



# THE MEANING OF EASTER

John Pepino, Ph.D.  
Professor of Church History  
Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary

**E**aster is that “most blessed day of ours!” North African Bishop Commodian exclaimed in the 240s AD. What light do the Fathers of the Church shed on the meaning of this feast?

St. Bede, writing in eighth-century England, reports that “Easter” is derived from the Anglo-Saxon name for April, *Eostur-monath*, named after their goddess Eostre, the patroness of the dawn or of the spring. The Latin term *Pascha* (from which comes the term paschal candle), taken over unchanged from the Greek Πάσχα, derives from the Hebrew word for the Passover, *Pasah*. The meaning of these words is worth pondering in our preparation for Easter.

First, *Easter*: Bede indicates that the retention of the pagan name brought with it no connotation of the old religion; now Christians, Englishmen “call the joy of a new solemnity (Easter) by the word they were used to in the old religion” (*On the Reckoning of Time* 15). There is no more paganism left here than in the names of weekdays or months (Thursday for Thor, January for Janus, etc.). For Bede, the predominant meaning of Easter is joy.

*Pascha* conveys a number of meanings, all connected to Easter. The early Christian writers of Alexandria, Egypt, focused on the Resurrection of Our Lord as a fulfillment of the Passover of the Jewish people through the Red Sea and ultimately into the Holy Land. Our joy is in passing from death to life through Baptism as well as in partaking of the feast of the slain Passover Lamb in

Holy Communion, as we “pass over from the things of this life to God” (as third-century writer Origen wrote in *Against Celsus* 22). The dominant note here is of movement: from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, and from the world as it is now to paradise restored after the Resurrection of the Dead. The Old Testament readings of the Vigil Mass, particularly the twelve lessons in the traditional Easter Vigil, recall and develop this theme.



Farther East, Christian writers underscored the similarity between the word *Pascha* and the Greek word *paschein* πάσχειν, meaning “to suffer”, which is, it seems, related to the English (through Latin) term “Passion”. The dominant note here is that Our Lord suffered death as the Paschal Lamb. St. Paul had written (1 Cor 5:7): “Christ

our pasch is sacrificed . . .”, and in a lengthy sermon for Easter, Melito, Bishop of Sardis (present-day eastern Turkey), in the 180s AD, said: “What is the Pascha? . . . from ‘suffer’ comes ‘suffering’. Therefore, learn who is the suffering one” (*On Pascha* 46).

Later on, Western Fathers brought together the two strains of Passover and Passion. Most representative of this is St. Augustine, who said, “It is with His Passion that the Lord has ‘passed’ from death to life and has opened the way to His Resurrection for us who believe, since we, too, pass from death to life” (*Exposition on Psalm 120*, 6). Passion, Passover, and Joy: Easter themes. ✝

