



Easter Is in the Air

by Jonathan Aitken

APRIL IS THE MONTH OF EASTER, by far the most important, ancient, and authentic festival in the calendar of Christendom. But the primacy of Easter is a long way from being accepted, let alone observed, in our secular age, which gives rather higher priority to once-religious activities such as Christmas giving, St. Valentine's Day betrothing, Lent dieting, Advent carol singing, or personal rejoicing in Epiphany moments. So as Easter 2007 approaches, it is interesting to look back on the festival's historical and spiritual roots, linking this retrospective exercise with a look forward to how we should meaningfully celebrate Easter in modern times.

The early Christians understood exactly what Easter (although not given that name until about the sixth century) was all about. It was the joyful commemoration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without a belief in that event there was no Christian faith, as St. Paul bluntly emphasized in his letter to the Corinthians: "If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile" (I Cor 15:17). When it came to celebrating Jesus' rise from the tomb, it was natural for the early Christians to associate the sacrifice of the true Lamb of God and his Resurrection with the traditional Jewish Passover observances. This was because Jesus' final days coincided with the Passover and his death fell upon the day of the Passover feast.

Combining the ancient Israelite commemoration of the Passover with the new idea of the Messiah as the sacrificial lamb seemed a good reason for celebrating the old and new feasts at the same time. This close as-

sociation between the risen Christ and the Jewish Passover or *Pesach* (the Hebrew word) is linguistically preserved to this day in several tongues such as the French *Pâques* and the Latin *Paschalia*.

In about 700 A.D., however, the Germans, or to be precise the early Teutonic tribes of central Europe who were embracing Christianity, started to connect the celebrations of the Resurrection with the celebrations of spring. Many of the pagan rites in honor of *Ostara*, goddess of spring, crept into the religious rituals of Christian commemoration. From these combined traditions came the German word *Oster* and our English word Easter.

Eggs, bunnies, and Easter bonnets also derive from several different non-Christian traditions celebrating spring. The ancient Egyptians gave us the custom of coloring and eating eggs, which was part of their fertility rites at the end of winter. Easter rabbits, originally hares, were also fertility symbols in the spring festivities of ancient Egypt and Persia. Hares and eggs became rabbits and eggs in countries where hares were unusual. Religious Easters in Europe seem to have accidentally absorbed these pagan symbols of the ancient world along with some agreeable if expensive customs.

For example, the idea of Easter bonnets or Easter outfits came from the Franco-German superstition that it was unlucky for a woman not to wear some new headgear or article of clothing on Easter Sunday. Easter brides and weddings had their popular origins in fertility superstitions that spring was a propitious time for starting the process of childbearing. All this

was moving a long way from the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as the focus of Easter, but it is as well to acknowledge that paganism, vernalism, and commercialism have played a major part in the traditions of Easter as we know them today.

One of the more bewildering aspects of Easter is the moveability of its date. The confusion originated in a squabble between the early Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. The Jews, mindful of the linkage between Christ's death and the Passover, insisted that the Resurrection must be commemorated on Passover feast day or *Pesach*, regardless of the day of the week on which it fell. Gentile Christians insisted that the holy day must be observed on Sunday, since it was on the first day of the week that Jesus rose from the tomb.

It took the Emperor Constantine to sort out this rift between the different sides of the Church. He convened the Council of Nicaea, which ruled in 325 A.D. that Easter should be observed, as it is now, on the first Sunday after the full moon following the spring equinox. Despite further confusion due to arguments about lunar astronomy, the merits of the Julian or Gregorian calendars, and huge commercial pressure to find a fixed date for Easter once and for all, the Nicaean rules still apply. This is why Easter remains a moveable feast.

THERE ARE SOME SIGNS in our present age that the Christians of the 21st century world are becoming more focused on the original meaning and purpose of Easter. Many churches of all denominations now include in their Easter liturgies the words "Christ is risen" answered by "He is risen indeed. Alleluia!" This was a universally familiar part of the Russian Orthodox Easter liturgy until banned by Lenin soon after the revolution of 1917. Like most bans it was counterproductive and the prohibited words spread across the Christian world like wildfire.

In the same era, liturgical theologians such as Odo Casel in his classic *The Mystery of Christian Worship* (1932) began to emphasize the sacramental element of Easter as the accomplishment of the mystery of God's saving purpose. This emphasis on the paschal mystery of human redemption through Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Easter message both ancient and modern. "Who is to condemn?" wrote Paul in Romans 8:34. "It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us."

If we are going to be worthy of such intercessions, God surely expects that our Easter spiritual commit-

ments should exceed our non-spiritual commitments to Easter eggs, rabbits, and vacations. But how should we make such commitments? Every individual believer will have his own personal answer to that question, but perhaps it should be an answer in harmony with

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the Easter-tide spirit of dying and rising with Christ. In many contemporary liturgies there is now renewed attention on the interconnection of the three days known as the *Triduum*, the period between sunset on Thursday of Holy Week to dawn on Easter Day, when participants pass from darkness to light aided by the kindling of a new fire or the lighting of a new paschal candle.

At my local parish church in London, St. Matthew's Westminster, we have enthusiastically embraced these *Triduum* rituals in recent years. They are brought to a climax by a late night vigil in total darkness, eventually broken by a dawn bonfire and a candle-lit service around it as the first streaks of light herald the dawn on Easter Sunday. It was too much of a novelty for one elderly resident of the parish whose apartment overlooks the church. At around 5 A.M. last Easter she thought she had spotted the sinister shadows of an arson gang fumbling around with matches, firewood, and candles. She dialed the emergency services and summoned the fire brigade. As our first mass of Easter was unexpectedly interrupted by the arrival of two or three wagonloads of fire fighters, explanations were needed. "Well, that's a new one on me," said the puzzled fire chief, "starting Easter Sunday with a bonfire."

Yet it makes a lot more spiritual sense than bonnets, bunnies, and chocolate eggs. To burn away the old rubbish and to fire up with the energy of a renewed commitment to Jesus Christ is as good a way as any of starting the year afresh with an Easter Resurrection in one's own life. ❧

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