

## A CATHOLIC PASSOVER CELEBRATION

### **Introduction:**

The Passover Seder is a ritual feast. It is fundamentally a religious service set around a dinner table where the participants pray, eat, sing, drink wine and recall the saving works of God.

### **Setting the Seder Table:**

The finest tableware is used. Four glasses of wine/fruit juice will be poured for each participant. Three large pieces of unleavened bread (matzah) are placed on a special plate near the leader. Another large, beautiful plate, called the seder plate, is also placed near the leader. This seder plate contains the following five items:

1. A lamb shank bone.
2. A hard-boiled egg.
3. A bitter herb – horseradish, parsley, lettuce.
4. Haroset – a sweet salad of apples, nuts, wine and cinnamon.
5. A green herb – parsley or celery.

The following are also placed on/at the seder table: dishes of salt water, dishes of haroset, dishes of horseradish, two or more candles, the cup of Elijah, and an extra (empty) place setting. Available near the seder table: a basin, water jug and towel and a wet face cloth and towels for each participant.

### **Before the beginning of the Seder**

**Leader:** (*Leader wears an alb*) Welcome to our Passover seder. During the seder we will celebrate the exodus from Egypt, God's redemptive liberation of Israel from slavery and spiritual misery. In order to prepare ourselves let us be silent.

*A time of silence*

**Mother figure:** (*As she lights the candles*) Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us by your commandments and commanded us to kindle the lights of the Passover holiday. I pray that the brightness of these lights may inspire us and bring spiritual joy and promise to all of us. Amen.

**Participants:** (Dressed elegantly and modestly) Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who has brought us life and sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season of joy.

**Leader:** Tonight we celebrate the Passover, the feast of freedom and redemption. On the seder plate beside me we have five meaningful items. The first of these is a lamb shank bone.

**A Participant:** What is the significance of the lamb shank bone?

**Leader:** It reminds us of the lamb offered at the Temple in Jerusalem during the Passover celebration two thousand years ago. It also recalls that God passed over the houses of the Hebrew people that were marked with the blood of the lamb.

Here on the seder plate we also have an egg.

**A Participant:** What is the significance of the egg?

**Leader:** The egg reminds us of the roasted egg that was offered in the Temple of Jerusalem during the feast of Passover. Its roundness reminds us of the cycle of renewal and rebirth.

Near the egg we have bitter herbs.

**A Participant:** What is the significance of the bitter herbs?

**Leader:** They remind us of the bitterness and hardship of slavery.

Beside the bitter herbs we have Haroset - a sweet salad of apples, nuts, wine and cinnamon.

**A Participant:** What is the significance of the Haroset?

**Leader:** The Haroset reminds us of the mortar used by the slave-labour of the Hebrews in Egypt.

Finally, we have a green herb.

**A Participant:** What is the significance of the green herb?

**Leader:** The green herb, parsley or celery, is a reminder of springtime – the time of Passover. It is also a sign of thanksgiving to God for creation and for our food. There are other symbols on the table. One of them is salt water.

**A Participant:** What is the significance of the salt water?

**Leader:** It symbolises the harshness of slavery. Parsley/celery is dipped in it.

**A Participant:** What is the significance of the second plate with the three pieces of unleavened bread (matzah)?

**Leader:** It represents, among other things, the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

**A Participant:** What is the significance of the special wine goblet on the table?

**Leader:** This special goblet is called Elijah's cup. The prophet Elijah is said to return at the coming of the messiah. Therefore 'Elijah's cup' is a symbol of hope in the coming of the kingdom of God into our world.

**A Participant:** Why is there an empty place set at the table?

**Leader:** That extra place symbolises those who are not yet free, reminding us that until all can celebrate freedom, our own freedom is incomplete.

**A Participant:** How many glasses of wine/grape juice are we to drink at the Passover seder?

**Leader:** Four glasses of red wine/grape juice are required to be drunk at the seder. The Four Cups represent the four expressions of deliverance promised by God in Exodus 6:5-7: "I will bring out," "I will deliver," "I will redeem," and "I will take."

