

# holy week

*Be quiet, for this day is holy. ~ Nehemiah 8:11*

**H**OLY WEEK IS THE HEART of the Church year. It is a week unique and most holy in the annual

cycle of sacred time for Christians. The liturgies of the Church observed during this week remember and *make present again* the passing of Jesus from life to death to new life, and all of creation along with him.

## Palm Sunday

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, also called Passion Sunday today because the theme of Jesus' suffering and death begins with the reading of the Passion. Parish liturgies begin with the blessing of palms somewhere outside the usual assembly area, in imitation of the triumphant entrance of Jesus from Bethany to Jerusalem (see Mt 21:1-11; Mk 11:1-11; Lk 19:29-45; Jn 12:12-19). The Gospel of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem is read, followed by a procession into church, with people holding blessed palms and singing festive songs. Immediately afterwards, the theme of triumph changes radically with the reading of the Passion narrative from one of the four Gospels. The Palm Sunday liturgy is therefore devoted more to the suffering of Christ than to his triumphant reception by the people. On Palm Sunday, the Church celebrates

*"Holy Week is the heart of the Church year."*

the beginning of Jesus' passage from life to death to new life: the Paschal Mystery.

## Preparation Days

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week are preparation days, both spiritually and physically, for the holy days to come later in the week. The tradition of receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation during these days is reminiscent of ancient practices. During early centuries, repentant sinners were absolved from their sins on Holy Thursday, after six weeks or more of public penance. This day was chosen so that all could participate in the solemnities of the *Triduum* (three days) and Easter. Today, many parishes conduct communal penance services during the early part of Holy Week.

## Holy Thursday

Holy Thursday begins the Triduum. The oldest and still official name of this day is "Thursday of the Lord's Supper." It commemorates the historical Gospel events surrounding the Last Supper and the institution of the Holy Eucharist. "Maundy Thursday," a popular title in English-speaking countries, comes from the solemn ritual of washing of feet in imitation of Jesus at his Last Supper. The name



*Christ's entry into Jerusalem, by Gustave Doré, 1855-1885*

*"Palm Sunday celebrates the beginning of Jesus' passage from life to death to new life."*

is a corruption of *mandatum* (Latin for "commandment") from the words of Jesus sung as the washing begins: "A new commandment I give to you" (Jn 13:34).

Parish liturgies take place in the evening, with joyful overtones. Bells ring and festive colors are used for vestments and decorations. The Gloria, not prayed since Ash Wednesday (except for solemnities such as the Feast of the Annunciation), returns for this brief moment. The tabernacle is empty so that all might receive the Eucharist from bread consecrated at this Mass.

The Holy Thursday ritual has included a ceremonial washing of feet by the presider since the 5<sup>th</sup> century. This ritual imitates Jesus' Last Supper action of humility and service. Appropriate songs are sung during this symbolic washing. Usually, twelve participants are chosen from the parish at large or from those in parish leadership positions.

At the end of the Holy Thursday liturgy, consecrated Hosts are carried in procession, with incense and song, to a chapel of adoration. These Hosts will be received the next day in Communion. After placing the Hosts in the tabernacle, an atmosphere of quiet watching with the Lord begins. It is common for people to spend a Holy Hour sometime before midnight in the adoration chapel.

### Good Friday

The second day of the Triduum is the Passion of the Lord, known as Good Friday, the anniversary of the death of Jesus on the cross just outside the walls of Jerusalem. The origin of the term "Good" for this day is unknown, but probably emphasizes the saving value of the historical event of the crucifixion of Jesus. The theme of this day throughout history has been one of quiet sadness and mourning for the crucified and dead Jesus.

On this one day of the entire year, the Mass is not celebrated. The Church's Good Friday liturgy takes place in the evening. The

emphasis of the liturgy is on Scripture readings and prayers, the veneration of the cross, and the reception of the Eucharist from the Hosts consecrated on Holy Thursday.

### Holy Saturday

The daytime hours of Holy Saturday continue the atmosphere of Good Friday, and have been observed as a time of quiet and fasting from the earliest centuries. The day has no liturgy or religious traditions of its own. There is an atmosphere of anticipation for the coming of night and for the celebration of Jesus' Resurrection.

Adults preparing for Baptism or reception into the Church at the Easter Vigil often spend some time in a mini-retreat, with fasting and prayer as the hours of the Easter Vigil approach.

### Easter Vigil

The Easter Vigil on the evening of Holy Saturday is the night of all nights and the primary celebration of Jesus' Resurrection. The late 20<sup>th</sup>-century restoration of the adult catechumenate (RCIA) first developed in the early Church has added an important feature to the Easter Vigil that had not existed for centuries: the public Baptism of adults, and reception of the other sacraments of initiation by them

and by already-Baptized adults being received into full communion with the Church.

