

THREE GREAT DAYS

THE EASTER TRIDUUM

Kevin J Fritz

The season of Lent ends on Holy Thursday evening when we enter into the Easter Triduum – the “*culmination of the entire liturgical year.*”¹

This is why these three days are the greatest days in our liturgical year when “*the Church solemnly celebrates the greatest mysteries of our redemption, keeping by means of special celebrations the memorial of her Lord, crucified, buried, and risen*”²

In this article we explain these special celebrations in order to bring about a greater understanding that will lead to a more active participation. We also see how these celebrations offer meaning for our ongoing journey of faith and conversion.

*“The Easter Triduum begins with the evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, reaches its high point in the Easter Vigil, and closes with evening prayer on Easter Sunday.”*³

Holy Thursday

Mass on Holy Thursday is celebrated in the evening and commemorates the last meal Jesus shared with his apostles the night before he died.

We celebrate three things: the institution of the Eucharist, the institution of the priesthood, and the washing of the feet of the apostles by Jesus.

This Mass “*is, first of all, the memorial of the institution of the eucharist, that is, of the memorial of the Lord’s Passover.*”⁴

The first reading reminds us of the Passover of the Jewish people in the land of Egypt when they procured a lamb and, in every house where they partook of the lamb, they applied some of the blood of the lamb to the doorpost of the house. This is the night on which they fled from slavery in Egypt after the Lord struck

down every first born of the land except in those houses marked by the blood of the lamb.

The second reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians tells us of the "account of the institution of the Christian Passover in the eucharist."⁵

Jesus gave bread and wine as his Body and Blood to the apostles and commanded them to "Do this in memory of me." This Mass "is also the memorial of the institution of the priesthood, by which Christ's mission and sacrifice are perpetuated in the world."⁶

The gospel reading from John gives us the example of the washing of the feet of the apostles by Jesus himself. The Mass on Holy Thursday also serves as "the memorial of that love by which the Lord loved us even to death."⁷

After the homily, the celebrant washes the feet of twelve members of the assembly. Jesus gave his apostles and us an example of how we should act when he washed the feet of the apostles. He performed the actions that a servant normally performed. We are called to be servants to one another – to welcome everyone into our lives – to wash their feet as a people of hospitality.

Joe O'Callaghan offers us this challenge:

"Can we see Jesus in the homeless, the poor, the immigrant, the Jew, the Muslim, the African women dying of HIV/AIDS, or those different from us in any way?"⁸

Do we welcome all people following the commandment of Jesus to love one another?

Our hospitality reaches out to welcome the people within our community as well as those who wish to join us – the sick and those who join us through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. During Holy Week, prior to this Mass, the bishop of the diocese blesses the Oil

Jesus gave his apostles and us an example of how we should act when he washed the feet of the apostles.

of the Sick and the Oil of Catechumens along with the consecration of the Chrism. These are distributed to all the parishes in the diocese for use in the sacraments during the year.

Before the presentation of the bread and wine on Holy Thursday, the parish celebrates the reception of the oils.

First, the oil of the sick used in the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is received. We pray:

"May the sick who are anointed with this oil experience the compassion of Christ and his saving love, in body and soul."⁹

The oil of catechumens is used prior to the baptism of infants and in the preparation of adults who come for baptism. We pray:

"Through anointing with this oil may our catechumens who are preparing to receive the savings waters of baptism be strengthened by Christ to resist the power of Satan and reject evil in all its forms."

Finally we receive the Chrism used in the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Ordination of a priest. This comes from the Greek word *chriein* and means anointing. The title Christ comes from the same word. Jesus is the anointed one and when we are anointed with Chrism we are anointed to be images of Christ in the world. It is the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit who will guide us. We pray:

"Through anointing with this perfumed Chrism may children and adults, who are baptized and confirmed, and presbyters, who are ordained, experience the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit."

After the oils are received, the gifts of bread and wine are presented and we continue with the Liturgy of the Eucharist during which the bread and wine become the very body and blood of Jesus Christ – the body of Christ given for us and the blood of Christ poured out on the cross. In Communion we receive this great gift.

There is no concluding rite for this Mass. After communion we transfer the body of Christ to an area of repose in a procession. Here we are invited to spend time and watch with Jesus in prayer and adoration returning *“to Jesus all the love he showers on us.”*¹⁰

We join the prayer of Jesus as he approaches his death: *“Not my will but yours be done.”* As Jesus struggled to accept God’s will in the garden before his death, we are invited to spend time with Jesus in our struggle to accept God’s will in our lives.

We depart in silence.

