

THE EPISTLE

Saint James' Episcopal Church
Livingston, Alabama



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This Month's Cover

This month's cover is *Saint Joseph with the Infant Jesus* by Guido Reni, completed in 1625. The cover of the March, 2018 *Epistle* was also a Reni with the same title, but it was completed 15 years later in 1640. Reni was obviously quite fascinated with this subject. In 1640 he did two such paintings in which the figures of Saint Joseph and Jesus are almost identical in each, but with many variations in auxiliary details. Those figures are clearly based on this 1625 painting, although the facial expressions and perspective are different. The face of Saint Joseph is also very similar to that of his painting of Saint Matthew (September 2020 *Epistle*). Joseph's clothing in all three paintings is the same. All three are oil on canvas. This 1625 one is 3'x4'1", slightly smaller than the 1640 ones. It is displayed in the Archbishop's Collection in the Diocesan Museum, Milan, Italy. This, like the later two, portrays Joseph holding the infant Jesus and looking down at him. While there is clearly a loving bond depicted here, it does not show the touching tenderness that Reni achieved in the two 1640 paintings. While nothing is known of Joseph's age when he married Mary, one tradition says he was an older widower with children from a previous marriage. Marriages between older widowers and young women were very common in ancient Israel. Reni's image of Joseph is that of an older man.

Saint Joseph was the Virgin Mary's husband. While not Jesus' biological father, he was his legal father by Jewish law, and the Bible frequently refers to him as such. He is revered by Christians as the paragon of perfect fatherhood. There is no mention of him in the Bible after Jesus was twelve years old (Lk. 2:41ff). The absence of any mention of him at the Cruci-

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fixion, along with Jesus' commending of the care of Mary to the Apostle John, indicates that he was dead by that time.

Guido Reni (1575-1642) was a Bolognese painter in the High Baroque style. This was an ornate and flamboyant style encouraged by the Counter-Reformation to dispute the dour, austere simplicity favored by Protestants. It eventually evolved into the highly detailed and "busy" Rococo style of the late 17th century. Most of Reni's works were of religious or mythological subjects. His parents were Bolognese musicians, so by the norm of his time he was trained to become a musician. He showed little talent for it, but his artistic genius was noticed early in his life. He apprenticed in the studio of Denis Caelvert, where he made lifelong friendships with other students who also went on to achieve great fame. After his highly successful periods in Naples and Rome, he returned to Bologna in 1614, opened his own studio, and received commissions from many important patrons around Europe. He is the most famous Italian painter of his time, and in his studio he trained many students who also became renowned masters. Reni died in Bologna in 1642, and was buried in the Rosary Chapel of the Basilica of San Domenico. The painter Elisabetta Sirani was later buried in the same tomb. Her father had been Reni's pupil, and many believed that she was Reni's artistic reincarnation.

(Reni's biography reprinted from the March 2018 Epistle.)

Richard R. Losch+

A Word from the Editor

Promises, promises! January was a brutally cold month—far more so than most Alabama Januarys—but the long-term forecast was that February would be quite mild. As I write this, February is about half over. With the exception of a couple of beautiful days it has been nasty, and the current forecast shows that it will continue to be so until March. Today, after a series of thunderstorms that kept Barney under the bed for half the night, the temperature has dropped 20° and is still falling, and we are in for an ice storm in a couple of days. So much for

promises. In the over eight decades that I have been on this planet I have come to realize that the only promises on which we can completely rely are those that God has given us through revelation, Holy Scripture, and the Church. Unfortunately for us impatient humans, God takes his time in letting us see the fulfillment of his promises, but that fulfillment is 100% assured. As Longfellow wrote, “Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small; Though with patience He stands waiting, with exactness grinds He all.” One of the things that Lent teaches us and that we need to work on is patience. God is not often in a hurry to fulfill his promises, but fulfill them he will; he is not always in a hurry to answer our prayers, but answer them he will, even if the answer is “no,” “not yet,” or “not in that way.” God’s has promised us forgiveness, redemption and salvation. He may make us work hard to attain them, and he may permit a lot of stumbling blocks in the process, but if we are patient and persevere, we will receive what he promised. Lent is given us to help us learn that patience and perseverance. The work, however, is up to us.

