

## FROM ASHES TO THE LIVING FONT

### THE SACRED PASCHAL TRIDUUM

Our long Lenten journey leads us from dust and ashes to the living waters of the baptismal font. Our journey culminates in the three days of the Easter Triduum. This one liturgy with three parts celebrated over three days, is not a historical re-enactment of something that happened over 2000 years ago but an actual participation in the events themselves. These mysteries are timeless and made present in our liturgical celebrations. The Triduum immerses us into the Paschal Mystery of the saving life, suffering, passion, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ TODAY. It is the effectual making present and celebration NOW of our Passover in light of the resurrection. We pray especially at this time for all throughout the world who will celebrate the Sacraments of Initiation at the great Easter Vigil.

### HOLY THURSDAY Mass of the Lord's Supper

Tonight, the Church inaugurates the Triduum. We recall that last supper, when Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, loving those who were his own in the world until the very end, offered his Body and blood under the species of bread and wine to God and gave them to his Apostles that they might eat and drink. He commanded them and their successors in the priesthood to offer them. Tonight, we rejoice in the institution of the Eucharist and the priesthood, as well as Jesus' command of love and service. The Tabernacle is empty at the beginning of the celebration. We receive communion this night from the fruits of the sacrifice we have just offered, a pattern for the rest of the year.

The Exodus account of the Passover tradition reminds us of the exit, the liberation, of the people in slavery in Egypt, and the meal that commemorates it. "This day is to be a remembrance for you, and you must celebrate it as a feast in the Lord's honour."

The Gospel proclaimed tonight is not the Institution of the Eucharist but the foot-washing. The model of service instituted by Jesus is firmly rooted in the *mandatum*, the humble actions of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Jesus' words are strong "As I have done for you, so you should also do." This action of humility and service expresses the responsibilities of those who share the Eucharist. According to the Talmud the washing of feet was forbidden to any Jew except those in slavery. Peter's defiant response shows that Jesus' action was culturally shocking and challenging from the beginning. The sign expresses the profound drama of Jesus' action when the presider gives the example to others by falling to his knees to serve those in the community and service expresses the responsibilities of those who share the Eucharist. In the washing of the feet and in the bringing of the gifts for the poor at this Mass, the presence of God is recognised and proclaimed. "Where charity and love are found, there is God."

At the conclusion of Mass the Blessed Sacrament is transferred to the Altar of Repose so that we might continue to be nourished with this Sacrament on Good Friday. The chapel altar and sanctuary are stripped bare in silence and without ceremony. The Paschal Triduum continues with the solemn watch until midnight. (During this time you might like to read the Gospel of John, chapters 13–17).

## **GOOD FRIDAY The Celebration of the Passion of the Lord**

On this day, we gather to prayerfully recall the death of Jesus "in the sure hope of the resurrection" (Prayer over the People, Good Friday). Because his resurrection is inseparable from his death, the Lord's Passion is truly celebrated. We remember last night's Entrance Antiphon, "We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered." On this day, when Christ our paschal Lamb was sacrificed, the church contemplates and adores the Cross of her Lord and Spouse, commemorating her own coming forth from the side of Christ as he slept on the cross, and interceding for the salvation of the world. According to a most ancient tradition the Church does not celebrate the Eucharist today.

The celebration begins in silence. The priest and deacon wear red chasuble and dalmatic. This is the only occasion on which a chasuble is worn outside of Mass. It signifies the unity of this liturgy with yesterday's Eucharist and the one tomorrow.

The celebration begins with the act of prostration. This signals the seriousness of today's prayer. "This act of prostration, which is proper to the rite of the day, should be strictly observed, for it signifies both . . . abasement . . . and also the grief and sorrow of the church" (Paschale Solemnitatis, 65).

What is striking is how today's first reading portrays the Suffering Servant: before him the crowds are 'astonished' and kings stand 'speechless.' The first reading from Isaiah is known as the Fifth Gospel in the way that the significance of the Suffering Servant is fulfilled in Jesus's suffering and death. The solemn proclamation of the narrative of the Passion from the Gospel of John lies at the heart of the celebration.

The Solemn Intercessions conclude the Liturgy of the Word. These are unique as the oldest example of the era when intercessions were a regular part of the western liturgy. These prayers express the full scope of the universal effects of the Passion of Christ: through his sacrifice on the cross, salvation has been won for the whole world.

We now adore the Cross of Christ. The new missal uses the term 'adoration of the cross' for the first time. The faithful adore CHRIST not the wood of the cross. The community does not adore the cross as if it were God; the community adores the risen Christ, of whom the cross is a most sacred symbol. "This is the wood of the cross, on which hung the Saviour of the world." The cross becomes for us the tree of life, undoing the sin of Adam.

Although we fast from celebrating the Eucharist today, we re-connect with our celebration of the Lord's Supper by receiving Holy Communion. This is the bread that gives life. This is Christ's self-giving love for us. This is our nourishment for our mission and food for the journey.

This part of the liturgy of the triduum concludes with the Prayer over the People. No further dismissal is given. Our leaving in silence links this celebration to the Easter Vigil, as our beginning in silence connected us with Holy Thursday.

## **HOLY SATURDAY**

The Missal now mentions the descent into hell and the anticipation of the resurrection. This is influenced by the Eastern Rites, which honour the descent intensely on this day. In the Office of Readings we read "Something strange is happening--there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep." It depicts Christ's triumphant descent into Sheol, his meeting with our first parents, and the beginning of the great victory procession by which the souls of the just are liberated by the conquering saviour, King Jesus. One imagines, as many icons have depicted, Jesus pulling Adam and Abraham and many others by the hand, leading them out to the consternation of the disbelieving devils! "Awake sleeper and arise from the dead."

## **EASTER SUNDAY OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD**

### **The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night**

This "mother of all vigils" (St Augustine) is the "greatest and most noble of all solemnities and it is to be unique in every single Church" (Missal). On this holy night, the Church keeps watch, celebrating the resurrection of Christ in the sacraments and awaiting his return in glory. It is the turning point of the Triduum, the Passover of the new covenant, which marks Christ's passage from death to life. This is the night the Church awaits in vigil the Resurrection of the Lord, celebrating it with the sacraments of Christian initiation.

Darkness is the first movement of the liturgy tonight. Shattering that darkness, the great paschal candle is lighted with the blazing Easter fire, five incense grains are imbedded, and it becomes the symbol of the crucified Christ. The Paschal Mystery, already celebrated in various ways since the Mass of the Lord's Supper, is clearly and joyfully announced from the very beginning of the Vigil liturgy. It is in the light of the Easter candle that the liturgy continues to unfold. The Easter Vigil is the most noble of all liturgies.

The Four Parts of the Easter Vigil move us through a gradual unfolding of the Paschal Mystery of Christ. The Fire rite immediately dispels the gathering gloom. The Liturgy of the Word reveals the path of God's plan throughout salvation history and we respond with thanks and praise. We see the return of the Alleluia, solemnly intoned after the glorious Epistle that compares Baptism to resurrection. The Liturgy of Baptism draws the elect through the baptismal waters into the promise of eternal life and renews the baptismal belief of the faithful.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist brings the celebration to the climax of the Banquet of the Lamb, as we experience the presence of the Risen Christ in our midst. The tomb is empty. There is Light in the midst of our darkness. We've been fed by the Word and given new life in the waters of baptism. Now we eat his Body and drink his Blood and receive the life in him that he promises. "Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us, come let us keep the feast." Alleluia, Alleluia!