

holy week

Be quiet, for this day is holy. ~ Nehemiah 8:11

HOLY WEEK IS THE HEART of the Church year. It is a week unique and most holy in the annual cycle of sacred time for Christians. The liturgies of the Church observed during this week remember and *make present again* the passing of Jesus from life to death to new life, and all of creation along with him.

Palm Sunday

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, also called Passion Sunday today because the theme of Jesus' suffering and death begins with the reading of the Passion. Parish liturgies begin with the blessing of palms somewhere outside the usual assembly area, in imitation of the triumphant entrance of Jesus from Bethany to Jerusalem (see Mt 21:1-11; Mk 11:1-11; Lk 19:29-45; Jn 12:12-19). The Gospel of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem is read, followed by a procession into church, with people holding blessed palms and singing festive songs. Immediately afterwards, the theme of triumph changes radically with the reading of the Passion narrative from one of the four Gospels. The Palm Sunday liturgy is therefore devoted more to the suffering of Christ than to his triumphant reception by the people. On Palm Sunday, the Church celebrates

"Holy Week is the heart of the Church year."

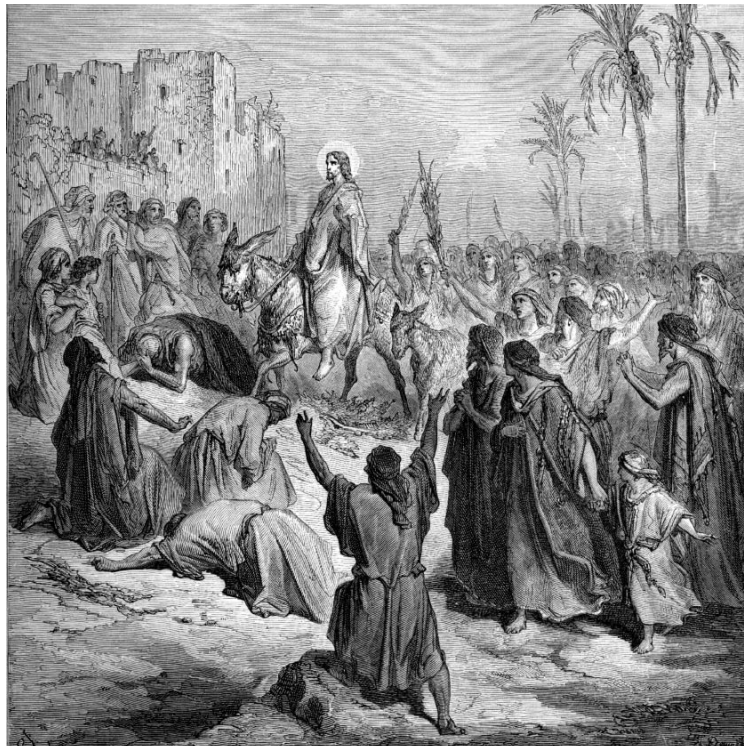
the beginning of Jesus' passage from life to death to new life: the Paschal Mystery.

Preparation Days

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week are preparation days, both spiritually and physically, for the holy days to come later in the week. The tradition of receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation during these days is reminiscent of ancient practices. During early centuries, repentant sinners were absolved from their sins on Holy Thursday, after six weeks or more of public penance. This day was chosen so that all could participate in the solemnities of the *Triduum* (three days) and Easter. Today, many parishes conduct communal penance services during the early part of Holy Week.

Holy Thursday

Holy Thursday begins the Triduum. The oldest and still official name of this day is "Thursday of the Lord's Supper." It commemorates the historical Gospel events surrounding the Last Supper and the institution of the Holy Eucharist. "Maundy Thursday," a popular title in English-speaking countries, comes from the solemn ritual of washing of feet in imitation of Jesus at his Last Supper. The name



Christ's entry into Jerusalem, by Gustave Doré, 1855-1885

"Palm Sunday celebrates the beginning of Jesus' passage from life to death to new life."

is a corruption of *mandatum* (Latin for “commandment”) from the words of Jesus sung as the washing begins: “*A new commandment I give to you*” (Jn 13:34).

Parish liturgies take place in the evening, with joyful overtones. Bells ring and festive colors are used for vestments and decorations. The Gloria, not prayed since Ash Wednesday (except for solemnities such as the Feast of the Annunciation), returns for this brief moment. The tabernacle is empty so that all might receive the Eucharist from bread consecrated at this Mass.

The Holy Thursday ritual has included a ceremonial washing of feet by the presider since the 5th century. This ritual imitates Jesus’ Last Supper action of humility and service. Appropriate songs are sung during this symbolic washing. Usually, twelve participants are chosen from the parish at large or from those in parish leadership positions.

At the end of the Holy Thursday liturgy, consecrated Hosts are carried in procession, with incense and song, to a chapel of adoration. These Hosts will be received the next day in Communion. After placing the Hosts in the tabernacle, an atmosphere of quiet watching with the Lord begins. It is common for people to spend a Holy Hour sometime before midnight in the adoration chapel.

