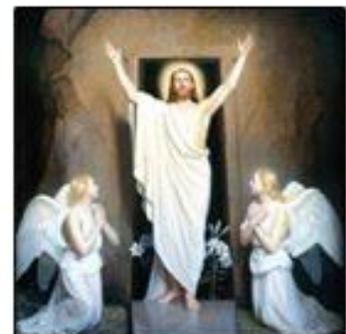


# Easter Triduum



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In the Sacred Triduum, the Church solemnly celebrates the greatest mysteries of our redemption, keeping by means of special celebrations the memorial of her Lord, crucified, buried, and risen.

- *The Roman Missal, third edition*

Since Christ accomplished his work of human redemption and of the perfect glorification of God principally through his Paschal Mystery, in which by dying he has destroyed our death, and by rising restored our life, the sacred Paschal Triduum of the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord shines forth as the high point of the entire liturgical year.

- *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year*

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The Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday marks the end of the liturgical season of Lent. Often thought of as the final days of Lent, these three days -- Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday --- along with Easter Sunday itself, comprise the shortest, yet holiest and most solemn liturgical season of the Church's calendar --- the Sacred Paschal Triduum.

The Easter Triduum is to Christians what Passover, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are to the Jewish people, and the month of Ramadan is to Muslims. The days of the Triduum are the "high holy days" of Christianity. Marked by special prayers and rituals, the Triduum commemorates God's victory over the powers of darkness and death.

The word "Triduum" is Latin for "three days." Liturgical days differ from our ordinary calendar days in that they are measured from one sunset to the next. Thus, the first liturgical day of the Triduum begins at sunset on Holy Thursday and continues until sunset on Friday. The second liturgical day then begins on Friday evening and continues until sunset on Saturday. The third liturgical day begins at sunset on Saturday and ends at sunset on Easter Sunday.

Even though the observance of the Easter Triduum takes place over a period of four calendar days, it is really one continuous liturgy. During this time, we come together a number of times as a community of faith to commemorate the events of Jesus' Passion, death and Resurrection, after which we return to our homes to pray and meditate on these events.

The Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, with its multiple themes of Eucharist, priesthood, and charity, begins with the familiar rituals common to any celebration of the Eucharist, but it quickly becomes apparent that this Mass is different from all others. The sound of bells during the singing of the "Gloria" expresses joy over Jesus' gift of himself in the Eucharist. Then begins a somber time of silence during which the joyful ringing of bells will not be heard again, until the singing of the "Gloria" during the Easter Vigil Mass celebrates Christ's Resurrection. On Holy Thursday, the feet of twelve persons are washed by the priest in imitation of Jesus washing the feet of his apostles at the Last Supper. Bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ, just as Jesus commanded his disciples to do in memory of him. After Mass, we stay with Jesus in adoration at the Altar of Repose, called to watch and pray as were the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. The liturgy ends abruptly and in silence, with no concluding rite, dismissal, or closing hymn. The Church remains in prayer, keeping watch with Jesus during this first night of His Passion.

The liturgy of Good Friday picks up where the previous evening's liturgy left off. The priest and servers enter in silence, and following a brief period of silent prayer, the priest reads the opening prayer without any greeting, and without even the usual invitation of "let us pray." We listen to the "Suffering Servant" prophecy from the Book of Isaiah, and hear the fulfillment of that prophecy proclaimed in St. John's account of Jesus' Passion and death. We pray the general intercessions for all the people of the world, because Jesus died for all. We venerate the crucifix with a kiss as a sign of love for Christ, who showed his love for us by dying on the cross. We receive in Holy Communion the Body and Blood of Christ which was consecrated at the Mass the previous evening because the Church, as a sign of sorrow, does not celebrate Mass on Good Friday. After Communion, the priest reads the closing prayer and again everyone leaves in silence, reflecting the solemn quiet and starkness of this day. There is no concluding rite or dismissal, for the Church continues to be at prayer throughout the Triduum.

On Holy Saturday, the Church waits, keeping silent watch in anticipation of Jesus' Resurrection. The Easter Vigil begins with the faithful gathered together in darkness. Again, there is no greeting or opening rite. The liturgy begins by creating a blazing fire that illumines the night, reminding us that by rising from the dead, Jesus conquered the darkness of sin and death. After the fire is blessed, the Paschal candle is lit and carried in procession symbolizing Christ, the Light of the world, leading us out of the darkness of sin. We listen to the singing of the Exultet, which reminds us of the powerful importance of this night. We hear readings from Sacred Scripture that retrace God's salvation history, beginning with the story of creation and culminating in the account of the Resurrection. The Holy Spirit is called upon to bless the waters of Baptism, and new members of the Church receive the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. Finally, we are once again fed and nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion. Only at the end of the Easter Vigil Mass do we again hear the familiar blessing and dismissal, now accompanied by the words "alleluia, alleluia", marking the conclusion of the solemn three-day Triduum liturgy. The Easter Triduum itself continues until the praying of Vespers (Evening Prayer) on Easter Sunday.

The Easter Triduum is not a three-act play recounting Jesus' final days. Rather, it is an encounter with Christ during which we not only celebrate the Paschal Mystery, but also enter into this mystery through the liturgy, sacraments, and sacramentals of the Church. We become united to Christ in his death and Resurrection through our celebration of the Easter Triduum.