

All About Holy Week

We begin the holiest week of the year. The liturgy gives us a special opportunity to deepen our spiritual awareness and to enter into the mystery of dying and rising with Jesus. We all have many spiritual deaths. They include everyday disappointments of life, be they personal, or what we hear on the news. We also have opportunities to experience resurrection. When you go through a difficult time and God answers your prayers and brings you hope, you experience resurrection. I hope these reflections will help you not only to understand the ceremonies, but more importantly to enter into the mystery.

Passion Sunday

The Sunday of Holy Week is called Passion Sunday because the Gospel is always in an account of the Passion. Because of Christ bloodshed red vestments are worn this day. Some call it Palm Sunday because of the opening rite of the Mass which ordinarily includes a palm blessing and procession, recalling the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. If there is to be a palm blessing this can be done in a separate place from the church and conclude with the procession into the church. Alternatively, the blessing may take place in church with the solemn procession incorporated. And in either case there is a Gospel reading which recalls Jesus being greeted with palm branches as he enters Jerusalem. After the Gospel the presiding priest blesses the palm, and it is carried in procession. The assembly could be invited to wave their palm during the procession. During the Liturgy of the Word the proclamation of the Gospel is unique today. There are no candles nor kissing of the Gospel book at the end of the Passion. The Passion can be read in parts with the priest taking the part of Jesus. Most likely the Deacon will be the narrator with other lectors taking the parts of

other speakers. The Passion of Jesus is what is central to this day's liturgy. Spiritually speaking we need to identify our own experience of suffering, including our Lenten sacrifices, as one with the suffering of Jesus. We die with him with the hope of rising with him. Take some prayer time outside the Mass to enter into the mystery.

The Paschal Triduum

Lent ends Thursday afternoon as we begin the Three Days of the Christian Passover. What we are doing is more than just a historical recalling of the Last Supper and the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are entering into “mystery” and not just “history.” We are about “anamnesis” and not just “mimesis.” What does this mean? Rather than pretending that Jesus is doing the Last Supper all over and dying all over and rising all over, we are entering into the mystery of these events. Every time we offer Eucharist it is not just a reenactment of the Last Supper. Rather than Jesus dying and rising all over again, the mystery and the sacrifice of his dying and rising is made present as bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ, the sacrifice of his death and resurrection are made present. Not that Jesus dies and rises all over. The Anamnesis is a central part of the Eucharistic Prayer in which we recall Jesus’s death and resurrection and offer this as praise to the Father. We are not just mimicking what happened (mimesis) but entering into the mystery (anamnesis). Spiritually we take our own experiences of dying and rising and make them one with the sacrifice of Jesus death and resurrection made present here and now.

Holy Thursday

We celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper this evening. A unique feature of this Mass is the foot washing that takes place after the homily. The priest washes the feet of representatives from his parish. Spiritually speaking I think the image of Jesus washing his disciple's feet as the perfect image of our call to be servants. I have a wood carving of Jesus washing his apostle's foot. I use this to meditate when I think about my call to serve. I hope you spend some time reflecting on how you serve God's people.

After Communion there will be a Eucharistic procession to the place of reposition. After the Eucharist is placed there it is incensed. Mass then concludes very simply with no final blessing or dismissal rite. The priest will strip the altar of its cloths. Do spend some time reflecting on both your call to serve, symbolized by foot washing, and on the gift of the Eucharist and what it means to you.

Good Friday

Good Friday is a day of fast and abstinence. While not required I suggest extending the day of fast and abstinence through Holy Saturday until the Easter Vigil is concluded. This Paschal fast is different from the Lenten fast as we anticipate the joy of Easter. It is like we are too excited to eat and drink ordinary food. Yes, there is some sacrifice involved but it is a joy filled anticipation of what is to come. Think of an engaged couple too excited to eat and drink as they approach their wedding feast. Besides fasting and abstaining from meat be sure to spend some extra time in quiet prayer reflecting on what all this means.

Again, red vestments or worn this day. We used to wear black vestments and it was as if we were celebrating Jesus's funeral. Rather we are celebrating his victory over sin and death. As on Passion Sunday there are no candles or incense or kissing of the Gospel book associated with the proclamation of the Passion. Again, the priest takes the role of Jesus and perhaps the Deacon will be the narrator with other lectors taking the speaker parts.

After the homily there are the Solemn Intercessions. The Deacon stands at the ambo and introduces each of the 10 prayers. Those who planned the liturgy should decide whether or not they want the assembly to stand and kneel and the Deacon give the invitations as to their posture. After each introduction the priest chants or recites the petition.

