

# THE LITURGY OF HOLY WEEK: *entering the Paschal Mystery*

## Introduction

The major ceremonies of Holy Week are the most profound in the Church's year. They celebrate the central and climactic moments in the history of salvation - the final week of Our Lord's life. The main ceremonies are:

- Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord
- Spy Wednesday: Mass of the Oils
- **Maundy Thursday: Mass of the Lord's Supper**
- **Good Friday: Commemoration of the Lord's Passion**
- **Holy Saturday: Celebration of the Easter Vigil**
- **Easter Sunday: Mass of the Resurrection**

We tend to think of these as five separate days involving five separate ceremonies. This is not really how the Church sees it. The central ceremonies are those of the Triduum - the three days from the evening of Maundy Thursday through to the evening of Easter Sunday. These three days take in the most significant and powerful ceremonies of the Church's year:

1. The Mass of the Lord's Supper with the Washing of Feet.
2. The Commemoration of Christ's Passion with the Veneration of the Cross.
3. The great Mass of the Easter Vigil, including the Baptism of adults who are coming into the Church and the reception of Christians who wish to become Catholics.
4. The Mass of the Resurrection including the renewal of our baptismal promises.

These great ceremonies are most truly understood as *a single liturgy* spread out over three days. In other words, what we begin on Maundy Thursday we do not conclude until the end of the Easter Vigil. After the greeting on Maundy Thursday there is no

dismissal at the end of the Mass that night, there is no greeting at the start of the Good Friday Commemoration of the Lord's Passion, no dismissal at the end of the Commemoration, and no greeting at the start of the Easter Vigil. What is begun on Maundy Thursday is not completed until the proclamation of the Resurrection in the first hours of Easter Sunday (i.e., when the sun has gone down on Saturday evening). They are all truly a single liturgy - an unbroken and continuous whole that we celebrate over the course of these three days. ***For this reason, it is understandable that the Church should urge and encourage all those who are able to attend the ceremonies over all three days.*** Naturally, there are many who can not come to all of these ceremonies because of work, health or age - BUT if we are *able* to go, we should intend and aim to go to all three. To miss any of these three ceremonies will take away from the unity and progression that they are designed to offer to us.

### ***Memory and Christian Liturgical Remembering***

It is important to remember that we are not simply *remembering* what Christ did: the ceremonies of Holy Week, and especially the three great days of the Triduum, are not just memory-joggers or ritual re-enactments of the events of our salvation. There is a mysterious unity between what Christ did 2000 years ago and what we do on these days.

It is best described using the language of St. Paul when he describes the Church as ***Christ's Body***. There is a mystical communion between the mortal, physical, flesh and blood, human body that Christ had from his conception to his burial, the body which was pierced with nails and knew the pangs of hunger, and the 'Body of Christ' which is made up of the human beings who have been reborn into Christ through Baptism (you and me). Both of these are flesh and blood - Christ received a true human body from Mary through which he truly suffered and died, BUT the Body of Christ (the Church, you and me) is also flesh and blood and we are only too well aware of this when we are called to suffer.

Not only this - both 'Bodies' are more than simply physical: they are also *spiritual and supernatural*. Jesus Christ is not *merely* human: he is also the divine Son of God who has taken human nature to himself and perfectly united it so that wherever one is, the other is present also. In reflection of this, Christ's *mystical* Body (the Church, you and me) is both human and divine in origin in a unique unity. Through Baptism, we are soaked through with the Holy Spirit and united (without possibility of separation) to Christ. Christ is not incidental to the Church - in fact the Church is inconceivable without Christ's permanent presence as its head, and without the Holy Spirit as its soul, animating the body and giving it life. Just as Jesus Christ is the perfect union of divine Person with human nature, so the Church is a living union of the divine nature with human persons.

All this is really to stress to you that there is a profoundly intimate association between the travails of Christ, especially in the Passion, and the trials and sufferings of the Church and its members. We are truly the Body of Christ: but we are also invited by God to become more perfectly configured to Christ by accepting as he did to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to the Father. We are called not just to *remember* Christ's life but to ***reproduce his life in the day-to-day events of our own, through***

***the power of grace working within us.*** We can only be Christ's mystical Body if we follow him in every regard, without picking and choosing what aspects of his life we wish to experience. We become more fully united to Christ when we accept a share in his passion and death - so as to share in the glory of his resurrection (this, after all, is exactly how we describe Baptism - going down into the tomb with Christ, sharing his death, so as to rise out of the tomb with him, sharing his resurrected glory). Thus the *mystical* Body, the Church, seeks to be moulded fully in the pattern of the incarnated Christ.

*In the liturgy of Holy Week, we enter into the Paschal mystery of Christ so as to draw from it in a special way the power of Christ's victory over sin and death.* Each of the major ceremonies immerses us in an aspect of his saving sacrifice and moulds us according to the pattern of the Son of God. Each ceremony pulls us into the dynamic power of the events which secured our salvation in Israel almost 2000 years ago - in their totality they comprise the fullness of the Paschal Mystery of the Son of God, but in their constituent parts, they enable us to see how Christ redeemed the world to the Father and they enable us to appropriate to ourselves the divine power they contain so as to convert our lives, in their wide variety of experiences and situations, and so to share in the glory of the Saviour.

