

Our Holiest Week – A Practical Guide to the Liturgies of Holy Week

By Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M.

“Don’t miss the best part!” That’s my advice as we approach the end of Lent. The liturgical services on Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion and the Easter Triduum (Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday) are among the very best things we do in the church.

I know that they are “different” and “long.” But isn’t that to be expected? Special events—a daughter’s wedding or a grandson’s Baptism—usually cause us to change our routine and our ordinary way of doing things. And, yes, they may be a bit “longer”—special events often are. For example, Thanksgiving dinner takes longer than an ordinary Thursday dinner. That should not surprise us.

In this *Update* I want to describe what goes on during these days and why. I hope to entice you to participate in these liturgies if you are not in the habit of doing so; and if you are already a “regular” during Holy Week, I hope this brief explanation will help you enter into “our holiest week” with an even greater appreciation of its meaning.

Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion

Entrance. “On this day the Church celebrates Christ’s entrance into Jerusalem to accomplish his paschal mystery” (Roman Missal). “Entrance” is the key to understanding the liturgy of Passion Sunday. We enter into Jerusalem with Christ. We enter into our holiest week. We enter into our final preparation for the Easter feast. Ordinarily when we go to Sunday Mass we enter the church one by one, as we arrive. But for the principal liturgy on this Sunday we enter the church *together*. We make a *grand entrance*. The parish gathers in another location (outside the church, for example, or in the school hall). There one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ triumphant entrance into Jerusalem is proclaimed. “The very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, / while others cut branches from the trees / and strewed them on the road. / The crowds preceding him and those following / kept crying out and saying: / ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’” (Mt 21:8-9). And then we “enter into” the Gospel. We go with Christ into Jerusalem. We process into the church.

Procession with palms. This is one of our most joyful and triumphant processions of the entire year. As we gather on this Sunday we receive a branch of palm or olive (or other green plant). In many areas of the world these branches are prepared ahead of time at home, and are braided and tied with decorative ribbons and flowers. Often this activity involves the children and the whole family and causes a sprit of excitement and anticipation of the Sunday liturgy.

Readings. After we have processed into the church we hear one of the “suffering servant” poems (Is 50:4-7): “I gave my back to those who beat me, / my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; / my face I did not shield / from buffets and spitting.”

Next we hear the beautiful passage from Philippians (2:6-11) which, in a few verses, “summarizes” the meaning of Holy Week. “Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, / did not regard equality with God / something to be grasped. / Rather, he emptied himself, / ...becoming obedient to the point of death, / even death on a cross. / Because of this, God greatly exalted him / and bestowed on him the name / which is above every name.”

The Passion. The Gospel proclaimed on this day is one of the accounts of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew, Mark or Luke. (The Passion from the Gospel according to John is read each year on Good Friday.) Some parishes, in order to make the story more living and present, have several readers: The priest speaks the words of Jesus, a second reader narrates, and a third reader proclaims the words of the other persons in the narrative. Often the whole assembly is invited to proclaim the words of the crowds—reminding us that it is indeed *our* story.

As the Passion is read we find ourselves going with Christ to Calvary and standing at the foot of the cross. We find ourselves calling out “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Yet only a moment ago, when we were entering the church, we were triumphantly singing, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” The contrast is striking. Is this not all too often our story? One moment I am full of good resolutions and promises to follow Christ; but when the times get hard, I find myself ready to crucify Jesus by my sins.

Entering more reflectively into the liturgies of Holy Week enables us to becoming better, more consistent disciples of Jesus.

The Easter Triduum

The Easter Triduum—Holy Thursday evening through Easter Sunday evening—is the “high point” of the Church Year. The Latin word *triduum* means “a three-day period.” We use the word to name collectively Friday (which in the Hebrew way of reckoning begins Thursday evening), Saturday and Sunday. St. Augustine, the great fifth-century bishop of North Africa, speaks of the “triduum of Christ crucified, buried and risen.” Shortly after the time of Augustine the Church at Rome began to celebrate a special commemoration of the Last Supper on the Thursday evening before Good Friday and this celebration was included in “The Three Days.” Now, as the Roman Calendar (19) says, “The Easter Triduum begins

Holy Thursday

The Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper preserves two ancient traditions that were once common to every Eucharist. First, the Mass begins with the tabernacle entirely empty. We receive Holy Communion this evening from the bread and wine consecrated at this Mass, not from a previous Mass. Second, the entire community is gathered at this one Eucharist, with all the priests, ministers and parishioners celebrating one Eucharist together.

