

Spirituality

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Supporting, empowering, and educating members in spirituality, leadership and service; reaching out with Gospel values to meet the needs of Church and society.

A HOLY WEEK PRIMER

During Holy Week, Catholics take part in ancient religious practices. We actually act out parts from Christ's life. By doing so, we share in the mystery of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. Catholic churches throughout the world take part in these rituals in varying degrees, but they are all part of the church's traditions. Included in the following information are some of the "WHYS" that we carry on these practices.

PALMS, PROCESSIONS AND THE PASSION

On Palm Sunday, a week before Easter, the Catholic Church recalls Jesus' messianic entrance into Jerusalem before his crucifixion. Jews gathered around him as he rode into the city on a small donkey and threw their cloaks and palm branches on the road before him as they exclaimed his praises as he passed by.

Traditionally, there is a blessing of palms which the faithful hold as they process into church. The blessed palms are later kept in the home as a witness to faith in Jesus Christ, the Messianic King, and in his Paschal victory. Palm Sunday Mass also has the Gospel account of the Passion of Christ read aloud with the responses of Christ, the Apostles, and the crowds who appeared throughout the Passion.

VEILED IMAGES

Many of us remember another ancient tradition. Starting on Palm Sunday, some churches cover or veil (with purple cloth) all the religious artwork in the church except stained glass windows and the Stations of the Cross. Other churches remove the images altogether. The custom of veiling crosses and images helps us to concentrate on the great essentials of Christ's work of Redemption. The somber custom is believed to come from a 9th Century German practice of extending a large cloth called the "Hungertuch" (hunger cloth) before the altar from the beginning of Lent. This hid the altar and was not removed until during the reading of the Passion on the Wednesday of Holy week, at the words, "the veil of the temple was rent in two."

Crucifixes are unveiled after the Good Friday ceremonies and all other images just before the Easter vigil Mass on Holy Saturday.

WASHING FEET

At Holy Thursday liturgy in the Vatican, even the pope performs the foot washing. Across the centuries, it has been the practice for the pope to wash the feet of 12 priests after Mass and of 13 poor men after his dinner. This is done, just as Christ did for his 12 Apostles at the Last Supper and as he commanded them to do likewise. During the Mass of the Lord's Supper, the priest, who represents Christ, washes the feet of 12 people in the congregation.

GOING WITH JESUS TO GETHSEMANE

After the Last supper, and before he was arrested and condemned to death, Jesus went to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was accompanied by two of his disciples. So after the Holy Thursday Mass, the remaining sacred hosts are carried out of the sanctuary to an "altar of repose". People go with the Eucharistic Christ in a procession. The transported is sometimes surrounded by decorations of greenery and flowers to suggest a garden. People stay for a time to adore the wondrous sacrament that Jesus instituted that day over 2000 years ago.

A VACANT CHURCH

When the Mass of the Lord's Supper is finished, the church, now without the Eucharist, is truly empty. So the tabernacle light, which is always lit and burning to signify Christ's presence, is extinguished, and the tabernacle door is left open, exposing the vacant space inside. The altar is stripped bare of its linens and candles, holy water is removed from the church's fonts and the sacraments are not celebrated until the Easter Vigil. This replicates the first Christians bereft of Jesus and mourning the two days after the crucifixion. The church stands unadorned until the Easter vigil Mass on Saturday night when the church's joy is restored with the resurrection of Jesus.

THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS

By praying the Stations of the Cross, a person makes a spiritual pilgrimage to the principal scenes of the salvific Passion of the Lord, aided by artistic representations of these scenes. The Stations of the Cross devotion is centered on the Passion of Christ. It can be an especially poignant experience during Holy Week when the entire church recalls the way of Jesus' suffering and death. Stations of the Cross are found inside churches, spaced in intervals on the walls, but sometimes outdoors, such as in cloisters of monasteries. Devotions to the Stations of the Cross are often held throughout Lent.

EMBRACE THE CROSS

On Good Friday, the church gathers for the Liturgy of the Lord's Passion. This includes a reading of a Gospel account of the Passion, Holy Communion (that was consecrated at Mass on Holy Thursday night) and veneration of the Cross.

In the tradition of the veneration of the cross, the priest holds a wooden crucifix while the faithful process to him at the foot of the sanctuary, as if to receive communion. There, each person reverences the crucifix with a kiss or a bow.

In some churches, there are additional Good Friday devotions, especially from noon to 3 pm – the hour at which Christ died on the cross.

EASTER

Easter is the oldest Christian holiday and the most important day of the church year. Easter is a day of celebration because it represents the fulfillment of our faith as Christians. St. Paul wrote that, unless Christ rose from the dead, our faith is in vain. Through his death, Christ saved mankind from bondage to sin, and He destroyed the hold that death has on all of us, but it is His Resurrection that gives us the promise of new life, both in this world and the next. The new life in Christ at Easter is why people who are converting to Catholicism traditionally are baptized at the Easter Vigil service. Their baptism (RICA – Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) parallels Christ's own Death and Resurrection, as they die to sin and rise to new life in the Kingdom of God.

COMMUNION: OUR EASTER DUTY

Because of the central importance of Easter to the Christian faith, the Catholic Church requires that all Catholics who have made their First Communion receive the Holy Eucharist sometime during the Easter season, which lasts through Pentecost, 50 days after Easter.

The reception of the Eucharist is a visible sign of our faith and our participation in the Kingdom of God. We should receive Communion as frequently as possible, this "Easter duty" is simply the minimum requirement set by the Church. The Church also urges us to take part in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) before receiving this Easter communion.

EASTER EGGS AND CHRISTIANITY

Over the centuries, Easter Sunday has been supplemented by popular customs, many of which were incorporated from springtime fertility celebrations of European and Middle Easter pagan religion. Rabbits and eggs, for example are widely-used pagan symbols for fertility.

Some Christians disassociate themselves entirely from Easter eggs because of their pagan connotations. Other Christians view Easter eggs, or other candies and treats, as symbols of joy and celebration (as they were forbidden during the fast of Lent) and as a "taste" of new life and resurrection that they have in Jesus Christ.

HOW IS THE DATE OF EASTER DECIDED

The method for determining the date of Easter is complex and has been a matter of controversy. Put as simply as possible, the Western churches celebrate Easter on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox.

It is actually a bit more complicated than this. The spring equinox is fixed for this purpose as March 21 and the "full moon" is actually the paschal moon, which is based on 84 year "paschal cycles" established in the sixth century, and rarely corresponds to the astronomical full moon. These complex calculations yield an Easter date of anywhere between March 22 and April 25.