

The Holy Week Journey: An Invitation

Actually Holy Week isn't really a journey in itself, but the conclusion of the forty-day journey that is Lent. It ends with what we commonly call the *Triduum* (or "Triduum Sanctum") the "holy three", the final three days of Holy Week - Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The word triduum refers to three consecutive days of prayer, often in preparation for a great feast, and I think the word *consecutive* is very important - especially in the context of Holy Week - in that it implies a seamless process (or, again, a journey) lasting three unbroken days.

Scripture texts throughout Lent remind us that Our Lord too was very much on a journey - toward Jerusalem. That journey would culminate in the events of the three days in which he would share the Passover supper with his disciples, be arrested, sentenced to death, crucified and buried, but then, on the third day, rise from the dead.

For all sorts of childhood-related reasons, many people continue to look on Christmas as the highlight of the Church's year and, of course, it *is* a highlight and important and I am not disputing that. However, if you stop and think about it, the fact that Jesus was born in and of itself didn't achieve anything; it was his death on the cross and his rising from the death that brought about our redemption. Consequently, it is Easter that we should see as being *the* highlight, *the* crowning feast of the Christian year. And yet many Catholics are much less familiar with the liturgical celebrations of Holy Week than they are with those of Christmas, though why that should be I'm not sure.

It's true that participating in the liturgies of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday do require a commitment of time – especially, perhaps, for those who normally only go to church on Sundays. But those three celebrations are so powerful and central to the story of our redemption that it is difficult to understand why anyone who could be there for them would choose not to be. It is equally difficult to understand why some people only take part in a portion of that final journey of Holy Week because, as I said above, they are three consecutive days that form one continual journey.

What typically tends to happen is that considerable numbers of people go to church on Good Friday¹ but not on Maundy Thursday or Holy Saturday.² Spiritually and emotionally they enter into Our Lord's passion and death (but without the strength of the Last Supper) and then, effectively, remain behind on Calvary. While they will no doubt be at Mass on Easter Sunday morning, they

¹ (despite the afternoon timing of the service and possible conflicts for people who work)

² (when the services are in the evening and therefore there shouldn't be any conflicts)

have missed out on the beautiful Easter Vigil celebration of light and new life – symbols of Our Lord’s resurrection – which is the transition between the two days. They miss day one, join the journey on day two, miss its conclusion on day three and then have to catch up on the news of what has happened.

The example is inadequate by comparison, but let’s say you are invited on a specially arranged visit to London. On day one you will be taken around the more un-miss-able of the city’s sights; on day two you have tickets for a must-see West End show; and on day three you will be attending a garden party at Buckingham Palace. If you chose to take part in only one of those, imagine how much poorer your trip would be; imagine how you would feel when everyone else would be talking about their experiences on all three days and you could only relate to one of them.

The journey begins on **MAUNDY THURSDAY** with the “Mass of the Lord’s Supper” – a commemoration of the meal which Our Lord celebrated with his disciples on the eve of his passion and at which he instituted the Eucharist which is at the heart of our spiritual and sacramental lives as Catholic Christians. The instruction in the missal says that the Mass of the Lord’s Supper should be celebrated in the evening (as the Last Supper was) with the full participation of the whole local community (meaning there should be only one celebration in the parish – logically in the largest or most central church if there is more than one). When you come into church, the tabernacle will be empty (because the supper, the Eucharistic meal, hasn’t taken place yet) and therefore you don’t need to genuflect - and the same on Good Friday.

The structure of the celebration is the same as for any other Mass except for the ‘Washing of the Feet’, repeating Our Lord’s action at the Last Supper.

At the end of Mass, the Blessed Sacrament is taken in procession to an altar of repose where people may “watch” for a while – a reminder of Our Lord’s request to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. The altar is then stripped and the sanctuary left as plain and empty as possible, a symbol that the Church is dead with Christ in the tomb³ when people come into church the next day.

The “Celebration of the Lord’s Passion” on **GOOD FRIDAY** takes place in the afternoon and consists of three parts. The celebrants process into church in silence and prostrate themselves in the sanctuary in reverence to the altar as a symbol of the buried Christ.

The Liturgy of the Word includes an Old and New Testament reading, the Passion account and the general intercessions.

A crucifix is then processed from the back of church in stages and the “Veneration of the Cross” follows. The instruction in the missal says that we

³ Therefore no sacraments (including reconciliation) are celebrated on Good Friday or Holy Saturday (until the Vigil). The communion service on Good Friday uses hosts consecrated on Maundy Thursday.

should make a simple genuflection or perform some other appropriate sign of reverence according to local custom - for example, kissing the cross – so the choice is yours depending, perhaps, on age, mobility, etc.

The altar is then prepared very simply for the communion service which follows, the Blessed Sacrament being processed from the altar of repose and returned there after communion.

Following the concluding prayer everyone should leave in silence – the point being, again, that Our Lord is in the tomb and we should leave silently and reverently as we would after paying our respects to someone who has died and even more so in Our Lord’s case of course.

The “Easter Vigil” of HOLY SATURDAY should take place at night - it is a night vigil anticipating Our Lord rising from the tomb before the following morning. At the same time, the symbolism of new light emerging from darkness that is central to the first part of the liturgy is lost if it is still light. And for the first time since Lent began, we sing and pray “alleluias” once again - an expression of praise and thanksgiving.

The celebration, which is basically in four parts, begins with a service of light. The new fire is blessed at the back of church and the Paschal candle lit – a symbol of the new life of the Risen Christ. That new light is then distributed to everyone in church as the Paschal candle is processed to the sanctuary in stages, set on its stand, and incensed. The “Exultet”, the great Easter proclamation of the good news that Christ is risen, is then sung (either all or in part).

The Liturgy of the Word follows, beginning with a selection of Old Testament readings reminding us of our salvation history. The ‘Gloria’ is sung and then there is a New Testament reading and the Gospel.

After the homily new baptismal water is blessed and, if there are any candidates, their baptism follows. The people’s candles are relit for everyone’s renewal of baptismal promises. After the ‘Prayer of the Faithful’ the Liturgy of the Eucharist continues as usual.

Having said all of that, the “journey” I have been referring to can’t be fully appreciated simply by reading about it on paper – it has to be experienced, we have to take part in it experiencing the shifts in emotions and moods as we move from death to life, sorrow to joy, darkness to light. And the Church assists us in that journey with a rich use of symbolism in each day’s celebration. We are invited to join Christ at the Last Supper, watch with him in the garden, solemnly witness his passion and death and then rejoice, hope restored, in his resurrection. It’s a three-day journey that we should try, wherever possible, to experience in its fullness so we know what everyone is talking about on Easter Sunday. The journey begins on Maundy Thursday – see you then!

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