



Veiling of Crosses, Statues, and Images during Lent and Holy Week

- ♦ At the beginning of Lent churches often drape a purple cloth from crosses.
- ♦ Beginning the fifth week of Lent, in addition to crosses, all statues and images are covered with purple cloth (accept St. Joseph). Stations of the cross and stained glass windows are never covered.
- ♦ All crosses and statues are covered with red cloth on Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

Why do we veil crosses, statues, and pictures during Lent and Good Friday

Traditionally, the veiling referred to the closing words of the Sunday gospel for the 5th Sunday of Lent, *"They picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple" (John 8:59).*

There has been a long tradition in the church of veiling crosses and images during the last two weeks of Lent. Prior to the liturgical reforms (1964), the Passion was read on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, hence it was called Passiontide. As Monsignor Peter Elliot wrote, "The custom of veiling crosses and images ... has much to commend in terms of religious psychology, because it helps us to concentrate on the great essentials of Christ's work of Redemption."

Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical University agrees with Monsignor Elliot, but adds;

"Although this is true, the historical origin of this practice lies elsewhere. It probably derives from a custom, noted in Germany from the ninth century, of extending a large cloth before the altar from the beginning of Lent. This cloth, called the "Hungertuch" (hunger cloth), hid the altar entirely from the faithful during Lent and was not removed until the Tenebrae service on Wednesday evening after the Passion was read."

What does the 'hunger cloth' or Lenten veiling suggest? It dramatizes for us the results of sin - separation! A veil before the altar would be an especially stark symbol of the rupture in communion brought about by sin. For the altar is where the faithful are nourished in their union with the Lord Jesus, where the people of God eat together with God.

Lenten veiling also suggests the shroud of sin with its deception and shame. Remember Adam and Eve, how they covered themselves with loincloths after they disobeyed God. They hid themselves because they were ashamed of their sinfulness. Fr. McNamara continues,

"Some authors say there was a practical reason for this practice (hiding the entire altar from the faithful during Lent) insofar as the often-illiterate faithful needed a way to know it was Lent. Others, however, maintain that it was a remnant of the ancient practice of public penance in which the penitents were ritually expelled from the church at the beginning of Lent."

After the ritual of public penance fell into disuse — but the entire congregation symbolically entered the order of penitents by receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday — it was no longer possible to expel them from the church. Rather, the altar or “Holy of Holies” was shielded from view until they were reconciled to God at Easter. For similar reasons, later in the Middle Ages, images of crosses and saints were also covered from the start of Lent. The rule of limiting this veiling to the 5th week of Lent (Passiontide) does not appear until the 17th century.

Why the color purple?

Long ago, the dye needed for the color purple was extracted from a particularly scarce family of shellfish which made it quite valuable. Purple, then, became a symbol of royalty and riches due to the scarcity of its dye.

For centuries, purple had been the color worn by royalty. Purple during penitential seasons reminds us that we are doing penance in honor of the Great King Who humbled Himself to come to earth, to live among us as a human being, and to die for our sins so that we, His creatures, might be granted eternal life with Him. What greater King could we possibly desire?

Why the color red?

Used twice during Holy Week (**Palm Sunday** and **Good Friday**), red is associated with passion and love. Red is the liturgical color for exactly this reason, to help drive home the point that Jesus loved us to death -- and beyond. The two times that we read the Lord's Passion in its entirety are Palm Sunday and Good Friday, so it's no coincidence that the liturgical color these two days is red.

Also associated with feast day of martyrs (those who witness to our Catholic faith to the point of giving their lives), the red liturgical color on these two days symbolizes the blood shed by Jesus.

Why the color white?



White is the color of both Easter and Christmas (including the Feast of the Epiphany). It is the color of celebration, joy, and peace. With the color gold, white symbolizes the greatest work of God in the world, specifically His incarnation into this world at Christmas, and His triumph over death and evil at Easter. White is the color used for funerals, as they are celebrations of the resurrection. Likewise, it is the color of baptisms and weddings, as we celebrate the arrival of another child of God into his household of faith, and as we celebrate the union of two persons into one family in the eyes of God.

May the coverings of our sacred images and crosses this Lent prepare us for the joy and happiness that await us through the suffering, death and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

