

# The Easter Triduum

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The Easter Triduum, the “Three Days”, is the celebration of the Christian Passover. Just as our Jewish ancestors gathered annually to remember the events of their release from slavery in Egypt, so too, we gather to celebrate our Passover from death to life in Christ. The Triduum is at the heart and soul of our Christian faith, commemorating the triumph of God's love over darkness and death. It's the fullest ritual expression of what it means to be a Christian. In our reliving and remembering, we're renewed and reborn along with the newly initiated members of our community.

In essence, the Triduum is one great festival that lasts for three days: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. As with all the great feasts of the Church, the celebration begins at dusk on Holy Thursday with the Mass of the Lord's Supper. On Good Friday, the first full day of the Triduum, we gather to remember the Lord's Passion and Death. Saturday is a day of quiet reflection on the Entombment of Christ as we wait, like the disciples, for news of the resurrection. And finally, on Saturday night we gather in vigil and hear the amazing news that Jesus Christ, our companion and brother, is not dead, but is risen from the grave. The Triduum liturgy ends with Evening Prayer on Easter day.

As we prepare the rites of the Triduum liturgy, we are afforded many opportunities to emphasize and maintain the unity of this one celebration. We accomplish this ritually by remembering that each of the days, while having their own emphasis, celebrate the entire mystery of Christ's passion and death. In our Friday rituals, we need not pretend that the resurrection has not yet happened. We are not play-acting here. Though the liturgy of Friday is stark, we may still catch glimpses of Easter triumph. The same is true of Easter. We arrive at the joy of the resurrection only through suffering and death. Easter without the cross has little meaning.

Another way of supporting the unity of this three-day festival is by observing the ancient practice of the Paschal fast. This fast traditionally lasted from the beginning of the Triduum until the communion rite on Easter. By means of this sacred fast, we're mindful of our prayers as we depart for our homes until we gather again the next day.

Finally, the unity of the Triduum can be greatly enhanced by the music we choose for the celebrations each of the days. Like symphonic composers, we might incorporate melodic themes, threading together the disparate elements of this one great festival. Triduum unity is enhanced when we make use of recurring melodies and musical elements on successive days.

## Holy Thursday: Celebration of the Lord's Supper

We begin the Triduum with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The entrance antiphon for this day gives us wonderful insight into the Triduum celebration: "We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection; through him we are saved and set free." (Gal. 6:14) We celebrate the triumph of God's love accomplished by the cross of Jesus Christ. Life is born from death.

The liturgy of these three days is rich with symbols. As we prepare these rites we are challenged to help people enter into the prayer of these rites. The Triduum symbols become incredible vehicles of prayer. The primary symbols of Holy Thursday are the washing of the feet and the sharing of the Eucharist. These symbols embody the themes of service, priesthood, and unity. As we implement the rites, we're afforded a wonderful opportunity to ensure these two great symbols stand out boldly and clearly for all. The foot washing clearly needs to engage the assembly in the most profound way possible. And on this day of all days, a loaf of real bread, along with wine from the cup, should be the norm.

At the Last Supper, Jesus transformed the Jewish Passover meal into a memorial of his death and resurrection. He becomes the new Passover, the Way to new life in the kingdom of God. Today, we as Christians gather to celebrate this covenant meal and bind ourselves to Him as we follow him to death and resurrection. And with Him, we surrender our own lives for the sake of the world.

The goal of the Triduum liturgy is to unite the entire community of faith into a single celebration. Despite the differences in our worship during the rest of the year, we celebrate this liturgy as one family. We preserve this unity by providing only one celebration on the days of the Triduum. Providing separate liturgies for special groups only undermines the unity.

Note that there is no dismissal or final blessing for the liturgy on Holy Thursday. The service does not end but continues when we gather on Friday for the Celebration of the Lord's Passion. After the solemn procession of the Eucharist, the assembly informally disperses as the altar and sanctuary are stripped in preparation for the liturgy the next day. Little emphasis should be placed on the rite of stripping. This is just a simple act of preparation for the next day.

