

Three Holy Days

A Lenten Series on the Easter Triduum



Part I - The Easter Triduum

The season of Lent has always been an important time in the life of the Catholic Church. It begins very dramatically with the reception of ashes, in a sense, marking us as God's people. Near the end of the season we receive palms which remind us of the people's love for Jesus - a love which turned to hate and indifference quite rapidly. The special practices of Lent....added prayer, fasting, abstinence, almsgiving... remind us that this is no ordinary time. Because Lent is a season with a personality of its own, we tend to think of it as a season which has its existence just for the sake of itself. However, it is important to remind ourselves that Lent exists only as a preparation for something bigger. That something bigger is the **Easter Triduum**.

The term **Easter Triduum** might not sound familiar to you; however, you are very familiar with it. The Triduum is the three-day celebration of the death and resurrection of Christ - Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Vigil/Easter Sunday. The Church meets at times during those three days to remember what it is that Jesus has done for us. Lent often overshadows the Triduum, but the documents from Vatican Council II tell us:

*"Christ redeemed us all and gave perfect glory to God principally through his paschal mystery: dying he destroyed our death and rising he restored our life. **Therefore the Easter Triduum of the passion and resurrection of Christ is the culmination of the entire liturgical year.**"*

General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar, # 18

Lent exists so that we can prepare ourselves for these three great days. What is remembered during these three days is so spectacular and miraculous that it takes the Church fifty days to celebrate it. From the close of Easter Sunday until Pentecost we celebrate with great joy that which Jesus has done for us.

Just imagine that someone you loved was torn from you unexpectedly, dying a painful, hideous death, and suddenly that person is brought back to life. Imagine your joy. How would you express that joy? Could you be happy for one day and be done with it? Probably not. It would take many days, perhaps a lifetime to express your joy. Because that person's life has been restored, your life has been restored.

That is exactly what happens. Jesus dies a hideous death. God's only Son sent to save us has been put to death. And then suddenly he is alive again. We need fifty days to celebrate this great miracle - or perhaps we need our lifetime to express it. Thus we take forty days (Lent) to prepare, three days (Easter Triduum) to experience, and fifty days (Easter time) to celebrate the great mystery of our faith.

In this article, we will explore the importance of the Easter Triduum and what each of the three days celebrates. Those days are so important that all who are able are encouraged to celebrate them together. Hopefully, the knowledge you gain will call you to be present at the celebration of the Easter Triduum.

Part II - Three Holy Days

What the Triduum commemorates, that which makes it the "culmination of the entire liturgical year," is the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus was willing to die for our sins and was resurrected, death no longer is the end of life for us. It is the beginning of new life. We gather at the Easter Triduum to remember the saving act of Jesus and the miracle of his resurrection. Because Jesus died and was resurrected, we live.

The term Triduum means "three days." The three days are counted as the Hebrews counted their days, from dusk to dusk. Therefore, the three days of the Easter Triduum are from dusk on Holy Thursday to dusk on Good Friday (day one), dusk on Good Friday to dusk on Holy Saturday (day two), and dusk on Holy Saturday to dusk on Easter Sunday (day three). Each of those days "tells" a different part of the story of Jesus' saving action. On Holy Thursday we remember the Last Supper. Jesus gives us the Eucharist and tells us to "Do this in memory of me." He then washes the feet of the apostles. On Good Friday we remember the passion and death of Jesus. We celebrate the resurrection of Christ either at the Easter Vigil on Saturday night when new members are baptized and welcomed into our Catholic community or on Easter Sunday morning.

We look at the Easter Triduum as one single celebration that lasts for three days. We cannot separate the death of Jesus from his resurrection. We do not spend all of the three days in church, but at various times during those days, we are called to church to gather and remember together. When we are not in church, we are asked to keep the spirit of those days even in our homes, if possible. Those days are not days of "business as usual."

In the following paragraphs we will look at each of the three days to learn something about the significance of each day and how we can prepare ourselves to draw closer to God through a good observance of the Easter Triduum.

