Holy Thursday Guide

What is the Mass of the Lord’s Supper?
The Pascal Triduum begins on Holy Thursday with the celebration of the Mass of the Lord’s Supper. This liturgy commemorates Jesus’ last supper with His apostles before His arrest and crucifixion. In this Pass-over meal Jesus instituted both the Eucharist and the ministerial priesthood. He also gave the commandment of love for one another through service. All three, the Eucharist, the priesthood, and the call to loving service are emphasized in particular ways in the Holy Thursday Mass.

What happens at the Mass of the Lord’s Supper?
The first thing one may notice, before Mass even begins, is that the Tabernacle is empty. Enough bread will be consecrated this night for everyone gathered, as well as enough for those attending the following day’s Good Friday service. The empty Tabernacle serves as a reminder on this night when we celebrate the very first time Christ offered Himself in the Eucharist that there was a time where there was no Eucharist.

As Mass begins, the Gloria is sung for the first time since the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. The return of this song, which we have been fasting from during Lent, marks this Mass as an occasional of joy and celebration as we memorialize Jesus giving us the great gifts of the Eucharist and the priesthood.

In the Liturgy of the Word we hear: a description of the original Passover celebration (1st Reading), a song of thanksgiving (Responsorial Psalm), St. Paul’s account of the Last Supper and the first Eucharist (2nd Reading), and St. John the Evangelist’s account of Jesus washing His apostles’ feet (Gospel Reading).

After the homily there will be the Washing of the Feet. The priest removes his outer vestments and then washes the feet of a group of the faithful who have been chosen to represent the community. This action echoes Jesus’ washing of His apostles’ feet at the Last Supper. “In performing this rite Bishops and priests are invited to intimately conform themselves to Christ who ‘came not to be served but to serve’ (Mt 20:28),” (In Missa In Cena Domini) and all are reminded of the baptismal call to follow His example.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist proceeds as usual.

After Communion the Blessed Sacrament is processed to the Altar of Repose. This procession usually consists of clergy, along with the servers, leading the faithful with the cross, incense and candles to a place outside of the main church adorned for the Blessed Sacrament. While processing, a traditional Eucharistic hymn, such as Pange Lingua is sung. When the procession reaches the altar of repose Tantum Ergo is sung as the priest incenses the Blessed Sacrament. The tabernacle is then closed and the faithful are invited to spend some time in prayer and adoration, “keeping watch” until later in the evening. As once explained by Pope Benedict XVI, “[During the] Eucharistic procession on Holy Thursday, when the Church repeats the exodus of Jesus from the Upper Room to the Mount of Olives. … It is the authentic desire of the Church in prayer to keep watch with Jesus, not to abandon him in the night of the world, on the night of betrayal, on the night of the indifference of many people.” At midnight the Chapel of Repose is closed and Church turns her attention from keeping watch to reflecting on Christ’s Passion on Good Friday.

After the Blessed Sacrament has been processed to the Altar of Repose the stripping of the Altar begins. The altar cloths are removed from the altar and anything that can be reasonably moved out of the sanctuary is removed (flowers, decorations, candles, furniture, etc.). Remaining statues and crosses are covered with red or purple veils. The resulting bare sanctuary is meant as a sign of mourning and serves to remind the faithful that Jesus was once stripped of His garments and on the night of Passover, abandoned and left alone.
Why should we participate in the Holy Thursday Mass?

The Mass of the Lord’s Supper marks the start of the Easter Triduum. Although involving three services on three days, (The Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday, The Celebration of the Lord’s Passion on Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday) the Triduum is considered a single celebration and is the summit of the Liturgical Year. These liturgies are both beautiful and powerful. As each is only offered once in each community, they are a tremendous opportunity for the whole community of the faithful to gather and worship together in a heightened way. Special attention has gone into the planning and preparing for these liturgies often making them very moving experiences for those who attend. On Holy Thursday we particularly celebrate God’s gifts of the Eucharist and the priesthood and reminded of Christ’s great sacrificial love for us.
Holy Thursday Reflection

Family Last Name: _________________________________

First Names of Adult Participants: ________________
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First Names of Youth Participants: _________________________________
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Has your family ever participated in Holy Thursday before?
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How would you describe your Holy Thursday experience this year?
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What was something that stood out for you, particularly in the liturgy? Why did it stand out?
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Did Holy Thursday help you to connect with God and/or our parish community? If yes, how? If not, why not?
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What is one thing about Holy Thursday that you would like to share with others?
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