



# The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop

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## Easter Symbols

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm



I was created with an inquisitive nature and coupled with my life-long study of all things liturgical, I love to research and understand many of the wonderful aspects of our rich traditions in Catholic worship. April 5 we celebrate the keystone of our entire liturgical year, the Resurrection of the Lord. Easter and the Three Days (Triduum) have a complex history in and of themselves. For this article, I've decided to delve into some of our most common symbols associated with the Feast of Feasts. Some are rooted in antiquity and pre-Christian religiosity, others have been absorbed into how Christians celebrate this keystone of our faith.

**Eggs.** They have been used for centuries as a symbol of new life, as when a chick breaks its way out of its egg. (You can still see that process at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry.) Believe it or not, decorated ostrich shells have been found in Africa that are 60,000 years old. Yes – 60,000! The Egyptians and people of Sumeria decorated eggs 5,000 years ago. Ancient Zoroastrians painted eggs for their celebration of the spring equinox (Nowruz) and the tradition continues today among Persians of Islamic, Zoroastrian and other faith traditions.

It's believed that Christians of Mesopotamia were the first to adapt eggs for Easter, staining them red for the Blood of Christ shed at the Crucifixion. The hard shell came to be interpreted as the sealed tomb of Christ. Eggs are extremely popular in Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Russia, Ukraine and other central European countries.

Thirty years ago someone gave me a Ukrainian *pysanka*, one of those elaborately decorated eggs pictured here. The word comes from the verb *to write* and is a process of wax-resist method to attain the beautiful, complex designs. To give a *pysanky* is to give the gift of life. Each color is symbolic of an aspect

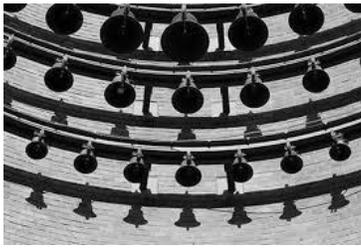
of our Christian belief in the Resurrection. I cherish this one little egg for its artistry and the life it signifies.

The White House egg rolls and hiding eggs outside (or inside if weather is bad) are customs that have nothing to do with Easter but certainly are fun for our children. The White House event was made official in 1878 although for years before that people had egg roll contests on the lawn of the Capitol. Obviously members of Congress didn't like what kids did to "their" lawn so they passed a lawn banning children's play in 1876. Yes! President Rutherford Hayes and his wife opened the White House lawn for the Egg Roll in 1878 and its been done there ever since except during both World Wars.

Back to religious symbolism... The opening of the Vigil is the Liturgy of **Fire** and it doesn't take much to understand how Light is an integral sign of the Risen



Christ. Pictured here is the Vigil within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem with hundreds of people gathered around the Tomb of Christ in the center. In some countries, like Cyprus, it is customary for people to build great fires. Young boys are sent throughout their neighborhoods to gather scraps of wood. The bonfires are lit in church or school yards. Our liturgy calls for building a new fire from which the Paschal Candle is lit...the Light of Resurrection shatters the darkness of sin through the power of God in Christ Jesus! Fire is one of the four classic elements (fire, water, air, earth) of the universe and it's significant that Mother Church begins the central liturgy of our faith with this primeval element and the third Liturgy of the Vigil centers on another, water, in the Liturgy of Baptism.



Our Vigil of the Resurrection and its four liturgies is one cosmic celebration of new Life. There is a rubric called for in the Liturgy of the Word for when the

presider intones the *Glory to God*: “bells may be rung according to custom.” I have loved this custom since I was a boy and served my first Easter Vigil in Quincy. There is a custom in the Netherlands, Belgium and areas of France that claim the bells fly out of their steeples on Holy Saturday, go to Rome and return on Easter Sunday. This legend began because the bells were silenced in mourning before Easter. When the bells peal at the *Glory to God* during the Vigil, it only adds to the festivity of the Queen of all Vigils.

From the sublime to that most secular of all symbols, the **Easter Bunny**. Where? How? Why? Well, there are actually good reasons a rabbit or hare has taken on such importance in our secular celebrations. First of all, there is a difference between rabbits and hares. They are of the same family, *leporidae*, but of different families. Hares are larger, have longer ears and not as social as rabbits. Anyway – they’ve both been used by ancient cultures (Egyptians) in mythic interpretations of life, creation and the divine. They’ve always been viewed as images of the feminine, fertility, the lunar cycle and longevity. Rabbits were viewed by the ancient Celts to have been messengers between the living and spirits of the dead (hence, they burrow below ground). These cute creatures were held almost sacred by the ancient Greeks, Romans and Nordic tribes, all of whom viewed the rabbit as a sign of fertility because of their multiple births.

