

THE SACRED TRIDUUM

The Sacred Triduum is the name we give to the last three days of Holy Week and is an even shorter mini season in its own right. It consists of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, and all Catholics go to the services on these days, even re-arranging work and holiday schedules to make sure they can get there.

MAUNDY THURSDAY As we have seen (above) Maundy Thursday celebrates several different things all at once. At Mass, all is white: the vestments, the altar frontal, and even the purple veils that cover the crucifixes (although not the statues) are all white. There is a solemn hush on this day. Holy Water and votive candles have been removed from the church, and there are no



sacramentals, as we call such things. All of our attention is given to what is just about

to happen. Even the Blessed Sacrament has been removed from the tabernacle in preparation for the remembrance of the very first Mass which was celebrated by Our Lord Himself at the Last Supper.

At the Last Supper, Our Lord washed the feet of His first priests, demonstrating to them the need for humility in their service of God and of God's people: 'The Son of Man is not come to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give His life as a redemption for many' (Mt 20:28 *et par*). This, in turn, ties in with Our Lord's command to 'Do this in remembrance of me' when He institutes the Most Holy Eucharist. Our Lord is not just empowering His first priests to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass – which He most certainly *is* doing – but to lay down their own lives, as He is just about to lay down His life, and be willing to sacrifice themselves for God and for God's people, in imitation of the Sacramental Sacrifice that they will offer every day on the altars of Catholic churches around the world.

At the Last Supper, Our Lord ordained His first priests, offered the very first Mass, but He then went further. He walked with His Apostles (Judas had left them by this point) and journeyed out of the city of Jerusalem, down the hill and across the little river of the Cedron, and up the hill on the other side of the valley and into the Garden of Gethsemane on the small hill, or mount, of Olives. Here, Our Lord suffered His agony, sweating blood in His

anguish. What was the nature of His agony? Imagine trying to push two magnets together. Like poles repel each other, don't they? In the person of Christ, we have all the sin of the world, past, present, and future, gathered into one place, His human body. Christ committed no sin, of course, but He had taken our sins upon Himself. Now recall that in Christ, who is the Son of God, is the fulness of the Godhead. But... God and sin are completely alien to each other. They cannot inhabit the same space. They repel each other. So, in the person of Christ – in His human body and mind – there are two vast and powerful forces, God and sin, repelling each other and almost tearing that body and mind apart. *That* is the nature of Our Lord's Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.



THE ALTAR OF REPOSE After the Mass of the Lord's Supper, the Blessed Sacrament – Christ Himself – is carried in procession to the Altar of Repose. Here, the altar is decked out with flowers and candles representing the Garden of Gethsemane and the presence of the Angels who came to minister to Him (Lk 22:43). Just as Our Lord commanded His disciples to 'Pray, lest you enter into temptation' (Lk 22:40) so we, too, are commanded by Him to watch with Him one hour in prayer. Praying at the Altar of Repose represents this watching (during which His disciples fell asleep) until He was betrayed by Judas with a kiss, and arrested by the soldiers and taken off to the court of Pontius Pilate to be tried and executed.

On Maundy Thursday, then, all Catholics spend at least some time watching before the Altar of Repose after the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper.

Once the priest has placed the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle on the Altar of Repose, he returns to the sanctuary and the high altar and, now wearing a purple stole instead of white vestments, intones the words from Psalm 21 (v.19), *Diviserunt sibi vestimenta mea, et super vestem meam miserunt sortem*, 'They parted my garments amongst them, and upon my vesture they cast lots.' Then, just as Christ will be stripped of His garments when the soldiers crucify Him, so, now, the priest strips the altar of its altar cloths. In fact, he removes everything that is removeable from the sanctuary and leaves it bare and forsaken, ready for the drama of Good Friday.

GOOD FRIDAY The single most important day in the Christian year. Funnily enough, there is no Mass on this day anywhere across the world. Instead, Catholics attend what we call the **Liturgy of the Passion** at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the time when Our Lord died on the Cross. For this, Catholics really should re-arrange work schedules and holiday plans to make sure they can attend.

On this day, we hear the Passion of Our Lord read from the Gospel, as we did on Palm Sunday, but on Good Friday it is always from the Gospel of St John. Following the Gospel we pray the General Intercessions of the Church, from which all prayers of supplication are drawn. And, most significantly, we venerate the Wood of the Cross on which our Redeemer died. We approach the Crucifix, genuflecting three times as we get closer to the altar, and then kneel to kiss the feet of Christ on the crucifix as we worship the One who died for our sins. During the veneration, all the other crucifixes in the church are uncovered once more, and the choir sing the **Improperia**, or the **Reproaches**, a series of cries from the dying Christ, based on lines from Micah 6:3-5 in the Old Testament and an ancient three-fold Greek acclamation based on Isaiah 6:3:

*My people, what have I done to you?
How have I offended you? Answer me!
I led you out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom,
but you led your Saviour to the cross.*

Holy is God!