Part III - Holy Thursday

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General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar, #18*

Part II discusses the three days of the Easter Triduum: dusk of Holy Thursday to dusk of Good Friday, dusk of Good Friday to dusk of Holy Saturday, and dusk of Holy Saturday to dusk of Easter Sunday. We set these days aside as days to remember the great saving action of Jesus Christ on our behalf and his resurrection on the third day. We are called to church at various times during these three days to remember together, and when we are not in church, we try to spend our time at home more simply with quiet time and less influence from the outside world of entertainment and activity. Now we look at the first day of the Triduum more closely - Holy Thursday.

Many people are under the impression that Lent ends with Easter Sunday, but Lent really ends at dusk on Holy Thursday. Our forty-day preparation for celebrating a good Easter is complete on Thursday; our time is up. All regular masses in a parish are suspended to allow for only one mass, the mass of the Last Supper held always on Thursday evening. There are no daytime masses held anywhere in the Catholic world, only the evening mass which begins the Triduum celebration.

Because the procession of Holy Thursday is the procession for a three-day celebration, it is larger and more encompassing than the procession of a regular Sunday mass. One part of the procession exclusive to Holy Thursday is the procession of the holy oils. The oils used in the parish throughout the year are received at the Chrism Mass, a special mass held once a year at

the cathedral and presided over by the bishop. All the oil used in the entire diocese is blessed and presented to each parish at that time.

The sacred Scripture which we hear this night reminds us of the first Passover meal of the Israelites as they prepare for their journey out of slavery in Egypt. We then hear of the institution of the Eucharist by Christ and his admonition of "Do this, in remembrance of me." And then we have the wonderful example of the service to which we all are called when Jesus, who is Lord and master, takes a basin of water and a towel and washes the feet of his apostles ending with the words, "What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do." Christ saves us from the slavery of sin, the Eucharist nourishes and strengthens us so that we can serve our brothers and sisters. In order to reinforce this important teaching of Jesus, the presider of the mass washes the feet of members of the parish family.

The mass continues; we receive the Eucharist and the final blessing. The Blessed Sacrament is then taken to the chapel to rest there; the sanctuary is cleared, and we are invited to stay and vigil with the Blessed Sacrament until midnight, if we so desire. There is no procession to end this mass because the celebration does not end. The prayer continues in our homes until we are called together again on Good Friday to remember the next part of the story of our salvation.

Part IV - Good Friday

The Easter Triduum has been the topic of this article because, as a Vatican Council II document states, ". . . *the Easter Triduum of the passion and resurrection of Christ is the culmination of the entire liturgical year.*" What we do during the Easter Triduum is to remember the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ over a period of three days. We are called together at various times during the three days to remember different aspects of Jesus' saving action on our behalf. When we are not in church, we try to spend our time at home more simply without the distractions of the "outside" world. In Part III we discussed Holy Thursday; now we speak of Good Friday.

Something which has always set Good Friday apart is that it is a day of fast and abstinence. Because we are asked to fast on Good Friday, we often think of this day as part of Lent. But remember that Lent ended at dusk on Thursday. The fast of Good Friday is not the Lenten fast of discipline and repentance. It is the excited, nervous fasting of anticipation. We might all have experienced this type of fast before a wedding (a happy time) or before a wake or funeral (a sad time). At these times food is not important to us. On Friday we remember that something monumental happened. We remember that someone died so that we might live - not just someone, but God.

We begin the service in silence with no procession. There is no need to process. This service does not stand alone; it is a continuation of what began on Holy Thursday. The priest kneels or more often prostrates himself as a sign of utter humility before God. During the Liturgy of the Word, the Passion of Christ is proclaimed. We listen and remember how Jesus suffered and died for our sins. After the Passion we are reminded that there are many people in the world who need our prayers, and so in our role as priestly people we pray a more lengthy and elaborate form of the General Intercessions.