Together, these ceremonies comprise the Paschal Mystery - *each one of them is essential to the salvation Christ won for us* and so each of them imparts that victory to us in its own unique way. In addition, the ceremonies teach us how we are to convert our lives so as to reflect the grace that these events have won for us:

- ***PALM SUNDAY:*** Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem hailed by the crowds as King. *This is a saving event.* Christ's few moments of recognition and acceptance are as salvific as the many occasions of his rejection. As his Body, the Church, we will have fleeting moments of recognition when we are praised and lauded - these can be participations in Christ's victorious entry to Jerusalem. But, like Christ, we should recognise what these moments of public adulation are for: they are to set the stage for the drama of Christ's betrayal, death and resurrection. In other words, Christ saves by using even the moments when his authority and person are *accepted* by the world - they are few and are always preparations for the cross, but they are a part of his plan, too.
- ***SPY WEDNESDAY:*** Christ is betrayed by Judas to the Chief Priests and he accepts the offer of 30 silver pieces as the price for the betrayal. This, too, is a *saving* action - Christ uses the treachery of his own apostle to carry through the will of his Father. As his Body, we will be subject to betrayal as was he: betrayal appears hopeless and solely evil in its consequences, and yet in it lies the key to Christ's saving passion. Nothing will deflect God's determined plan to offer us salvation: even treachery and betrayal can be incorporated into the plan and be used to secure forgiveness and redemption for us.
- ***MAUNDY THURSDAY:*** Christ's Last Supper, the institution of the Sacrifice of the Mass, the institution of the Priesthood, the command to love one another, the washing of the Apostles' feet. The Last Supper and all the words and actions they contain are a part of the Paschal Mystery. Christ saved

humanity and creation as much in the Upper Room as he did on the Cross or rising from the dead because they are all a single unbroken action, one flowing into the next. This is important to us - the Last Supper is inseparable from the Cross and the empty tomb: for us this means that the Sacrifice of the Mass (which *is* the Last Supper) is inseparable from the cross and the empty tomb. Immerse ourselves in one and we receive the power of all three for the power of all three is contained in each one. *They are the same action – the one great Paschal Mystery of Christ.* Christ saved the world through the Last Supper: we should recall this each time we come to Mass and to any of the sacraments because the sacraments are NOTHING MORE than *the making-present here and now of the power of the Paschal Mystery.* Maundy Thursday is the reminder, if we need one, that *each* time we come to the sacraments (each of them) we are submerging ourselves in the very real and effective power of the entire Paschal Mystery. Christ saves us today by applying to us the power of this first Holy Week in Jerusalem - and the way he applies it is in the sacraments.

- **GOOD FRIDAY:** Christ is tried, bound over from one tribunal to the next, condemned, flogged, taunted, brutally tortured, forced to carry his cross, crucified, died on the Cross, is pierced by a lance, removed from the cross and finally buried in haste and without the time for the dignified and required burial rites of the Jews. Every aspect of his trial, passion, death and burial is designed for maximum pain and for the stripping of his dignity. He was not just *executed*; he was systematically stripped of his human dignity, made to appear first laughable (wearing the crown and robe of a king) then powerless and helpless (the trial) and finally horrific and shameful (the flogging, beating and crucifixion). He was humiliated for the enjoyment of his accusers and the gratification of the crowds. BUT remember - *this too was the saving event of humanity.* Christ is not deflected by this abuse: he is not forced simply to stomach such treatment or to try and cope with it as if it were simply an unnecessary distraction from his saving work (in the way that flies on a hot day are an unavoidable distraction for people at work outside - they just have to put up with it in order to get the main job done). The shocking brutality with which Christ was treated was not *incidental* to the Paschal Mystery and the salvation of the world - it is the very stuff of Christ's saving passion. For us this is important: God calls us to share in Christ's entire life not just by being patient and enduring all things but, like Christ, USING all things for the work of salvation – even hardship, abuse, taunting, torture, becoming a laughing-stock or even the painful road to death are ALL the raw materials out of which Christ hews salvation. The agony of Good Friday is not to be seen as an unfortunate means to an end but as the very essence of the saving work of Christ. He saves by sacrificing *everything*: and so there is the potential for every experience we undergo to be powerful, effective, salvific, sanctifying and redemptive. Our suffering, united to Christ's, can redeem mankind – this is the meaning of Good Friday for the Christian.
- **HOLY SATURDAY:** Christ in the tomb, the liberation of the souls of the righteous dead from the chains of death, their return with Christ to the home man was created for; heaven. The first to hear the Gospel of Christ's death and resurrection were the dead - what we call '*the Harrowing of Hell*' is better

described as *'the Emptying of Limbo'*. (?) Those who went before Christ (Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Ezekiel etc.) could not enter heaven until the Paschal Lamb had been slain for the redemption of the world. Mankind was not righteous: heaven was closed to him until Christ died to give to mankind the righteousness that can only be found in God. For us today? Not only that dying is one of Christ's saving actions (that is manifest from Good Friday): we are aware that Christ's *first* saving event (i.e., the first to be saved from their sins by Christ's Paschal Triumph) were the **DEAD**. Christ's victory is over SIN - and the sting of sin is death. The Paschal Mystery is the destruction of the power of death to keep us chained in our sins, away from the Father and our home of Heaven. Christ works first to save the dead: as his Body, we share in this work. Holy Saturday means that God is master over death. As Christ's Body, he has conquered death in us already by Baptism, so that we can be involved in his saving work for those who have died. It underlines the absolute need for (and effectiveness of) our prayer for the dead.

