



The Holiest Week of our Church Year

Today, 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. Today's liturgy is longer primarily because of the long passion narrative. This year, we are making a concerted effort to shorten all three of the Triduum liturgies. But 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."

PALM SUNDAY

Today's first reading is one of the four powerful "suffering servant" poems from Isaiah. You would think that the author received a special glimpse into the sufferings of Christ as he wrote these poems. In today's first reading, the servant says:

*"I gave my back to those who struck me ...
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting."*

On Good Friday, Isaiah says the following about the servant:

*"Our infirmities he bore, our sufferings he endured...
He was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins."*

Our second reading today is Paul's famous 'kenosis' passage. 'Kenosis' is the Greek word for 'self emptying.' Writing to a community in which the members often bicker and believe some are more important than others, Paul holds up before them the humble servant of Nazareth. Though he is divine, he does not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he empties himself (of any sense of self-importance) and becomes a humble servant to all who

open their hearts to him. What a beautiful example for us. In many ways, the Christian life is about emptying ourselves of self so that we might be filled with God's goodness and wisdom.

During our three-year cycle of readings, we are presented with one of the three synoptic Gospels. We listen to John's Gospel on Good Friday. This year (Cycle B), we listen to Mark's account of Jesus' passion. Two characteristics of Mark's passion are:

- Jesus' fidelity to God and his mission, no matter what the cost, contrasts with the *infidelity* of the disciples and the crowd. Jesus has no desire to die; he prays three times that God would spare him. But if fidelity to God and his mission involved embracing the cross and death, he was willing to do this. This fidelity is expressed in his wonderful prayer of surrender: "*Not my will but your will be done.*" In stark contrast, we notice weakness and infidelity in the disciples. They fall asleep when Jesus needs their support in the garden. Peter, the leader, denies Jesus. Judas betrays him. At the time of his arrest, they all flee and leave him. At the time of his trial, the crowds who had previously sang his praises now chant: "*Crucify him! Crucify him!*" But not all are unfaithful. A few women remain close to him. One anoints him; others keep watch as he dies on the Cross.
- Mark's passion also presents us with a very *human* picture of Jesus. In the garden, he begs the Father three times to free him from dying. We can *feel* Jesus' disappointment when he finds his beloved disciples asleep not just once but three times. What must he have felt when all his disciples "fled and left him"? How painful it must have been for Jesus to hear the crowds call for the release of the criminal Barabbas and demand Jesus' crucifixion—and most of all, the sense of his Father abandoning him: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" This is a cry of one steeped in human agony. Jesus pays the ultimate price for fidelity to his call.

The Feeling of God's Absence When Dying

We are all familiar with physical, emotional and mental suffering. To what extent have we experienced spiritual suffering, the feeling that God has abandoned us or is absent in our time of need? Such suffering was the lot of many great saints like St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.

Perhaps the time when we might most need the sense of God's presence is when we are dying. Yet it seems that is not always given to people—even to very faith-filled people. In my years as a priest, I have noticed many people die peaceful deaths and I have seen many others struggle very much, faith-wise, in their dying. A few years ago, Fr. Ron Rollheiser had a very interesting article on this issue in the *Florida Catholic*.

"A common soldier dies without fear, but Jesus died afraid." Iris Murdoch wrote those words and they teach one of the lessons of Gethsemane. The Garden of Gethsemane is also the place where we are put to the test. What does this mean?

The great spiritual writer **Fr. Henri Nouwen** once wrote a book ("In Memoriam") within which he tried to come to grips with his mother's death. The manner of her death had surprised him and left him struggling with some painful doubts and questions. Why?

His mother had lived a full life; she had died surrounded by a loving family and friends, and in her final illness had been made as comfortable and pain-free as possible by the best of modern medicine. What's troubling about that?

She'd died struggling, it seemed, with her faith, unable to find at the most crucial moment of her life consolation from the God she'd loved and served so faithfully her whole life.

His mother, as he explains at the beginning of the book, had been a woman of exceptional faith and goodness. He was teaching abroad when he received the phone call that she was dying. Flying home to be with her, he mused naively how, painful as it was going to be, his mother's death would be her final gift of herself and her faith to her family. A woman who had given them the faith during her life would surely deepen that gift by the way in which she would face her death.

But what he met in his mother and her struggles as she died was, at least to outward appearances, very different. Far from being peaceful and serene in her faith, she fought doubt and fear, struggling, it seemed to continue to believe and trust what she had believed in and trusted in her whole life. For Henri, expecting that someone of such deep faith should die serenely and without fear, this was very disconcerting.

"Why," he asked, "would God do this? Why would someone of such deep faith seemingly struggle so badly just before her death?"

