‘WE ARE AN EASTER PEOPLE AND ALLELUIA IS OUR SONG!’
(St Augustine -354-430AD)

Some Thoughts for Catechists

Although at every celebration of the Eucharist we again celebrate the day of the Lord’s Resurrection; celebrating the Last Supper, Christ’s Passion and Death and his Resurrection – the Paschal Mystery; this, Easter, is the Paschal season – which we greet with the Alleluias that we have not uttered since Ash Wednesday.

(http://cruzblanca.org)

The word ‘Paschal’ is derived from the Aramaic form of the Hebrew word ‘pesach’, meaning ‘passover’, for in our celebration we celebrate Christ’s Passover from death to resurrection and ascension into heaven. In many languages the word for the feast echoes its origin; Italian – Pasqua; Spanish – Pascua; French – Pacques; Greek – Pascha.

In English, however, as well as in German, the name for the feast has a pagan origin. According to the eighth-century theologian the Venerable Bede (who came up with the dating system of AD and BC), Easter is named for Eostre, an Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring. She is associated with the egg and with the hare, both symbols of procreation that have been incorporated into the season in the form of Easter eggs and the Easter bunny who brings them.

Though the New Testament contains no reference to an annual feast celebrating the Resurrection, the practice was well-established by the second century. Early churchmen were divided on whether to hold a feast on 14 Nisan (the date of the Jewish Pesach (Passover) or on the following Sunday; disputes continued until the Council of Nicæa in 325 decided it must fall on a Sunday. Eventually the date was formulated as "the first Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the vernal equinox." This can range between March 22 and April 25.

All that we have been doing during Lent, in fact, all we have been doing since the first moment of Advent has been leading us to the Easter moment. This, the greatest moment in the Church’s year, is celebrated in the Easter Triduum, meaning simply ‘the three days’, beginning with the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on the evening of Holy Thursday and ending with evening prayer on Easter Sunday. Lent officially ends on Holy Thursday and we enter into Christ’s Passion, Death and Resurrection.

As we come to the end of Lent we have on Passion (Palm) Sunday a preparation for the Triduum in that, having re-enacted the welcome Jesus received on entering Jerusalem, we listen to St Matthew’s telling of his Passion, from the Last Supper to his burial in the tomb.
How we help our children and young people to enter into this celebration? This day is a perfect opportunity for our Confirmation candidates to be involved in the Liturgy of the Word – perhaps reading the Passion and enacting it through mime. For younger children maybe a simplified version of the Passion could be used in the Liturgy of the Word for Children. Certainly you will have more time to do this today, while the adult congregation listens to the Passion.

This extended time will also give you the opportunity to talk a little about the Triduum. Many of our children may not experience any of the three celebrations; the celebrations on Holy Thursday and Holy Saturday happen in the evening, and often children attend only the Stations of the Cross for children on Good Friday morning. How can we help them to experience something of these moments? Many of the adults in our parishes do not attend either the evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper or the Easter Vigil, although the Celebration of the Lord’s Passion on Good Friday is traditionally well attended. Any encouragement we can give to develop people’s experience of the Triduum is worthwhile.

If our experience of Good Friday is that children attend only the Stations of the Cross, then maybe we could introduce a simple veneration of the Cross at that celebration. We use a bare cross rather than a crucifix, for it is the cross that we focus on here, the ‘Tree’ on which Jesus died, perhaps seen as the tree of life, the link between heaven and earth. We see the cross as the instrument of our redemption, the tree on which the evil one was defeated. The cross is brought to the sanctuary, and, one by one, the whole community come forward to venerate, touching the cross with their forehead or their lips.