*Pause for silence.*

**Leader:** We are now going to follow the ritual of the Passover Seder. There are fourteen (14) sections to the ritual.

## THE PASSOVER SEDER

### 1. The Blessing of Wine.

*The first cup of wine is filled, lifted up, and the leader pronounces the traditional blessing.*

**Leader:** Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine.

**All Participants:** Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, you have preserved us and sustained us to this hour.

*All drink from the first cup of wine.*

### 2. Washing of the Hands.

*A jug of water, a bowl and a towel are brought to the leader who washes his hands in silence.*

### 3. Eating a Green Herb.

*Everyone dips a green herb into some salt water and the leader recites the blessing.*

**Leader:** Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, creator of the fruit of the earth.

*All eat the green herb.*

### 4. Breaking the Middle Matzah.

*The leader uncovers the three matzot and breaks the middle one in two. One half is left on the plate. The other half, the afikomen, is wrapped in a cloth and hidden.*

### 5. The Passover Story.

*Having uncovered the plate that contains the three ritual matzot, the leader lifts it up and recites in a loud voice:*

**Leader:** This is the bread of affliction, which Israel ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are in want come and celebrate the Passover with us. It is our hope that next year we will be free, that next year humanity will be free from all oppression.

*The youngest person present now asks the ritual questions which introduce the story of the Exodus, thus giving us the meaning of the celebration.*

**Youngest present:**

- On all other nights we eat leavened or unleavened bread. Why on this night only matzah?

- On all other nights we eat all kinds of herbs. Why on this night bitter herbs only?
- On all other nights we do not dip herbs at all. Why on this night do we dip them twice – in salt water and haroset?
- On all other nights we eat either sitting or reclining. Why on this night do we recline?

*(The leader uncovers the matzot.)*

**Leader:** These are excellent questions. The people of Israel were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought them forth from there with his mighty hand and his outstretched arm.

- The people had no time to bake their bread. They could not wait for the yeast to rise. So, as they hurried out of Egypt, they let the sun shine down on the dough. This baked it into flat unleavened bread called matzah.
- We eat only bitter herbs this night because our ancestors were slaves in Egypt and were bitterly oppressed by the Egyptians.
- We dip herbs twice tonight – into the bitter salt water and into the sweet haroset. Our ancestors were able to withstand the bitterness of slavery because it was sweetened by the hope of freedom.
- In biblical times reclining at a table was a sign of a free person as opposed to a slave. We recline at table tonight to remember that our ancestors were freed on this night.

*(There now follows a hymn of praise which can be either chanted or recited)*

**Leader:** What wonderful things the Lord has done for us. If he had brought us out from Egypt without chastising the Egyptians.

**All Participants:** That would have been sufficient for us.

**Leader:** If he had divided the Sea of Reeds without swallowing up our enemies.

**All Participants:** That would have been sufficient for us.

**Leader:** If he had plunged our enemies into the sea and had not provided for our needs in the desert for forty years.

**All Participants:** That would have been sufficient for us.

**Leader:** If he had provided for our needs for forty years but had not fed us with manna.

**All Participants:** That would have been sufficient for us.

**Leader:** If he had fed us with manna and had not given us the Sabbath.

**All Participants:** That would have been sufficient for us.

**Leader:** If he had brought us to Mount Sinai and had not given us the Torah.

**All Participants:** That would have been sufficient for us.

**Leader:** If he had given us the Torah and had not brought us to the land of Israel.

**All Participants:** That would have been sufficient for us.

**Leader:** How much greater then is our debt for the manifold favours which the All-Powerful has conferred on us?

**All Participants:** He has brought us out of Egypt/executed judgement on the Egyptians and their gods/slew their first-born/gave us their wealth/divided the sea for us/plunged our oppressors in its waters/looked after us in the desert for forty years/gave us manna to eat/gave us the Sabbath/brought us to Mount Sinai/gave us the Torah/brought us into the land of Israel/and built the Temple for us for the remission of our sins.