The answer eventually came to him: All her life, his

mother had prayed to be like Jesus and to die like Jesus. Shouldn't it make sense then that she should die like Jesus, struggling mightily with doubt and darkness, having to utter, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" Jesus didn't die serenely, but struggling with doubt. Shouldn't his most committed followers expect a similar struggle?

The great mystics called this struggle "the dark night of faith," an experience within which God purifies us by seemingly withdrawing all sense of his felt presence so that our thoughts and feelings run dry and we can no longer imagine God's existence. We become, in our hearts and heads, atheists at that moment, though something in our souls knows another reality.

And it's an awful feeling, one of the worst pains possible. Darkness, chaos and fear overwhelm us and we stand, literally, on the brink of nothingness, of nonexistence, sensing our finitude, littleness and loneliness in a way we never sensed them before. We feel exactly what it would mean to live in a universe where there is no God.

The great doctors of the soul tell us that, while nobody is immune from this trial, it is generally experienced in so radical a way only by those who are the most mature in the faith and thus more ready to be purified by its particular fire. It's not surprising then that it is experienced so strongly by people like Henri Nouwen's mother.

The rest of us tend to get it in bits and pieces. Little doses of what Jesus experienced on the cross appear in our lives, reveal the fearful edges of nothingness, and let us taste for a moment what reality would feel like if there were no God. Part of the darkness and pain of that (and why it feels as if we are suddenly atheists) is that, in that experience, we come to realize that our thoughts about God are not God and how we imagine faith is not faith. God is beyond what we can feel and imagine and faith is not a warm feeling in the heart or a certainty in the mind, but a brand in the soul—beyond thought and feeling. One way or the other, all of us have to learn this. But we'd like the lesson to come to us a bit more gently than how it came to Jesus in his last hours. Whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer and say, "Do not put us to the test," we're asking God to spare us from this night of doubt.

Reflection:

**What strikes you most about the above article?
Currently, how do you feel about death and dying?**

THE TRIDUUM: THREE-IN-ONE, ONE-IN-THREE

Mother Church tells us that our celebration of the Triduum is the "culmination of the entire liturgical year." She says that 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....*"

The Meaning

What are we celebrating in this continuous "three-in-one and one-in-three" liturgy? 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. Perhaps one reason that the Church has not made these days holy days of obligation is that by doing so, she would be stating the obvious. It would be like making it obligatory for us to celebrate Independence Day or an important anniversary. No one should have to tell us to come to Church on these days. If we are in touch with our Catholic Christian tradition, we would automatically plan to be there. Now for a brief look at each of the three moments of this one continuous celebration.

Holy Thursday

The Triduum begins with the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper. This Mass preserves several traditions that were once common to every Eucharist—and in a sense are ideal for every celebration—but now seem special and different." 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 opening prayer reminds us that "we are gathered here to share in the supper which your only Son left to his Church to reveal his love." The first reading (Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14) gives the background and de-

tails for 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 (1Corinthians 11:23-26) contains the earliest written account of the Lord's Supper. "I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, namely, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"

The Gospel proclaimed at this Mass of the Lord's Supper is not one of the accounts of the "institution of the Eucharist" (Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:14-20). 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 who in turn will move to various parts of the Church and wash the feet of others.

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 to 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*.

Adoration Chapel. On Holy Thursday at 7:00 pm, the Eucharist will be removed from the Chapel prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper at 7:30 pm. It will be returned *after* the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, about 11:00 pm. After Holy Communion on Holy Thursday, the consecrated hosts which will be used on Good Friday, will be taken into Our Lady's Chapel, where there will be adoration until midnight. At midnight, the hosts will be taken from Our Lady's Chapel and placed on the altar of repose.

Good Friday — Celebration of the Lord's Passion

Good Friday is the most sober day of the entire Church year. Sober is perhaps the key word—the liturgy is very restrained and straightforward. The altar is bare, without cloths, candles or cross. There is no Mass on this day. "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.

The Liturgy consists of three parts: Liturgy of the Word, 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. It is as if we were asked to kiss a guillotine or the electric chair.

THE 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. So, we can say our celebration of the *Easter Vigil* is a "mini-celebration." 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

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. Our 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.

Liturgy of the Word

During the Liturgy, we listen to the stories of creation and redemption. This year we will only read three of the seven readings from the Old Testament. 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."

Celebration of Baptism and Confirmation

This part of the Vigil 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 waters of our makeshift baptismal pool 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 be confirmed.

This year, we will baptize and initiate into our Catholic Community 3 children and 12 adults. Recently, I heard on EWTN that about 200,000 adults join the Catholic Church each year. That is surely good news.

Liturgy of the Eucharist

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.

Sacrament of Reconciliation

Fr. Martin and I will be available for confessions after the Holy Thursday celebration and after the Celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday and the Stations of the Cross.

Have a prayerful Holy Week,

Fr. Laron

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