Good Friday

The Easter Triduum continues on Good Friday. In keeping with ancient tradition, the Church does not celebrate Mass on Good Friday. Instead we celebrate the liturgical service of the Lord’s Passion. This celebration has three parts:

- The Liturgy of the Word
- The Adoration of the Cross
- Communion

Just as we ended in silence the night before, we begin in silence. The priest and other ministers enter and prostrate themselves on the floor in an act of humility – the same humility we learn from Jesus Christ

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled

*himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)*¹¹

We are called to enter into the death of Jesus in humble submission so that by dying to ourselves and living for Christ we may also rise with him. In the Opening Prayer we pray that

*“...just as being conformed to him, we have borne by the law of nature the image of the man of earth, so by the sanctification of grace we may bear the image of the Man of heaven.”*¹²

The Liturgy of the Word *“has as its center John’s narrative of the passion of him who was portrayed in Isaiah as the servant of Yahweh (first reading) and who became the one High Priest by offering himself to the Father (second reading).”*¹³

We end the Liturgy of the Word with the General Intercessions for the Church, the Pope, the Clergy and Laity of the Church, those preparing for Baptism, the unity of all Christians, our Jewish brothers and sisters, those who do not believe in Christ, those who do not believe in God, those in public office, and for all of those in special need.

These intercessions *“signify clearly the universal effect of the passion of Christ, who hung on the cross for the salvation of the whole world.”*¹⁴

The second part is the Adoration of the Cross. As the cross is carried in procession we are called to

*“Behold the wood of the Cross, on which hung the salvation of the world.”*¹⁵

We are called to enter into the death of Jesus in humble submission so that by dying to ourselves and living for Christ we may also rise with him.

Each person is invited to come forward to show reverence to the Cross by a kiss or by touching it. We express our willingness to die to sin and give our lives in loving, humble service of others following the example of Christ who gave his life for us.

The third part is Communion. Since we do not celebrate Mass today there is no consecration of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. We receive the body of Christ from the hosts consecrated on Holy Thursday. As we receive the body of Christ that was given up for us in death, we are called to give our lives in humble service to one another. We are called to die to sin and selfishness.

The death of Jesus is not the end. His death leads to victory over sin and death in the resurrection. In the Concluding Prayer we acknowledge that God has *“restored us to life by the blessed Death and Resurrection of your Christ”* and we pray that by our participation in the mystery we have just celebrated *“we may have a life unceasingly devoted to you.”*¹⁶

Once again we all depart in silence.

Holy Saturday

As we move into Holy Saturday, the world is in silence and at rest. An ancient Holy Saturday homily tells us:

*“Something strange is happening – there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep.”*¹⁷

The Church abstains from the celebration of Mass on this day while we wait *“at the Lord’s tomb in prayer and fasting, meditating on his Passion and Death and on his Descent into Hell, and awaiting his Resurrection.”*¹⁸

The Descent into Hell is professed in the Apostle’s Creed when we say *“he descended into hell.”* What does this mean?

The Church tells us that it means Jesus really died and his soul joined those other souls who died before him. He joined the dead in *Sheol* in Hebrew or *Hades* in Greek. We translate these words as hell.

*“Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of the damned, but to free the just who had gone before him.”*¹⁹

Jesus went to the place of death to save the just who died before him, so that by his death the gates of heaven would be open for them.

As we reflect on this on Holy Saturday, we wait in silence and hope to celebrate the risen Christ.

I remember as an altar server we would receive our assignments for the next week on Saturday afternoon. One Holy Saturday I came to check my assignments and went into the church. This was when we still celebrated Mass on the high altar and the tabernacle was in the center of that altar. The tabernacle was open and empty but all the Easter lilies were in place around the tabernacle and the altar. I still remember this scene so vividly each year on Holy Saturday. It impressed on me the idea that everything is ready and we are waiting with great anticipation and hope.

We wait in silence and hope until darkness comes.

Jesus went to the place of death to save the just who died before him, so that by his death the gates of heaven would be open for them.

Easter Vigil

When darkness comes we begin the night vigil of Easter *“which is the greatest and most noble of all solemnities.”*²⁰

*“It is a nocturnal vigil, retaining its ancient character of vigilance and expectation, as the Christian people await the Resurrection of the Lord during the night.”*²¹

This vigil consists of four parts:

Service of Light
Liturgy of the Word
Baptismal Liturgy
Liturgy of the Eucharist

We begin in silence outside where a fire is prepared. This fire is a light in the darkness. Fire destroys just as the death of Jesus destroyed our sins. From death comes life. From the fire comes a light – the paschal candle representing the light of the risen Christ to *“dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds.”*²²

We move in procession from outside the church leaving the fire (and our sinfulness behind) and bring the light of Christ into a dark church. We listen to the wonderful Easter Proclamation calling us to exult and be glad *“knowing an end to gloom and darkness.”*²³ We rejoice in Christ who has *“wiped clean the record of our ancient sinfulness”* by *“pouring out his own dear Blood.”*²⁴

*“This is the night when Christ broke the prison bars of death and rose victorious from the under-world...The sanctifying power of this night dispels wickedness, washes faults away, restores lost innocence to the fallen, and joy to mourners, drives out hatred, fosters concord, and brings down the mighty”*²⁵

Now we move to the Liturgy of the Word. In darkness we remember *“the wonderful works of*

When darkness comes, we begin the night vigil of Easter as we wait for the Resurrection.

