

# HOLY WEEK LITURGIES

## (HISTORICAL/THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES)

### PALM SUNDAY

A very important place in the 40-day season of Lent belongs to the sixth Sunday, **Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord**, as the full title runs in the Roman Missal. The title already shows that the liturgy of the day will unite two commemorations: that of the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem and that of his passion.



The diary of the Spanish pilgrim Egeria (381-383 AD) recounts her experience of the Jerusalem liturgies at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> C/beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> C. Christians of Jerusalem used to gather in the early afternoon on the Mount of Olives for a lengthy liturgy of the word. Then, toward evening, they would go in procession into Jerusalem, carrying palm branches or olive branches. This rite was soon esteemed by other Churches of the East.

The name Palm Sunday occurs in Spain and Gaul (France/Germany) around 600 AD.

The custom of blessing the palm branches is seen by the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> C. In the oldest Greek and Latin liturgical texts the palm branches served as a symbol of life, hope and victory.

At the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> C there are an increasing number of witnesses to a procession with the palms. The hymn *Gloria, laus et honor* (All glory, laud and honor) was composed for this purpose and soon become a fixed part of the ceremony.

The medieval custom, which was gradually dropped, of gathering at a place outside of the church for the blessing of the palms and of then going in procession to the church was revived in the new Holy Week Order of 1955. It is suggested in the new Missal as well.

### **Currently there are 3 forms of the entrance on Palm Sunday:**

1. **The Procession.** The congregation assembles in a secondary place where the palms are blessed and sprinkled with holy water and the passage of the entrance of Jesus is read with this gospel proclaimed in the usual way. The procession into the church is led by the incense, cross, candles, Gospel Book, priest, then follow the people carrying palm branches. Upon entering the church the priest venerates the altar, incenses it then goes to the chair.

2. **The Solemn Entrance.** When a procession outside the church cannot take place, the entrance of the Lord is celebrated inside the church by means of a Solemn Entrance. The faithful, holding branches, gather either outside the front door or inside the church itself. The branches are blessed, the gospel of the entrance is proclaimed and then the priest and

ministers advance to the sanctuary where the altar is venerated before the priest assumes his place at the chair.

3. **The Simple Entrance.** This beginning combines the commemoration of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem with the usual entrance procession for Mass, during which the entrance song is sung. Arriving at the altar, the priest venerates it and goes to the chair. After the Sign of the Cross, he greets the people and continues the Mass in the usual way.

## THE HISTORY OF EASTER

--The goal of the liturgy during the Triduum is not imitation of the activities of Jesus, rather the goal of all Christian worship is to give thanks and praise to God. The actions of the Triduum bring the community of faith together as participants in the present moment rather than as spectators at a past event they missed. The ritual actions carry and express communally the assembly's thanksgiving and praise, which is the purpose of all liturgy.

--Immediately the Apostles/Christian community observed Sunday as the weekly celebration of the Resurrection.

### **1<sup>st</sup> C to the Beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> C**

--in the decades after Jesus, nearly all Christians adhered to their Jewish pasts and calendars, so Passover was the primary annual feast. The slaughtering of the lamb was the primary symbol of the feast and this was assumed into the Christian theology of Easter for the first few centuries. Christianity emerged as a faith really apart from Judaism after the destruction of the Temple (70 AD).

--Gentiles brought to Christianity had not previously known the annual Jewish observance, so in some of the early Gentile churches there was probably a tradition of weekly Sunday gathering for the liturgy without the annual observance of Easter.

--from the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> C the annual feast of Easter on Passover can be accounted for. The passion/death of Jesus was interpreted with the theology of the Passover event, and the slaughtering of the lamb (Exodus 12) was the basic interpretation of the death of Jesus. The sacrifice of the lamb is fulfilled in the crucifixion of Christ. The description of the early feast was based on the Greek word *paschein*, which means "to suffer", so it is the root for the very word for Easter (*Paschal*).

--Initially (1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> C), the fast before the Passover/Easter Eucharist was extended into a vigil during the night, so that the celebration of the feast with the Eucharistic Meal only began at cockcrow/3 a.m.

--By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> C in Alexandria (N. Africa/Egypt) we encounter a new understanding of the feast focussed on "passage" rather than "passion"—passage from death to life (Clement of Alexandria).