Good Friday

The second day of the Triduum is the Passion of the Lord, known as Good Friday, the anniversary of the death of Jesus on the cross just outside the walls of Jerusalem. The origin of the term “Good” for this day is unknown, but probably emphasizes the saving value of the historical event of the crucifixion of Jesus. The theme of this day throughout history has been one of quiet sadness and mourning for the crucified and dead Jesus.

On this one day of the entire year, the Mass is not celebrated. The Church’s Good Friday liturgy takes place in the evening. The

emphasis of the liturgy is on Scripture readings and prayers, the veneration of the cross, and the reception of the Eucharist from the Hosts consecrated on Holy Thursday.

Holy Saturday

The daytime hours of Holy Saturday continue the atmosphere of Good Friday, and have been observed as a time of quiet and fasting from the earliest centuries. The day has no liturgy or religious traditions of its own. There is an atmosphere of anticipation for the coming of night and for the celebration of Jesus’ Resurrection.

Adults preparing for Baptism or reception into the Church at the Easter Vigil often spend some time in a mini-retreat, with fasting and prayer as the hours of the Easter Vigil approach.

Easter Vigil

The Easter Vigil on the evening of Holy Saturday is the night of all nights and the primary celebration of Jesus’ Resurrection. The late 20th-century restoration of the adult catechumenate (RCIA) first developed in the early Church has added an important feature to the Easter Vigil that had not existed for centuries: the public Baptism of adults, and reception of the other sacraments of initiation by them and by already-Baptized adults being received into full communion with the Church.

The elaborate and beautiful ritual of the Easter Vigil calls for extensive preparation by the parish team and many other parishioners. The church is decorated; sacramentals of oil, incense, water, and fire are readied; and the liturgy is rehearsed. Adult Elect and Candidates begin their final hours of preparation.

The Easter Vigil has four clearly-defined parts: the service of light, the Liturgy of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, and the Eucharist. The service of light be-

*“On this one day of the entire year,
the Mass is not celebrated.”*



*His Eminence Theodore Cardinal McCarrick,
Archbishop of Washington, DC from 2001-2006*

gins with a fully darkened church. The presider and other celebrants begin outside or at the back of the church, striking the Paschal flame and lighting the Paschal candle (the symbol of Christ's Resurrection), which is inscribed and adorned with appropriate symbols. Once the Paschal candle is lit to the chant of *Lumen Christi* ("light of Christ"), its flame is used to light small candles held by those in the congregation. The Paschal candle is processed to the altar, during which *Lumen Christi* is sung twice more at intervals.

Following the arrival of the procession, the *Exsultet*, a recounting of the saving actions of Christ, is sung, without musical accompaniment. Then the readings of the Mass, several from the Old Testament, are interspersed with responsorial Psalms and prayers by the celebrant. The Liturgy of the Word is far lengthier than in any other Mass of the Church, consisting of as many as seven readings that recapitulate God's saving action throughout history. The prayer at the end of this part of the Liturgy of the Word is the Easter Proclamation, immediately after which the lights are turned on suddenly, and the Gloria is sung with the maximum amount of musical instruments, bells, and choir available to the parish.

Following the proclamation of the Gospel and the preaching of the homily, the celebration of Baptism of the Elect begins, followed by a rite to receive already-baptized Candidates, and Confirmation of all those just received into the Church. The Mass concludes with the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Easter

The theme of Easter morning continues the triumphant joy of the Easter Vigil. It remembers and celebrates the very foundation of Christianity: Jesus is raised from the dead, and is Lord. Those who believe and are



An adult Baptism during the Easter Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday

baptized share in this resurrection to new life. This theme will continue for the next fifty days of the Easter Season, which does not end until Pentecost Sunday.

It was natural that the very first followers of Jesus would hold the moment of Jesus' Resurrection sacred. It was the anniversary of that won-

derful time when they experienced him risen and still among them. His death had occurred on the most important of all Jewish feasts: the Passover. His Resurrection fulfilled all that the Passover had meant to them as Jews. It was an *exodus*, or passage, from the old times and the oppression of slavery to spiritual freedom. Jesus himself was the Paschal Lamb, slain to achieve this freedom.

Christ's Resurrection was the sign of new beginnings: a springtime. This theme was part of the evolution of the Passover long before the Exodus from Egypt. The ancestors of the Jews had celebrated a springtime festival of the first fruits of their planting with a sacrifice of grains and breads, and the first fruits of their flocks with a sacrifice of lambs. Under the direction of Moses, these feasts were combined as an annual memorial of the mystery of their escape from Egypt, and the "passing over" of them by the angel of death. For 3,000 years, and still today, Jews celebrate this drama of miraculous salvation by repeating the ancient story with song, Scripture readings, and symbolic foods: the Seder meal. Now, as throughout history, the ritual is observed in the evening of the 14th day of the month of Nisan on the Jewish lunar calendar.

It was the Seder meal of this Passover that Jesus celebrated with his disciples the night before His crucifixion, with the command that it be celebrated in a new way as a memorial — an unbloody re-presentation — of his sacrificial and salvific death on the cross.

(CCC 1168-1169)

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Jesus is raised from the dead, and is Lord."***