

# Three Holy Days

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The celebration of the Easter Triduum lies at the center of the liturgical life of the Church.

Indeed, "just as the week has its beginning and climax in the celebration of Sunday, which always has a paschal character, so the summit of the whole liturgical year is in the sacred Easter Triduum of the passion and resurrection of the Lord, which is prepared for by the period of Lent and prolonged for fifty days."<sup>1</sup> These three holy days hold such preeminent importance because "Christ re-deemed us all and gave perfect glory to God principally through his paschal mystery: dying he destroyed our death and rising he restored our life." Sadly, however, in many places the celebrations of the Triduum are held with a lack of due reverence and solemnity, often the result of an insufficient understanding of the theological importance of the three days. We

must, therefore, devote ourselves with increasing care and diligence to more properly and fully celebrate the great liturgies of the Triduum for the benefit of the Christian faithful.

Through the liturgical celebrations of these three holy days, "the greatest mysteries of the redemption are celebrated yearly by the Church beginning with the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday and ending with Vespers of Easter Sunday."<sup>2</sup> During these days when we memorialize the passion, death, and resurrection of the Lord Christ, "the Church, by the celebration of this mystery through liturgical signs and sacramentals, is united to Christ, her spouse, in intimate communion."<sup>3</sup> Each of these three holy days are inseparably linked and connected together. If these days are celebrated without a mind to the celebration yet to come or from that previously cel-

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ibrated, the Triduum stands, from our vantage point, to lose some of its power and insight. In order to better understand the sacred Triduum, let us, then, reflect briefly upon Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday.

## Holy Thursday

The Passover celebration for which Jesus gathered in the upper room with his disciples is, really, a renewal of the covenant between God and his people. The Lord established this covenant with Moses on Mount Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments from the Lord. Moses described the commands of the Lord to the people who agreed to keep them, after which Moses inscribed the commands. Moses then offered holocausts and sacrifices as peace offerings to the Lord and "took half of the blood and put it in large bowls; the other half he splashed on the altar. Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people, who answered, 'All that the LORD has said, we will heed and do.' Then he took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you

in accordance with these words of his'" (Ex. 24:6-8). The covenant was sealed with the blood of the sacrifices, sprinkled on both the altar, symbolic of God, and on the people. God and the people partook of the sacrifice; blood sealed the covenant. The people vowed to follow the commands of the Lord and the Lord vowed to be their God; blood now bound the two together.

The Passover "was a night of vigil for the LORD, as he led them out of the land of Egypt; so on this same night all the Israelites must keep a vigil for the LORD throughout their generations" (Ex. 12:42). At each Passover the Israelites were freed from the bondage of Egypt and God renewed the covenant with his people. Through the slaughter of the paschal lamb and the splashing of its blood on the posts and lintels of every Jewish home, God remembered his covenant with them and spared their firstborn as the angel of the Lord saw the blood on their homes - a blood that prefigured Christ's own blood - and passed by their homes. The blood of the paschal lamb saved the people from death and brought them into freedom.

On the night of the Passover, from the most ancient of times through today, the youngest boy of the fam-

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ily is required to ask, "Father, why is this night different from any other night?" The father of the family is required to respond, "With a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, that place of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, every firstborn of man and beast alike" (Ex. 13:14-15, emphasis mine). The Passover celebration

was not simply a remembrance of the freedom from slavery for our ancestors and it was not simply a remembrance of the covenant with God; rather, it is the night of the renewal of the covenant and it is the night we are led from slavery to freedom and the shackles of sin are broken. What happened in the past, God does for us this very night.

Jesus certainly knew this when he gathered together with his disciples in the upper room for the celebration of the Passover. At this Passover celebration, one unlike all others before it, Jesus gave new meaning to the feast and established the new covenant in his blood by sharing his very body and blood with the disciples and by instructing them to do the same in his memory. By instituting the holy

Eucharist and offering himself as our sacrifice on the Passover, Jesus seals the new covenant with his very own body and blood "shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt. 26:28). God and the people partook of the sacrifice; the blood of Jesus saves us from death, "for our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed;" he is the Passover that is our salvation (1 Cor. 5:7).

The words of the *Exultet*, the Church's great hymn of Easter praise, are quite fitting for Holy Thursday, as they are for each of the days of the Triduum: "This is our Passover feast, when Christ, the true Lamb, is slain, whose blood consecrates the homes of all believers. This is the night when first you saved our fathers: you freed the people of Israel from their slavery and led them dry-shod through the sea." This is the night!