Passover context. The opening prayer sets the tone: “We are gathered here to share in the supper which your only Son left to his Church to reveal his love.” The first reading (Ex 12:1-8, 11-14) recounts the origins of the Passover meal. The Hebrew people in Egypt are saved by the blood of the lamb which causes the wrath of God to “pass over” the houses marked with its blood. The second reading (1 Cor 11:23-26) contains the earliest written account of the Lord’s Supper. “I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, / that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, / took bread, and, after he had given thanks, / broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you.’”

The Great Commandment. We might expect the Gospel for this Mass of the Lord’s Supper to be one of the accounts of the institution of the Eucharist (Mt 26:26-29, Mk 14:22-25, Lk 22:14-20). Instead, the Church presents Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (Jn 13:1-15). And not only do we hear about Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, but we see and experience it. The leader of the parish community takes off his Mass vestment and takes water and a towel and washes feet.

For many years I thought that washing feet was somehow “out of place” on this solemn night when we gather to celebrate the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. Solemn adoration of the Most Holy Sacrament and washing dirty feet! It seemed strange that these two actions were so closely associated on this solemn day. Little by little through the years as I have washed feet, watched feet being washed, and had my own feet washed, I’ve found this ritual to be the most meaningful homily and commentary on the Eucharist. It gets to the very heart of what the Eucharist means. We gather to thank Jesus for the gift of the Eucharist; but the liturgy calls us to go deeper. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not an end in itself; it is also the means to build up the unity of the parish and of the whole Body of Christ.

At each Eucharist we pray that God send the Holy Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine so that they may become the Body and Blood of Christ. But then we continue with the other half of the petition and ask God to send the Holy Spirit upon the community so that “*we, who are nourished by his Body and Blood, may be*

filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ” (Eucharistic Prayer III). We cannot stop short at the first petition without praying the second.

Divine in the ordinary. Maybe we are tempted to stop short because it is easier to see Christ in the Blessed Sacrament than to see him in the faces of the ordinary men and women around us. My fellow parishioners seem somehow all too ordinary to be taken up into the solemnity of Holy Thursday and the adoration of the Eucharist. But in the midst of gold vestments and vessels, ringing bells and smoking censers, when we solemnly recall the institution of the Eucharist and the incomprehensible miracle of God’s continuing presence among us, we wash feet! We are confronted with the reality that we cannot love God unless we love our neighbour. Simple, humble, loving service for our sisters and brothers and the building up of the one Body of Christ: This is true reverence for the Eucharist. By the Christian assuming the lowest rank, all are elevated and share in a common dignity. This is humble yet *glorious* service, for it is the service of one who reigns triumphant from the cross. “So when he had washed their feet / ...he said to them, “Do you realize what I have done for you? / ... I have given you a model to follow, / so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” (Jn 13:12, 15)

Following the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist which will be shared tomorrow during the liturgy of Good Friday is taken in procession to a tabernacle prepared for it, and the church is prepared for Good Friday. *“Then the altar is stripped and, if possible, the crosses are removed from the church. It is desirable to cover any crosses which remain in the church”* (Roman Missal).

Good Friday

Sober. The liturgy of Good Friday is the most sober of the entire Church year—restrained and straightforward. The altar is bare, without cloths, candles or cross. There is no Mass: “according to the Church’s ancient tradition, the sacraments are not celebrated today or tomorrow” (Roman Missal). It is a day of fasting. There are no greetings, genuflections, opening songs, processions. We simply come and prostrate in humble submission before the Word and the glorious cross of Christ.

Readings. The first reading is from the book of the Prophet Isaiah (52:13—53:12). The mystery of the glorious cross is immediately placed before us: The suffering servant is raised high and exalted. If there were some way to explain in a few simple words how crucifixion can be “glorious,” we might not need the liturgy of Good Friday. But there is no simple intellectual resolution of “cross = glory.” The paradox can only be experienced. The second reading (Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9), speaks of our “great high priest” who “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered.” The cross “perfected” Jesus. This is at the heart of the Christian mystery.