After the Solemn Intercessions there is the Adoration of the Cross. There are two different forms of this. In the first option the cross is brought to the center of the sanctuary and the priest unveils the cross in three movements, each time chanting, "Behold the wood of the cross..." to which the assembly responds. The alternative form is that the cross is carried in procession from the back of church up to the sanctuary. Three times the one carrying the cross pauses and holds up the cross and sings, "Behold the wood of the cross...." The veneration of the assembly follows however it was planned. When the veneration is finished the cross will be placed where it will be left for the rest of the liturgy. The Deacon will go to wherever the Eucharist is reserved, put on a humeral veil and bring the Eucharist to the altar for the Communion Rite. The liturgy concludes, but with no dismissal rite as was the case on Holy Thursday. You may wish to think of the Triduum as one continuous liturgy with two long intermissions. There is no dismissal rite on Holy Thursday or Good Friday just as the usual opening

rite is missing on Good Friday and the Easter Vigil. Be sure to take quiet time outside the liturgy to reflect on the cross of Jesus and your own experience of the cross. Thank Jesus for undergoing his passion out of love for you.

Holy Saturday

On Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday there are no morning liturgies. However, in many parishes, like Holy Guardian Angeles, Morning Prayer from the Liturgy the Hours is celebrated. Also, Easter baskets are blessed this day.

The Easter Vigil

The high point of the entire liturgical year is the Easter Vigil. If your parish has a catechumenate process the catechumens since the Rite of Election are known as the elect or chosen ones. This is the night in which the elect will be baptized, confirmed, and receive the Eucharist for the first time! This night is all about them.

There are four parts to the Easter Vigil:

- I. The Service of Light
- II. The Liturgy of the Word
- III. The Liturgy of Baptism
- IV. The Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The vigil begins outdoors where a fire has been lit. The Deacon is holding the Easter candle, a symbol of the risen Christ. The presiding priest welcomes people and blesses the fire and candle. Once he completes the words he says over the candle, it is lit. Then the procession begins. The Deacon leads the way into the darkened church. As he goes down the center aisle there are three times the Deacon stops, lifts up the candle and sings "The Light of Christ." After the first time the priest's candle is lit. The deacon continues to the middle of church, stops to hold up the candle, and sings again "The Light of Christ." Then the people's candles are lit. The Deacon then continues to the front of church where he faces the people and sings for a third time "The Light of Christ." The Deacon then lights the candles of those near the front of church and proceeds to the candlestand located near the ambo. Then the Deacon may require some assistance in placing the Easter candle into its stand. The priest will put incense into the censor and proceed to incense the Easter candle. As the Deacon prepares to sing the Easter Proclamation, he will seek a blessing from the priest similar to what he does before the Gospel. Then stepping to the ambo, he will sing the Easter Proclamation.

The Liturgy of the Word follows. Up to nine readings may be proclaimed from the Hebrew scriptures. Then following the Epistle there is a very solemn Alleluia chanted by the priest. Next the Deacon asks for the priest for a blessing prior to proclaiming the Gospel. The Gospel procession may take a longer but carefully rehearsed path to the ambo during the Alleluia. Incense can be used but no candles are carried. When the Gospel is finished in some parishes the Deacon chants "The Gospel of the Lord" and the alleluia is repeated. The homily will follow.

The Liturgy of Baptism will follow the homily. Of course, if there are no catechumens to be welcomed into the Church this rite will simply consist of a blessing of the water and a renewal of the people's baptism promises. In any event there is a procession during which the Litany of Saints is sung. The Easter candle is carried along for the blessing of the water. During the blessing the Easter candle will be lowered three times into the font. The Deacon may assist with this. After the water is blessed those to be baptized will come forth. If any are to make a profession of faith, they will do so and the sacrament of Confirmation will be conferred on those who will receive it. After this is finished, or if there are no catechumens, the people are asked to renew their baptismal promises. Afterwards they will be blessed with the Easter water. After the assembly has been sprinkled with the Easter water there will be the usual General Intercessions.

After the intercessions the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins as usual. The only thing different for the rest of Mass are the First Communions and then the Dismissal Rite. The Deacon will chant the dismissal adding the alleluias. This will conclude the Easter Vigil.

Easter Sunday

Easter Sunday is always very special. The music will be the best of the entire year. The church decor will be the outstanding. And in place of the Creed there will be the Renewal of Baptismal Promises. After the assembly has renewed their promises, they will be blessed with Easter water. After the final blessing the Deacon or priest will dismiss the people and the special alleluias will be added on Easter Sunday and during the octave of Easter.

Spiritually we can prepare for this great feast by reflecting on the gift of our own baptism. What does it mean that God has giving you a share in his very divine life? What does it mean that you truly are a disciple of Jesus? What does it mean and you have been promised everlasting life?

It is my hope and prayer that these reflections on both the rituals of Holy Week and the spirituality of these days have been helpful.

May you, and all you love, have a very Blessed Easter!

Father Michael Ahlstrom