

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

On Palm Sunday we begin once again the holiest and most solemn week of our entire liturgical year. This week we accompany Jesus during the last days of his life on earth. This week our services are a bit different and yes, a bit longer. The fact is special occasions by their nature take more time or are given more time e.g., birthdays and anniversary celebrations. Ideally, we should come to our Holy Week celebrations with a spirit that says: let's not rush through these special celebrations.

The readings for Passion Sunday revolve around the two meanings of the word "passion." Christ felt such passion (love) for humanity that he took on our human condition and endured the most extreme passion (suffering) we can imagine as the servant of God.

The Triduum - Three in One, One in Three

The Church tells us that our celebration of the Triduum is the "culmination of the entire liturgical year." The Triduum is not so much three celebrations, (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil) but one continuous celebration with three parts to it. The unitive nature of the three liturgies is underlined by the omission of a concluding rite on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. These two liturgies are "left hanging," so to speak, incomplete without that which follows, as if the liturgies of Holy Thursday and Good Friday are saying to us, "we are not done yet. To be continued."

We are celebrating the Passover or passion of Jesus Christ. By dying and rising, God's Son broke the bonds of death and was restored to life. The connection and meaning for us is that if we unite our lives to Christ, he will take us through our pain and darkness and lead us into the fullness of God's light. Nothing in our Church year is more important than our celebration of the Triduum.

Holy Thursday – Mass of the Lord's Supper

The Triduum begins with the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper. The Mass begins with the tabernacle entirely empty for we receive Holy Communion this evening from the bread and wine consecrated at this Mass, not from a previous Mass; the entire community is gathered at this one Eucharist with all the priests, ministers and parishioners celebrating together.

The Gospel proclaimed at this Mass of the Lord's Supper is not one of the accounts of the "institution of the Eucharist." Instead the Church presents to us John 13:1-15: Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. And not only do we hear about Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, but we see and experience it. On Holy Thursday, the Presider following the example of Christ, will take off his outer vestment and wash the feet of several members of the assembly. This simple ritual reminds us that we as followers of Christ are called to be people of the towel and water-people ready to be humble servants of those in need.

After Holy Communion, we will have what is called the Transfer of the Eucharist to a chapel of repose. Since there is no Mass on Good Friday we need to reserve consecrated hosts for the Good Friday communion service. After the procession the altar is stripped.

Good Friday-Celebration of the Lord's Passion

The first thing one might wonder or ask about this day is why is this event called "Good" Friday, when it was the day the Son of God was cruelly tortured and crucified? This day is called Good Friday because it was the day Jesus willingly sacrificed his life for us and our sins. It is called "Good" because it shows forth the absolute goodness of God on our behalf.

Good Friday is the most sober day of the entire Church year. The altar is bare, without cloths, candles or cross. There is no Mass on this day. It is a day of fasting. There are no greetings, genuflections, opening songs, or processions. We simply come and prostrate in humble submission before the word and the glorious cross of Christ. The Liturgy consists of three parts: The Liturgy of the Word, The Veneration of the Cross and Holy Communion. In the Veneration of the Cross, a large cross is brought forward, unveiled and presented to us. We come forward to kiss or touch this instrument of torture. We, as church, venerate the cross as an act of gratitude to Christ, who turned the wood of the cross an instrument of torture, into the means of our redemption and a sign of God's infinite love. When we come forward to venerate the cross, we bring all the pain, hurt and suffering in our lives and unite them to the sufferings of Jesus.

As on Holy Thursday, there is no concluding rite. All depart in silence. This tells us "we are not done yet" with our celebration of the Lord's Passion. It will be continued tomorrow evening, after sunset, with the Easter vigil.

Easter Vigil

St. Gregory of Nazianzus, called the Easter Vigil the "solemnity of solemnities." St. Augustine called it the "Mother of Vigils." In the early church the Vigil started after sunset and continued all night until sunrise. The Vigil is of course, the most solemn and important celebration of the entire Liturgical year, more important than midnight Mass at Christmas. The Vigil celebrates the victory of Jesus over the darkness of Good Friday, his victory over sin and death. The Easter Vigil has four main parts, the Service of Light, Liturgy of the Word, Celebration of Baptism and Confirmation, and Liturgy of the Eucharist.

During the Service of Light, the Easter Vigil begins outdoors with the lighting and blessing of the Easter fire. All participants are encouraged to gather outside for this beautiful ritual. The new Paschal Candle is then lit from the Easter fire. We process into a dark church (symbolizing the world without Christ) with the Paschal Candle chanting "Lumen Christi" (Light of Christ). The Service of Light concludes with the beautiful chanting of the Exultet which celebrates Christ's victory over death.

During the Liturgy of the Word we listen to the stories of creation and redemption. St. Augustine in an Easter Vigil Sermon exhorts us: "Watch I tell you and pray. Let us celebrate the vigil internally and externally. Listen to God speak to us in the readings. Let us speak to him in our prayers. If we hear his words obediently, he to whom we pray will dwell in us."

The Celebration of Baptism and Confirmation is very beautiful and rich with sacred ritual. The Elect (the unbaptized) are called forth and presented to the community. They process around the church as the

community chants the Litany of the Saints invoking their intercession for these brothers and sisters who are about to enter the baptismal waters. The baptismal waters are solemnly blessed. Then follows the Profession of Faith and Baptism. While the elect change into their white robes we the already baptized are sprinkled with the newly blessed holy water as we renew our own baptismal promises. The neophytes (the newly baptized) will then receive the Sacrament of Confirmation.

The Easter Vigil reaches its culminating point in the celebration of the Eucharist. Our Church tells us that tonight's Eucharist is the "Easter Sacrament paramount. It is the consummation of Christian initiation and a foretaste of the everlasting Easter." This is a big moment for the elect who have been looking forward to this moment for a long time.

I urge you with all my heart to make a special effort to participate in our celebration of the Triduum, the high point of our church's year. I encourage parents to introduce your children to these beautiful celebrations. Sit up front so that your children can see everything that is going on and become engaged in it.