*(There now follows the explanation of the meaning of the three symbols: The Passover lamb, the unleavened bread, and the bitter herbs.)*

**A Participant:** The Passover lamb which our forefathers ate according to custom, during the era of the Temple, why was this so?

*(The leader holds up the lamb shank bone)*

**Leader:** It reminds us of the angel of death passing over the houses of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, which were marked with the blood of a lamb.

**A Participant:** Why are we eating matzah?

*(The leader holds up the matzah)*

**Leader:** Because the dough had no time to rise when the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He, made known their deliverance and worked it out as it is written: *They baked cakes with the dough which they had brought from Egypt, unleavened because the dough was not leavened; they had been driven out of Egypt, with no time for dallying, and had not provided themselves with food for the journey* (Exodus 12:39).

**A Participant:** Why are we eating bitter herbs?

*(The leader holds up the bitter herbs)*

**Leader:** Because the Egyptians made bitter the lives of our forefathers in Egypt, as it is written: *The Egyptians forced the sons of Israel into slavery, and made their lives unbearable with hard labour, work with clay and with brick, all kinds of work in the fields; they forced on them every kind of labour* (Exodus 1:13-14).

*(The cups/glasses are filled for the second time)*

**Participants:** Not only were our ancestors redeemed by God from slavery; all of us also are now redeemed in spirit. Therefore, we raise our cups and drink the Cup of Memory – the memory of our salvation.

*(All raise their cups but do not drink yet)*

**Leader:** Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine.

*(All drink from the second cup of wine/fruit juice)*

## 6. Washing of the Hands

(A wet cloth and towel are brought to the leader)

**Leader:** We are ready to enjoy the Passover meal. Before we eat let us wash our hands and say together:

**Participants:** Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, you have sanctified us through the commandments, and you have commanded us to wash our hands.

(Wet cloths and towels are passed around and all wash their hands)

IT IS HERE THAT THE 'MANDATUM' WOULD HAVE TAKEN PLACE i.e. JESUS WASHING THE FEET OF THE APOSTLES.

**Reader:** The Lord be with you.

**Participants:** And with your spirit.

**Reader:** A reading from the holy Gospel according to John.

**Participants:** Glory to you, O Lord.

**Reader:** It was before the festival of the Passover, and Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father. He had always loved those who were his in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was.

They were at supper, and the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot son of Simon, to betray him. Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God, and he got up from table, removed his outer garment and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing. (John 13:1-5)

The Gospel of the Lord.

**Participants:** Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

## 7. Blessing over the Matzah.

(Every participant takes a piece of the top matzah)

**Leader:** Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.

**Participants:** Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who sanctified us with your commandments and who commanded us to eat the matzah.

(Each participant eats a piece of matzah)

## 8. Eating the Bitter Herb.

(Everyone dips the bitter herbs in haroset)

**Participants:** Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who made us holy with your commandments and who commanded us to eat the bitter herbs.

(All eat the bitter herbs)

### **9. Eating the Bitter Herb and the Matzah Together (The 'Hillel Sandwich').**

(The bottom matzah is broken, and each participant takes two pieces with some bitter herbs in between forming the 'Hillel Sandwich').

AT THIS MOMENT JESUS WOULD HAVE ANNOUNCED THE BETRAYAL (See John 13:21-30).

**Leader:** The Jewish scholar Hillel, did the following during the days of the Temple. He joined matzah and bitter herbs together in a sandwich in order to observe the biblical command: *They are to eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs* (Numbers 9:11).