The elaborate and beautiful ritual of the Easter Vigil calls for extensive preparation by the parish team and many other parishioners. The church is decorated; sacramentals of oil, incense, water, and fire are readied; and the liturgy is rehearsed. Adult Elect and Candidates begin their final hours of preparation.

The Easter Vigil has four clearly-defined parts: the service of light, the Liturgy of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, and the Eucharist. The service of light be-

*"On this one day of the entire year,  
the Mass is not celebrated."*



*His Eminence Theodore Cardinal McCarrick,  
Archbishop of Washington, DC from 2001-2006*

gins with a fully darkened church. The presider and other celebrants begin outside or at the back of the church, striking the Paschal flame and lighting the Paschal candle (the symbol of Christ's Resurrection), which is inscribed and adorned with appropriate symbols. Once the Paschal candle is



*An adult Baptism during the Easter Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday*

lit to the chant of *Lumen Christi* ("light of Christ"), its flame is used to light small candles held by those in the congregation. The Paschal candle is processed to the altar, during which *Lumen Christi* is sung twice more at intervals.

Following the arrival of the procession, the *Exsultet*, a recounting of the saving actions of Christ, is sung, without musical accompaniment. Then the readings of the Mass, several from the Old Testament, are interspersed with responsorial Psalms and prayers by the celebrant. The Liturgy of the Word is far lengthier than in any other Mass of the Church, consisting of as many as seven readings that recapitulate God's saving action throughout history. The prayer at the end of this part of the Liturgy of the Word is the Easter Proclamation, immediately after which the lights are turned on suddenly, and the Gloria is sung with the maximum amount of musical instruments, bells, and choir available to the parish.

Following the proclamation of the Gospel and the preaching of the homily, the celebration of Baptism of the Elect begins, followed by a rite to receive already-baptized Candidates, and Confirmation of all those just received into the Church. The Mass concludes with the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

### Easter

The theme of Easter morning continues the triumphant joy of the Easter Vigil. It remembers and celebrates the very foundation of Christianity: Jesus is raised from the dead, and is Lord. Those who believe and are

baptized share in this resurrection to new life. This theme will continue for the next fifty days of the Easter Season, which does not end until Pentecost Sunday.

It was natural that the very first followers of Jesus would hold the moment of Jesus' Resurrection sacred. It was the anniversary of that won-

derful time when they experienced him risen and still among them. His death had occurred on the most important of all Jewish feasts: the Passover. His Resurrection fulfilled all that the Passover had meant to them as Jews. It was an *exodus*, or passage, from the old times and the oppression of slavery to spiritual freedom. Jesus himself was the Paschal Lamb, slain to achieve this freedom.

Christ's Resurrection was the sign of new beginnings: a springtime. This theme was part of the evolution of the Passover long before the Exodus from Egypt. The ancestors of the Jews had celebrated a springtime festival of the first fruits of their planting with a sacrifice of grains and breads, and the first fruits of their flocks with a sacrifice of lambs. Under the direction of Moses, these feasts were combined as an annual memorial of the mystery of their escape from Egypt, and the "passing over" of them by the angel of death. For 3,000 years, and still today, Jews celebrate this drama of miraculous salvation by repeating the ancient story with song, Scripture readings, and symbolic foods: the Seder meal. Now, as throughout history, the ritual is observed in the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Nisan on the Jewish lunar calendar.

It was the Seder meal of this Passover that Jesus celebrated with his disciples the night before His crucifixion, with the command that it be celebrated in a new way as a memorial — an unbloody re-presentation — of his sacrificial and salvific death on the cross.

(CCC 1168-1169)

*"Easter remembers and celebrates the very foundation of Christianity:  
Jesus is raised from the dead, and is Lord."*

# THE CHRISM MASS

*You shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer;  
a holy anointing oil it shall be. ~ Exodus 30:25*

## Why is This Mass Special?

**T**HE CHRISM MASS is celebrated only once a year during Holy Week, if possible, on Holy Thursday. Two significant things happen at this unusual Mass:

- 1) All the priests from the diocese come to renew their promise of obedience to their bishop.
- 2) The holy oils that are used for the coming year are blessed or consecrated, that is, set apart for sacred use. At this Mass, there may be more priests than people in the congregation.

## Why are All the Priests There?

All the priests from the entire diocese are encouraged to come to renew their promise of obedience to the bishop during this Mass. The priests get the opportunity to be encouraged by their bishop in their calling to the priesthood. It is also their opportunity to enjoy each other's company and celebrate Mass together as a community of pastors.

