

RCIA  
Holy Week and the TRIDUUM  
Session 23

---

**“Holy Week refers to the week beginning with Palm Sunday and ending with “Holy Saturday”. It includes the last days of Lent. “The TRIDUUM” celebrate the heart of the Christian faith: Jesus’ redemptive death and resurrection. It begins with the evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, continues through Good Friday and Holy Saturday, culminates in the Easter Vigil, and concludes with evening prayer of Easter Sunday.”**

---



## HOLY WEEK, THE TRIDUUM, EASTER

### **Holy Week**

Six weeks of penance, prayer, and special devotions come to a climax. Bold signs and symbols are everywhere. Rituals seem to be more exciting at this time than during the rest of the year. They tell a religious story that is powerful and unambiguous. Emotions are a mixture of relief and anticipation. It is Holy Week.

The spiritual journey of Holy Week closely follows ancient historical events. Parishioners move quickly from Jesus' triumph in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to his passion and death. Holy Thursday rituals consecrating holy oils in cathedral churches, along with Last Supper liturgies in parish churches, are like a refreshing pause. They are a few hours of rejoicing before the reality of Jesus' suffering and death continues on Good Friday. Then there is a quiet waiting until the burst of the new light of resurrection conquers the dark of death at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night.

### **Paschal Mystery**

The words "Pascha," "Pasch," and "paschal" come from the Hebrew *pesach*, a "passing by" or a "passing through." This became the popular word "Passover." The greatest of all Christian feasts is most profoundly associated with the greatest of all Jewish feasts. The Israelites were saved from slavery when the angel of death struck the firstborn of the Egyptians but "Passed over" the chosen people. The remembering of this saving act of God became the heart of the Hebrew religious experience.

It was during the annual Jewish Passover that Jesus "passed through" suffering and death into a new life, a divine act that saved all of humanity and creation from final death.

### **Sacred Triduum**

Originally, there was no Holy Week. The Pascha was celebrated in the context of a single day: the Easter Vigil. It began with sunset on the Sabbath evening and continued until dawn on the first day of the week or Sunday. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century, this Paschal Mystery had been broken down into its historical pieces. The nucleus was called the Sacred Triduum (Latin, "Three days"): Friday until Easter morning. It remembered the death, burial, and resurrection. Later, Holy Thursday was included because all days were reckoned from sunset of the previous evening.

### **Holy Thursday**

Remembering the institution of the Holy Eucharist is the heart of Holy Thursday observance. Parish liturgies take place in the evening with joyful overtones. Bells ring and festive colors are used for vestments and decorations. The Glory to God, not sung since Ash Wednesday, returns for this brief moment.

The tabernacle is empty so that all might receive communion from bread consecrated at this Mass.

### **Washing of Feet**

The Holy Thursday ritual has included a ceremonial washing of feet since the 5<sup>th</sup> century in some local churches. This ritual imitates Jesus' Last Supper action of humility and service. It may be re-enacted by choosing twelve participants from the parish at large, or it may be done in such a way to allow all parishioners to participate in the ritual.

### **Chapel of Adoration**

At the end of the Holy Thursday liturgy, consecrated communion bread is carried in procession with incense and song to a chapel of adoration. The church is cleared of all decorations, statues are covered or hidden, and it is stark and bare. This starkness symbolizes the emptiness of the world during the time of the suffering, death, and time Jesus spent in the grave.

After placing the consecrated bread in the tabernacle of reserve, an atmosphere of quiet waiting and prayer with the Lord begins, as in the gospels when Jesus asks His Apostles to wait with Him in the garden. On this evening people are invited to spend a holy hour sometime before midnight in the adoration chapel.

### **Stripping the Altar**

The first hints of a new theme quickly become obvious: an anticipation of suffering and death. The altar table, symbolic of Christ, is stripped in silence. At times in the past, this action was considered symbolic of the stripping of Jesus before His Crucifixion.

People begin leaving in procession, accompanying the Holy Eucharist to a temporary reservation tabernacle, where they are then invited to watch and pray. Today we also understand these hours to be "waiting" with Jesus as the saving events begin to unfold.

### **Good Friday**

This day is part of something bigger than itself. The liturgical services of Good Friday have no formal beginnings or endings, no greeting or dismissals. The services are all part of the single, three-day liturgy of the Triduum.

The main service on Good Friday is usually held in the afternoon. This is the time when the lambs were slaughtered in the Temple in Jerusalem to prepare for the Passover feast. This is the time when Jesus died.

The service begins in silence. For a few moments everyone kneels or lies flat on the ground. Then everyone rises. A prayer is read. The traditional prayer for this day is very old. It reminds us that this is the day God created the very first humans from clay.