- **EASTER SUNDAY:** Christ rises and appears to the living. The Rising Son shatters death, and he gives supernatural, glorified life to those who accept him. It is interesting that one particular Christmas Carol (*"Hark, the Herald Angels sing"*), which celebrates Christ's BIRTH not his passion, has one of the best statements on the resurrection. Each line has double meaning, paralleling the first birth of Christ (in Bethlehem) with his 'second birth' (the tomb in Jerusalem): *Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace* (heaven-born since he was sent from heaven at his manger-birth, but heaven-born in his resurrection since this life is the glorified life of heaven which is not naturally transmitted by our parents), *Hail the Son of Righteousness* (this is one of the oldest titles of Christ that relate to the resurrection: as he gives his supernatural life of the resurrection, so he gives its righteousness), *Light and life to all he brings*, *Risen with healing in his wings* (the life he brings is the life he receives from the Father after the resurrection - the glorified life of the Risen Son, not the mortal life from Bethlehem: *"risen with healing in his wings"* is clearly a resurrection reference and needs no explanation), *Mild he lays his glory by*, *Born that man no more may die*, *Born to raise the sons of earth*, *Born to give them second birth* (all these apply to Christ's Bethlehem birth in that the reason for his birth was to give everlasting life to humanity, and for that to happen he needed to lay his divine glory aside for the duration of his earthly life - but it also refers to Christ's new birth from the tomb: he *'laid his glory by'* in the passion when he suffered so grievously, he is *'born that man no more may die'* in that his resurrection-birth is the entry into the glorified life from which there is no dying and so he lives the unending life which he now offers to men, *'born to give them second birth'* in that he offers to his disciples the opportunity to receive his glorified, resurrected life through the ministry of the Church his Body, esp. in the Sacraments). We should not be surprised that a carol displays this double meaning: the Incarnation and Resurrection are two sides of the same coin: *both* are redemptive and saving in their effects because they are inseparable (he was born to die, and his death is the offering up of all that the Incarnation implies). Suffice it to say that Easter is about our living today the life of the resurrection: as we were 'incarnated' at Baptism when the Holy Spirit was given to us and we received the resurrected life of Christ, so

we are 'resurrected' not just at Baptism but on every occasion that we cooperate with grace so as to overcome the death of sin.

Each part of Holy Week says something essential about the effectiveness of the Christian life when it is lived in Christ: it points to the way we live our lives and reminds us that every moment of our day we can unite to the Paschal Mystery of Christ for the redemption of the world.

### ***Holy Week and the Mass***

One last thing - all these ceremonies, especially from Maundy Thursday to the Vigil on Holy Saturday evening, are in truth a single liturgy, one event even though spread over a number of days. They mark and celebrate the entire Paschal Mystery, the passion, death and resurrection of the Lamb who died for our salvation. The one event we know well which unites all these events in a liturgical form is ***the Mass*** – the Mass is our daily and weekly celebration of the entire Paschal Victory of Christ encompassing his death and resurrection through which Christ imparts to us the grace and power of his victory over sin and death. In a sense, the Mass is the only way to understand Holy Week and to see it as a single saving-event. This is not just my fanciful thinking - it is one of the oldest ways of describing the unlimited depths of Holy Week. The twelfth century French theologian *Peter Abelard* was perhaps the one who most consistently showed the relationship between the various events of Holy Week and the structure of the Mass. Explaining the hidden meaning of Holy Week, he paralleled the events of Christ's last days before death with the various parts of the Mass. The similarity is quite striking and, I believe, quite deliberate:

- ***PALM SUNDAY***: Christ enters Jerusalem, the place of his crucifixion. This corresponds to the ***Entrance Procession*** of the Mass. In both cases, the priest walks to the altar to begin the sacrifice that sets us free. In the priest, it is Christ who comes to the altar of sacrifice at each Mass we celebrate.
- ***SPY WEDNESDAY***: Christ (and Judas) make their final preparations for the Passover Sacrifice. The apostles prepare the room in which they are to celebrate the sacrifice-meal, while Judas meets the Pharisees and arranges Christ's betrayal. This corresponds with the ***Preparation of the Altar*** - the preparation of the Gifts, when the bread and wine are brought to the altar and dedicated to God before they are consecrated. All is now ready for the sacrifice, as it was on that Wednesday.
- ***MAUNDY THURSDAY***: Christ celebrates the Passover with the disciples. He takes bread and turns it into his Body, wine and turns it into his Blood. The institution of the Mass itself takes place and, during it, the ordination of the first priests - the apostles. This part of the Paschal Mystery corresponds most fully with ***the Consecration*** as we repeat the words Christ used and celebrate the Last Supper.
- ***GOOD FRIDAY***: for three hours Christ hung on the cross, giving his life for the world. Christ's body was broken in death, saving us from sin. This corresponds with ***the Fraction of the Host*** when the priest breaks the host

over the chalice as a sign of Christ's death, while the people acclaim Christ as "*Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.*"

- **HOLY SATURDAY:** the Vigil celebrates the new life of the Risen Christ, when he breaks the chains of death and springs triumphant from the grave. During that night, Christ vanquished death and rose in glorified form, no longer subject to physical nature as we are (hence his appearances in locked rooms etc.) His glorified life he shares with the disciples on many occasions, often eating with them. This corresponds with *the reception of Holy Communion*: here, it is we who receive the glorified and mystical Body and Blood of Christ, his new life since the resurrection.
- **EASTER SUNDAY:** In Christ's appearances to the disciples, he confers on them innumerable blessings including the power to forgive sins and the command to preach to all nations. This corresponds with the *Blessing and Dismissal* at which we are confirmed in the faith we hold in the Risen Christ and are commissioned, as were the apostles, to go out and give witness to our faith.

The Mass effectively summarises the entire drama and power of Holy Week. Through the Mass we celebrate together the *whole power* of these world-changing events is released into our lives to the extent that we are prepared to open ourselves to it. There is a thought to conjure with!

## **Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord**

The Mass begins with the blessing of palms and the procession into Church. This procession re-presents Christ's journey from Bethphage to the City of David, Jerusalem. He is greeted with the Messianic chant "*Hosanna, Blessings on the King of Israel. Blessings on the coming kingdom of our father, David.*" Note this - Christ is acclaimed as King, as Son of David, as the fulfilment of the prophecies to David in 2 Samuel 7 when God swore that he would establish the line of David for ever, and a son of David would rule on the throne of Israel without end. This journey is the inauguration of the new Kingdom, in the heavenly Jerusalem (which we read about in the Book of Revelation). The promised Son of David (from whom Christ descends) has entered the city of the promise.