The bishop's homily will be one encouraging his priests to strive for holiness and to live their promises more perfectly. His encouragement to them can be taken for every Christian as well, to always try to be more like Jesus, to turn away from sin, and to take joy in the love that God has for us as his children.

## What Are the Three Oils That are Blessed?

The first type is the **Oil of the Sick**, used in the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick for those who are seriously sick, infirm, or near death. The second is the **Oil of Catechumens**, normally used in the sacrament of Baptism for an infant and in preparation for Baptism as an adult. The third is the **Oil of Chrism**, used in the sacrament of Baptism of infants (to show the connection of Baptism to the sacrament of Confirmation), in the sacrament of Confirmation, and in the sacrament of Holy Orders.

(CCC 1297)

*"The bishop's homily will be one encouraging his priests to strive for holiness and to live their promises more perfectly."*



*The Holy Oils*

# SOLEMNITY OF EASTER

*Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. ~ 1 Peter 1:8*

**E**ASTER, the celebration of Jesus' Resurrection from the dead, is the highest feast and greatest of solemnities in the Church. It ushers in its most extended season of rejoicing, the fifty-day period from Easter Sunday to Pentecost. All Sundays are feasts because Jesus' Resurrection, the "great feast," occurred on a Sunday. It is the Passover of Christ (see CCC 1168), and is always celebrated very near the date of the Jewish Passover, although the method of calculation is not exactly the same and, of course, Easter must always fall on a Sunday. (The method of calculation also differs between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, a problem that it can be hoped will be resolved soon.)

Of all days, Easter is the day of which the Psalmist sings: "This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps 118:24). We shout for joy, for our Savior has risen; he has conquered death, and he dwells in glory. Truly he is great, he is "the Son of the Most High" (Lk 1:32). He possesses "the throne of his father David, and he [reigns] over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his Kingdom there will be no end" (Lk 1:32-33). "The Lord has risen indeed" (Lk 24:34).

Christ was born, suffered, died, and rose from the dead; these are historical events. The Resurrection of Jesus was a real event, one that is at the very core of the mystery of faith "that transcends and surpasses history" (CCC 647). His Resurrection confirms his divinity and our expectation of rising with him. This is the significance of Easter for the Church and all its faithful members.

The triumphant Exsultet in the Church's Easter proclamation is sung at the Easter Vigil Mass. From the moment that the Exsultet is begun, the liturgy of Easter resounds with joy, jubilation, and shouts of "Alleluia!" The joy of Easter bursts like a long-awaited flood upon the Christian soul. One is



*Mary Magdalene witnesses the risen Lord, by Domenico Mastroianni, 1876-1962*

struck by the splendor of the Exsultet and the daring of its words: "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!" (*The Roman Missal*, Mass of Easter Vigil, Easter Proclamation). This "happy fault" (*felix culpa* in Latin) is a bold declaration, a cry of hope and optimism confirming that the power of God is so incredible that he can turn sin into a means for his own glory and our good.

The Church seems unable to restrain its joy at the Resurrection: "Rejoice, O earth," it sings, "in shining splendor, radiant in the brightness of your King! Christ has conquered! Glory fills you! Darkness

vanishes forever!" It continues: "The power of this holy night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy; it casts out hatred, brings us peace, and humbles earthly pride" (*The Roman Missal*, Mass of Easter Vigil, Easter Proclamation).

A 2<sup>nd</sup>- or 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Christian writer sang thus: "O spiritual feast! O divine Passover!... O festival of the whole cosmos! O joy of the universe, its honor, its banquet and delight!... Heaven's gates have opened; God has appeared as a human being and human beings have risen as God... O divine Passover, to us you have spiritually united the God whom the Heavens cannot contain" (*Ancient Paschal homily* 62).

A Father of the Church, St. Gregory Nazianzen, carried away by the glory of Easter, cried out: "O great and holy Easter, I speak of you as of a living being" (*Oratio XLV*). Easter is the glorious feast of faith. The Risen Jesus says to each of us, as he said to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (Jn 11:25-26). Blessed will be we who can reply, inspired by God's goodness and grace, "Yes, Risen Lord, I believe." This

belief will merit an eternal Easter.