*God in the history of salvation.”*²⁶ Seven Old Testament readings are provided but we usually only read three of these readings. We remember and celebrate the continued presence of God in creation, the exodus event where the Israelites were freed from slavery passing through the water of the Red Sea, and the invitation of Isaiah to “come to the water.”

Each of these Old Testament readings is followed by a Responsorial Psalm and a Prayer. Then we proclaim the great hymn of praise – the Gloria. After the Opening Prayer, we proclaim the reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans that reminds us of our baptism in which *“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 the newness of life.”* (Romans 6:4)

Now we sing again the Alleluia which we have not sung during the season of Lent and hear the proclamation of the Resurrection in the gospel.

After the homily we begin the third part of this vigil – the Baptism Liturgy. The Elect are called forth for Baptism. The Elect are those unbaptized adults who desire to enter the Catholic Church and have been preparing through the process of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). In addition children and infants may also receive Baptism.

We invoke those who have gone before us in the Litany of Saints. Then the celebrant blesses the baptismal water. The blessing recalls many of the images of water in the Bible – creation, the flood, the Exodus event, the Baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River, and the water

that flowed from the side of Jesus at his death. We recall the command of Jesus after his Resurrection to go forth and baptize all people. We pray that the Holy Spirit will come upon this water so it *“may be found worthy to rise to the life of newborn children through water and the Holy Spirit.”*²⁷

Those who will be baptized make their baptismal promises renouncing sin and evil and professing their faith in what the Catholic Church teaches. Then they receive the sacrament of Baptism.

Now the entire assembly renews our own baptismal promises. At the beginning of Lent we were marked with ashes as a reminder of our sinfulness and the need for conversion. The season of Lent is a time of penance and growth as we try with God’s help to overcome the sinfulness of our life.

Lawrence Mick points out the connection between ashes and the water of baptism:

*“We dirty our faces on Ash Wednesday and are cleansed in the waters of the font. More profoundly, we embrace the need to die to sin and selfishness at the beginning of Lent so we can come to fuller life in the Risen One at Easter.”*²⁸

And so we are invited:

*“Dear brothers and sisters, through the Paschal Mystery we have been buried with Christ in Baptism, so that we may walk with him in newness of life. And so, now that our Lenten observance is concluded, let us renew the promises of Holy Baptism, by which we once renounced Satan and his works and promised to serve God in the holy Catholic Church.”*²⁹

Those who were baptized return to the assembly dressed in the white garment of their

We must clothe ourselves in Christ and bring the light of Christ into the world.

baptism since *“you have become a new creation and clothed yourselves in Christ.”*³⁰ They also receive a lighted candle reminding them to *“walk always as children of the light and keep the flame of faith alive in your hearts.”*³¹

These are challenges for all of us who have just renewed our own baptismal promises. We must clothe ourselves in Christ and bring the light of Christ into the world.

The candidates – those who are already baptized in another Christian denomination but now seek full entrance into the Catholic Church – profess their faith.

Now the newly baptized and those Christians who have joined the Catholic Church receive the sacrament of Confirmation.

We continue with the Liturgy of the Eucharist in the spirit of joy and thanksgiving in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ who has destroyed death and restored us to life.

The newly baptized and those Christians who have joined the Catholic Church now share for the first time with us in the great gift of the body and blood of Christ. We go forth to bring the joy of the resurrection into the world.

Easter Sunday

On Easter Sunday morning we celebrate that Christ is risen. We see the Paschal Candle reminding us of the light of the risen Christ.

The first reading is from the Acts of the Apostles – the witness of the early Christian community to the risen Christ. Two options are given for

the second reading from Paul that *“concerns the living out of the paschal mystery in the Church.”*³²

The risen Christ is truly among us today calling us to *“celebrate the feast, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”* (1Cor 5:8)

The journey we began in ashes at the beginning of Lent led through a process of conversion, repentance for our sins, and death to sin in Jesus Christ who died for us bringing us to the glory of the risen Christ and new life.

We embrace that new life as we renew our baptismal promises on Easter Sunday and are sprinkled with water reminding us of our baptism and the life giving water of the risen Christ. Today we begin life anew.