BUT note that his Kingdom is not of this world - the earthly Jerusalem is only an image of the Kingdom he has come to inaugurate. For this reason, his reign, in earthly terms, is short, unpopular and strikingly unsuccessful. Christ's Kingdom is established not on a throne of glory but on the throne of the cross. Jerusalem may be the seat of David the great King - but it was *also* the site of the ancient mountain range of Moriah: this was the place where God instructed Abraham to sacrifice his son "your *ONLY* son, your *BELOVED*" Isaac. The only person about whom such words are recorded again in the scriptures is Jesus Christ - at his Baptism in the Jordan, and at his Transfiguration on the mountain. Christ is consciously being associated with Isaac - who was to die on Moriah/Jerusalem as an innocent sacrifice to God the Father.

But it goes on - Jerusalem was *also* the city of the Temple, with all its sacrifices including that of the Passover Lamb - and the apostles had not forgotten that at the start of his ministry Christ was identified by his cousin John the Baptist as "*the Lamb of God*", the animal of sacrifice which would set Israel free. Palm Sunday is interwoven with themes of sacrifice and dying. While the story itself is one of triumph, there is an undercurrent that is dark and foreboding - Jerusalem was God's chosen dwelling place and thus a place of joy and closeness to God. BUT it was also the place associated with frustrating God's plans - here the prophets had been martyred by the authorities throughout the centuries as Christ himself recalls ("*It cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem*" (Lk. 13:33) "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!*" Mt. 23:37) It was always from Jerusalem and the Pharisees based there that investigators were sent to examine the teachings of John the Baptist (Jn. 1:19) and then Christ (Mt. 15:1) with a view to stopping their preaching. Jerusalem was the centre of the opposition to Christ and now he comes to the very threshold of the powerful enemies who have vowed to kill him. As Christ enters Jerusalem to the sound of cheering crowds, his oft repeated prophecies to the disciples must have been ringing in their ears ("*From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*" Mt. 16:21) So intimidating was the prospect of Jerusalem that Peter tried to persuade Christ from going there, only to be forcefully brushed aside by Christ who was determined to finish his work. All this is a part of our thinking as we celebrate Christ's joyful entry into this blood-soaked, sacred, royal, city - infamous in its past history, governed by Israel's religious leaders who were implacably opposed to Christ's teaching.

The Passion narrative of one of the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark or Luke) is read on this day. This is an ancient custom in the West, which has spread all over the world and is now done universally. Instead of commemorating the Passion of Christ on the Friday before Easter (as we now do) it was the custom in the West to commemorate the Passion on the preceding Sunday (probably because more people would be present on the Sunday, when everyone would be there, than would turn out on a Friday) and so became known as Passion Sunday. This was retained but joined with the Eastern practice of commemorating Our Lord's Passion on the Friday before Easter. In the East, the preceding Sunday was Palm Sunday when the entry of Christ into Jerusalem was re-presented. Today we preserve both ancient traditions in Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord.

## **Spy Wednesday**

The Gospel at Mass this day is the story of Judas' agreement to betray Christ for 30 pieces of silver, "*and from that moment he looked for an opportunity to betray him.*" (Mt. 26:16) This is traditionally a day of voluntary penance, for in Judas' action we see an image of sin as it is found in each one of us. Just as Judas preferred the possession of money to the Lamb of God, so the essence of sin is to put an earthly good above that of our relationship with God - in effect we betray Christ, and not always for as high a price as 30 pieces of silver.

Usually this is the day for the celebration in the Cathedral of the *Mass of Chrism*. Technically, it ought to be celebrated on Maundy Thursday but since this clashes with the Mass of the Lord's Supper it is usually celebrated on the Wednesday instead. The Mass of Chrism serves two purposes.

1. It is the Mass of the priesthood: the bishop and priests renew their priestly promises which they made when they were ordained, to serve the Church through faithful teaching of the Word of God and through the faithful administration of the Sacraments through which Christ the Paschal Lamb pours out the risen glorified life of the resurrection. We recall that the Last Supper was not just the institution of the Mass; it was also the ordination of the first priests, the apostles. We should remind ourselves that priesthood lies at the very centre of the Paschal Mystery of Christ by which we have life. It is not a later addition that the early Church injected into the actions of Christ, because Christ *instructed* the apostles “*Do this in memory of me.*” Priesthood is a critical gift to the Church, which Christ left it on the night before he died. It is one of the elements of his legacy and thus has particular importance for us, just as the words of one about to die would have particular significance for their family.
2. The Mass of Chrism is the occasion on which the bishop, assisted by all the priests of the diocese, consecrates the Oil of Chrism and blesses the Oils of Catechumens and of the Sick. These are the three *Holy Oils*, which are used in the administration of the sacraments throughout the year in all the parishes of the diocese. Blessing them at this Mass says two things in particular: every priest of the diocese will be present around the bishop while he blesses the oils that they will use in his name. This is a very powerful statement of the unity of the local Church around our apostle, the bishop. Beyond this, the timing of the Mass of Chrism shows how important the sacraments are for the Church. Right in the middle of Holy Week, at the most sacred time of the Christian calendar, just before we enter into the mystery of the three days of the Triduum, we bless the raw materials through which Christ will anoint the sick, confirm the young and not so young, anoint those preparing for Baptism, anoint the hands of newly-ordained priests, consecrate churches and altars etc. These are specific moments when the victory and power of the Paschal Sacrifice of Christ, which we are about to celebrate in the Triduum, are made present in the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit and applied to those who have need of the grace.