--At the same time as the older tradition of observing the annual celebration of Easter on Passover there is emerging the observance of Easter on the Sunday following Passover. Some churches are beginning to join together the regular Friday fast with the Saturday paschal fast to create a continuous 2-day preparatory fast before the festival, though there is considerable diversity in practise.

--Christians in Egypt/Syria created 6 days of fasting from Monday until the end of the Saturday night vigil and this is explained as a kind of atonement for the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. There is a special distinction made, however, between the days of fasting earlier in the week and the older 2-day fast immediately prior to the feast.

--not surprising in the sources from the late 4<sup>th</sup> C to see the liturgical observance of Good Friday as a memorial of Christ's death and Easter itself now being regarded essentially as a feast of the resurrection. To this was added Holy Saturday as a commemoration of Christ's burial/descent into hell. This development seems to have begun at Jerusalem in connection with the sacred sites themselves, and spread from there to other parts of the East. Reception in the West is at first somewhat mixed.

--In the 4<sup>th</sup> C the Triduum fully emerges liturgically as a way of teaching/countering the Arian heresy (Arius-d. 336 AD/Alexandrian priest) which denied the full divinity of Christ.

-By the 4<sup>th</sup> C, Easter is embraced as the appropriate time for baptism, based on the understanding of St. Paul as a passage from death to life (Romans 6). Prior to this, at least in the East, baptism was celebrated more commonly in relation to Epiphany.

## THE SACRED PASCHAL TRIDUUM

### Thursday of the Lord's Supper

--In the original conception of the Triduum, Holy Thursday was presented as the day of the institution of the Eucharist. The name of the Mass and of the day in Latin are identical, ie. "in cena Domini". From this it is evident that the way to celebrate the day is to celebrate the supper.

--the footwashing rite/Mandatum emerged in the 7<sup>th</sup> C as a formal part of Holy Thursday. This gesture of sacrifice and service is indicative of how the apostolic ministry is to be exercised.

--The Roman Missal (2011), p. 282, n. 11 stated: "The *men* who have been chose are led by the ministers to seats prepared in a suitable place....." Pope Francis introduced a change to this rubric in 2016, so that it now states: "***Those who are chosen from amongst the people of God*** are lead by the ministers to seats prepared in a suitable place...." The change foresees that individuals may be chosen from amongst all the members of the people of God. The

significance does not now relate so much to the *exterior imitation* of what Jesus has done, rather as to *the meaning of what he has accomplished* which has a universal importance, namely the giving of himself *to the end* for the salvation of the human race, his charity which embraces all people and which makes all people brothers and sisters by following his example. In fact, the example that he has given to us so that we might do as he has done goes beyond the physical washing of the feet of others to embrace everything that such a gesture expresses in service of the tangible love of our neighbour.

--The washing of feet is not obligatory in the *Missa in cena Domini*. It is for pastors to evaluate its desirability, according to the pastoral considerations and circumstances which exist, in such a way that it does not become something automatic or artificial, deprived of meaning and reduced to a staged event. Nor must it become so important as to grab all the attention during the Mass of the Lord's Supper, celebrated on the most sacred day on which our Lord Jesus Christ was handed over for our sake.

--Holy Thursday reservation of the Eucharist is the inseparable counterpart to Good Friday communion.

--As early as the 7<sup>th</sup> C the Eucharist is being reserved for communion the following day.

### **The Uniqueness of Holy Thursday Reservation**

1. The uniqueness of HT reservation and adoration is their unmistakable link with the eucharistic action, that is, communion in the Lord's Supper. The purpose of reservation is primarily for reception.
2. The consecrated elements are substantially identical with the body and blood of Christ not as he once was at any moment in past history, but as he now is for all eternity in risen glory.
3. In effect, the Mass of HT is a Mass with two communions—one that evening, the other on the next afternoon. Reservation connects the two, looking back to the one and forward to the other. Thus HT and GF go together in the same way that the supper and the cross go together.
4. If HT night and GF afternoon go together, even as do supper and the cross, the divide in the Triduum is between the end of the GF service and the start of the paschal vigil. This is the time of waiting for the dawn of the third day when Christ will rise, never to sleep in death again.

