

# **A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF THE CEREMONIES OF HOLY WEEK**

## **PALM SUNDAY**

In the new Roman Calendar of March 21, 1969, the Sunday before Easter, traditionally known as Palm Sunday, is also called Passion Sunday. Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem before His Passion is commemorated in every liturgy today.

Just as the Christians in Jerusalem relive the events today in their historic setting, we recreate the first Palm Sunday for ourselves. Our City of Jerusalem is our Parish Church. Its main entrance is the gate to this city. In some churches it is a custom to decorate the entrance as a triumphal arch through which the procession enters. Ideally, the congregation gathers in a place apart from the Church itself, to which the procession will move. All carry palm or other branches. All kinds of branches can be blessed, especially those of flowering shrubs.

The celebrant wears red Mass vestments in honor of Christ our King. He greets everyone and blesses the branches they hold. His prayer reminds us that the branches are primarily for use in the procession. The Gospel passage describing the first Palm Sunday is proclaimed. A short homily may follow, ending the preliminary rites at this outer place. The procession sets out for the church, singing in honor of Christ the King. It is our privilege to join the procession and proclaim our devotion and loyalty to our Savior. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord: Blessed is the King of Israel!"

Representing Christ, the celebrant, together with the people, enters the new city of Jerusalem which is the Church. When all are in their places, Mass continues with the Opening Prayer. During the Mass the Passion is proclaimed, reminding us that Christ's Kingdom is not of this world, and that later His throne will be a cross.

At all Masses, branches may be distributed to everyone entering the church, so they can be held during the Entrance Song. In some churches an adapted form of the Procession may be used, the so-called Solemn Entrance. At all other Masses this day, the Lord's entrance is at least commemorated with the so-called Simple Entrance. The Entrance Procession of the celebrant and ministers through the Church is a miniature Palm Sunday Procession.

### **MONDAY, TUESDAY & WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK**

These three days have traditionally been set aside to complete the many chores that might be an obstacle to participating in the Easter Triduum (Thursday, Friday and Saturday). They are the days of Spring cleaning and Easter shopping. If not already attended to, these are the days to receive the Sacrament of Penance. Also, these are the days of reflection on the events of the first Holy Week.

On these days the first readings of the Masses are from the “Servant of the Lord” oracles of Isaiah. The New Testament and Christian tradition see a fulfillment of these prophecies in Jesus. The Gospels of the Masses focus on Jesus’ words and actions during this time of His life: on Monday, we read of His anointing by Mary Magdalene at Bethany; on Tuesday and Wednesday, we read of His Last Supper discourse excerpts concerning His betrayal. The term “Spy Wednesday” originated in the belief that Judas spied on Christ this day to know the opportune time to betray Him.

The Holy Week spirit can be strengthened by attending Mass on these days and listening attentively to the readings.

### **HOLY THURSDAY**

The Easter Triduum begins with the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper. Its Entrance Antiphon emphasizes the theme of the Triduum. “It behooves us to glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, by whom we are saved and delivered.” (Galatians 6:14)

Holy Thursday is the anniversary of the Lord’s Supper when Jesus ate the Passover meal with His apostles. It was then that He instituted the Eucharist, which is Sacrament, Sacrifice and Memorial. He commanded His first priests to repeat this action as a Memorial to Him. It was also then that He washed their feet and gave us an example and command of brotherly love. Unselfish love is the theme of this day. It should contain works of mercy, care and concern in response to Christ’s words, “I give you a new commandment: love one another”. (John 13:34)

One feature of this Mass is the re-enactment of the Gospel narrative of the washing of the feet. We are dramatically reminded that the Christian life means humble service.

The first reading of the Mass from the book of Exodus tells of the first Passover. It included a sacrifice and a meal as a memorial to God’s love for His Chosen People. The second reading recalls that after Our Lord celebrated the ancient Passover, He established a new covenant in His blood, a Sacrifice, Sacrament and Memorial with the new People of God. What more fitting

occasion is there than this evening to participate in the liturgy and receive the Sacrament given by Our Lord.