## **Maundy Thursday - Mass of the Lord's Supper**

The Mass celebrated in the evening of Maundy Thursday is the Mass of the Lord's Supper. This Mass begins the Triduum - the Liturgy will not end until the conclusion of the Vigil, late on Saturday night.

The Mass centres on the actions of Christ the night before he died. Christ celebrated the Passover with the disciples but instituted massive changes that radically altered forever the way that his disciples would celebrate the Passover. He institutes the new Passover of the New Covenant. Like the Passover in Moses' time, it was a sacred

meal which was also a sacrifice: through it, those who participated would renew the promises of the Covenant and draw to themselves the power and liberation which was won for them by God. In Moses' time, it was liberation from slavery in Egypt: in our day the liberation we receive through the New Covenant Passover is liberation from the slavery of sin, freedom from death in our sins and the ability to resist temptation and live a life of holiness. This side of the grave there is no conceivable gift greater than the Mass because it truly is the very presence of the Risen Christ, "*risen with healing in his wings*", who offers his life to the Father for us for all eternity and offers us his own righteousness by pouring into us his glorified life.

The Mass also contains the ritual of the Washing of Feet. At the Last Supper, Christ gave the apostles the commandment to love one another as he had loved them. In order to demonstrate the force of his words, Christ took a towel and water and washed the feet of the Twelve, showing that he, the Lord of all Creation, had come among them as one who serves not as one who is served. This provides a model of Christian service and discipleship that the Church has carried out ever since. After the homily, the priest (who acts *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ) takes off the chasuble and washes one foot each of twelve of his people. It is in the fashion of this act of humility that the Church is called to serve the world and that Christians are called to serve each other.

After Communion, the Blessed Sacrament is carried in procession to the Altar of Repose and the Tabernacle is left empty and open. Once again, this is an ancient symbol of the desolation of creation after the death of Christ. At the Altar of Repose, the Blessed Sacrament, Christ himself, is placed for adoration and prayer. At this time we reflect on Christ's hour of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane when he experienced the fear of his coming crucifixion and sweated drops of blood. The apostles were urged by Christ to stay with him and pray for that hour, but they fell asleep. The custom of the Church is to remain for a while in the Church, praying with Christ as he urged us to do. The priest and servers leave in silence without any dismissal for this Liturgy has only begun - the Paschal Mystery is not complete. The altar is then stripped bare, the candles and cloth removed as we prepare for the commemoration of mankind's darkest hour - the murder of the Lord of Life which we enter into on Good Friday.

## **Good Friday - Commemoration of the Lord's Passion**

Mass may not be celebrated today or during daylight on Saturday. The Church enters the tomb with Christ and experiences the death of the Saviour through the liturgy, usually celebrated at 3pm, the hour at which Christ was crucified. The fourfold structure of the liturgy is at least as old as the fourth century and may be even older.

There is no formal greeting at the start of the liturgy because it is the continuation of the Triduum Liturgy begun the previous night. The priest enters in silence and prostrates himself before the bare altar as a sign of repentance from sin, which he offers on behalf of the whole community.

1. **THE LITURGY OF THE WORD:** we hear the prophesy of the passion in the Book of Isaiah ("*through his wounds we are healed*") and the letter to the

Hebrews which speaks to us of Christ as our High Priest, offering the perfect sacrifice of his life which brings us salvation. The climax is the solemn reading of the Passion of Christ in the Gospel of St. John. There is too much to note in John's Passion narrative to be recorded here but a couple of things should be said. Christ is presented as the new Passover Lamb, instituting a New Covenant, and as the New High Priest who is offering the perfect sacrifice. John records that Christ was crucified on Passover Preparation Day, at about the sixth hour - this was the time when the Law of Moses laid down that the High Priest should be in the Temple, beginning the sacrifice of the Passover lambs in preparation for the Passover the following day (John is saying that the true Lamb is being slain not in the Temple but outside Jerusalem: the New Covenant is being inaugurated but quite separate from the Temple), Furthermore John has *Christ* in the role of the Priest: his inner garment, John calls a "Kitown", is gambled for by the soldiers - the word kitown is a formal liturgical word which is only ever used to describe the vestments of the High Priest when he offers sacrifice: John is saying quite clearly that Christ is the High Priest who is offering this sacrifice. Finally, note what John records about Christ's dead body: the soldiers do not break his legs (as they do with the thieves) but they pierce his side - this fulfils the scripture that not one bone of his body will be broken, records John. This quotation comes from the regulations concerning the Passover - the lamb of sacrifice must be without blemish, ordered God through Moses, and none of its bones may have been broken. Here, John is telling us that Christ is the Lamb of Sacrifice, the perfect offering which no High Priest has ever been able to offer before because no animal could be found truly worthy of God - but truly, "*worthy is the Lamb that was slain.*"

2. **THE INTERCESSIONS FOR CHURCH AND WORLD:** these are offered after the Passion and are very ancient in form. We pray for governments and world leaders among others, and for the salvation of the Jewish people. Note that many of these prayers were composed in the third century, when the Church was being persecuted by the civil authorities (the Roman Emperors esp. Nero, Vespasian and Decius) and at the encouragement of the Jewish Pharisees who were intent on eradicating what they saw as an heretical Jewish offshoot. They are the first "bidding prayers" and our bidding prayers at Mass follow the structure and formulae of these.
3. **THE ADORATION (or 'VENERATION') OF THE CROSS:** this began in Jerusalem when Emperor Constantine's mother, Empress Helena, discovered the Cross of Christ (c 330 A.D.) in a half-filled, disused, overgrown rock-cistern just outside the walls of Jerusalem. Each year, on the Friday before Easter, the Church in Jerusalem gathered in their thousands to venerate this most precious relic - the cross on which Christ gave his life. The clergy would slowly unveil the cross for the veneration of the people, while they sang, "*This is the wood of the Cross, on which hung the Saviour of the world; come let us worship.*" The custom soon spread all over the Church: although we hold up a cross made of ordinary wood, not the wood of the True Cross, it remains symbolic for us of the cross on which Christ died. As we kiss the cross in faith and in repentance for our sins, we should remember that many thousands of martyrs of the early Church died for precisely what we are now permitted to