Father Rick Losch+

A Bit of Covid Advice

I was recently advised of something which had never before occurred to me, and I want to pass it on. When you take out your trash barrel, and especially when you bring it back in, wear gloves and wash your hands carefully afterward. You might also want to use disinfectant wipes or spray on the handles of the barrels before you touch them. The trash collectors handle hundreds of barrels every day, most of which are filthy and contain some really revolting stuff (just think of what their truck smells like). Dangerous germs are passed from barrel to barrel, including yours.

Richard R. Losch+

Easter Flowers

Each year St. James' Church offers the opportunity to remember loved ones through donations to the Altar Guild, which provides the lilies and altar flowers in the church for Easter services. If you wish to make a donation for this –In Memory of, In honor of, or In Thanksgiving for – envelopes with forms are available at the back of the church or you may print this information clearly and mail it along with your contribution to Carolyn Patrenos, President, St. James' Altar Guild, Post Office Box 399, Livingston, Alabama 35470. Checks should be made payable to St. James' Altar Guild. Because of the increased costs for these flowers, we ask for a minimum donation of \$30.00 for memorials. Publication deadline for inclusion in the Easter bulletin is Sunday, March 28th. Your donation is tax deductible.

Hiram Patrenos

Services for Holy Week and Easter

- **March 28th, Palm Sunday** - Liturgy of the Palms and Holy Communion at St. James' at 11:00 a.m.
- **April 1st, Maundy Thursday** –Holy Communion and Stripping of the Altar at 6:00 p.m.
- **April 2nd, Good Friday** – Good Friday Liturgy and the Mass of the Presanctified at 5:00 p.m.
- **April 4th, Easter Day** - Holy Communion at 11:00 a.m.

Hiram Patrenos

The Veiling of the Cross

In recent years there has developed a rapidly growing movement in the Christian Church to restore some old traditions that have been abandoned in the last fifty years. This is most evident in the increasing number of Latin Masses that are being celebrated in many places in the Roman Catholic Church (where the local bishops allow it). It can also be seen as more and more Protestant churches are starting to practice more

formal observances of traditional seasonal ceremonies,¹ as well as adopting such outward signs as liturgical vestments and colors, candles, and more formally structured worship services.²

For centuries it was the tradition of the Roman, Anglican, and many Lutheran churches to cover their crosses and sacred images in the church with veils, usually purple, throughout Lent. These were often replaced with red veils on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, then with black on Good Friday. The veils were not removed until the Great Vigil of Easter on Holy Saturday evening. In recent years Passion Week (the week preceding Palm Sunday) and Holy Week have been merged into a single Holy Week, and the veiling, if done at all, takes place only during Holy Week. I think that this is a loss to the Church, as it removes a powerful teaching tool. The veiled crosses and images are a constant reminder that we are in a special and important season of the year, and encourages us to maintain the spiritual disciplines that we have taken upon ourselves.

There are two penitential seasons in the Church year: Advent and Lent. In Advent we focus on the promise of the coming and return of Christ, while in Lent we focus on the hopelessness of a world without him. Veiling the images that remind us of him brings us to a closer awareness that salvation is not ours by right, but is an unmerited gift of God that but for his love he could just as easily have withheld from us.

For this reason, those of you who come into Saint James' Church will see the old tradition restored, with cross veiled.

Richard R. Losch+

¹ Until only a very few years ago, for example, it was quite rare for most Protestant churches to have any significant observance of Lent other than Good Friday, whereas today many impose ashes on Ash Wednesday and teach the importance of adopting a Lenten self-discipline.

² Unfortunately, as is happening in society in general, many of the mainstream Protestant denominations are tending to polarize between those who embrace very liberal values and practices and those who want to return to the old more conservative ones.