## Good Friday: Celebration of the Lord's Passion

The liturgy on Good Friday is the second ritual step on the Triduum journey. In the context of the one great liturgy, the death of Christ is not to be isolated from the fullness of the Paschal mystery. Good Friday is not a time of mourning, but rather, of remembering, of seeing once again the boundless love of God expressed in the self-offering of his own Son. Though Jesus of Nazareth dies in shame on a cross, God's love is so powerful that not even death can defeat it.

The Celebration of the Lord's Passion has three distinct parts: the Liturgy of the Word, the Veneration of the Cross, and the Communion Service. It's significant that the Gospel of John was chosen as the Passion account for this day. In John's gospel the victory of Christ shines through every step of the way. Death is not seen as defeat but rather as the passage of Christ into his glory.

Today, the liturgy begins in silence. We do not provide opening music or a call to worship. The rites assume that this is simply the continuation of the liturgy of the previous evening. During the liturgical year, only the Good Friday and the Easter Vigil liturgies begin in this way. This reflects the true nature of the three days of the Triduum as being one extended celebration.

The primary symbol of today's liturgy is the cross as a sign of victory and salvation. The Veneration of the Cross is one of the most ancient elements in liturgy today. We gather as family around the cross of Christ and embrace it as our own. As each of us has an opportunity to carry it, so too will we enjoy its victory and joy. A wooden cross, large enough to be visible from every corner of the church, and without a corpus, is the ideal. A single cross respects the connection with the one cross of Christ that is our salvation.

The actual rite of veneration should be handled with efficiency and grace, while not seeming rushed. The symbol cannot speak to people's hearts if they are not allowed to fully experience it. The challenge in planning the movement of this rite is that all present be given an opportunity to make some sign of reverence to the cross. Besides making our own act of veneration, much of the power of this rite lies in watching other people make theirs. Young and old, rich and poor, healthy and infirm, we all come to the cross to find hope and be saved.

A simple communion rite concludes the service this day. We again depart in silence until we gather for the vigil on Easter. During the day on Holy Saturday we are encouraged to spend some time in reflection on the burial of the Lord, allowing ourselves to sit quietly with the disciples as they wonder what to do next.

## **Easter Vigil: The Celebration of the Lord's Resurrection**

The Easter Vigil liturgy has its roots in the Old Testament and relives in ritual, the night the Israelites stayed awake waiting for the Lord to deliver them from their slavery in Egypt. Similarly, we wait with the disciples for the good news that Jesus indeed is risen! In its fullest expression this is a true vigil, a night watch. We gather as family to re-tell the wondrous stories of our salvation and draw strength as we remember. We wait together in joyful hope for the good news of Christ's victory over death. In the process, we discover for ourselves the glory of the Cross.

The liturgy this night has four parts: the Light Service, the Liturgy of the Word, the Rites of Initiation, and the Celebration of the Lord's Supper. Each part is imbedded with powerful symbols: light and darkness, fire, word, water, oil, touch, and a meal shared as friends. If we put of our energy into preparing these

symbols so that they can speak loudly, people will be drawn into their power and experience the presence of God.

While our present-day Easter Vigils rarely last throughout the night, they can remain long and cumbersome for many communities. Unfortunately, in our technological age, we're not people who typically do well with waiting. It is important for us to begin where the community is and not where it ought to be. The challenge we face as liturgists is to prepare the rites in such a way that the people can truly hear the stories, experience the fullness of the symbols, and participate in the wonder of this night.

As we find an expression of the ritual that works for our assembly it's good to stick with it, and not feel that we must come up with something new every year. If there are things that didn't work last year, we might summon our creativity and imagination in finding a better way to improve on them. In every decision, our guide should be what will most engage people in prayer and allow them to experience the power of the symbols.

Often our Easter assemblies are much larger than normal and diverse with many visitors. For some this may be one of the first times they've come to church in a while. It's important to choose music that people already know or can easily sing with little or no practice. If there is an absolute need to teach a piece before the liturgy begins, we might do a very brief practice. Keep it very short and use it as a way of leading people into the prayer of this night.