John's account of the passion is heard today. This account is in many ways different from those in the other three gospels. Jesus is in charge of His own destiny. John shows us how God's glory is seen in the suffering and death of Jesus. We hear that Jesus was buried like a monarch, with a hundred pounds of sweet-smelling myrrh. The tomb was in a garden. Perhaps John is telling us that, because of the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord, we are welcome back to paradise.

On Good Friday the gathered church prays for the world and all its peoples. We do this every day, but today the prayer takes an ancient form, with kneeling and standing so that even the movement of our bodies becomes part of the prayer.

A large wooden cross is carried into church. Then, in most parishes, everyone comes forward in procession to honor the holy wood, "on which hung the Savior of the world." The cross is surrounded with candles and fragrant incense. People keep watch near it.

In mystery, we say that this wood is the cross on which Jesus died. We also say that this is the tree of life in Eden. This is the ark that saved Noah and his family and the creatures huddled inside. This is the staff that Moses held up to split the waters of the Red Sea. Is it any wonder that people call this Friday "good"?

### **The Easter Vigil**

The daytime hours of Holy Saturday, continuing the atmosphere of Good Friday, have been observed as a time of quiet and fasting from the earliest centuries. The Easter Vigil takes about two – three hours rather than all night. It has four clearly defined parts: the service of light, the liturgy of the word that recalls salvation history, the celebration of baptism and confirmation, and the celebration of Eucharist.

In the midst of the early dark of night a fire begins to flicker outside the church. An Easter Candle, boldly marked with the symbols of the current year and of Christ's divinity and glorious suffering, is lit from the new fire. It is carried prominently into the midst of the people. There it is heralded with joyful song: "Light of Christ... Come, let us adore him." From this one light, the candles of hundreds of assembled believers are lit until the church is ablaze with new light. A cantor sings an ancient and beautiful song (*Exultet*, 'Rejoice') before the Easter Candle.

Powerful Scripture readings about God's relationship with His people beginning with Genesis, the Exodus story, and other readings from the Old Testament. Bells ring, lights are raised, the sanctuary is decorated and the Gloria is joyfully sung. The Epistle, New Testament reading and Gospel are proclaimed.

After the presider reflects on the Word of God as presented in the readings, the Easter water is blessed with sacred oils consecrated just days before. A litany of the Saints is sung or prayed, recalling the Communion of

Saints, models of the faithful throughout the ages. Catechumens step forward, speak their baptismal vows with the supportive voices of the congregation around them, and are baptized. After the Elect are received through baptism, they and other Catholics desiring to complete their initiation with as well as those wishing to enter the Roman Catholic Church are Confirmed into the community of the faithful.

The celebration of the Mass continues and at Eucharist, the newly baptized and those entering the church are invited to their first Eucharist. No other moment of the church year is as rich in powerful and earthy symbolism as the Easter Vigil. It is *the night of all nights*. It is the heart of Christianity. It is Easter; Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Alleluia!

### **Easter Fire**

The impressive blessing and lighting of the Easter fire was not part of the ritual in ancient times. During the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, Irish missionaries brought to the continent a tradition of blessing bonfires outside of the church on Holy Saturday night.

The lighting of a new Easter fire also had a practical purpose. The lamps in church used to be extinguished Holy Thursday night. Consequently a new fire had to be lit for the celebrant and readers to see by.

### **Easter Candle**

The lighting of the Easter Candle seems to have originated in the ancient daily ritual of *Lucernare* (lighting of the lamps), as darkness fell. The tradition of lighting candles held by people present began in Rome in the early centuries. There the dark of night at the Easter Vigil was filled with candles symbolic of the resurrected Christ (Light of the World).

In the Frankish kingdom, further symbolism was added to the Easter Candle and continues today at the discretion of the pastor. A cross is cut or traced into it with the proclamation: "Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end," adding the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, "Alpha and Omega." The numbers of the current year are added in the four angles of the crossbars with the proclamation: "All time belongs to Him and all the ages; to Him be glory and power through every age forever. Amen." Four grains of incense, sealed with wax, red nails are inserted at the ends of the crossbars and one is inserted where the crossbars meet with the words: "By His holy... and glorious wounds... my Christ our Lord.... Guard us... Keep us. Amen."