There are carvings of rabbits in many medieval churches, including one in the Cathedral of Paderborn, Germany. Paderborn just happens to be the city from which the first friars of our Sacred Heart Province left for the United States in 1858. Here you see the *Dreihasenfenster* in the cathedral with three intertwined rabbits. Why three and why in union? Think about it.



The rabbit in Christian art really blossomed in the Middle Ages and it was not always a nice, cute little bunny! There is a carved rabbit/man on one of the portals of Chartres Cathedral that’s chasing a woman. Rabbits were thought to be androgynous or capable of changing from female to male, therefore a symbol of wicked sexual prowess.

By the Renaissance, though, little bunnies came to symbolize the exact opposite: docility, gentleness

and submission, qualities the Church fostered. In just a few hundred years, see how that interpretation changed in this 1530 painting by Titian named *Madonna of the Rabbit*. Notice how Mary holds Jesus in her right hand and a rabbit in her left. Here the rabbit portrays the epitome of purity and goodness in the Mother of God.



In terms of the Easter Bunny, it’s believed that German immigrants who settled in Pennsylvania brought with them their tradition of the Osterhase (Easter rabbit) who could lay colored eggs. They sometimes left out carrots in case the Osterhase was hungry from all his work. Resonate with cookies for Santa? Hmm...

Many feasts have specific **foods** associated with them. Did you know that ham/pork has been a preferred meat for feasts in almost all of eastern and western Europe? There’s a German phrase of “Schwein haben” that literally means “they have pig” but came to really mean “good luck.” Roast pork and ham became synonymous with big feasts to convey luck and prosperity. Ham at Easter gave rise to piggy banks and, in turn, some carried pig charms for good luck. All I know is that this German/Irish friar can eat ham almost any day of the week for any meal. But ham is only one noteworthy Easter food.

In Poland the Catholic Church prides itself in the *swieconka*, the blessing of decorative baskets of food. People of Bosnia, Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia and other eastern European countries also fill baskets with choice Easter foods like eggs, sausages, ham, special pastries and the butter lamb. I’d never encountered this custom until I worked in a parish where many were of Polish and Bohemian ancestry. Every Holy Saturday we gathered in the gym and hundreds of people showed up with elaborately laced or decorated baskets. It was so touching to see how faith flowed into the everyday lives of people, how the celebration of the Resurrection continued from church into homes. A few years ago I was privileged to share Holy Week with a family in San Luis Potosi, Mexico. Their Easter feast consisted of menudo (or pancito), a soup of tripe served with festive pastries. The list of foods from every country on Earth used for particular feasts could fill shelves and we have to thank God for all of them. As an aside, have you ever noticed the imbalance in Mother Church? We fast forty days then feast for the 50 days of Easter! I love that!

Hundreds of florists around the world prepare

countless **lilies** for Easter and what would our churches be without banks of white “Easter” lilies? Fascinating story here. Apparently this type of lily was introduced in Bermuda from Japan, of all places, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Because it flowers around the feast of Easter, it was quickly named for it. And once it entered the States it was immediately adopted as the favorite flower for Easter. This is another fine example of how an everyday thing was absorbed into religious activity and acquired symbolism. The religious meaning was layered even more because of Matthew 6: “Not even Solomon was arrayed like one of these.” And centuries before the Easter lily, other lilies were used in art to symbolize purity, goodness and beauty. Peruse images from the medieval period and Renaissance Madonnas and you’ll see.

Eggs, fire, bells, rabbits, foods and lilies import layers of meaning. But what of the **name** itself? Get ready for even more fascinating history. Many nations call the feast **Pasch** in some form (*Pascha, Pasqua, Pascua, Pâque, Paskir, Paaske, casc*) which all come from the Latin and Greek *pascha* which are both derived from the Hebrew *pesach*, which means

Passover. This feast of our faith ancestors was celebrated on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month Nisan, which was always about a week before the first full moon of the spring equinox. Our Easter is still determined by what some call the Passover Moon, and watch this year as Easter draws near. You’ll see this heavenly signal that has dated our religious heritage for nearly 3,000 years! *Pascha* was carried into the earliest days of

Christianity when the Lord’s Resurrection was remembered on one special Sunday near Passover and every Sunday of the year. That continues. The word

**Easter** (*Ostern* in German) has its origins in northern European peoples (*Eostur, Eastur, Ostara, Ostar*) all of which were used to name a feast in the spring. The sun rises in the East and brought new life to the cold, frozen lands in the North. Venerable Bede mentioned the name **Easter** in his writings (735).