John’s Passion. The third reading is the proclamation of the Passion according to John. If we listen closely we find that this Passion account is very different from the one we heard on the previous Sunday. In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ power and majesty shine through. Jesus is in control of everything that happens. He carries his cross alone. He is victorious on the cross. Jesus reigns from the tree. The cross is our glory. The instrument of death is the instrument of salvation.

Intercessions. Following the proclamation of the Passion we join in the Church’s most solemn form of the General Intercessions. We pray that the glory of the cross be realized in our day. The intentions are announced; we kneel and pray silently; the presiding minister joins our prayers into a solemn prayer of petition.

Wood of victory. The third part of the Good Friday liturgy is unique to this day. A **large cross** is brought forward. It is unveiled and presented to us. We approach the wood of the cross, the instrument of torture, cruelty and death, and we reverence it with a touch or a kiss! If it were not for the eyes of faith we could never understand this strange, indeed bizarre action: seeing glory in the cross. For some today this might not seem strange because the cross has been tamed and domesticated by our constantly seeing the cross only as

a religious symbol or a piece of art. But what if we were asked to kiss a guillotine or an electric chair? The first Christians were faced with that kind of startling paradox: to kiss a cross!

The Good Friday rites conclude with a simple Communion service with the Eucharist from Holy Thursday's liturgy. Holy Saturday is a day of quiet waiting and preparation for the Easter Vigil.

Easter

Many Catholics have become accustomed in recent years to fulfilling their Sunday obligation by attending Mass Saturday afternoon or evening. Once again, the Triduum interrupts our routine. There are no anticipated "Easter Masses" on Holy Saturday evening. We gather for a vigil.

Keeping vigil. The dictionary explains that a *vigil* is "a purposeful or watchful staying awake during the ordinary hours of sleep." This is what we do on Holy Saturday night. We gather; we wait; we watch. We keep vigil. We wait with the catechumens. We wait with the generations of those longing for Christ to rise from the tomb.

Service of light. As the natural light of day fades away, we turn our attention to the light that is Christ. We gather around a fire and we think of Christ, the light of God's glory. And from this special fire, we light our most beautiful candle. As the light of this paschal candle enters the church; its light spreads to the candles held by each member of the worshipping community. Our feelings during this unique ritual experience are expressed in song: "Exult, all creation, around God's throne! Jesus Christ, our King, is risen! ...This is our Passover feast....This is the night when Jesus Christ broke the chains of death and rose triumphant from the grave....O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!" (Roman Missal)

Salvation history. In this light we keep watch. And as we wait around this special fire—the paschal candle—we tell our story: Creation, Abraham's sacrifice, our passing through the Red Sea. Our joy and anticipation grow and we sing, "Glory to God in the highest" (a hymn we have not used since Lent began).

Death in Baptism. The Letter of Paul to the Romans makes explicit the fact that this is our resurrection night. "Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus / were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, / so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, / we too might live in newness of life" (6:3-4). We stand and joyfully sing "Alleluia" (a word we have not heard for 40 days) and the Gospel of the Resurrection is proclaimed: Christ is risen!

Sacraments of Initiation. The catechumens now come forward and enter the waters of Baptism and rise from the tomb/womb of the baptismal font to Easter life with the risen Christ. After the elect are baptized and confirmed, the Church turns to its members and asks: "Do you reject sin? Do you believe? Do you wish to renew your Baptism?" The answers to these questions are two simple words: "I do." Simple words, but for a bride and groom on their wedding day these simple words "I do" contain years of history and even more years of promise. Similarly the "I do" of our baptismal vows is much more than two simple words. In this "I do" we renew all that this holy night promises so that in the Eucharist we can share with the newly baptized the Food and Drink that take the sting out of death and assures eternal victory.

Do the exercises. Some years ago I subscribed to a diet and exercise magazine but didn't lose a pound. I read the magazines, but didn't do the exercises. In this *Update* we've discussed the Holy Week liturgies. Now I encourage you to "do the exercises." Go and experience these beautiful rites. Participate actively in the Holy Week services and together we will enter more deeply into the death of Christ "so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, / we too might live in newness of life."

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