### **Chrism**

(Kriz'uhm: Gk., Chrisma, Anointing) the oil of olives mixed with perfume – balm, or balsam. The bishop blesses chrism every year at the Chrism Mass, which usually takes place on Holy Thursday, although it may be celebrated at some other convenient time during Holy Week. Chrism is used in the

administration of baptism, confirmation, priestly and episcopal ordinations, and the consecration of bishops. It is also used during the dedication of churches and altar stones, chalices, patens, the solemn blessing of bells, and the blessing of baptismal water. The two elements together signify a "fullness of grace." Long treated with great reverence by the Church, chrism is often reserved in a special place in the church sanctuary with the oil of the sick and the oil of catechumens. The strengthening effect and fragrance of the oil reflect the presence of the Holy Spirit when one is anointed with it. Chrism has also been associated with the coronation of kings. Its symbolism is both royal and priestly. Chrism traditionally was made from the oil of the olive, but in 1990's vegetable, seed, or coconut oil began being used. Canon law was also given that oils could be blessed at other times than at the Mass of Holy Thursday, and conferences of bishops were authorized to extend to priests the right to bless oils in cases of necessity.

### **Chrism Mass**

Earlier in the day (now in many dioceses anticipated for practical reasons on Tuesday of Holy Week) the bishop, clergy, and parish delegations of the laity gather at the Cathedral church. There, in solemn ritual, the holy oils used during the year in parishes throughout the diocese are consecrated. These are the oils of Catechumens (a mixture of olive oil and fragrant balm used to anoint those preparing for baptism in the adult catechumenate), oil of chrism (used in baptism, confirmation, and ordination), oil of the sick (used in the sacrament of the anointing of the sick.) Parish representatives carry these oils back home where they will be part of their parish's celebration of sacraments for the coming year, beginning with the Easter Vigil.

### **Chrismation**

Anointing with the holy oil of chrism. Although Chrismation can be used to mean any anointing, the term is used liturgically to refer to the Eastern Church rite that is related to the Western sacrament of Confirmation.

### **Oils**

The use of oil for anointing far antedates Christianity. Historically from the Hebrews to the primitive Church, it has stood for strength, sweetness, and spiritual activity. Holy oil used in rituals intends to portray spiritual strength.

**Blessed Oils** The Church also recognizes the use of blessed oil by a lay person, as other sacramentals which "extend and radiate the sacraments" (as holy water or candles do, for example). The purpose would normally be for healing and protection, and the method, a simple signing of the forehead (or appropriate part of the body) with a cross using the oil.

## Sacred Housing for Oils

The housing for the sacred oils is called an *ambry*. The word comes from the Latin word for armory. The Christian needs protection on natural levels beyond the graces asked in the seven sacraments. The oils, in the tradition of the church, symbolize the graces asked over and above the supernatural graces asked in the sacrament.

There are three oils brought to the parochial churches from the diocesan center at Easter time. Blessed by the bishop these oils signify the universal charisms of the church for healing, consecration (chrism), and faith building (oil of catechumens). The three oils obviously have connections with baptism so an ambry has an appropriate place of reservation near baptistery. Since it is in baptism itself that all other ministries are implied for all Christians, the ambry's most appropriate place in the church building is at the baptism entry because all Christians, nourished by Christ's sacraments, are baptized into his death, and called to share in his priesthood through ministry.

## Easter: What is it?

Easter is the joyful celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's an ancient Christian festival that is the PRINCIPAL EVENT of the Church year. For all Christians, it's a celebration of *New Life* and *Redemption through Christ*.

In almost every language except English, the name for this annual memorial of the resurrection is some form of the word "Passover" (for example, *Pasche*, from the Hebrew *Pesach*). When Christianity arrived in the north countries, its springtime celebration of the resurrection received a new name from the Teutonic people, a name used today by English speaking people: Easter. At one time it was thought that this name came from an Anglo-Saxon spring goddess, *Eostre*. This is how Venerable Bede (d. 735) explained it. However, there is doubt that such a goddess ever existed. A better explanation lies in people's misunderstanding of a Latin phrase for Easter Week, "week in white vestments" or garments of the newly baptized (in *albis*), thinking it was the plural of *alba* the Latin idiom for "dawn." This was translated in Old High German as *eostarun*. Regardless of the exact origin of the term, the symbolism remains: Christ is the sun that rises at dawn – in the east.

Easter Sunday did not exist in the early church. What is celebrated today as Easter occurred during the night hours preceding dawn on the first Sunday after the spring equinox, the Easter Vigil. This primary celebration of Easter is emphasized once again today using the Jewish understanding of the new day beginning at sunset (Holy Saturday after sunset.) In fact, Easter Sunday morning is the first Sunday of Easter, meaning that Easter itself has already occurred. The Easter Sunday Mass was introduced when the Easter Vigil was *anticipated early* on Holy Saturday *morning*. No special rituals accompany Easter Sunday Mass except those that were re-introduced with great solemnity the night before at

the Easter Vigil: joyful resurrection songs (especially the Alleluia), baptisms, renewal of baptismal vows, a sprinkling of the congregation with the new Easter water, and the joyful decorations of Easter lilies and flowers.