This love of Christ, on which the new covenant is established and by which we are given the Eucharist, is exemplified in his humility as he washed the feet of his disciples. Jesus alludes to baptism through which we will share in his inheritance, the gift of eternal life that we

will celebrate in just two days' time. Through the washing of the feet of his disciples, Jesus accepts the totality of his mission, and shows to us a way of life, saying, "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do" (Jn. 13:15). Following his example, we are to lay down our lives in the waters of baptism to be given new life to live in the service of others, strengthened with his body and blood.

We gather this evening to participate in the Last Supper of the Lord Jesus. The Mass of the Lord's Supper is, "first of all, the memorial of the institution of the Eucharist, that is, of the memorial of the Lord's Passover, by which under sacramental signs he perpetuated among us the sacrifice of the New Law. The Mass of the Lord's Supper is also the memorial of the institution of the priesthood, by which Christ's mission and sacrifice are perpetuated in the world. In addition this Mass is the memorial of that love by which the Lord loved us even to death." There is much to celebrate this night, particularly the love of Christ Jesus that binds these three aspects of Holy Thursday together.

I wonder, though, if Jesus were to come to us as he did to the Apostles, would we be willing to let him wash our feet and thereby demonstrate his love for us? Would we humble ourselves in order that he might humble himself? Or would we be like Peter,

refusing to let him humble himself, even though his humbling is necessary for our salvation? Without Jesus' self-emptying love, he would not have been led to the cross, and we would still be cast out from God's presence. His sacrifice this night restores us to the Father.

**Good Friday**

John the Evangelist opens his Gospel with John the Baptist exclaiming, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29). Christ, the Lamb of God: it is a title we repeat at least four times each Sunday, but we rarely stop to ponder and consider what it really means. If we think about it, a lamb is not exactly what one might call a great and mighty animal; a lamb is not powerful, it is not impressive to look at, it has no real dignity about it at all. Why, then, call Jesus, God's very Son, the "Lamb of God?"

The Evangelist tells us that Jesus was crucified on the "preparation day for Passover, and it was about noon" (Jn. 19:14). There were many tasks that needed attending to on the day of preparation as the stores and shops closed for the feast. The lambs needed to be obtained and secured, the herbs had to be purchased or gathered, the houses needed to be cleaned and all other housework completed; and, perhaps most impor-

tantly of all, the lambs needed to be slaughtered.

On the preparation day for Passover, the priests began to slaughter the sacrificial lambs in the temple at Noon, the lambs whose blood would save the people from sin and death. The paschal lamb, the Lamb of God, the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, whose blood saves his people from their sin, was slaughtered at Noon. John explicitly connects the death of Jesus on the cross with the slaughtering of the lambs. Jesus is our paschal lamb who died to take away the sins of the world; it is no mere mistake or random coincidence that the Romans crucified Jesus at Noon.

The *Exsultet* exclaims: "This is our Passover feast, when Christ, the true Lamb is slain, whose blood consecrates the homes of all believers. . . . What good would life have been to us, had Christ not come as our Redeemer? Father, how wonderful your care for us! How boundless your merciful love! To ransom a slave you gave away your Son. O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!"

Our paschal lamb, Jesus the Christ, came to us to fulfill the mission given to him by the Father: to break the chains of sin and death and open wide the gates of heaven. With the sin of Adam, we were forever banished from the presence of God. The sin of Adam truly is lamentable, but it is also one of great joy, for with-

out his sin, we would not have needed and received so great a Savior as the Lamb of God.

Through his sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus restores us to grace and pays the price of our sins, clearing the way for our return to the Father; his cross bridges the chasm between heaven and earth opened at the Fall. Heaven is now reunited and wedded to earth through the obedient actions of the Lamb. "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!"

On this Friday that we call good, we commemorate and make present again the saving death of Christ on the cross. "On this day, when 'Christ our Passover was sacrificed,' the Church meditates on the passion of her Lord and Spouse, adores the cross, commemorates her origin from the side of Christ asleep on the cross, and intercedes for the salvation of the whole world." It is a day of great sorrow and of great penance. This day, though, on which all hope seems lost, when Jesus, our Savior and Lord, is slain, is not the end of the Lamb; this sacrificial Lamb will be raised from the dead.

John records the return of the Lamb in his *Revelations*: "Then I saw standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders a Lamb that seemed to have been slain" (Rev. 5:6). This Lamb, to whom we owe "blessing and honor, glory and might, for ever and ever," is worthy because he was

slain and purchased us with his blood for God (Rev. 5:13). This Lamb is worthy because he did as Isaiah told of him: "Like a lamb let to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers, he was silent and opened not his mouth" (Is. 53:7). Indeed, "the LORD laid upon him the guilt of us all" (Is. 53:6).