do: in refusing to worship the pagan idols but instead insisting on kissing the cross, they were sent to their deaths. Love of Christ crucified has led an innumerable host of men, women and children to forsake their lives rather than deny him. During the veneration of the Cross we sing or read aloud the “reproaches” – a series of prayers that take images of God’s gentleness and compassion in the Old Testament and contrast them with the way we have treated Christ. This series of prayers is quite overwhelming in its power to move the hearts and minds of the people coming to kiss the cross: *“My people, what have I done to you? How have I abused you? Answer me! I led you out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom, but you led your Saviour to the cross. For your sake I scourged your captors and their firstborn sons, but you brought your scourges down on me. I opened the sea before you, but you opened my side with a spear. I led you on your way in a pillar of cloud, but you led me to Pilate’s court. I bore you up with manna in the desert, but you struck me down and scourged me. I gave you saving water from the rock, but you gave me gall and vinegar to drink. For you I struck down the kings of Canaan, but you struck my head with a reed. I gave you a royal sceptre, but you gave me a crown of thorns. I raised you to the height of majesty, but you have raised me high on a cross.”*

4. **HOLY COMMUNION:** the climax of the Liturgy. The Blessed Sacrament is brought from the Altar of Repose to the High Altar, which has been dressed in readiness with altar cloth, missal etc. This is the very heart of the Passion, for now Christ's mystical Body (the Church) identifies herself totally with Christ's battered and mutilated physical body: we receive our Saviour himself not just in the Word but also in the flesh, drawing us into the very centre of the Paschal Mystery. Holy Communion is the sacrament of Christ's death as well as his resurrection, and so it is of the greatest significance that on the day we commemorate his saving death, we receive the sacrament of that life-giving sacrifice in the form of Holy Communion. The mystical Body of Christ (the Church) is fed again on the now glorified Body of the one who gave that same Body to be nailed to the cross and whose Blood was poured out on Calvary for the forgiveness of sins.

At the end of Holy Communion, the Blessed Sacrament is returned to the Altar of Repose. After a prayer, the priest and servers leave in silence, again without a blessing or dismissal - still the Paschal Mystery is not complete and we must wait for the celebration of the Resurrection at the Easter Vigil.

## **Holy Saturday - the Easter Vigil**

Mass may not be celebrated today until the sun has set and the new day begun. Throughout the day, the altar remains bare and the Tabernacle stays open and empty.

The Easter Vigil is called the “mother of all vigils” because it is from this liturgy that the whole mystery of faith flows. Just as from the pierced side of Christ on the cross flowed water and blood, symbolising baptism and the Mass, so from this Vigil flow the great truths which set us free: God has kept his word, he has come to the salvation of his children, he has forgiven our sins through our participation in the cross and our

entry into the mystery of Christ Crucified and Resurrected. You could say that every Mass is, in a sense, a scaled down version of the Easter Vigil in that each Mass is the local celebration of the cosmic event of the Resurrection of Christ, which brings new life to all who receive from it. At the Vigil, we do not simply remember or recall these events - we *effectively* remember them, or *remember them with effective power*: the power by which they were accomplished in the first century moves in the Church where we stand and is applied to those who receive the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion with the Risen Christ. There can be no more powerful event, looked at in real terms, not just in superficial physical terms - for all those who take part are being united to the single most shattering and world-changing event that is feasible: the power and holiness of the vindicated, glorified, triumphant and eternal God, who has conquered death, is released by the Father to sanctify, elevate, glorify, strengthen and transform those who would receive it. We are filled with Christ, the Lion of Judah, who has conquered (cf. Revelation 4:5).

The Vigil itself may only begin after the sun has set (and thus the new day begun, in the thinking of the ancients). The focus of the Vigil is double: primarily, it deals with Christ, whose resurrection from death is being celebrated; but in addition there is a secondary focus which in truth we should not separate from the first – the mystical Body of Christ, the Church. What we are celebrating is more than a historical event that is now over: we go beyond this to proclaim that the resurrection is a reality in this day and age, albeit in seed form. As Christ's physical body was transformed into his glorified body in the tomb on the night of that first Easter, so the mystical Body of Christ, the Church, is being filled with the Holy Spirit by the Father to bring about the same end - we receive a fore-taste of the resurrection through the new life we are given in the sacraments of the Church. This is especially true in the baptised - Baptism is the sacrament of Christ's resurrection as well as of his passion. St. Paul describes Baptism as going into the tomb with Christ and sharing in his death so that we might rise with him out of the tomb - as he is raised to life by the Father on the third day, we are raised with him and receive a share in his life. The baptised have been given a share in the here and now of the glorified life of the Risen Christ. This is one of the reasons why St. Paul can say that it is not he who lives but "*Christ who lives in me.*" (*Gal. 2:20*) In effect, when we participate in a Baptism ceremony, we are watching the fruit of the resurrection of Christ before our very eyes: they are the new creation that we have become, and they have at that moment been given Christ's resurrected life.

Now, it should be clear to us why the Church has arranged things so that those adults preparing for Baptism should be baptised during the Easter Vigil, when we are celebrating the resurrection of Christ. Right in the middle of the celebration, we see why we should be celebrating so much: Christ's resurrection was not a victory for himself alone but for all who believe in him, to whom he gives "*power to become children of God*" (*Jn. 1:12*). We see Christ give his glorified life to those who choose Baptism. Christ's resurrection has significance in our day and age because in Baptism Christ is constantly sharing his risen and glorified life with those who come to him.

