

March 21, 2021 - Pastoral Letter

Dear Saints in Christ Jesus,

Easter or Resurrection Sunday is the day Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus the Christ from the dead. Even before theologians explained the death of Jesus in terms of various atonement theories, the early church saw his resurrection as the central witness to a new act of God in history and the victory of God in vindicating Jesus as the Messiah. This event marks the central faith confession of the early church and was the focal point for Christian worship, observed on the first day of each week since the first century (Acts 20:7; Sunday was officially proclaimed the day of Christian worship in AD 321). Easter as an annual celebration of the Resurrection that lies at the center of a liturgical year has been observed at least since the fourth century. Even in churches that traditionally do not observe the other historic seasons of the church year, Easter has occupied a central place as the high point of Christian worship.

Prior to the fourth century, Christians observed **Pascha**, Christian Passover, in the Spring of the year. Adapted from Jewish Passover, Pascha was a festival of redemption and commemorated both the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as the vehicle for God's grace. While historical records are not clear, it is likely that early Jewish Christians observed both Passover (Pesach) and Pascha. However, many Gentile converts were hesitant to adopt the Jewish festival, especially since the Jerusalem Council had decided that Gentile converts to Christianity did not have to observe Jewish religious practices (Acts 15). Gradually by the fourth century, with an increasing emphasis on Holy Week and Good Friday, Easter moved into a distinctively Christian celebration of the Resurrection, with Good Friday commemorating Jesus' crucifixion and death.

Easter, like Passover, is a **movable feast**. That is, the date of Easter (and Passover) is not fixed but is determined by a system based on a lunar calendar adapted from a formula decided by the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. In this system, Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the Spring equinox (the day when the sun's ecliptic or apparent path in the sky crosses the equator, thus making days and nights of equal length). This usually occurs on March 21, which means the date of Easter can range between March 22 and April 25 depending on the lunar

cycle. Since Jewish Passover is calculated differently, the dates for Passover and Easter do not correspond, although often the first Day of Passover falls during Holy Week. Much of the calendar of the Church year is determined by the date of Easter.

In the Christian church year, the two major cycles of seasons, Christmas and Easter, are far more than a single day of observance. Like Christmas, Easter itself is a period of time rather than just a day. It is actually a seven-week season of the church year called **Eastertide**, the **Great Fifty Days** that begins at sundown the evening before Easter Sunday (the Easter Vigil) and lasts for six more Sundays until Pentecost Sunday. These seven Sundays are called the **Sundays of Easter**, climaxing on the seventh Sunday, the Sunday before Pentecost Sunday. **Ascension Day** (the fortieth day after Easter, always on a Thursday) marks not only the ascension of Jesus into heaven, but his exaltation from servanthood to Ruler and Lord as the fitting climax of the Resurrection season.

These special days and seasons are a means to shape sacred time, a structure in which to define what it means to be Christian and to call God's people to reverent and faithful response to God. Easter encompasses a time of preparation (Lent; Advent for Christmas) as well as a following period of reflection on its significance for the life of God's people (Pentecost; Epiphany for Christmas). However, while Epiphany following Christmas focuses on the mission of God's people to the world, the Pentecost season following Easter focuses on the church as the witness to the resurrection. In anticipation of this emphasis at Pentecost, the Scripture readings during the Sundays of Easter are different, with readings from the Acts of the Apostles replacing readings from the Old Testament. This emphasizes that the church, as empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, is the best witness to the resurrection and the work of God in the world in Jesus the Christ.

Blessings to all of you during this Easter celebration,
Pastor Lucero