Be Wordly Wise

Slaves and Slavs

It may strike you as a strange coincidence that the name of the Slavic people and the word slave are so similar, but it is no coincidence. The usual biblical words for slave are the Hebrew *ebed* (עֶבֶד), the Greek *doulos* (δουλος) and the Latin *servus*, but all are usually rendered “servant” in English translations of the Bible. It is uncomfortable to confront the fact that in biblical times slavery was an accepted institution in every culture, even that of the Jews. Nonetheless, those words clearly mean slave. Remember, though, that while slavery in any form is evil, ancient slavery was a very different institution from British and American slavery in more recent centuries.

In the 9th and 10th centuries AD the region that we now call Eastern Europe was riddled with primitive tribes that had no standardized form of government, and were very fluid. Tribal loyalties and alliances shifted regularly, and the little that they had was of no interest to their more civilized neighbors, including their land. These people were known by the Byzantines as *Sklavos*, (Greek *Sklabos*, Σκλαβος).¹ They lived next to the empire of the Franks, who never made any serious attempt to conquer them, although it would have been no challenge for them to do so. They did raid them regularly, however, for the sole purpose of capturing slaves to sell on the European slave markets as a source of revenue. In time the name *Sklavos* entered Late Latin as *sclavus*, synonymous with *servus*, slave. Over the years the *c* disappeared and the word became *slavus*, from which the English word slave derives. During the period that the *Sklavos* became more civilized and eventually became Christians, the *k* and the Greek case ending slowly disappeared, and they came to be known as the Slavs.

Richard R. Losch+

¹ Remember that in many languages *b* and *v* are interchangeable. In Spanish, for example, the two letters are pronounced the same, like a *v* made with slightly open lips instead of with the upper teeth and lower lip.

Passion Week and Holy Week

In the past few decades Passion Week and Holy Week have tended to merge into one single week, although for centuries they were separate. The fifth Sunday of Lent was called Passion Sunday, and the sixth Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. Now many liturgies combine the two and call Palm Sunday the Sunday of the Passion. This is the result of what many of us deem the unfortunate oversimplification of the liturgy that followed on the heels of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church in the early 1960s. The Episcopal Church and several Protestant churches soon followed suit.

For several centuries the fifth Sunday of Lent marked the beginning of the two-week period known as Passiontide, that ended with special Good Friday observances centered on the death and burial of Christ. The Propers (special prayers and Scriptures) assigned for each day of Passiontide lead up to the climax of the Triduum, which is the three-day period from Maundy Thursday through Holy Saturday. While all of Lent focuses on penitence and redemption, the focus of Passiontide is specifically on the suffering and death of Christ as atonement for the sins of the world. This special focus begins on the fifth Sunday, and intensifies daily through Palm Sunday, when it begins to emphasize daily his death on the cross. Traditionally all crosses and images in the church building are covered with red veils during this week. The red symbolizes blood, and covering them reminds us not only that Christ will be taken from us temporarily for three days, but that on that first Good Friday his followers feared that he had been taken from them permanently. This reminds us of the horror of a world without him.

Palm Sunday, in recent times also called the Sunday of the Passion, begins Holy Week, the most solemn part of Lent. On this day we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when the people strewed palm leavers and their own robes in his path, and hailed him as a king. This joyful procession seems inconsistent with the solemnity of the season until we remember that he was entering Jerusalem on the way to his betrayal,

suffering and death a few days later. A popular practice on Palm Sunday is a dramatic reading of the Gospel at Mass. It is the story of the Passion, in which members of the congregation are the voices of all the people who speak in that scriptural passage, with the celebrant usually taking the voice of Jesus.

During Holy Week the red veils are replaced with purple ones to symbolize both the penitence of the season and the mourning in anticipation of the death of Christ. The liturgical color for Sunday through Wednesday of Holy Week is red. It is white for Maundy Thursday, black for Good Friday (if vestments are used for the Mass of the Presanctified), and white for the Great Vigil of Easter after sundown on Holy Saturday.

Holy Week reaches its climax on what is called the Triduum, which is the three-day period beginning with Maundy Thursday and ending with the Great Vigil of Easter after sundown on Holy Saturday. This is the most solemn part of Lent, with its center point being the commemoration of the Crucifixion on Good Friday.