The Vigil begins (as on Good Friday) without the usual formal greeting ("*In the name of the Father, ... The Lord be with you...*") because the Liturgy we began on Maundy Thursday has still not been completed. This can not be stressed too strongly: the Mass of the Lord's Supper does not stand on its own but flows immediately into the solemn

commemoration of the Lord's Passion - but that Liturgy does not end there, nor is the Commemoration of the Lord's Passion a Liturgy which is entire in itself or complete: it flows into the celebration of the Resurrection. ***This tells us something critical about our faith: we do not think of one without the other two.*** The Mass (i.e., Maundy Thursday) is not just a get-together but draws its character from Christ's Passion (Good Friday): but this is not the end: both the Mass and the Passion yearn for completion, which is achieved in the Resurrection. The Mass takes us from the Last Supper right through to the Resurrection without getting stuck along the way. In the West, popular devotion to Christ has traditionally been very cross-centred: Christ springs to the Western mind most commonly as the one who died for us. While this is true, he did die for us, and *“by his wounds you have been healed”* (1 Pet. 2:24), ***nevertheless*** the cross does not stand alone as the means of our redemption: if Christ has not risen from the dead then our faith would be in vain (so teaches St. Paul – *“if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain”* 1 Cor. 15:14). The cross only makes sense of human suffering because it is transformed by the resurrection into transcendent life. SO, we are still in the same Liturgy as begun on Maundy Thursday, which draws to a climax in the Vigil as the resurrection of Christ is proclaimed.

The Liturgy is divided into four parts:

### **(1) Service of Light**

We gather outside where a small fire has been lit. The symbolism of fire is many-fold: God is described as a raging fire (image of love and passion), fire is a source of light (*“I am the light of the world”* – Jn. 9:5), and finally, of all the ancient elements (earth, air, water & fire), it was fire that was considered to be alive, life itself, because it moved of its own will, consumed food etc. (which makes it a good image of the new life we celebrate in the resurrection). The fire is blessed and the Paschal Candle is lit. The candle is an image of Christ - the pillar of fire that led Moses out of slavery, the Light of the world. It is lit throughout the Church's year at every celebration which specifically recalls Christ's death and resurrection (i.e., through the 50 days of Eastertide and at celebrations of Baptism, when his resurrected life is poured out on infant or adult, at marriages and ordinations, confirmations and funerals as each of these is celebrated in the context of the new life Christ has won for us and gives us in the sacraments and brings to fulfilment in the court of Heaven after we die.)

After the candle is blessed, we process into the Church, walking behind the deacon (or priest) who carries the candle aloft. Symbolically we recall the journey of Moses and Israel out of slavery in Egypt, led by the pillar of fire (which is Christ). We apply that to our own day: we are led by Christ, the Easter fire, out of the slavery of our sins by following him not to the waters of the Red Sea but to the waters of Baptism and entry into his risen, mystical Body, the Church. The candles, which we carry as a reminder of our Baptism when Christ the Light came to us, are lit as we process into the Church: we enter the Church proclaiming our baptism and therefore our share in Christ's risen life.

The Paschal Candle is placed on its stand in the Church and then the deacon or priest sings the ‘Exsultet’ - a hymn, written in the earliest years of the Church, proclaiming

the Resurrection of Christ and the salvation it has brought to all mankind. It is of quite overwhelming beauty and I quote only a few lines below:

*“Rejoice, heavenly powers, sing choirs of angels. Exult all creation around God’s throne. Jesus Christ, our King, is risen! Sound the trumpet of salvation!*

*Rejoice, O earth in shining splendour, radiant in the brightness of your King! Christ has conquered! Glory fills you! Darkness vanishes forever!*

*Rejoice, O Mother Church, exult in glory. The Risen Saviour shines upon you. Let this place resound with joy, echoing the mighty song of all God’s people!*

*For Christ has ransomed us with his blood, and paid for us the price of Adam’s sin to our eternal Father!*

*This is our Passover feast, when Christ, the true Lamb, is slain, whose blood consecrates the homes of all believers.*

*This is the night when first you saved our fathers: you freed the people of Israel from their slavery and led them dry-shod through the sea.*

*This is the night when the pillar of fire destroyed the darkness of sin!*

*This is the night when Christians everywhere, washed clean of sin and freed from all defilement, are restored to grace and grow together in holiness.*

*This is the night when Jesus Christ broke the chains of death and rose triumphant from the grave.*

*What good would life have been to us, had Christ not come as our redeemer?*

*Father, how wonderful your care for us! How boundless your merciful love. To ransom a slave you gave away your Son.*

*O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a redeemer!*

*Most blessed of all nights, chosen by God to see Christ rising from the dead!*

*The power of this holy night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy; it casts out hatred, brings us peace and humbles earthly pride.”*

The poem uses *typology* for its impact: Christ is described in images of Old Testament precursors, especially Moses and the exodus from Egyptian slavery. To be able to understand the Exsultet we need to know the stories it refers to from the Old Testament, which are fulfilled in Christ. This is why the next part of the Vigil is the long Liturgy of the Word where these stories are told and read.

## **(2) Liturgy of the Word**

The Easter Vigil is a scriptural feast. When done fully, there are seven Old Testament readings, followed by the Gloria, then a reading from the Letter to the Romans and finally the proclamation of the Resurrection from one of the Gospels. The readings have been chosen because they speak of the plan of salvation which God began after the fall of Adam and which builds up to the crucifixion and resurrection of the Son of God. Two readings in particular stand out: the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (a prefiguring of the death of Christ: a father leads his son to his sacrificial death, the son carries the wood of his sacrifice, to the land of Moriah - the mountain range among whose peaks is a low hill called Calvary) and the account of the crossing of the Red Sea (an image of Baptism, the escape from slavery and delivery towards the promised land of Heaven). The Liturgy of the Word prepares us for the making-present of the realities we have just heard about: having listened to the account of God's salvation, we see it before our eyes in the Liturgy of Baptism.