Then a cross, the symbol of our salvation, is brought forward for us to venerate. The veneration of the cross is a practice unique to Good Friday. It is our opportunity to humble ourselves before the awesome saving action of Christ. We approach the cross and acknowledge its power in a number of ways. We can genuflect before the cross, kiss it, kneel before it, touch it with our hand, or stand before it and say a short prayer. The method we choose to show our respect is our own choice. After veneration we participate in a simple reception of the Eucharist and then leave church again in silence to continue our prayer and fasting at home and to return on Saturday evening for the Easter Vigil.

Part V - Holy Saturday

We have discussed the first days of the Easter Triduum, Holy Thursday and Good Friday. We have talked about what will happen on those days as we gather together to remember the saving action of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Now we look at Holy Saturday.

In Part IV we discussed Good Friday, not a fast of repentance but a fast of anticipation. The Church asks us, though it is not a requirement, to continue our fast through Saturday, if possible. Our anticipation has not ended with the death of Christ. In fact, our anticipation increases as we wait for the resurrection; for our salvation was not a result of Christ's death alone but of his death and resurrection. We await his resurrection in nervous anticipation.

The Easter Triduum begins with the mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday; it reaches its high point in the Easter Vigil, celebrated on Saturday night. This celebration is a long one; we have a lot to do this evening. We proclaim with fire and song that Christ is risen. We listen to the Scripture stories of God's interaction with humankind from creation through to the resurrection.

We baptize those desiring to be Catholic and confirm and give Eucharist to those seeking full membership in the Catholic Church. Then we are strengthened with the spiritual food of Christ's body and blood.

Because we have a lot to do this evening, we need time to do it well. Some people think of the celebration of the Easter Vigil as just another mass, but one that is longer than a Sunday mass. This is not true. There are things we do at the Easter Vigil that we do at no other time in the church year. The most significant of these is the welcoming of new members into our Church and our parish. They have been studying and learning about what it means to be Catholic for a year, and now it is time for them to become one of us. We hear more of Holy Scripture proclaimed on this night because our salvation history is a long story dating back to the creation of the world. We build a large fire outside to remind us that Jesus is our light in the darkness, and after lighting the new Easter candle from this first fire, we process it into the darkened church and hear of Christ's resurrection. We need time to do all of these things well.

A vigil is a watch kept for an extended period of time. In our daily lives we might keep vigil as we wait by the telephone or in a hospital waiting room for news. We cannot rush a vigil; it must take as long as it takes. The same is true of the Easter Vigil on Saturday night. As masses go, it is considerably longer than a Sunday mass. As vigils go, it is relatively short.

Part VI - Summary

In this article, we have discussed the Easter Triduum, also called the Paschal Triduum, in hopes that a greater understanding of the meaning and importance of these days will encourage us to come together and celebrate the great mystery of our faith.

We have learned that Triduum means "three days" and that the three days are counted from dusk to dusk, Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday. These days are the culmination of the entire church year because they celebrate the Paschal Mystery which is the basis of our faith, dying Christ destroys our death and rising he restores our life. The sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf and His resurrection on the third day cannot be celebrated in only three days, however. The joy in knowing that Jesus lives after we have seen him dead on the cross spills over, and we celebrate during the fifty days of Eastertime.

The Easter Triduum is one celebration which continues for three days. We come to church at various times during those days, and when we are not in church, we try to live a quieter, simpler life focusing more of our attention on Christ and less on the secular world.

There are practices we experience during the Triduum that we see at no other time during the year: the washing of the feet, the veneration of the cross, the service of light, the singing of the Exultet, the baptism of the elect, the reception of the candidates into full membership in the Catholic Church. It is said that the Triduum is so full of moments that can touch our inner being and move our soul that we would not be able to experience them more than once each year.

Called by your baptism as a child of God, you are invited to experience the Easter Triduum with all Catholics throughout the world. To experience the fullness of the Triduum is to be present for the mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, the service on Good Friday, and either the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday evening or mass on Easter Sunday morning.