Holy is God!

Holy and strong!

Holy and strong!

Holy immortal One, have mercy on us.

Holy immortal One, have mercy on us.



Following the **Veneration of the Wood of the Cross** the Blessed Sacrament is brought back in procession to the high altar from the Altar of Repose, and the people receive Holy Communion. At the end of the Liturgy of the Passion, all is solemn, and the priests and altar servers depart from the sanctuary in silence. The crucifix which we have venerated remains on the high altar flanked by candles for the rest of the day. Otherwise, the church remains empty and desolate like the city of Jerusalem after the marauders had done their worst, and the Jewish people had been carried off into exile to the distant city of Babylon by their captors. The cry of the Church on this day is that of Jeremiah in the Old Testament Book of Lamentations.

HOLY SATURDAY (Remember, today is Holy Saturday not Easter Saturday: Easter Saturday is the Saturday after Easter Sunday). On Holy Saturday nothing happens in church except Confessions. There is no Mass, there are no baptisms or weddings. Even funerals are not allowed on this day. The whole of Christ's Mystical Body, the Church – the Bride of Christ – is in mourning for the Saviour who has died on the Cross.

On this day, it is said, the Blessed Virgin Mary retraced the steps of her Son's last journey through the streets of the city of Jerusalem, beyond the city gates, and up the small hill, or mount, of Calvary to the place where He died, thereby making the first ever Stations of the Cross. It is for this reason that when we make the Stations of the Cross we often sing the Stabat Mater (the hymn, 'At the Cross her station keeping').

Having died in the flesh and been buried in the empty tomb that Joseph of Arimathea had planned to use for himself, Our Lord 'descended into hell,' as we say in the Apostles' Creed. In fact, the Fathers of the Church teach us, Our Lord descended into what we call the Limbo of the Fathers. It was here that all those who were deemed righteous by God and fit for heaven, but who were born and had died before Christ came down to earth, had to wait until the gates of heaven were opened by Our Lord at the moment of His resurrection. Here waited Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Isaiah, Jeremiah,



Kings David and Solomon, Ruth, Esther, Judith, and many others besides, known and unknown, until the moment of their resurrection. The dæmons were delighted to have these people in their charge, believing, as they did, that these souls were abandoned by God.

However, on Holy Saturday Our Lord descended into hell, broke the bonds of those captured there, pierced the darkness with a dazzling light that blinded, shocked, and terrified the dæmons, took the hand of Adam, who in turn took the hand of Eve, and so on, and led these souls from hell into the splendid light of victory in a movement that we know as the **Harrowing of Hell**.

The Easter Vigil is celebrated after sunset on Holy Saturday and is the first Mass of Easter. During this Mass, a fire is lit and blessed to symbolize the

fire that burns away the dross of sin and purifies souls (see Isaiah 1:25). Then is lit the Easter, or Paschal, Candle which has many layers of meaning attached to it. First and foremost, the Paschal Candle represents the risen Christ and is considered to be quasi sacramental. That is, we venerate the Paschal candle as we did the Wood of the Cross on Good Friday (although without actually kissing it). The candle is held up for our veneration as the priest sings three times *Lumen Christi* (the Light of Christ) just as the priest had held aloft the crucifix the day before and sung, *Ecce lignum crucis* (Behold the wood of the cross). Then the candle is processed through the darkened church where there are, as yet, no other lights. This darkness represents the darkness of sin into which bursts the light of the risen Christ. In the Book of Exodus we read how the Lord God led His people out of the slavery of Egypt and across the desert, guiding them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex 13:21). So, now, the Paschal candle – the Light of the risen Christ – is for us a pillar of light to guide us on our journey through life from the darkness of sin to the Promised Land, namely heaven. Into the wax of the candle, the priest has pressed five grains of incense representing the Five Wounds of Christ. He has traced the letters Alpha and Omega symbolizing the Christ who is the Beginning and End (Apoc 21:6). He has inscribed the year, showing us that Christ is eternally present, here and now. And the candle itself is made from pure bees' wax representing the purity of Christ's sinlessness. (Bees even get a mention in the Exsultet, the candle being described as the work of bees.)



Once the candle has arrived on the sanctuary, and the people's candles have also been lit, the Paschal Candle is incensed, and the Exsultet is sung, proclaiming this to be a holy night! The Exsultet dates back to at least the early eighth century, and almost certainly before that. The words describe the history of our salvation and proclaim the greatness of our God who has saved us, and are worth studying in detail.

During the course of the Easter Vigil, the church building is filled with light as the choir sings the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Water is blessed that will be used for baptisms and blessings, and priest and people renew their own baptismal promises and are sprinkled with the newly-blessed Easter water, during which the choir sings the *Vidi Aquam*, 'I saw water flowing from the temple, from its right side,' which is a reference to Ezechiel 47:1 as well as to the water flowing from the right side of Christ on the Cross (Jn 19:34).