On Maundy Thursday evening we commemorate the Last Supper, in which Jesus instituted the Blessed Sacrament of his Body and Blood. This Sacrament is the means by which we are continually united with him physically, whereby “we may dwell in him, and he in us.” This, along with his death, resurrection and ascension, is one of the most critical events in the entire earthly life of Christ. This is the last Mass that will be celebrated until the First Mass of Easter after the Great Vigil on Holy Saturday evening. On Maundy Thursday many churches remember Jesus’ command to love one another by washing feet as a symbol of humility.¹ Frankly, I have never been fond of this ceremony, because I find it too easy to slip in to the opposite of humility by feeling, “See how humble I am.” I believe it would have real meaning only if we actually went

¹ The word Maundy comes from a Middle English word meaning commandment. At the Last Supper Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and gave the command, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn. 12:34).

out into the streets and ministered to the needy. Appropriately, we also remember on that evening Judas's betrayal of Jesus, which reminds us that we betray him every time we sin. One of the most stirring liturgical events of Maundy Thursday is the Stripping of the Altar at the end of the service. The church is darkened, the Reserved Sacrament is consumed,¹ the sanctuary light and all candles are extinguished, the Tabernacle door is left open, and everything moveable is removed from the sanctuary.² Any immovable decorations are veiled in black. In some churches a rough wooden cross is placed on the altar, also veiled in black. The church is then left dark and barren, reminding us of the barren desolation of a world without Christ.

On Good Friday the Mass is not celebrated, but if the Sacrament has been reserved at an Altar of Repose, the people can receive Holy Communion on that day, after which any remaining Sacrament is consumed. Other than that, except for an emergency, no sacraments are administered from after the Maundy Thursday Mass until the First Mass of Easter on Holy Saturday evening or Easter Morning. The two traditional services for Good Friday are the Stations of the Cross and the Good Friday Liturgy, which is a beautiful penitential litany that concludes with the veneration of the Cross. After that service concludes, no services are held in the church until after Sundown on Holy Saturday, when the Great Vigil and First Mass of Easter are celebrated. A relatively modern service of preaching on the Seven Last Words of Christ developed in the Protestant tradition, and has been adopted by many Anglican, Lutheran and even some Roman Catholic churches. Since Christ hung on the Cross for three hours, the service is designed

¹ In many churches the Reserved Sacrament is solemnly moved to an Altar of Repose. This is in a side chapel if the church has one, or a place somewhere outside the sanctuary. There a constant vigil is kept by worshippers until it is consumed at the Mass of the Presanctified on Good Friday.

² The term Sanctuary refers to the area behind the altar rail, in which the altar is situated. To many Protestants the term Sanctuary means the entire room in which the worshippers assemble. We call that the Nave.

to last three hours from noon when he was crucified until 3:00 p.m. when he died. It includes seven sermons based on his seven last statements as recorded in the four gospels.¹ After the last service on Good Friday, no services are held until the Great Vigil of Easter after sundown on Holy Saturday.

The Great Vigil of Easter, in its full traditional form, is a very long service consisting of fourteen Old Testament prophecies, many blessings, and baptism, and concludes with the joyous First Mass of Easter.² In most churches today it is shortened to the blessing of new fire,³ the lighting and blessing of the Paschal Candle, two or three prophecies, the blessing of the baptismal font, baptisms,⁴ and the Holy Eucharist. Even in its shortened form this is a beautiful and stirring service, and a wonderful way to conclude Lent and Holy Week and to begin the jubilant celebration of the Resurrection of Christ.

Richard R. Losch+

¹ The Seven Last Words are: (1) "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34); (2) "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk. 23:43); (3) "Woman, behold your son . . . son, behold your mother" (Jn. 19:26); (4) "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46, Mk. 15:34); (5) "I am thirsty" (Jn. 19:28); (6) "It is accomplished" (Jn. 19:30); and (7) "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk. 23:46).

² This service long preceded the observance of the "Midnight Mass" on Christmas Eve, but it was the inspiration for it.

