have the warrant for the custom, revived from former times and fortunately becoming more common, of putting the paschal candle into the baptistery after it has been extinguished on Ascension Day. It is lit for all Baptisms, and is used as the source from which to light the candle given to the baptized persons.

indeed, that Christ himself may come in person at the end of the Vigil to find them gathered in its radiance, awaiting his coming. 'May the morning star find its flame alight – that Morning Star which knows no setting, which came back from limbo and shed its clear light upon mankind'. Thus he gives expression to the Church's ceaseless eschatological hope – her longing for the second coming of her Bridegroom who will lead her into the eternal nuptials. The deacon knows – the whole community knows – that Christ will certainly come at the end of this Vigil. If he does not appear visibly in the clouds of heaven, at least he will come sacramentally in the Eucharist wherewith the Vigil is concluded. The Mass of the Resurrection is, at it were, a sacramental rehearsal of the *Parousia.*

And so, to bring his song to its conclusion, the deacon prays for Holy Church – for Pope and bishop, for clergy and people now sharing with himself in the joy of the paschal liturgy. '*Precamur te Domine . . . omnenque clerum et devotissimum populum . . . in his paschalibus gaudiis . . .*' The symphony of joy fittingly ends on a concord – that concord, that togetherness of clergy and people characteristic of true liturgy, the 'worship which the community of Christ's faithful pays to its Founder, and through him to the eternal Father'.