

THE TRIDUUM – HIGH POINT OF THE LITURGICAL YEAR

The Sacred Triduum (“Three Days”) isn’t just the end of Lent – it’s the culmination of the Church’s liturgical year. Each of these days has unique and ancient liturgical celebrations, which were revived in the mid-1950s, then further updated and translated into English after Vatican II. The Triduum begins with the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday and ends with Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday.

Holy Thursday. The Mass of the Lord’s Supper is our most solemn remembrance of the night before Christ’s death, recalling not only the institution of the Eucharist but also Jesus’ example of service to others, as presented in John’s Gospel. The celebrant re-enacts Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet, using representatives from the parish community. Last year, Pope Francis included women among those whose feet he washed – an innovation for Rome, but something that had been commonplace in the American Church for many years. The Mass concludes with a procession of the Blessed Sacrament to an altar of reposition away from the main body of the church, recalling Christ’s departure from the Upper Room – where the Last Supper was held – to the Garden of Gethsemane. In many places, the 4th Degree Knights form an Honor Guard at the altar of reposition, their faithfulness to the Lord forming a counterpoint to his disciples’ abandonment of him at the beginning of his Passion.

Good Friday. Through the Commemoration of the Lord’s Passion and Death, we solemnly recall the redemptive action of Christ. The celebrant and servers enter in silence and the celebrant prostrates himself before the altar prior to any prayer – the only such beginning of a liturgy. In the reading of Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant,” we recognize the prophet’s foreshadowing of Jesus’ acceptance of the Father’s will. In John’s Gospel, the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate vividly presents the forces contending for the life of Christ. While the Gospel reading for Passion Sunday rotates among Matthew, Mark and Luke, Good Friday’s Passion reading is always that of John. The Veneration of the Cross is another unique ritual, giving each person the chance to approach and honor the cross, a counterpoint to those who mocked and jeered the crucified Christ at Calvary. Prior to the 1950s reforms, Good Friday was a day when only the dying could receive Communion – now we can conclude our commemoration of that day by drawing closer to Jesus through sharing his body in the Blessed Sacrament.

Easter Vigil. This culminates our celebrations and our faith – Christ’s resurrection from the dead and our sharing in this promise through baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. We review our salvation history, from God’s creation of the world, through his liberation of the Chosen People and his Covenant fidelity, to his raising Jesus from the dead. We celebrate the ultimate victory of light over darkness, bringing new Christians into the Church and renewing our own baptismal promises. With the powerful symbol of the Easter Candle, we proclaim over and over – “Alleluia! He is risen! Truly, he is risen!”

Easter Sunday. Our celebrations throughout this day joyfully proclaim the Risen Christ. Easter parades originated with the procession of the newly baptized in their clean, white garments, symbols of the spiritual cleansing they received and of the promise of resurrection in which they now share. The Triduum concludes with Evening Prayer, but the celebration of Easter continues for 50 days, ending with Pentecost.