## **Friday of the Passion of the Lord**

--Veneration of the cross arose at Jerusalem in the 4<sup>th</sup> C, as attested to by the pilgrim Egeria (381-384 AD).

--In Jerusalem the cross was publicly exposed in the morning for veneration until noon, followed by readings/psalms until about 3:00 p.m. when the crucifixion gospel from John was read. Finally, a blessing and dismissal was given. This practise was adopted by other churches in the East, ie. Constantinople.

-- until the 7<sup>th</sup> C the service at Rome consisted only of the scriptural readings and solemn orations (intercessions). Under the influence of Constantinople, the veneration of the cross was received at Rome in the 7<sup>th</sup> C. The Papal liturgy followed the pattern of Jerusalem with veneration of the cross before the scripture/Passion reading.

--In the suburban churches of Rome in the 7<sup>th</sup> C the practise changed with the scripture readings coming first followed by veneration of the cross and the reception of communion (from Holy Thursday's Mass) in a connected/simultaneous rite. It was this practise that spread north of the Alps to Germany/Gaul.

--by the 8<sup>th</sup> C, Communion is not received with the veneration in a simultaneous act but only after the veneration is concluded.

--by the 9<sup>th</sup> C the exposition of the sacred wood has been considerably embellished, with the intention of making it a theophany (revelation) consistent with John's presentation of the crucifixion as revelation of divine glory. The cross, veiled, is carried to the altar, stopping 3 times with an acclamation.

--by the 13<sup>th</sup> C the reception of communion was lost from the Good Friday liturgy until its restoration again in the Holy Week revisions of 1955/56.

--the sacred rites of the Triduum make present the event of redemption itself, not only their effects, and that by their power and fruitfulness Christ unites the church, which is his body, to himself in his own redemptive act.

## **Reasons for the reception of Communion on Good Friday**

1. Without communion on GF the reservation of the sacrament on HT loses its purpose. But without reservation there can be no adoration.
2. Without communion the liturgical connection between that afternoon and the previous evening would be broken and the rationale for including the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper as part of the Triduum would be hard to defend.
3. In GF communion it is Christ who is received not as he once was in past historical time but as he lives forever in risen glory—the victorious victim whose passion is his passage to the Father.

4. Communion prevents the GF liturgy from collapsing into mere subjective recall of an event in past history. To receive the body of Christ is to feed on his ever-living reality.

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

The Easter Vigil is the most ancient of the Three Days and from the time of the revision in the 1950's of Holy Week and since Vatican II, the prescription is that the Vigil takes place at night, that is, after dark. Because the Vigil is the celebration of God's grace and of the birth of the Church from nothing, it is never permitted to celebrate the entire Easter Vigil more than once in a given Church.

--4<sup>th</sup> C Jerusalem practise testifies to the established usage of Vigil readings (Creation/Gen. 1:1-3:24; Binding of Isaac/Gen. 11:1-18; Passover/Ex. 12:1-24) and the lighting of the paschal candle in accord with the custom of lighting a lamp (lucernarium) with the beginning of evening prayer. The vigil ceremony inevitably took on a special significance in this particular context, and later centuries saw it as symbolizing the light of Christ risen from the dead.

--the origins of the Easter fire/singing of the Exsultet are found in certain churches of Rome in the 7<sup>th</sup> C and are generally part of the liturgy by the 11<sup>th</sup> C.

--the symbol of the fire should not be diminished. If baptism is the rebirth of an individual member through the power of the Holy Spirit into the church, so the Easter Vigil is the rebirth of the Church as the Body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The fire stands for nothing less than the destruction of the past. The tracings on the Easter Candle draw together the temporal span from the beginning of creation to the end of time, uniting past and future at the moment of the Vigil.

--the theological and ritual reason for the long service of the Word is that, after the fire as a symbol of destroying the past, the narrative of reconstituting the people from those ashes begins. The Liturgy of the Word is the retelling of the story of creation and salvation from the beginning of the world to the narratives of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The narrative of the Vigil covers the full sweep of history.

-from as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> C in North Africa there is testimony of Easter as the appropriate time for baptism (Tertullian), such is the case in Rome by the 3<sup>rd</sup> C, and by the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> C we encounter paschal baptism as a universal phenomenon. St. Paul's imagery of baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6) is the justifying theology.