## **(3) Liturgy of Baptism**

When there are people to be baptised, the liturgy of the Easter Vigil is most complete. We have heard about God freeing Moses and Israel from Pharaoh through the miracle of the Red Sea - now we see God freeing those he has chosen from the more lethal bondage to sin through the life-giving waters of Baptism. As the experience of the Red Sea prepared Israel for the greater reality of salvation from sin, so the reading of the Red Sea crossing prepares us to witness the establishment of Christ's victory over sin and death. Easter is not just about the historical fact of Christ's rising from the dead - that is a matter of memory. Easter is about the reality of Christ's resurrection *today*: in our own day, we are immersed in Christ's redemptive suffering so that we can be reborn as children of God, heirs of heaven and coheirs with Christ. It is about receiving the Risen and Glorified life of Christ in a sacramental way so that we become a new creation, no longer drawing our character from Adam (who sinned because he was afraid to face death) but from the new Adam (who faced death because he refused to bow to sin, and thus becomes the source of life for those who are entered into him). Easter is about dying to Adam and living to Christ: all this is classical and scriptural *baptismal* language drawn from St. Paul's letters (esp. Romans and Galatians). It shows how central to the celebration of Easter is the sacrament of Baptism. In effect, we see the Risen Christ standing before us when the newly-baptised rises out of the font, for here is one who has just received Christ's risen life - it is no longer they who live but Christ who lives in them.

The Rite itself is simple: there is a litany of the saints, invoking the prayers of our older brothers and sisters in heaven, then the waters of Baptism are blessed, the candidates for Baptism renounce Satan and profess their faith in God and are baptised. They are then immediately confirmed. If there are none to be baptised, then after the blessing of baptismal water, we jump to this point: all the baptised renew the promises of their own Baptism, re-claiming the life they were given when they were baptised. Their candles are lit and they renounce Satan and profess their belief in God. Those who are to be received into the Church and confirmed are called forward, received into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church and confirmed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.

#### **(4) Liturgy of the Eucharist**

This is the Mass of the Resurrection - the first time Mass has been celebrated in the Church since Maundy Thursday. Through the sacramental signs of bread and wine, God gives to us the life of his Risen and Glorified Son: the baptised and the newly-received are fully one with the Church as they share with us the fullest and deepest communion with each other and with God through the Body and Blood of Christ. The same body which celebrated the Last Supper, was beaten and killed, lay in the tomb and was transformed at the Resurrection into the Glorified Body, is given to us today to fill us with the new life of the new creation, severing our ties with the first Adam and confirming our baptism into the new Adam – Christ, the Lord of Life.

At the end of the Mass, the deacon finally announces the conclusion of the Paschal Mystery, which we began together on Maundy Thursday, two days ago. He sings the triumphant call: *“Go in the peace of Christ, Alleluia, alleluia”* to which we sing in response *“Thanks be to God, Alleluia, alleluia.”* From the beginning of Lent we have not used the word *“alleluia”* (Hebrew for *“Praise to God”*) because it is a word that is most expressive of the joy of the Resurrection. The whole year round we join the choirs of Heaven who chant alleluia before the throne of God and the Lamb (see Revelation 19:1,3,4,6) in explicit celebration of the victory of the Resurrection. However, during the season of Lent, we are in a season of repentance and contrition rather than triumph and celebration so this word is dropped. Now, for the first time since Shrove Tuesday, the Church rings out again with this great acclamation of Christ's victory as we celebrate his gift of the resurrected life to us through the Church.

### **Easter Sunday**

The Mass of Easter Sunday is a derivation of the Easter Vigil. It is the Mass of the Resurrection, celebrating Christ's victory over sin and death. The Service of Light is not repeated as the Paschal Candle has been blessed and lit the night before. However, the Renewal of Baptismal Promises is done at each of the Masses on Easter Sunday. It is important for us to remember that Baptism is the way that you and I enter actually and really into the life-giving drama of the Paschal Mystery. Through it, we have died with Christ (the mystery we celebrate on Good Friday) and been raised up with Christ, receiving his glorified life and thus becoming a new creation (the wonder of Easter day itself). Baptism immerses us into the very actions which we have been celebrating throughout the Triduum, and by immersing us in them, the Rite of Baptism applies to us the very real power that is contained in these actions: the salvation of the world, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the raising up to new life. On Easter Sunday, we revive within us the power of our Baptism by recalling the degree of faith that it calls for within us and renewing our dedication to follow Christ as if we had been newly baptised. Once again, after the Renewal of Baptismal Promises, we are sprinkled with Holy Water as a visual and powerful reminder that God has visited his people, has cleansed their sins through Baptism and brought them to a new birth not as children of Adam but as his sons, sharing the nature of Christ. The sprinkling of water should remind us of the words of Ezekiel:

- *“I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.” (Ezekiel 36:25-27)*

The Holy Communion we receive this day seals the bond of the New Covenant, which Christ has made in his Blood. In the words of St. Paul *“He cannot disown his own self”* (2 Tim. 2:13) which, through Holy Communion with Christ, we have become.

These, then, are the central mysteries of the Catholic Church – communicated to us through the great celebrations of the Easter Triduum. Through them we have become the one Body of Christ and are filled with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They are worth celebrating in full and to the fullest because out of them we receive life – and receive it to the full.

Fr Guy de Gaynesford