Holy Communion is received from hosts freshly consecrated at this Mass. In some parishes the bread used is baked by members of the Parish. After Communion, the remaining hosts are transferred to the Altar of Repose. In the spirit of Holy Week, the Repository is decorated very simply. A period of Adoration continues throughout the evening, but ends no later than Midnight.

The altar of sacrifice is stripped in silence and the crucifix covered or removed from the sanctuary. Masses will not be offered again until the Easter Vigil Service. We depart strengthened in our belief that, "When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, until you come in glory."

### **GOOD FRIDAY**

Today the Church celebrates the Passion and Death of her Lord. Since Palm Sunday, the shadow of the cross has been cast across every liturgy. Today, the cross is the symbol which completely dominates our liturgy. The celebrant wears red Mass vestments to honor the Lamb whose blood saves us. A prayer recalling our redemption begins the ceremony. The first reading from Hebrews recalls that Jesus submitted humbly and became for all a source of eternal salvation. The Passion according to John is proclaimed. After the homily, we pray for all mankind in an ancient form of the General Intercessions. All of these petitions may be prayed, or a selection may be made from them.

Christians of earlier centuries venerated the true cross. Yet every image of the cross visibly brings to mind Him who suffered and died for us. The liturgy reaches its high point in the arrival of the cross. If veiled, it is presented to the celebrant who unveils it. Three times he proclaims "Behold the wood of the Cross on which hung the salvation of the world". Each time we kneel and respond, "Come, let us adore".

The cross is venerated. The celebrant and (at least some of) the congregation genuflect before it or kiss it as a sign of sorrow and gratitude. If many are present, the cross will be raised before all. At the end of this veneration, the cross is placed at the altar of sacrifice.

### **HOLY SATURDAY**

The Church tarries today at the Lord's tomb, meditating on His Passion and Death. She refrains from all ceremony until nightfall. During the night-watch (Vigil Service) sorrow and mourning give way to joy and celebration. The Easter Vigil Service is the high point of the entire liturgical

year. Easter is the SOLEMNITY OF SOLEMNITIES, and this most ancient vigil is the “Mother of all holy vigils.” Though the new order for the Vigil Service is shorter than in past year, the recent modifications and simplifications have made the meaning of this holy night shine forth more clearly.

A large fire is kindled and blessed outside the church where all are gathered. When the Easter Candle is lit from this fire, it symbolizes Christ the Light of the World, and it dispels the darkness of the night. Christ is our “pillar of fire” leading us, the new Israel. The Paschal Candle provides the light for the Easter Proclamation which recalls the grandeur of Jesus’ rising on this holy night. Its text recounts God’s wonderful works in the Old Testament, foreshadowing His wonders accomplished in the New Testament.

The Liturgy of the Word follows, during which there is a series of readings from the Old Testament, responses and prayers. The Glory to God is sung with majesty, the church bells are rung and the Alleluia, absent since Ash Wednesday, precedes the Gospel.

Through the readings we are disposed to receive the Sacraments with deeper faith. In imitation of the death and resurrection of the Lord, Baptism may be celebrated after the Gospel has proclaimed His Resurrection. Baptismal water is blessed from which the catechumens, buried with Christ by death to sin, emerge into the new life of His grace. “If we have been united with Him through likeness to His death, so shall we be through a like resurrection.” (Romans 6:5)

We renew our Baptismal Promises and pledge to witness by our lives and conduct to the new life bestowed on us in Baptism. Then the liturgy continues with the General Intercessions and the rest of the Mass continues as usual.

Those who participate in the Vigil Mass may receive Communion again if they take part in a second Mass on Easter Sunday itself.

### **EASTER SUNDAY**

THE LORD IS RISEN! ALLELUIA! Our joy has been made complete. The tomb is empty. Christ has returned in the glory of the Resurrection. We try to express our ecstasy by fully participating in the Church’s Easter celebrations. And if we understand the meaning of Easter we will continue to rejoice in it Sunday after Sunday after Sunday . . . forever. Dare we return to the tomb of half-hearted Christian living? Part of the mystery of Easter is the many ways in which the tomb of death is empty.