

WHAT IS THE TRIDUUM?

In fact, what is Holy Week all about?

HOLY THURSDAY OR MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

With this Mass beginning the Easter Triduum the church recalls the Last Supper, when Jesus on the night he was betrayed, displays his love for his disciples (and us) by giving them his body and blood, under the species of bread and wine. He commands the apostles to perpetuate this offering, the Eucharist. In this liturgy, through the signs and sacramentals of this Mass, we remember that Christ accomplished three major objectives: he instituted the Eucharist; he instituted the priesthood; and he commanded us all to love our brothers and sisters.

Eucharist is celebrated, and some is set aside for distribution on Good Friday. This is a somber, quiet liturgy, for we anticipate what is to come in Christ's death on the cross. Solemnly and reverently the Blessed Sacrament is moved to a place of "reservation".

Everyone leaves in silence, with no actual dismissal, appropriate because the assembly is to continue the Triduum. The three days are observed as a unit.

GOOD FRIDAY

This is a day of strict fast and abstinence. Its liturgy begins and ends in silence. Decorations in the church are sparse. The church is meditating on the Passion of the Lord. Celebration takes place in the afternoon. When the priest and ministers enter they do so in silence without any singing. After the reading of the Passion and the homily, general intercessions (prayers) are recited.

A significant part of this liturgy is veneration of the cross, when each person is invited to move up to a cross of wood, displayed or held up for this purpose, and either kiss it, bow or touch it reverently. Usually the cross that is adored is not a crucifix (with a body on it) because the church is not looking at just a moment in history, and because the acclamation is, "Behold the wood of the Cross."

After the Lord's Prayer and sign of peace, Holy Communion, which had been consecrated the night before at the Holy Thursday Mass, is distributed. When post-Communion prayers are completed, the people and ministers leave in silence, with no dismissal or formal ending. The cross itself is left in the church for meditation on the Paschal mystery (Christ's cross and resurrection).

EASTER VIGIL

For many people, this is the favorite liturgy of the year. It commemorates the holy night when Jesus rose from the dead.

This symbol-packed liturgy, which does not take place until nightfall, is full of excitement. The church awaits the resurrection. The sacrament of initiation (of entrance into the church) is distributed to the catechumens who have been studying and preparing for months for this joyful acceptance by the church.

People assemble in church in darkness. At the appointed time they hear the Easter proclamation. Then they participate in the service of the light. A fire is started, preferably outside, but sometimes in a grill within the church, and the paschal candle, representing Christ, is blessed and lighted. The candle is made of wax and is new every year.

A procession into the church is led by the light of the paschal candle, and from this candle the small candles held by the people in the pews are also lit, one by one, until the church is a beautiful picture of candles brightening the darkness. During the procession, the "Light of God" is proclaimed and the people respond with "Thanks be to God." The implied message is: just as the children of Israel were guided at night by the pillar of fire, similarly Christians follow the risen Christ.

The people hear seven readings from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament, all telling of the wonderful works of God. When the "Gloria" is sung, candles on or near the altar are lit, lights are turned on, and church bells are rung to ring out to the world the good news. A homily follows the joyful reading of the Gospel.

Excitement intensifies for those who have been waiting to be initiated into the church.

Water is blessed by the celebrant by plunging the paschal candle into the water once or three times. The assembly recites the profession of faith, and catechumens are baptized. Standing, the assembly renews its baptismal vows, and is sprinkled with water.

The celebration of Eucharist follows. As people leave this uplifting liturgy, they greet each other with "Happy Easter" and smiles of joy.

EASTER DAY

The Mass is celebrated with great solemnity.