

Presiding Through Holy Week

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Presiding through holy week services is one of the great joys of priesthood. Each liturgy presents its challenges, yet each draws us deeper into the paschal mystery. The priest who plans the rituals and his homilies throughout these days discovers the spiritual benefits they offer not only to the faithful, but also to himself.

For me, holy week comes more alive if I have persevered through a Lent of self-restraint. By denying myself some of the food, drink and activities that too often clutter my day, I clear away debris from my spiritual path and open my eyes to the brightly dawning light of the living Christ.

This article surveys some of the vexing issues that presiders face in preparing for holy week. But no priest should resolve them without first having entered the mystery of death and resurrection through maintaining a good Lent.

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

The first decision concerning Palm Sunday is selecting from the three options for its opening: the Commemoration of the Lord's Entrance into Jerusalem.

The most emblematic of these is the first form, the Procession. The assembly gathers outside the church, witnesses the blessing of palm branches, hears the gospel of Palm Sunday, and then joins the procession into the church. People may receive branches as soon as they arrive. Formerly, the presider blessed the branches before passing them out, but now he blesses the branches that the faithful hold. I usually invite people to raise them aloft at this time.

A group usually does not sing together well when walking in procession, but it really doesn't matter. However it goes, it goes.

The second option is called the Solemn Entrance, which seems like a misnomer. Its entire ceremony takes place inside the church. It requires less music at the beginning because the procession is omitted. To me, the first option is more solemn than the second, but the second is the one called "solemn."

The missal envisions that you use the first option only at the principal mass. But in many parishes, nearly every mass is the principal mass. We can expect strong attendance at all of them, and we have ministers on duty. Often one mass is not more principal than another. I confess that I have used the Procession at more than one mass on the weekend for this reason. But the missal thinks that you put heart and soul into only one mass each weekend, and that's the one you reward with the Procession. The Procession is not obligatory. You could use the Solemn Entrance for all the masses, especially if the Procession is impractical.

The third option is rarely used: the Simple Entrance. It commemorates the Lord's entry in the simplest way possible: with the entrance antiphon alone. There is no distribution and blessing of branches, no proclamation of the gospel of Palm Sunday, and no procession from outside. In this option, the words of the entrance antiphon are extremely important and could be recited by all. Alternatively, they may be replaced with a Palm Sunday hymn such as "All Glory, Laud and Honor." But that is the only reference to the palms. From the collect on, the rest of the mass concerns the Lord's Passion.

If I used the third option at a typical Sunday mass, I'd probably make a lot of enemies. People love the Palm Sunday mass and don't seem to mind its length. But there may be circumstances when the third form is appropriate: when presiding at a nursing home, or when a burdensome number of weekend masses offers little time for delay. Just be sure you provide palms blessed at an earlier mass. I used the Simple Entrance once for a locally televised mass that I had to complete within 27 minutes of airtime. Palm Sunday in 27 minutes. But that's a story for another day.

Holy Thursday

Distinguishing features of the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper include the bells, the washing of feet, the eucharistic prayer, the procession, and adoration.

During the Gloria on this night and at the Vigil, bells may be rung. During the announcements on Palm Sunday, I invite people to bring bells from home on these two nights. Many do. They ring out their joy throughout the entire Gloria.

The washing of feet is optional, but most priests include it. One reason to omit it is a presider too feeble to perform this most physical of rubrics in the repertoire of the Catholic liturgy. Even then, people could sit on risers that elevate even their feet in order to preserve the presider's back.

I thank God I can still get down on my hands and knees, a gesture I find appropriately humbling. Although the rubrics allow me to receive assistance from other ministers, I minimize it. I don't want it to look as though they are ministering to me more than I am ministering to the faithful.

Many parishes have taken Jesus at his word of invitation and ask those who have had their feet washed to wash the feet of others. I have never embraced this idea, and may have lost some friends over it! Some argue that without mutual foot-washing, the gesture is too clerical. But foot-washing takes the priest off his pedestal. He is showing his humility, not his authority.

Furthermore, I don't think that Jesus meant this literally. When he said, "You should also wash one another's feet," I don't think he intended to have the disciples delay their supper until they had filled ewers with water, fetched buckets, located clean towels, and mutually imitated his action. He used a metaphor. If after you wash someone's feet, they then wash someone else's, have they really done what Jesus asked? I think he wanted something more: a way of life that serves others at home, at work and on the streets.

For the eucharistic prayer at this mass I always use the first, the Roman Canon. You don't have to, but I like its traditional inserts for Holy Thursday. I know priests who never use the Roman Canon, and I know priests who only use the Roman Canon. I try to let people hear the full variety of eucharistic prayers throughout the year. My favorites may not be everyone else's favorites, and it's their prayer too - not just mine. But the historical connection of this prayer with its inserts at this particular liturgy are compelling.

