

Three Days to Rediscover Our Identity in Christ

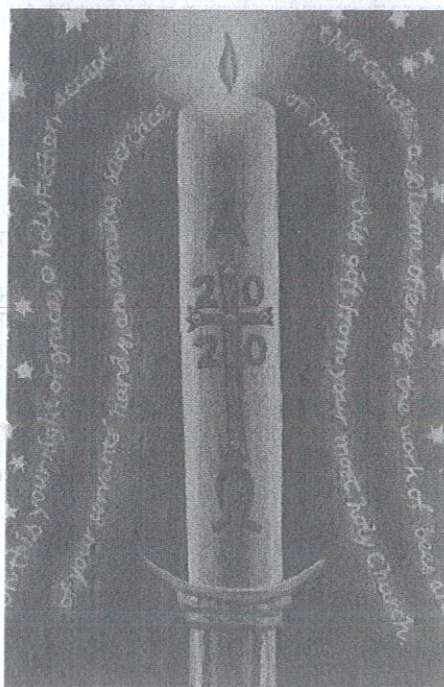
Kathy Kuczka

During the Passover seder, the youngest person at the table asks, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The leader then names those things that make the Passover seder different from other holiday meals. As we prepare for the Sacred Paschal Triduum, we may ask, "What makes these days different from all other days?"

The word *Triduum* is a Latin word that means "three days." The Church calls the three days before Easter—Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday—the "culmination of the entire liturgical year" (*General Norms of the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, 18). During the span of seventy-two hours, the community commemorates the core of what they believe—Christ, crucified, buried, and risen—as well as the heart of who the community is—a people freed and forgiven, restored and renewed by Christ's resurrection.

These mysteries are too much for one day. They must take place over several days. Even so, the Church observes them as one unified celebration, designing them to flow one into another. On Holy Thursday, the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper ends without a dismissal, continuing into the night, and perhaps the next morning, with adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. On Friday, the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord begins without a greeting and ends without a dismissal. On Holy Saturday, the Easter Vigil begins after nightfall.

To prepare for the Sacred Triduum, members of the community clear their calendars to journey with Christ, with the elect who will receive the initiation sacraments at the Vigil, and with one another through death to new life. This journey demands spiritual preparation that is different from other major feasts. With the exception of the sacraments of penance and the anointing of the sick, the Church abstains



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from celebrating any sacraments on Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The tabernacle is empty from the beginning of the Mass of the Lord's Supper to the end of Holy Communion at the Easter Vigil. Even the environment is made bare. On Holy Thursday, the altar is stripped and crosses are removed so that the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord begins without a cross, without candles, and without cloths on the altar. The faithful keep a paschal fast that anticipates the joy of Christ's resurrection.

During the Triduum, the Church's most powerful Scriptures are proclaimed, special rituals are performed, and symbols are employed. The washing of feet is reserved for the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday. The adoration of the cross is observed only at the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord on Good Friday. The community gathered after dark under the shadow of a full moon is called for only at the

Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. The lighting and blessing of a fire, and the community processing behind the Paschal candle takes place only at the Easter Vigil. Unlike the common practice of celebrating Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist on separate occasions, the Triduum brings these three sacraments of initiation together in one grand liturgy.

The three days that make up the Triduum are different because, unlike any other days in the liturgical year, the community walks through the most profound mysteries of its faith. We encounter Christ in the most solemn Scriptures, rituals, and symbols of our tradition. If we do this well, we will be drawn into a deeper intimacy with Christ's dying and rising. We will know Christ's victory over death as ours. We will rediscover who we truly are—a chosen people, the beloved of God, unafraid of death, assured of new life.

Text by Kathy Kuczka, author of *Connecting the Liturgy with Our Lives: Print and Digital Resources for Faith Formation* (LTP, 2019).
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www.LTP.org. *Pastoral Liturgy* magazine, March/April 2020, www.PastoralLiturgy.org.

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Keeping the Triduum

Maureen A. Kelly, MA



Imagine planning for weeks and maybe even months to attend an important event in your life and then missing most of it, or getting tickets to the Super Bowl and arriving just in time to see people heading for the parking lot. That's what it might be like for people who don't realize that the rituals and reflections of the Triduum are a significant facet of their faith journey.

On a spiritual level, when we miss the Triduum liturgies we miss the remembering of the stories and events that form us as a baptized faithful community living out the Paschal Mystery—the dying and rising of Christ.

The Triduum, which includes Easter, is the highpoint of the liturgical year. It begins with the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday and concludes with evening prayer on Easter Sunday. It is a time for the faithful to stop and reflect on their Baptism, in order to become renewed in their own baptismal calling.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

In the very early Church, the Night of the Great Vigil or the Easter Vigil was the only annual celebration of Christians. Every Christian was expected to attend, and they did. It is interesting to note that the Masses of Easter Sunday began in order to provide for the overflow of people from the Vigil.

Two to three centuries later, fast days were set aside to prepare for the Great Vigil, and many Christians became fascinated with the historical unfolding of the events of Christ's Passion. Dramas and celebrations around these events developed into a longer celebration called the "Great Week," and later "Holy Week." Through the centuries, believers grew to understand Holy Week (what we now call Triduum) as a reenactment of the historical events in Jesus' life. During this time, some of the direct connection to the baptismal commitment faithful was lost. By the beginning of the twentieth century what had begun as the only celebration of the Easter Vigil became an early morning Holy Saturday celebration with very few faithful attending. The main focus was on Easter Sunday, with little connection between the Paschal Mystery and the renewal of baptismal promises by the faithful.

As a result of liturgical research into the early Church in the twentieth century, however, changes were made in the

way we celebrated Holy Week. Vatican II restored the catechumenate, known in most parishes today as the RCIA. With this change, the focus on the baptismal character of the Triduum and the Easter season reemerged with an emphasis on the already baptized assembly. That focus continues today as the baptized are called to consider more deeply what it means to be baptized into the dying and rising of Jesus and to live as the body of Christ in the world.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Holy Thursday: How does Jesus' example of "washing the feet" translate into action for Christians today? Reflect on the words of Jesus: "I have given you an example. What I have done, you also must do."

Good Friday: Jesus gave his life for our salvation. For what am I willing to lay down my life? Jesus entrusted his spirit into the hands of his Father. How willing am I to put my trust in God?

Holy Saturday: On this night, we are asked to reject sin and renew our faith in God and the Church. How does this renewal of baptismal promises help me to live a life of faith?

ACTIONS TO TAKE

- Attend the Triduum services with family or friends.
- Plan ways to fast from food and activities during the Triduum in order to experience it as a kind of retreat.
- With family or faith-sharing group, talk about what difference your own Baptism makes in your life. **R**

SCRIPTURE CORNER

John 13:1–15; Hebrews 4:14–16; Romans 6:3–11

Read and reflect on these passages. How are they calling you to prepare to renew your baptismal promises?

MAUREEN A. KELLY is an expert on sacramental catechesis and religious education. She holds an MA in theology from the Catholic University of Louvain and is a founding member of the North American Forum on the Catechumenate.