On this Good Friday, we spend our day in somber prayer for our conversion and for the conversion of the entire world, worshipping in sorrow our Paschal Lamb who offered himself to gain for us eternal life.

## Holy Saturday

"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. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God has died in the flesh and hell trembles with fear."<sup>24</sup> Something strange is happening because "on Holy Saturday, the Church is, as it were, at the Lord's tomb, meditating on his passion and death and on his descent into hell, awaiting his resurrection with prayer and fasting."<sup>25</sup> This night is like no other. Tonight is the holiest day of the entire year; everything is geared toward this particular night. This is the night when the earth is renewed

and recreated – this is the night of our salvation!

John writes in his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn. 1:1-5).

Yesterday, it seemed certain that Christ, the light of the world, this light of whom John speaks, had been extinguished. The people had whipped him, mocked him, beaten him, cursed him, stripped him, crucified him; he died upon the cross. They pierced his side and placed him in the tomb, rolling the stone of several tons across the entryway. The light had surely been extinguished. God himself had died on this, the darkest day the world has ever known. The darkness of sickness, death, anger, unknowing, and confusion are all met on this one day and tonight they are banished.

During this "most blessed of all nights," however, "the darkness has not overcome" this light. Christ Jesus, our Paschal Lamb, "the light of the world," was raised from the dead by the power and will of the Father! (Jn. 8:12). This night on which Christ rose from the dead is the night of our salvation! It is a night of immense

joy, a joy that cannot be stifled. Sin and death are defeated! The darkness is vanished! The light of Christ shines everywhere and whoever follows him "will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life!" (Jn. 8:12).

This night we gather after nightfall outside the church around a large fire "whose flames should be such that they genuinely dispel the darkness and light up the night."<sup>6</sup> We bless the fire and light the Paschal Candle from this holy fire. As the pillar of fire led the Jewish people through the wilderness, so now Christ, our Paschal Candle, leads us through the darkness of sin and death into the light of his presence. We follow our light into the church and we sing a hymn of praise to this Paschal Candle, to Christ our light.

Rejoice, all that is! All who hear these words rejoice! Christ is risen! He is not dead! He is risen! This is the night! This is the night of Passover. This is the night when we are led out from Egypt. This is the night when the pillar of fire destroys darkness and death. This is the night when we are cleansed of sin. This is the night when Christ rises victorious over sin and death. This is the night! This is our hymn of praise; this is the reason for our praise and joy.

As the culmination, as it were, of

the Triduum celebrations, "the Easter Vigil liturgy should be celebrated in such a way as to offer to the Christian people the riches of the prayers and rites."<sup>7</sup> The Easter Vigil and, indeed, the entire Easter Triduum deserve and require the utmost care in their preparations and celebrations to allow the faithful greater union with the Paschal Mystery of the Lamb. Through the sacred Triduum, all are to be invited, encouraged, and assisted in uniting themselves with Christ crucified and risen that they experience anew the anguish and sorrow of the cross and the jubilation and awe of the empty tomb.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Paschale Solemnitatis (Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Easter Feasts of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, January 16, 1988)*, 2.

<sup>2</sup> *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar* 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Paschale Solemnitatis*, 38.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ceremonial of Bishops*, 297.

<sup>6</sup> *Paschale Solemnitatis*, 58.

<sup>7</sup> *Paschale Solemnitatis*, 93.

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## Preaching Pentecost

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One of the most brilliant converts to the Catholic Church, Henry Edward Manning, decided to publish a book of sermons. One of his friends, after reading the book, pointed out to him that he had entirely forgotten to mention the Holy Spirit. After admitting it, he started to read and study all he could find about the Holy Spirit. Through this study, which lasted about two years, Manning entered the Catholic Church where the Holy Spirit played a dominant role in his life.

Luke is the only evangelist who mentions Pentecost, and it plays a pivotal role in his writing. Paul speaks of staying "in Ephesus until Pentecost," which is the only time he mentions the feast (1 Cor. 16:18). Luke also describes the event of Pentecost in Jewish terms. Later on the

Gentiles receive the Spirit and become part of the community (Acts 10:34-48). We need to point out how the Spirit not only invited Gentiles into a relationship with God but also with the Jewish people. One of the problems of the Spirit coming as a wind and then disappearing is how can we count on the Spirit when needed. The better approach is to believe that the Spirit is always present. Each day can be a new Pentecost. In the Pentecost story we have various people like Partheans, Medes, Elamites, and others of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds coming together. Is the same true of our assemblies today as we gather attempting to form community? Pentecost ushers in a new era offering a challenge to any preacher.

Pentecost is not just the Church's birthday, but also a day of power for