(CCC 647, 655, 1168-1170)

*"The joy of Easter bursts like a long-awaited flood upon the Christian soul."*

# The Paschal Mystery

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who ... destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in Heaven and things on earth. ~ Ephesians 1:5, 5-10*

**T**HE TERM "PASCHAL MYSTERY" takes us back into the Old Testament. The word "Paschal" comes from the Hebrew word *pasch*, or "passover." The Passover was the defining event that led to the liberation of the Israelites from their slavery to the Egyptians. God "passed over" the Israelite homes, whose doorposts were smeared with the blood of a perfect, sacrificed lamb, but took the lives of the firstborn of the Egyptians. This terrible act of God's justice caused Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt (see Ex 12:1-51).

The word "mystery" in this context refers to something knowable, that is, known to us by God's rev-

elation, but which is beyond our full understanding. St. Paul writes that *"the mystery was made known to me by revelation"* (Eph 3:3). But even though we can be made aware of divine things, in no way does this mean that we can completely understand them, because they come from God, who is infinite and whose ways are beyond our comprehension.

The term "Paschal mystery" refers to a new Passover — the liberation of all humanity for all time from the slavery of sin by the Son of God, *"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"* (Jn 1:29) doing his Father's will in a plan of salvation actually carried out as part of human history. The Paschal mystery,

***"Paschal mystery" refers to a new Passover — the liberation of all humanity for all time from the slavery of sin by the Son of God."***



*The Paschal mystery is the triumph of Christ in a world torn by sin and suffering*

then refers to the saving events of Christ's Passion, death, burial, descent into Hell (that is, the abode of the dead), Resurrection, and Ascension. When

St. Paul refers to the mystery which God "*set forth in Christ*" (see beginning verses above) or "*God's mystery, of Christ*" (Col 2:2), he is referring to the Paschal mystery. When we profess in the Apostles' Creed that Christ "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried ... descended into Hell ... rose again ... [and] ascended into Heaven" we are referring to the Paschal mystery. Because these events accomplished our salvation, Holy Week, the Solemnity of Easter, and the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord constitute the highest holy season in the Church's liturgical year. Every Sunday is itself a celebration of the Paschal mystery, as is every holy sacrifice of the Mass. In these events, the Church is mindful of Christ's words: "*Do this in remembrance of me*" (Lk 22:19).

### Sin

The Paschal mystery encompasses three major elements: sin, the Father's love for us, and the life and work of Jesus Christ. Original sin and all subsequent transgressions of humanity deliberately upset the plan of God. He originally intended us to enjoy his creation and to spend our unending sojourn on earth in peace and his companionship. But Adam and Eve chose to disobey the Father's only prohibition. They sinned (see Gn 3:1-7). In so doing, they lost all that God had planned for them and for us. The relationship between God and humanity had been broken, tenure in the Garden of Eden was terminated, preternatural gifts were surrendered, supernatural life was ended, continued life on earth was burdened with travail, sorrow, difficulties, conflict, temptation, and the withdrawal of the friendship of God, and death with an uncertain after-life became inevitable (see Gn 3:14-19, 23-24). No matter how we describe sin and its consequences, it is humanly impossible to comprehend its grievous-

## *"Notwithstanding the enormity of sin, God would salvage us."*

ness, its horrendous gravity, its impact on all humanity and on God. Not only was Paradise lost, but Heaven itself was now closed. By sin, our first

parents had brought about their own condemnation. By sin, Adam and Eve had destroyed their own happiness, and that of their children. By sin, we had torn ourselves from the arms of God.

### The Father

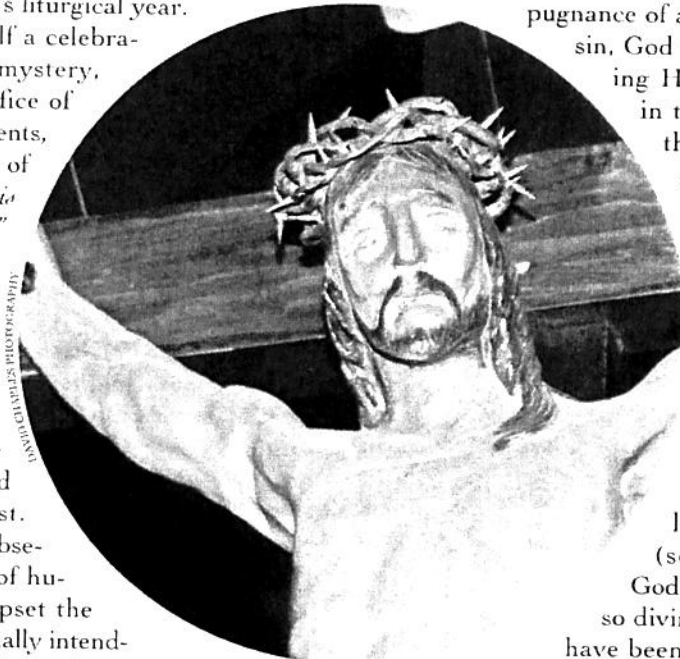
Yet our God is a God of love. He *is* love (see 1 Jn 4:8). In the immensity of his love, God had created us and, apparently, no matter what we did, God would not cease to love and care for us. And so, notwithstanding the enormity of sin and the re-

pugnance of a humanity corrupted by sin, God would salvage us. During Holy Week, the Church, in the Exsultet, shouts out these unbelievable words about original sin: "O happy fault!" O happy fault that the Father used as a reason to turn his will to plan the salvation, the eternal redemption of his beloved creatures.