St. Gregory the Great challenges us:

*“...it remains for us all, each in his own measure, to make known to those around us the mystery of our new life in Christ.”*³³

The risen Christ is truly among us today.

Today we live anew.

We go forth transformed by our celebrations during the Easter Triduum to transform the world bringing the hope of Christ into the world.

Joe O’Callaghan reminds us:

*“Easter teaches me to hope. With God all things are possible. Jesus’ rising from the dead triumphs over our greatest fear, transforms us and gives meaning to our lives. That transformative moment gives us hope that we too can be transformed and transform our world.”*³⁴

We go forth transformed by our celebrations during the Easter Triduum to transform the world bringing the hope of Christ into the world proclaiming *“that even in our darkest moments Jesus is alive and with us!”*³⁵

NOTES

-
- ¹ General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar (1969): #18.
² *The Roman Missal*: 298.
³ General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar (1969): #19.
⁴ *Ceremonial of Bishops*: #297.
⁵ Lectionary for Mass: Introduction (1981): #99.
⁶ *Ceremonial of Bishops*: #297.
⁷ *Ceremonial of Bishops*: #297.
⁸ Joe O'Callaghan Jr., Three Days: Reflections on Sacred Moments: 2.
⁹ All references to the prayers for the reception of the oils are taken from *The Reception of the Holy Oils Blessed at the Chrism Mass*.
¹⁰ Joe O'Callaghan Jr., Three Days: Reflections on Sacred Moments: 2.
¹¹ All Scripture references are taken from *The New American Bible*
¹² *The Roman Missal*: 315.
¹³ Lectionary for Mass: Introduction (1981): #99.
¹⁴ *Paschale Solemnitatis*: #67.
¹⁵ *The Roman Missal*: 329.
¹⁶ *The Roman Missal*: 338.
¹⁷ "Ancient Homily on Holy Saturday." *The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. 2*: 496.
¹⁸ *The Roman Missal*: 339.
¹⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church: #633.
²⁰ *The Roman Missal*: 343.
²¹ Eighteen Questions on the Paschal Triduum: 7.
²² *The Roman Missal*: 346.
²³ *The Roman Missal*: 348.
²⁴ *The Roman Missal*: 349.
²⁵ *The Roman Missal*: 351-352.
²⁶ Lectionary for Mass: Introduction (1981): #99.
²⁷ *The Roman Missal*: 377.
²⁸ Lawrence E. Mick, "Ash Wednesday: Our Shifting Understanding of Lent."
²⁹ *The Roman Missal*: 382.
³⁰ *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*: #229.
³¹ *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*: #230.
³² Lectionary for Mass: Introduction (1981): #99.
³³ Gregory the Great, "Moral Reflections on Job 13, 21-23." *The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. 2*: 259.
³⁴ Joe O'Callaghan Jr., Three Days: Reflections on Sacred Moments: 5.
³⁵ Joe O'Callaghan Jr., Three Days: Reflections on Sacred Moments: 4.

RESOURCES USED

- “Ancient Homily on Holy Saturday.” *The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. 2*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975: 496-498.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday, 1994.
- Ceremonial of Bishops* (1984 excerpts) in *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource* (Volume I). Chicago: Third Edition. Liturgy Training Publications, 1991: 193-227.
- “Eighteen Questions on the Paschal Triduum.” *Newsletter*, Committee on Divine Worship, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, XLVI (February 2010): 5-8.
- General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* (1969).” In *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource* (Volume 1). Third Edition. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991: 173-184.
- Gregory the Great, “Moral Reflections on Job 13, 21-23.” *The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. 2*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975: 257-259.
- Lectionary for Mass: Introduction* (1981) in *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource* (Volume I). Third Edition. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991: 117-164.
- Mick, Lawrence E., “Ash Wednesday: Our Shifting Understanding of Lent.” *Catholic Update* (February 2004).
- Morris, Thomas H., *The RCIA: Transforming the Church*. Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1997.
- O’Callaghan Jr., Joe, *Three Days: Reflections on Sacred Moments*. Internet: http://www.stjeromenorwalk.org/Three_Days-Triduum-Reflections.pdf (accessed March 18, 2012).
- Paschale Solemnitatis: Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Easter Feasts*. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, January 16, 1988.
- The New American Bible* (Saint Joseph Edition). New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1992.
- The Reception of the Holy Oils Blessed at the Chrism Mass*. Washington, DC: Committee on Liturgy, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994.
- Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Study Edition*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988.
- The Roman Missal* (English Translation according to the Third Typical Edition). Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011.
- Walker, Susan, *Triduum! Formation, Preparation, Celebration*. San Jose CA: Resource Publications, Inc., 2004.