

Holy Week 2019

Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

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Holy Week begins with the celebration of Passion Sunday, better known as Palm Sunday, through the Mass of Holy Thursday which marks the end of Lent. Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter are called the Triduum, a three-day season unto itself. The commemorations running Thursday through Sunday claim all of our attention. No funeral or wedding Masses are held on these days. The very space of our churches is occupied both by our assemblies and our silences. I used to have to explain this to ecumenical groups who desired to do Good Friday choral recitals in our parish church.

On April 16, our diocese will follow the tradition of celebrating the Mass of Holy Chrism during this special week. Other dioceses celebrate the previous week because of the greater distances that priests and parishioners must travel. This Mass features the blessing of oils that parishes will use in sacraments during the coming 12 months. The Mass is primarily a celebration of the power of the sacraments, and especially those wherein holy oils play a part: ordination of priests or bishops; baptism; sacrament of the sick. It also witnesses the priests renewing both their commitment to serve, and their promise of obedience and respect to the local bishop.

In any year, we look forward to the week both as celebration and as a “reset” based on our Lenten prayers and penances. But because we have had much to think about since last summer, the whole Church comes to Holy Week 2019 with conflicting feelings. There is anger, confusion and disappointment over the moral failures of individuals that comprise the “child sex abuse scandal” within the Church. Saying that abuse is a problem of our broader society does not lessen our internal responsibilities.

Our diocese has not escaped some of the same history. But we will enter prayer in Holy Week knowing a few things for sure: First, that since before 2002 the diocese has acknowledged victim-survivors and reached out to help them. In the intervening years, there has grown a better understanding that the response can be continually maintained and improved. Second, I believe that any reported instance of the sexual abuse of a minor by a cleric in this diocese occurred before the early 1980s. Third, our diocese has a zero-tolerance policy. This means that any credible and substantiated allegation of abuse will cause the permanent removal of the offending cleric from ministry.

Why bring up these distressing elements when we are trying to build a hopeful moment from fervent prayer and liturgy? Because leaving them outside our doors and our hearts would mean we fail to bring our whole selves, our whole diocese, into our prayers. If we think about the penitential rite at the beginning of each Mass, we realize that we always bring our whole and real situation before God, including our sufferings, confusions and sinfulness. Religious integrity does not mean that we are perfect, it means that we know what we need, and that we cannot act upon it — much less see it — apart from the grace of God.

Of course, Lent disposes us to appreciate what is truly good, especially the miracle of God’s blessings in our personal faith and relationships. We certainly bring these experiences into Holy Week. Each of us prepares differently based on our vocations and opportunities. Masses, Stations of the Cross, communal rosaries and parish penance services (not to mention all those Saturday

confessions) have caused us to slow down, to repent failures, and to sense the availability of God's loving kindness to us personally.

If you have not experienced the liturgies of the Triduum, I encourage you to do so. Invite a friend or family member to go with you. Each year, they teach me something new. If you have never participated in the Mass of the Last Supper on Holy Thursday, and felt the lesson that is the "washing of the feet," I am sure that you will learn something new about our Lord and his Church that goes beyond words. Something no newspaper column can convey.