³ On Maundy Thursday or Good Friday all fire (candles, votive lamps, etc.) is extinguished. At the Great Vigil new fire is struck with flint and steel, blessed, and used to light the Paschal Candle (since many do not know how to use flint and steel, the "flint" and steel of a Bic lighter is often used). The fire from the Paschal Candle is used to light the altar candles and the sanctuary lamp. Traditionally, all fire used in the church until the next year's Great Vigil is then passed from candle to candle throughout the year. Few churches practice that today.

⁴ For many centuries, except for emergencies such as impending death, the only time baptism could take place in the church was on the First Sunday after the Epiphany (the Feast of the Baptism of Christ) and at the Great Vigil of Easter.

The Heresy of Gnosticism

Gnosticism has been described as the most enduring heresy in the history of Christianity. The subject of Gnosticism, both as an ancient Greek phenomenon and as a Christian heresy, is immensely complex. Hundreds of volumes have been written on it, so the best we can hope to do here is present a thumbnail overview of it. There are two reasons for considering what might on the surface appear to be an arcane subject that would be of interest only to a few scholars. First, it has been glaringly headlined in our culture in two recent events: the development of an enormous secular following of the *Star Wars* series that began in 1977, along with the 2003 publication of Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* and the great controversy that it aroused. Secondly, several aspects of Gnosticism have appeared regularly throughout the history of Christianity, and are found thriving in the thinking of many modern Christians, both Catholic and Protestant.

The name Gnostic derives from the Greek *gnōsis* (γνώσις), “knowledge.” In ancient Greece, many people noticed that in this corrupt and often evil world there are often sparks of purity and significant goodness that appear to be of a spiritual origin. There arose a number of secret cults who believed that the gods had selected a few intellectual elites to whom they would reveal great universal truths. These truths were not to be revealed to the world in general, but would give the “in-group” special understanding that would enable them to contact that spiritual purity and be reunited with its divine origin. Probably today the best known of these Gnostic cults were the Pythagoreans, who studied mathematics, particularly geometry. Every high-schooler today knows the Pythagorean Theorem of right triangles, and it is possible that originally the only reason it became widely known was that someone in the cult leaked it. We have no idea how many great mathematical discoveries might have been made by the Pythagoreans that died with them. In ancient Greece there were numerous such Gnostic cults of all sorts, from the scientific and mathematical to the philosophical and

political. The Pythagoreans were among the earliest (6th century BC), but by Plato's time (4th century BC) many of these cults flourished, and Plato's philosophy encouraged them.

As Christianity spread in the ancient world, it became infected with Greek Gnosticism, mainly in north Africa, especially Egypt. They consisted primarily of theologians who claimed special God-revealed insights into theological understanding and religious history, particularly regarding the life of Christ that is not told in the four canonical gospels. One is the 4th century AD *Coptic [Egyptian] Gospel of Saint Thomas*, which consists mainly of statements allegedly made by Jesus that are not recorded in the other gospels.¹ For the most part these sayings are consistent with what the canonical gospels tell us of Jesus, yet the book provides no evidence to lead us to accept it as authoritative. Another 4th century Gnostic gospel is *The Gospel According to Judas*, which says that Judas was ordered by Jesus to betray him because he needed to be crucified, and Judas was the only one whose faith was strong enough that he would be able to carry it through and face the condemnation of the world for it.² There are a number of these books that are known as the Gnostic Gospels, and they are rejected by the Church as heretical. They are also known as the Coptic Gospels because they were written in Coptic, an Egyptian language.

There are two themes that run through most of Gnosticism: the dualisms of good versus evil and of spirit versus matter, and an inner-circle of people with special divine knowledge. Plato proposed that in all of creation spirit and matter are not only totally separate states of existence, but that they are in perpetual conflict. The spiritual is always good, and the material is always evil. In life our spirit (soul) is trapped in our body, and the ultimate goal is for it to escape its material prison and be

¹ This is not to be confused with *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, a 3rd century Egyptian work that contains highly imaginative and sometimes outrageous stories of Jesus' childhood.

² Nikos Kazantzakis played on this theme in his novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

released. This is accomplished at death. Plato's student Aristotle rejected this Platonic dualism of good and evil, but that theme nonetheless ran through virtually all of Gnosticism from Plato's time right into modern Christian Gnosticism.