Certainly, sin abounded, but grace in the form of the Father's love abounded far more (see Rom 5:20). Only God could have conceived of so divine a plan; only he could have been so magnanimous as to send his only Son. He gave of himself to bring back, to restore as sons and daughters, the creatures he had created. He gave a Son to restore men and women to sonship (see Gal 4:4-5).

### Christ Jesus

Christ's whole life is a mystery (see 1 Tm 3:16). His whole life is the mystery of redemption. Whatever Jesus did in his earthly life is a revelation of his Father's will: "*I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me*" (Jn 5:50). All that Jesus did, especially what he did at the climax of his life — his Suffering, death, burial, Resurrection, and Ascension — was exactly what his Father wanted from him for us. His life was an offering of himself to his Father in





DAVID LARGES PHOTOGRAPHY

*A First Communion with the Risen Savior*

atonement for sin and to reconcile us to the Father. As Christ's institution of the Holy Eucharist was to be a memorial of his life of sacrifice in fulfillment of his Father's will, so, too, his redemptive Passion was the very reason for the Incarnation. Christ yearned to complete his redemptive work (see Lk 12:49; Jn 12:27; Jn 18:11).

Sin, not the Jewish leaders and the Romans, was the real cause of Christ's suffering and death (see Heb 12:3). At Gethsemane, his agony was so intense because Christ was the only one who could take on all the sins of us all (see 2 Cor 5:21). He was the innocent lamb, perfect and unblemished, who, as St. John tells us, was condemned to death on the day of preparation for Passover, at about the sixth hour (see Jn 19:14), at the very time that the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple. He knew, as he hung upon the cross, that we all were responsible for the nails that held him. Yes, all of us, Pharisees and elders, Sanhedrin and Romans, apostles and Gentiles, and each and every one of us contributed to his agony and death. He knew we were all included in his redemptive surrender when he declared, "*It is finished*" (Jn 19:30).

***"We all were responsible for the nails  
that held him."***

Christ *really died*. There was on the cross and in the tomb a dead Christ. On Calvary, for us and for his Father, his earthly, purely human existence ended. The Paschal mystery includes the death and burial, but also the glorious Resurrection — the proof that he who redeemed us was truly God. This was the crowning truth of his life, and is the definitive proof of our faith (see 1 Cor 15:14; CCC 651).

The final act of the Paschal mystery is the Ascension of the risen Christ into Heaven. Before his death, Jesus prays to the Father: "*Father, glorify me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made*" (Jn 17:5). At the Ascension, Jesus kept his own body and it was glorified and resides in Heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father (see Mk 16:19).

The body of Christ that rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven was the same body that was tortured and crucified. Once risen from the tomb, that glorified body could go and be wherever he willed (see Mt 28:10; Mk 16:12; Lk 24:13-31; Lk 24:36-43; Jn 20:19-20; Jn 20:26-27; Jn 21:4-14). His humanity was no longer confined to earth, but belonged to his Father's divine realm. His body was not to return to earth to die again, as was that of Lazarus (see Jn 11:43-44) and the daughter of Jairus (see Mk 5:40-42).

Through the Paschal mystery, Christ brings about our redemption and reconciliation with the Father. "*While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son*" (Rom 5:10), and "*in him we have redemption through his blood*" (see beginning verses above). Lastly, because Christ is "*the firstborn of all creation ... [and] all things were created through him and for him*" (Col 1:15-16), everything is redeemed by him. The Paschal mystery reunites all

things in Christ, and places them under the Lordship of Christ.

What an astonishing wonder is the Paschal mystery! In this mystery we have clear evidence of the tragedy of sin, the infinite goodness of a God of pure love, and the willing obedience of a Son who sought only to do the Father's will. The Paschal mystery is a gift from God that gives us promise of forgiveness for our sins, of resurrection in glory of our souls and body, and an eternity of joy so great that "*no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him*" (1 Cor 2:9).

(CCC 512-513, 571-591, 595-618, 624-628, 631-655, 658-655, 659-664)