The Easter tradition of sunrise services was already popular in the Middle Ages. In churches these were usually in the form of early morning Mass. In many areas of Europe however, there was dancing and singing at the first sign of the Easter dawn. These rituals were very possibly a continuation of New Year celebrations that coincided with the spring equinox among many peoples of Europe. They welcomed the new power of the sun and new life in creation. The Catholic Church frequently borrowed from their Jewish ancestors and pagan cultural rituals, Christianizing their previous meanings.

Sunrise services are popular throughout the United States among Protestant and ecumenical groups. They began in the mid-1700's among members of the Moravian church in Pennsylvania. The famous sunrise service at the Hollywood Bowl began in 1921.

## **The Easter Season**

The Easter season is a fifty-day liturgical period, beginning with Easter Sunday evening. The season concludes on a Sunday, the 50<sup>th</sup> day, which has been called Pentecost Sunday since the late 4<sup>th</sup> century. The 50 days of the Easter season celebrate the mystery of the Christian Passover, the new life of the Spirit, inaugurated in the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. Thus, the Easter season is intrinsically connected with the meaning and celebration of the Paschal Triduum. The Easter season is celebrated as one festival extending for a week of weeks, and has sometimes been called "the great Sunday." With the renewal of the catechumenate, the Easter season is also called the period of *mystagogia*, the fourth catechetical period of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

Scholars have connected the origin of celebrating the Easter season for 50 days, or a week of weeks, to the 1<sup>st</sup> century understanding of the Jewish Feast of Weeks. This feast of Israel is described in Exodus 23:16 as the "feast of the harvest." It is also mentioned in Tob.2: 1 and 2Macc. 12:32 as the Pentecost, or the 50<sup>th</sup> day of the festival. The more common name of the feast is *Shabuoth*, which means 'Weeks'. This harvest festival of Israel extended for seven weeks beginning with the day after the 'Sabbath' of Passover and concluding with the Pentecost itself on the 50<sup>th</sup> day. These weeks, beginning with the feast of Unleavened Bread, brought the harvest season to a close. The Pentecost, or 50<sup>th</sup> day was kept as a sacred feast with pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Many church writers attest to the importance of the 50-day festival. Athanasius claims that the joy of the 50 days is really Christ's own joy, as the one slain who now lives. For Athanasius, the 50 days is a symbol of the eschatological time of the world to come. Basil reflects on the theological importance of the 50 days by commenting on the multiplication of the number seven. The number seven multiplied seven times is the eternal multiplication of

the first day of the resurrection and symbolizes the fullness of life in the risen Christ. The 50<sup>TH</sup> day becomes the symbol of the life that is to be consummated in heaven.

Augustine mentions the importance of the singing of the alleluia during this season. This song echoes the song of the multitude portrayed in the eschatological victory of the book of Revelation 19. It is a song sung to the Lamb who was slain and in it the Christian community joins in eschatological hope of the risen promise.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the unity of the 50 days began to be divided. Three divisions emerged: The Easter octave, the 40<sup>th</sup> day commemorating the ascension of the Lord, and the 50<sup>th</sup> day as the closing feast of the period where the Spirit promised by Christ is received by the disciples hiding in fear.

Although attempts have been made in the liturgical reforms to integrate the 50 days of Easter into a cohesive season, liturgists are quite aware of the inconsistencies that still remain in both the liturgical books and pastoral practice. It is not an uncommon observation of pastoral ministers that the celebration of the Easter season, in spite of the liturgical reforms, is a difficult season to keep alive for 50 days. Further studies need to be made as to the reasons, perhaps both cultural and theological, for the apparent difficulty in keeping the celebration of the 50 days as an extended Sunday festival.

Just as the season of lent is a 40 day period of prayer and fasting preparing for celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the Triduum is a three day period of intense prayer recalling Christ's suffering, death and Resurrection. The third and final stage of the (retreat) celebration of the Paschal mystery is spread over these 50 days, highlighted by the celebrations of the feasts of Ascension and Pentecost. This breaking up of the Easter time is not an historical description of what actually happened chronologically in the life of the risen Jesus. Rather it is the richness of the paschal mystery, which demands sufficient ritual time so that the various facets of this mystery can be incorporated into Christian living. Thus, the Church's retreat devotes ample time to deepening the festivity of its central celebration. To be in retreat during the final 50 days means joyous thanksgiving with the new members of the community as well as a recovered sense of one's own happiness with being a Christian. The liturgy is clear that Easter time is a single period of rejoicing in Christ's passage from death to glory. Ascension and Pentecost are important Easter celebrations. Pentecost is not an isolated feast of the sending of the Holy Spirit; it is the crowning feast of the Church's retreat.