



Invite parishioners to reflect on how the opening procession on Palm Sunday reveals that we are in constant spiritual motion.

Photo © John Zich

The Holy Week Liturgies: Forming the Faithful to Live as Christ

Vicki Klima

INTRODUCTION

As pastoral ministers, we know that parishioners who think of Mass as an hour spent with God that is separate from “real life” are missing a key purpose of our participation at Mass. During the liturgy, we give praise and thanks to God, but we also learn how to act like Christ in our daily lives. The words, rituals, and symbols of the Mass give shape to attitudes and behaviors that are put into practice the rest of the week. Returning to Mass the following Sunday, we gather our experiences—good and bad, successes and failures—and offer them back to the Lord, once

again opening ourselves to become more Christlike. This vital connection between liturgy and life unfolds as a never-ending circle, reminding us that God is with us not only on Sunday but every day of the week. What we experience and learn through our participation in the liturgy penetrates our hearts and sustains us on our journey to be Christ in the world.

Knowing that the Mass is always teaching us, what might the liturgies of Holy Week reveal about how to live like Christ in the world? As the highpoint of our liturgical year, these liturgies have much to teach about how our daily lives can be transformed by living in deeper union with Christ’s paschal mystery.

To help parishioners understand that the paschal mystery is something they are called to live out daily, it may be helpful to

remind parishioners that the liturgies of Holy Week are not historical reenactments of events from the life of Jesus. We don't have someone ride into church on a donkey, find twelve Jewish men for the foot washing, or nail a person to a cross. Instead, these liturgies help us have a personal encounter with the sacred mysteries at the very heart of our faith—that God became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who offered his life to free us from sin and death and rose again to give us a share in his divine life. Having died and risen with him in baptism, all the baptized are called to live in the newness of life that our sharing in his paschal mystery offers each of us.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

The Procession

Holy Week begins with a procession. Processions may very practically move people from one place to another, but their purpose is more than just getting everyone to their proper place. Processions serve as a reminder that each of us is in a state of constant spiritual motion. The Scriptures proclaimed this day reveal that a crowd in favor of something one day can easily turn against it when the tide shifts. Consider ways to invite parishioners to reflect on the following questions: Is the direction of my life moving me closer to or away from Christ? How firm is my commitment to Christ? Do I act out of my beliefs, especially my Christian values? Do I praise the Lord with my lips only to later take part in gossip or vulgarity? This simple act of movement at the start of Holy Week provides ample content for personal and communal reflection.

During the procession, the community joins in singing hymns or antiphons featuring the word *hosanna*. This word that is sung or prayed at every Mass as part of the Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy) expresses praise and joy; its original Hebrew meaning is “save us” or “save us, we pray.” This one word expresses our worship and devotion while also affirming our trust in God to keep us safe. How might we invite parishioners to reflect on their ability to trust God when challenges occur in their lives?

The Reading of the Passion

The passion from Matthew, Mark, or Luke is proclaimed, depending on which year it is in the three-year cycle of readings. Offering background or reflection on the passion would be an excellent preparation for this moment. Because the reading is both lengthy and well known, it can be easy to lose focus. Helping the assembly meditate on the personal meaning of Christ's passion would be an appropriate exercise. Homilists, Scripture study leaders, or other pastoral ministers can invite reflection by asking people to consider: How do I participate in the passion and death of Jesus in my daily life?



Provide opportunities for parishioners to meditate on the call to follow the humble example of Jesus.

HOLY THURSDAY MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Entrance Antiphon

The entrance antiphon for the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday sums up the meaning of these three days: “We should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, / in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, / through whom we are saved and delivered” (see Galatians 6:14). Many are accustomed to seeing crosses and crucifixes in a number of places; crosses are even worn as jewelry. Members of the assembly may have never taken the time to consider what it means to have an image of an instrument of torture and death on our walls, in our churches, and even around our necks. The image of the cross is ever before us as a reminder that there is no salvation apart from the cross. Out of Christ's death comes resurrection and life. Seeing the cross reminds us to take up our crosses and to pattern our lives after Christ's selfless love. Remind parishioners that we begin the Triduum knowing that we participate in the paschal mystery, and we renew our commitment to be followers of Christ in both dying and rising to new life.

Reception of the Holy Oils

An optional ritual for Holy Thursday, the reception of the holy oils is one of the only times that many Catholics see or hear about the oils unless attending another ritual in which they are used. Consider ways to heighten parishioners' awareness of what the symbol of oil means in our tradition and what it teaches about our relationship to God and to the Church. How does the oil of the sick provide a concrete reminder of our call to care and



Photo © John Zich

Help parishioners understand ways of offering their lives in union with Christ's sacrifice.

pray for the sick and to place our trust in God's healing power? How can the oil of catechumens remind the whole congregation of their responsibility to pray for both children and adults preparing for baptism? How does the chrism invite all the baptized to remember their anointing in baptism and confirmation as priest, prophet, and king? Recalling that chrism is also used in the ordination of priests and in the dedication of church buildings, how can the assembly be assisted to pray for those in church leadership and to give thanks for the house of worship provided for us as members of the Body of Christ? Finally, this ritual celebration offers an opportunity to help parishioners deepen their awareness of belonging to a particular local (diocesan) Church, as these oils were blessed by the bishop at the Chrism Mass and sent to each parish in the diocese.

Foot Washing

In providing catechesis on the washing of the feet, point out the historical context of the practice in Jesus' time. Since people were not walking on concrete roads in close-toed shoes, feet were often dirty. It was an act of hospitality to provide guests with what was needed to wash their feet. In wealthier homes, a servant washed guests' feet. When Jesus washed the feet of his

disciples, he took upon himself the task of a slave, a work that would never be done by a host or homeowner. Jesus clearly tells his followers the meaning of this action: "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do" (John 13:15).

By washing the disciples' feet, Jesus is teaching the way of humility and demonstrating what kind of leaders he wants them to be. Today, this might be called "servant leadership." Whatever our leadership role, certain tasks should not be considered to be beneath us. Do we pitch in to help with setup and cleanup, or do we consider ourselves above the volunteers? Do we stop to listen to the concerns of others, or are we too busy with what we think is more important work?

Beginning with his first Holy Thursday in Rome, Pope Francis has washed the feet of prisoners and refugees, disabled people, old and young, male and female—even some who were not Catholic—showing that we are to be servants of all. Offer these questions to parishioners: What can we do to be of service to others? Are we on the lookout for how we can help family, friends, neighbors, parishioners, and even strangers? Could we shovel a sidewalk, mow the lawn, share a meal, provide transportation? Could we choose to respond with kindness rather than annoyance, irritation, or road rage?

The suggested music for the procession of gifts following the foot washing is "Where true charity is dwelling, God is present there" (*Ubi caritas*). The foot washing just celebrated is a symbol of the love proclaimed in the text of this chant. The words remind us that charity unites us and puts "an end to malice, strife, and quarrels." All need to reflect on their relationships: Is there anyone who needs to be forgiven? Is it time to show mercy to those with whom we are estranged or alienated?

Transfer of the Eucharist

The procession with the Blessed Sacrament to the altar of repose—with cross, candles, incense, and Eucharistic chant—emphasizes the reverence due the Eucharist. Encourage parishioners to stay for adoration and personal prayer. Consider providing resources to assist them to use this time for further reflection on the liturgy of the Triduum, inviting them to spend some time praying about how they might fulfill the mandate of Holy Thursday, "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do," (John 13:15) and "Do this in memory of me" (Luke 22:19).

GOOD FRIDAY

The Proclamation of the Passion

While the passion on Palm Sunday was taken from the Gospel of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, on Good Friday the passion from the Gospel of John is proclaimed. Although the story is similar in all four accounts, each has a different emphasis and contains some distinctive details. The second reading sheds light on the passion of John: "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:8–9). Obedience may be a negative concept in an "I did it my way" view of existence, but becoming Christ in the world rests on obedience to our Lord's teachings. In preparation for (or following)

Good Friday, invite members of the assembly to reflect on these questions: Which teachings do I find difficult to follow? How does the passion and death of Christ connect with my life?

Solemn Intercessions

A significant part of the Good Friday ritual is the ancient practice of praying the Solemn Intercessions. The Church offers ten extended prayers, interceding for various persons and needs in the Church and in the world. What might it look like to offer these intercessions as suggested intentions for our own and parishioners' private prayer throughout the year? While it might not be practical to use all of them every day, one or more can easily be incorporated into daily prayer. As the Spirit draws us to pray for these groups and needs in our Church and in our world, our compassion grows. Examples (based on each of the Solemn Intercessions):

- For the Church, for unity and steadfast faith, for people abused by Church leaders, for those who do not feel welcome.
- For the pope, for his safety and faith, for a pastoral response to real issues for people today.
- For all the faithful, for grace and faithful service, for wisdom to know God's plan and follow it.
- For catechumens, for understanding and new birth, for strength to follow the way of Christ.
- For all Christians, for unity, for an end to strife among denominations.
- For the Jewish people, for faithfulness, for an end to falsehoods about them, and an end to their persecution.
- For people who do not believe in Christ, for enlightenment, for our acceptance of non-Christian religions in our world.
- For people who do not believe in God, for a desire to follow what is right, for kindness and understanding.
- For those in public office, for careful governing, for making the common good a priority.
- For those in tribulation—this group encompasses many: people who are poor, the sick and dying, prisoners, travelers, orphans, refugees, people suffering loss.

Adoration of the Cross

During the Adoration of the Cross, the presider proclaims, "Behold the wood of the cross, / on which hung the salvation of the world," and the faithful respond, "Come, let us adore." Again, help parishioners remember that the passion and death of



Catechesis forms the faithful to understand their responsibility to share the light of Christ.

Jesus are not being reenacted. This is not a time of pretending that the end of the story is unknown; even on Good Friday, the cross is viewed through the lens of the resurrection. Thoughtful preaching and catechesis on or in preparation for this day could assist the assembly in reflecting on Jesus' instruction to "take up your cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Parishioners and pastoral ministers alike may be guided to ask themselves: "What do I need to change or give up to follow Christ? What are the hardships or losses that I have experienced in striving to do so?" While most of us will not be asked to die for our faith as some early Christians did, would we stand up for our beliefs and values under ridicule or persecution? What is the cost of taking up our cross and living as disciples of Jesus?

EASTER VIGIL

Service of Light

At the Easter Vigil, the mother of all vigils, symbols and rituals are brought out in their full expression to celebrate all that the resurrection of Jesus means for us today. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, the historical death and resurrection of Jesus cannot remain only in the past but is present to us at each moment, drawing all of us to life (see CCC, 1085). The Exsultet repeatedly proclaims, "This is the night," not "That was the night." This is the night that the light of Christ dispels the darkness of sin and death. The ritual during the first part of the Easter Vigil moves the faithful who first observe the one light of the paschal candle piercing the darkness and then see that light spread throughout the church. How do we remind the assembly that if this touching moment does not stir us into action, its true meaning is lost? Accepting the light of Christ into our hearts, we promise to share that light.

Liturgy of the Word

The living Word of God is encountered in the Easter Vigil's extended Liturgy of the Word. Multiple readings, psalms, and prayers proclaim God's plan of salvation and then Christ's resurrection. The Liturgy of the Word can be overwhelming if time is not set aside beforehand for prayer (and study). To prepare for these readings, small groups could reflect on and study the Vigil readings during the weeks of Lent. This study should include discussion of what these readings mean for our lives today. Another possibility would be to encourage parishioners to use these readings in their personal prayer in the weeks leading up to the Easter Vigil.

Baptismal Liturgy

The baptism of the elect reminds the faithful of their baptismal commitment. We are renewed by seeing the excitement and enthusiasm of these new Christians, and we repeat our baptismal promises, saying again that we are followers of Christ. Consider leading a reflection on baptismal commitment as part of a parish mission during Lent or as part of adult formation sessions during the Easter season. In preparing for their renewal of baptismal promises at the Easter Vigil or as part of a mystagogical reflection post-Easter, invite the community to reflect on these or other suitable questions: What does our commitment to discipleship mean? How do we live it out day by day in our homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, parishes, and cities?

Liturgy of the Eucharist

Catechesis on the Liturgy of the Eucharist can be done during any part of the year. Repetition facilitates learning, and people need to be provided with ongoing opportunities to reflect on the significance of receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. Include the following elements in your ongoing catechesis on the Eucharist:

- *God takes the ordinary and transforms it into something extraordinary.* Humble gifts of bread and wine that come from seeds that have been planted are brought to the altar. God has blessed these gifts with sun and water, and they have grown and produced wheat and grapes that are made into bread and wine. As these gifts are returned to the Lord, he blesses them and changes them into something new, the Body and Blood of the Christ. When we offer ourselves to the Lord, he transforms us too.
- *We join in Christ's prayer of thanksgiving to the Father.* We pray the great prayer of thanksgiving, the Eucharistic Prayer, in which we give God praise for salvation in Christ. We call upon the Holy Spirit. We hear the words and actions from the Last Supper, joining ourselves to the sacrifice of Christ and offering our commitment to be united with Christ in service to others.
- *We become what we receive.* The faithful are invited to come forward and receive the Body and Blood of Christ, a Body broken for us and Blood poured out for us. By eating Christ's Body and drinking his Blood, the faithful become one with him. The action of receiving Communion is not merely personal time

with Christ; we are united to Christ to become the hands, feet, and voice of Jesus in the world today. Just as food and drink nourish the body, so does the Eucharist nourish the soul so that Christ can be proclaimed through word and actions.

- *We are one Body.* The Eucharist also teaches us about our equality as members of the Body of Christ. Everyone receives the whole Christ, whether they are the biggest donor to the parish, a politician, a rock star, a sports hero, or the humblest of persons. All share one bread and one cup and are drawn into communion with the one Lord and with one another.

CONCLUSION

Having explored many ways that the assembly can be shaped by the celebration of these sacred days, take a moment to consider how to enable your participation in the liturgies of Holy Week. It can be challenging to lead music or oversee the liturgies of Holy Week and still be able to enter prayerfully into them on a personal level. To facilitate your full, active, and conscious participation in the liturgies of Holy Week, do your best to be well organized and to recruit adequate volunteers to relieve some of the pressures of responsibility. Be sure to take time to prepare yourself before the liturgies and to reflect on them afterwards.

There is much to learn about the Christian life from the liturgies of Holy Week. The words, rituals, and symbols contemplated during this central time in the liturgical year call us to holiness. This call is foundational in our relationship with God. Twice in Leviticus, the Lord tells Moses to convey to the chosen people, "Be holy, because I am holy" (see 11:44; 19:2). In the New Testament, Peter quotes Leviticus, telling members of the Christian communities, "as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, for it is written, 'Be holy because I [am] holy.'" (1 Peter 1:15–16) The high standard to which Christians are called may seem overwhelming. And yet, holiness does not mean perfection. At its heart, holiness means to be set apart for God, to put God first. Day after day, the work of the Christian is to grow more and more Christlike. This does not happen overnight, but as time goes by, in imitating the Lord's selfless service of others, growth is experienced. Our aim for holiness is truly our ongoing work. ♦

VICKI KLIMA served as director of the Worship Center for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis for almost twenty years in addition to working in education, liturgy, leadership, and administration for Catholic parishes and schools. She is author of *Participation of the Heart, Deeper Engagement in the Mass* from GIA Publications.