This ritual originated in Jerusalem and was part of the Good Friday liturgy there in the fourth century. A pilgrim to Jerusalem, a woman called Egeria described it thus:

‘the gilded silver casket containing the wood of the cross is brought in and opened. Both the wood of the cross and the inscription are taken out and placed on the table. ...The bishop, remaining seated, grips the ends of the sacred wood with his hands, while the deacons... keep watch over it... All the people pass through one by one; all of them bow down, touching the cross and the inscription, first with their foreheads, then with their eyes; and, after kissing the cross they move on.’ (Eye-witness account of Egeria, Pilgrim to Jerusalem – quoted by Gabe Huck in The Three Days, publ. Chicago Liturgy Training Publications 1992)

This is a moment of great faith for us. The action of bowing and kissing the cross is one of submission, of humility, when we acknowledge the greatness of what God has done for us.

Perhaps parents could be encouraged to bring children to at least the beginning of the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night so that they can see the Easter fire and the lighting of the Paschal candle. This generally happens outside the Church so that they could leave, if necessary, without causing any disruption. As all gather round the fire the celebrant takes the Paschal Candle, and with a stylus cuts a cross into the wax. The he traces the Greek letters ‘Alpha’ (the beginning) and Omega (the end) above and below the cross, with the numerals of the current year between the arms of the cross, proclaiming ‘Christ
yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega...’ The candle is lit from the fire.

For most of our children their celebration of Easter is at Mass on Easter Sunday morning rather than the Vigil. If you do not have an Easter Garden, maybe this year might be the time to make one. The following instructions might help. The ideas could be enlarged for a bigger garden in the Church or used as they are for something to be made at home.

Easter Garden
You need:
* A shallow tray or dish
* Garden soil or potting compost
* Moss, cut grass or sand
* Dried twigs
* Sewing thread
* Small pot
* Flat stone large enough to cover the mouth of the pot
* Egg cups (or other small containers)
* Small flowers
* Gravel

To Make:
1. Fill the tray with soil or potting compost.
2. Arrange it to make a hill on one side of the tray.
3. Cover the soil with moss, grass or sand.
4. Make three crosses with dried twigs tied together with sewing thread and place on the hilltop.
5. Press the small pot into the hillside to make a cave like the garden tomb. Place the stone over the mouth of the tomb.
6. Press egg-cups full of water into the soil around the garden and fill with flowers.
7. Make a path coming from the tomb with gravel, to show how the disciples ran to the tomb on Easter morning.
8. Early on Easter morning, move back the stone from the tomb – showing that it is empty.

Taken from www.justforkidsmagazine.com

In many parishes the children (sadly, often not the adults too!) will receive small chocolate eggs at the end of Mass. Perhaps it is useful to look at the origin of some Easter customs so that we are not focused totally on just ending the fast from chocolates and sweets that many have committed themselves to during Lent.
The use of painted and decorated Easter eggs was first recorded in the 13th century. The church prohibited the eating of eggs during Holy Week, but chickens continued to lay eggs during that week, and the notion of specially identifying those as “Holy Week” eggs brought about their decoration. The egg itself became a symbol of the Resurrection. Just as Jesus rose from the tomb, the egg symbolizes new life emerging from the eggshell. In the Orthodox tradition, eggs are painted red to symbolize the blood Jesus shed on the cross.

**Easter Bunny**

The Easter bunny has its origins in pre-Christian fertility lore. Hares and rabbits served as symbols of abundant new life in the spring season. It really is a hare – not a rabbit – that symbolises Easter. From antiquity hares have been a symbol for the moon, and the first full moon after the vernal equinox determines the date for Easter. Hares are born with their eyes open, while rabbits are born blind. The hare was thought never to blink or close its eyes, and it is a nocturnal creature, like the moon. The hare also carries its young a month before giving birth – like the changing moon erupting into fullness monthly.

According to one legend, the Easter bunny was originally a large, handsome bird belonging to the goddess Eostre. One day she magically changed her pet bird into a hare. Because the Easter bunny is still a bird at heart, he continues to build a straw nest and fill it with eggs.

It is important also to recognise and celebrate the fact that Easter is a season, not just one week. Our ‘Alleluia’ needs to resound through the whole season, which lasts fifty days, from Easter Sunday to Pentecost (meaning ‘fiftieth’). Let’s ensure that we continue to celebrate the joy of the Resurrection for the whole season!