(All eat the 'Hillel Sandwich')

HERE THE INSTITUTION OF THE EUCHARIST COULD HAVE TAKEN PLACE (See Luke 22:19-20)

### **10.The Passover Meal**

(Dinner is served. Jews ate roast lamb at the Passover Meal until the year 70AD when the Temple was destroyed. Nowadays Jews eat fish, roast chicken, a casserole, a stew etc. If Christians eat lamb at the Passover, it is in memory of the Last Supper and to honour Jesus – the Lamb of God.)

### **11.The Afikomen**

(Half of the middle matzah, the Afikomen, was hidden at number 4 in the celebration. After the meal the children search for the Afikomen. Songs may be sung at this time).

### **12. The Blessing after the Passover Meal.**

**Leader:** Praised is he of whose bounty we have all received and through whose goodness we live. May he be praised and may his name be praised. Praised be you, O Eternal our God, Ruler of the universe, you nourish the whole world through your goodness. By your grace and loving kindness you give food to every creature. May we never be in want of food forever, for the sake of your great name. Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, who provides food for all.

**Participants:** We thank you, Lord our God, for the goodly land which you have given to our ancestors, and for bringing us out from the land of Egypt and redeeming us from the house of bondage. We thank you for the Torah which you have taught us, and for the life of grace and loving kindness which you



have graciously bestowed upon us, and for the food we eat with which you nourish and sustain us at all times.

(The cups/glasses are filled for the third time but not drunk yet)

**Participants:** The biblical text reminds us of God's redemption: *I will release you from slavery to them, and with my arm outstretched and my strokes of power I will deliver you* (Exodus 6:6).

**Leader:** Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine.

(All drink from the third cup of wine – the Cup of Redemption)

IT IS NOW THAT JESUS DECLARED: 'THIS CUP IS THE NEW COVENANT IN MY BLOOD WHICH WILL BE Poured OUT FOR YOU.' (Luke 22:20)

(The door is opened for the ceremony of receiving Elijah the prophet. The cup of Elijah is filled and set in the middle of the table. After a few moments of silence, the community welcomes the expected messenger of peace.)

**Leader:** At this moment we welcome Elijah the prophet. He brings a message of redemption and of delivery from oppression.

**Participants:** Now we remember all those who suffer persecution because of their religious and spiritual beliefs. Their witness under oppression is an inspiration to people of faith.

### 13. Praying of the Psalms

(It is the custom to recite the 'Hallel' or psalms of praise [113-118] here. Psalm 114 is offered here to be chanted.)

**All Participants:**

When Israel came out of Egypt,  
the House of Jacob from a foreign nation,  
Judah became his sanctuary  
and Israel his domain.

The sea fled at the sight,  
the Jordan stopped flowing,  
the mountains skipped like rams,  
and like lambs, the hills.

Sea, what makes you run away?  
Jordan, why stop flowing?  
Why skip like rams, you mountains,  
why like lambs, you hills?

Quake, earth, at the coming of your Master,  
at the coming of the God of Jacob,  
who turns rock into pool  
flint into fountain.

#### 14. Conclusion of the Seder

*(The cups/glasses are filled for the fourth and final time. This final cup is not drunk yet. All lift their cups and recite the following:)*

**Participants:** As we drink this fourth cup of wine, the cup of Hope and Freedom, it reminds us of freedom – its hopes, struggles and dreams for so many enslaved nations and individuals.

**Leader:** Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine.

*(All drink from the fourth cup of wine)*

**Leader:** Our Passover seder now concludes with a blessing.

*May the God of all consolation order your days in his peace and grant you the gifts of his blessing.*

**P:** Amen.

*May he free you always from every distress and confirm your hearts in his love.*

**P:** Amen.

*So that on this life's journey you may be effective in good works, rich in the gifts of hope, faith and charity, and may come happily to eternal life.*

**P:** Amen.

*And may the blessing of almighty God, the Father, and the Son, + and the Holy Spirit, come down on you and remain with you for ever.*

**P:** Amen.

**Leader:** Go, the seder is over.

**Participants:** Thanks be to God.