

# A Guide to the 7 Churches Visitation

Have you ever heard about a 7 churches visitation? Have you always wanted to do it but thought “Maybe next year...”? Or have you been too intimidated to even try? Cast all your worries about this aside! The 7 churches visitation is a beautiful tradition and a great way to really allow Jesus’ final moments to come alive. It’s also a really fun activity to do with your friends, family or church group! The below guide is an extensive look into planning the visitation. While the idea of the pilgrimage is simple, putting time, prayer, and thought into this can lead to an extremely fruitful experience.

## What is the 7 Churches Visitation?

- At Mass: On Holy Thursday, we celebrate mass and the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. After mass, the Eucharist is removed from the main tabernacle, to an altar of repose. The tabernacle on the main altar of the church is left open and at midnight, the Eucharist is removed from the church to symbolize Jesus’ death and the emptiness of the world before his resurrection.
- In The Bible: After the last supper, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, enduring agony, until he was betrayed and taken into the custody of the Romans. During his agony, the apostles with him, Peter, James and John, all fell asleep. When he goes to see what they are doing, he asks them, “Could you not stay awake for one hour?” During the 7 Churches Visitation, we keep Jesus company while he is enduring this agony. Think of it like staying with a friend through a hard time or with a loved one staying in the hospital. Your presence can bring so much comfort and support to them in that situation.
- History: The 7 Churches started in the 1500’s with St. Philip Neri, who would bring pilgrims to the 7 Major papal basilicas in Rome as an act of penance. Since then, the pilgrimage has spread throughout the world as a popular activity for the night of Holy Thursday.

## When is Holy Thursday this year?

April 2! You will want to start with an evening mass and then visit churches after. Don’t plan to be home before 9pm if you want to do the whole pilgrimage.

## Who can come?

- Anyone! A few things to keep in mind with different groups
  - FAMILIES: With younger kids, I’d recommend picking 2 or 3 churches and going to mass as a family.
    - If you plan on taking grandma and grandpa, be sure to check the accessibility of the churches you are going to.
  - YOUTH GROUP:
    - This is a great opportunity for confirmation candidates or older students. The pilgrimage lets them get outside of their home church and experience the broader Catholic community.
    - If your youth group is taking several cars, please be sure that chaparones are up to date on safe environment training and policies!
- With friends from church
  - Have you wanted to know people in your parish better? Invite them to join you!

- Do you have a men's or women's group you are a part of? Maybe you volunteer with the food pantry team. This would be a great activity to grow in faith together and remind yourself and other volunteers why you do the work.

## How do I plan this?

### During Lent

- **PRAY:** Prayer is the most important part of the planning process. As you spend time in prayer this Lent, ask the Lord if he is calling you to plan this or participate with a group or a church.
- **READ:** Spend time in the scriptures surrounding the passion. Spending time with the Gospels is a great way to grow your relationship with Jesus.
- **THEME:** I have found it fruitful to set a theme for the pilgrimage, in addition to scripture readings. Any theme is good, as long as it helps your group grow closer to God and make Holy Thursday feel more alive. Here are a few ideas:
  - **The Eucharist:** The Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith- have you heard that phrase and has it not really stuck with you? What does the Eucharist mean to you? What is your relationship with Jesus through the Eucharist? Educate yourself on the Eucharist and use this time to grow in relationship with Him.
  - **Who do you say I am?:** If Jesus were to ask you this question, how would you respond? Pick a title of Jesus and meditate on it for the night.
  - **The parables:** The lost sheep, the prodigal son, and so many more are the stories from the bible a lot of people know from the Gospels. Choose one and relate it to Lent.
  - **Saints:** Many of our churches are named for great saints. Use this as an opportunity to get some new friends in Heaven. Print out mini-biographies to read at each church and prayers for the saint's intercession.
  - **Art:** The Catholic Church has such incredible art and it's not just there for decoration, it can really help us pray! Pick a specific window, painting, or statue to show your group before you go and bring it to mind.

### One Month Before

- **PRAY:** Continue to pray during your planning process. Pray that the people who need this experience are able to come and participate.
- **SAVE THE DATE:** The 7 Churches Visitation is a commitment of your whole evening. Give your friends and family the heads up that you will be doing this so anyone who wants to join can mark it on their calendar.
- **PICK YOUR CHURCHES:** Choose the 7 churches you want to visit! Figure out their mass time and start creating an itinerary. You'll want to plan to visit the church about one hour after mass starts. (Ex: If Mass is at 6pm, don't plan to visit the church before around 7)
  - Ideas for churches to visit
    - **Geographic:** This is the most direct way to do the 7 Churches Visitation. Choose churches that are close in proximity so you can spend more time praying and less time traveling.
    - **"Sister" Churches:** Say you go to Holy Family Church, go to churches associated with the Holy Family. For Example: St. Joseph's in Camillus, Immaculate Conception in Fayetteville or St. Ann in Manlius
    - **Churches of Childhood:** If you grew up in the Syracuse Diocese, bring your kids to the church you grew up going to you, where you got married, or any other important churches to you. It's a great time to hear stories about going to church as a kid and send the message of how important faith is for your family!

- **MAP IT OUT:** Use the diocese's map or google maps to chart out where each church is and where they are located in proximity to each other. Try to figure out the most efficient way to get there.
- **PARKING:** Use Google Maps to check out the parking situation at each church.
- **CREATE MATERIALS:** After deciding on a theme, decide how you want your group to participate in this. I have used Canva to create a slideshow with all of the information before, however, if you don't want to be glued to technology, print out the materials. If you are focusing on scripture, just bring your bible and note where the passages are with sticky notes. For scripture passages use the following:
  - Luke 22: 39-46
  - John 18:19-22
  - Matthew 26: 63-65
  - John 18:35-37
  - Luke 23: 8-11
  - Matthew 27: 22-26
  - Mathew 27: 27-31
- **COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR DRIVERS:** If you are taking a large group, you need to figure out how to get around. Ask people if they would be willing to drive and how many people their car can hold. Send out your itinerary and map so they are able to familiarize themselves with where you are going.
- **Google Form:** There's a bit of information to gather when it comes to the visitation. Google Forms is a straightforward way to organize information and get a definite of who is joining you.

## The Week of

- **PRAY:** Pray for a fruitful holy week and start preparing your heart for the pilgrimage. Pray for nice weather and a good experience for everyone!
- **CLEAN OUT YOUR CAR:** Okay, be real, if you're like me, your car needs a good vacuum. Be sure to have gas in the tank too!
- **SNACKS:** Buy or make snacks to have in the car. This is very needed if you are fasting before mass and want to get straight into the visitations.

## Holy Thursday

- **STAY TOGETHER:** If you are going with a group, stress the importance of staying together, make sure your drivers know that even if you are in separate cars, you will enter and leave the church together.
- **Set a time:** Choose how long you plan to stay at each church. This can be helpful for keeping you on track. Make sure everyone knows about how long you plan to stay. 10-15 minutes is usually a good time.
- **Spread the Gospel:** If you are going into the city for the night, chances are you will encounter people in need. Jesus wouldn't have ignored them and neither should we. Pack some granola bars and prayer cards to spread the joy of the Gospel to them!
- **FAITH FILLED CONVERSATIONS:** When you leave each church, keep the grace going in the car. Read the reflections or scripture passages. Talk about what you are praying about. Have fun but also allow the conversation to turn to God whenever it feels organic.

## After

When you've visited all 7 churches, regroup with everyone and debrief the experience. If you've chosen a theme for the pilgrimage, loop back to that and discuss. End the night in prayer, thanking the Lord for the gift of his son and his resurrection.