Many Christians today, without even realizing it, are heretical dualists in much of their thinking. Dualism is very attractive, because it lays things out neatly in black and white, leaving few gray areas that require making moral judgments. While few Christians would consciously reject the Resurrection, their basic thinking is that when we die we escape the body, and our souls, freed from the trammels of the material world, go to a purely spiritual heaven. This is Platonic, and is completely inconsistent with the teaching of the Bible. We will deal with this more completely as we approach Easter in next month's *Epistle* in an article on the Resurrection. Another form of dualism often appears is in thinking of God and Satan as equal and opposite powers of good and evil who are constantly battling with each other for supremacy. This is false. Satan is a creature of God who, only with God's consent, exercises the free will that God has given to some of the angels and to all of mankind. The idea of equal dueling good and evil deities is Zoroastrian. While Zoroastrianism had an influence on Judaism during Judah's exile and rebuilding, it is rejected by Judaism and Christianity. Satan was an angel who fell from grace because of his pride. He is not an evil power separate, opposite and equal to God, and he is not an evil "other side" of God.

This is where *Star Wars* comes in. The Force is pure Gnosticism.¹ It is dualism within a godlike but impersonal two-sided power that manifests itself in both good and evil. There is a good manifestation (the Force) and its equal and opposite evil manifestation (the Dark Side). Each of these bestows special knowledge and powers on a small inner circle of elites, the good Jedi Knights and the evil Sith Lords. This makes for a great story, but we must remember that it was "looon, long ago,

¹ George Lucas, in many of his writings and interviews, has demonstrated a great deal of Gnostic influence in his thinking.

in a galaxy far, far away,” and we must be careful not to confuse it with reality.

The Gnostic concept of an elite inner circle is manifested today in the secular world and in the Church. In the world, we see it most often in conspiracy theories. It is very attractive to be one of the few who understands what is really going on, while all those ignorant people out there are being duped by the “cover story” publicity that hides the real truth. We see the same thing in the divisions of the Church. There is a longstanding joke about Saint Peter giving someone a guided tour of heaven. At one point they approach a very pious looking group, and Saint Peter whispers, “Shh. Be very quiet. Those are the [choose a denomination], and they think they’re the only ones here.” It is comforting to think that our group has a hold on Christian Truth while all others are in error, but it is also Gnostic and heretical, especially if we think that God has revealed it to us alone, and that we are therefore special.¹

While it is extremely difficult these days not to have a touch of Gnosticism in our lives, it is nonetheless very important that we be aware of it and keep it as subdued as possible. It is heresy, and it can lead to very corrupted thinking.

Richard R. Losch+

The Epistle is Online

The last eight years of *The Epistle* are now online. Go to <http://rlosch.com> and click on the “Epistle” tab at the top. On a mobile device, click on the blue menu at the top right and select the “Epistle” page. You can read it online or download it as a .pdf file. This is an easy way to share articles with others.

Richard R. Losch+

¹ It has been argued that Christianity itself is essentially Gnostic, because it teaches that God revealed the Faith to the Apostles on Pentecost. This is an interesting argument, but it falls apart when we remember that they were not given private knowledge to keep secret among themselves, but were commanded to share it with the whole world. That is not Gnostic.

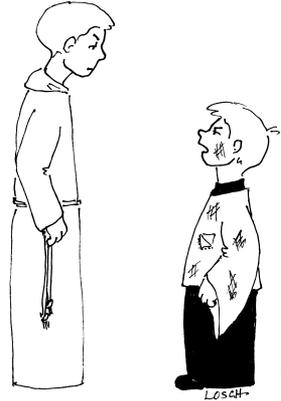
A Touch of Trivia

President Nixon was enamored of the pomp and ceremony of European palace guards. Rather than the usual black suits and sunglasses, he wanted the Secret Service to wear uniforms. He designed a uniform with a white double-breasted tunic, gold braid and epaulettes, and an oddly shaped hat. He received such a harsh backlash from the press and public that he finally abandoned the plan and donated the uniforms to a local high school marching band.

Richard R. Losch+

JAMIE

by Richard R. Losch



"We need more scientific research on how to find a cure for jerks!"



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