**Easter Week** is often called the *Week of Sundays* because every day is a solemnity, a feast of highest ranking in the Church. This conveys the meaning that Easter is THE primary feast of our faith. Everything we believe is rooted in the Resurrection of Christ Jesus. The presider wears white or gold, prayers and hymns are filled with the joy of endless repetitions of **Alleluia**. This word comes from

Hebrew and means “praise God”. And so we should praise our Creator for the gift of his Son, and the gift of the Resurrection that has brought us everlasting life! The word is banned during all of Lent but makes a dramatic return (and joyful) during the Vigil of the Resurrection.

Whether rooted in primeval rites of spring, assimilated from other cultures or brought into being by Christian faith, the symbols that surround the Festival of Easter all have something splendid in common. They convey a certain freshness, goodness and festivity that aid us humans in entering more fully into the very heart of our religion, the Death and Resurrection of Christ. Every single Eucharist remembers that first **Pascha** so when it comes to **Easter Sunday** itself, believers are surrounded by great signs of the Event when God’s salvation came to fruition in its most dramatic experience. After all of Holy Week’s marvelous liturgies and the Great Vigil, it only seems appropriate that we continue the celebration in many ways. Which is exactly why I wanted to share all these symbols and some of their history with you.

**Easter** is the cornerstone of our faith and it’s uplifting, encouraging and even fun to know all the ways people have entered into the Feast for centuries. If we removed even one of these symbols, even the secular ones, the holiest day of the entire Christian year would lose a bit of its efficacy. Cherish these time-honored signs among us, just as the faithful disciples and women cherished the risen Lord among them. They point us beyond ourselves and lead us to deeper faith in God who raised his Son to new life and draws us into the Great Mystery, **Pascha**. We friars remember you in prayer every day in gratitude for your constant support. May this Easter bring you God’s grace, beauty and joy. And please enjoy some chocolate, Peeps or a nice honey-baked ham!

[ Michaelangelo: The Resurrection ]



You can find my latest musical work, *The Nature Suite*, recorded in Italy last summer, in St. Peter’s Book and Gift Shop. You can search for it by name online via Amazon, CD Baby, iTunes, etc. I know you’ll enjoy this delightful orchestral music; 16 reflections on various aspects of nature in the spirit of Francis. Peace and all good ~ *Friar Bob Huttmacher, ofm*

## **Your Personal Financial Considerations**

Retirees face longevity and reinvestment risks. The right strategy can help you enjoy your retirement years. Here are some questions you might want to consider in shaping a financially comfortable retirement.

- 1) What options do I have to maximize Social Security benefits?
- 2) How can I supplement my Social Security and my pension?
- 3) How can I allocate my investments to help reduce risk while maximizing return potential?
- 4) If you could get a strong income in retirement, how long would you like it to last?
- 5) How much of your retirement savings can you afford to lose?
- 6) How important are guarantees to you?
- 7) If you could get a guaranteed income for the rest of your life, how much of that income would you like to guarantee?
- 8) Is income for life that is safe, predictable and guaranteed of prime importance to you?

- 9) Have you considered strategies to make the most of your “just in case” funds?
- 10) Is your Single Sum meeting your legacy needs for family and/or your favorite charity?

If you would like a free meeting to discuss any of the above considerations or other ideas/strategies you would like to pursue, call Peter Wells at 847-543-4886.

## **Leaving a Legacy for St. Peter Church in the Loop**

St. Peter Church in the Loop is a sacred space where much healing and spiritual comfort and rejuvenation occur. Would you please consider leaving a legacy in your will or estate plan for St. Peter Church in the Loop? Would you like to leave St. Peter Church say \$10,000 or \$25,000 or \$50,000 or more from your current assets or *create* such an asset for a fraction of the ultimate gift? For ideas on how to create your dream gift to St. Peter Church in the Loop call Peter Wells at 847-543-4886.

### **APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE**

*(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)*

To be lit in honor of:   
Living\_\_\_\_\_ Deceased\_\_\_\_\_

Requested by:

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately\_\_\_\_\_ Specific Date\_\_\_\_\_

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.

### **APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION**

*(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)*

Please Enroll:  
  
 as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter’s Friars Legion.  
Living\_\_\_\_\_ Deceased\_\_\_\_\_

Your Name:

Address:

City, State, Zip Code: