

THE EASTER TRIDUUM

The Easter triduum, marking the days of Jesus' passion and resurrection, is the most important time of the church year. It begins with the evening Mass of Holy Thursday, reaches its high point in the Easter Vigil, and closes on Easter Sunday evening. Prepared by the days of Lent, Christians celebrate on these holiest of days the saving work God has accomplished in Christ.

From the events remembered these days, so sorrowful and so joyful, the church learns the deepest lessons. In rites and words the mysteries of Jesus' final hours are with us again, his passion, his cruel suffering, his rising from the dead. And we discover the answer to age old questions: Does God love us? Is God merciful? Does God care for us? We have only to look and learn from Jesus Christ.

These are days for fixing our eyes on the holy mystery of his cross and filling our ears with the words of his gospel. Nowhere else does God's love appear so vividly. In the love Christ showed for a sinful world we find the beginning of our church, the source of our sacraments, the key to understanding the human story, and our hope for eternal life.

Holy Thursday—The Easter triduum begins with Mass on Holy Thursday evening, when Jesus sacramentally anticipated the gift he would make of himself on the cross. His command to serve others is dramatically recalled this night in the ceremony of the washing of the feet, which he performed in the supper room for his disciples. Like the Paschal lamb, killed and eaten by the people, according to the Old Testament account read from Exodus this evening, he is a sign of God's salvation.

Good Friday—The Good Friday rites center around the reading of the Passion of Jesus. With simple dignity that story is retold, followed by prayers for the entire world, for this powerful mystery brings blessings to the world. According to ancient tradition, an image or relic of the cross is venerated this day, and the sacrament of Christ's love for his church is received. It is a day of fasting and quiet mourning.

The Easter Vigil—The Easter Vigil is the high point of the Easter triduum celebrating the passion and resurrection of Jesus. With a rich display of symbols, rites and readings, the church in worship expresses her faith in the mystery that brings her into being.

LIGHT CONQUERS DARKNESS—The vigil opens with a service of light. Like the Jewish Passover, our Easter celebration coincides with the beginning of spring, when the sun offers new warmth and earth is ready to flower again. The lighting of the fire and the Easter candle go back to rites that long preceded Christianity. The candle, carried with loving reverence and lyrically praised in word and song, is a sign of Christ, "the light of the world," and celebrates the victory of light over darkness that humanity has ever longed for.

GOD'S LOVE ENDURES FOREVER—A series of readings recalls the great interventions of God in history, from creation to the redemption of Israel from Egypt, and ends with the story of Jesus' resurrection. The great "alleluia" proclaims with quiet joy the triumph of God's Son. Those preparing for Baptism then receive the sacraments of initiation. The blessed water sprinkled over others signifies the blessing of new life.