When the revised translation debuted a few years ago, many people disliked Jesus' words "for you and for many" because it seemed to imply that Jesus did not die for all. Scholars think that the words inserted on Holy Thursday intended to correct any false interpretation of what Jesus meant: "On the day before he was to suffer for our salvation and the salvation of all..." According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus used the word "many," but according to the Roman Canon (and many other biblical citations), Jesus suffered for the salvation of all.

The Transfer of the Most Blessed Sacrament immediately follows the Prayer after Communion. There is no concluding rite with its greeting, blessing and dismissal. The final spoken words are the prayer. An announcement could be made about the logistics of the procession, as well as the details for Good Friday. But this information could be communicated to the faithful before the mass begins or in a printed booklet.

The priest holds ciboria - not a monstrance. Wearing the humeral veil, he carries the Blessed Sacrament to its place of reposition. It is kept in the vessels that will be used for communion the next day.

The ideal destination for this procession is a tabernacle located apart from the main church, but some parishes do not have that option. The traditional eucharistic hymns *Pange, lingua* and *Tantum ergo Sacramentum* are not obligatory, but people may obtain a plenary indulgence under the usual conditions by singing the *Tantum ergo* on this night, so it is courteous to include it. Note that the tabernacle door is closed immediately. There is no exposition of the Blessed Sacrament on Holy Thursday night.

During the time of adoration, readers may proclaim biblical passages, such as the farewell discourse from John's gospel (chapters 14-17). Volunteers could sign up to read a portion of it every 30 minutes or so. Hymns could be sung. Prayers may be said. Silence may be kept.

Adoration concludes before midnight. You or another minister may lead night prayer or some other prayer, and thank people for watching an hour with Christ.

Friday of the Passion of the Lord

The question I get the most about Good Friday is "Should we use a cross or a crucifix for veneration?" I think a cross is better.

Let's start with the word "veneration." The revised translation has corrected the word. It is "adoration." That is one powerful word, yet the full title of

this action is “The Adoration of the Holy Cross” - not “The Veneration of the Crucifix.”

Throughout this part of the liturgy, the rubrics unflinchingly refer to the object as a “cross.” They never uses the word “crucifix.” At the end of this liturgy, before the ministers depart, they do not bow to the altar, nor do not genuflect to the tabernacle. Instead, they genuflect to the cross. This is a powerful gesture. The Good Friday liturgy imbues the cross with a sacred presence, as if your cross is the very cross on which Jesus died. It is the instrument of the entire paschal mystery. It is stained with the blood of Christ. The rubrics treat the cross as they treat exposition of the Blessed Sacrament - but only on Good Friday. The confluence of this day with the instrument of the suffering makes the cross the holiest object in the building.

A crucifix, by contrast, is a sacramental worthy of veneration. It shows an image of Jesus dying. But on Good Friday, we are not venerating an image of Jesus, we are adoring the cross on which he died.

Furthermore, during the liturgy we sing, “Behold the wood of the Cross” - not “Behold the image of the dying Jesus.” Of that wood we sing, “Come, let us adore.”

Many people prefer the crucifix. The pope uses a crucifix at St. Peter’s in Vatican City. But if you look at the missal’s words and rubrics, you will see something else. The empty cross speaks as loudly as the empty tomb.

The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night

The longest, most beautiful, and most demanding liturgy of the year, the Easter Vigil is the crown of celebrations. Many priests shorten it, especially by eliminating Old Testament readings, but the length of the vigil is one of its symbols. I use all the readings. It makes the vigil a vigil.

This liturgy - like Holy Thursday - begins with an empty tabernacle. No one receives previously consecrated bread on Holy Thursday, the night we commemorate the institution of the eucharist. No one receives previously consecrated bread on Easter, the night that we first encounter the risen Christ, present preeminently in the eucharist.

The homily tonight deserves all the work that the preacher can give. Here is a tip I apply to the preaching throughout holy week, and even on days like Christmas. When I preach on these occasions, I try to keep the central point close to the bone. The main message I want to preach at the Easter Vigil is “Christ is risen.” That’s it. I develop the theme in different ways each year, but at the end of it all, I want people to hear the original good news. That will unify the entire celebration.

With regard to the initiation rites, here is some advice that you may not like: Reserve the Vigil for the baptism of the elect by receiving previously baptized candidates into the full communion of the Catholic Church at other times of the calendar year.

The combined rite of adult baptism and reception into full communion has been popular. But it was not part of the original vision either of the revised Easter Vigil or of the entire Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Rather, the Rite of Reception was intended to be a simple celebration available on any day of the year, preferably at a typical Sunday mass. Baptisms pertain to Easter. Receptions do not. I have found that the third part of the Easter Vigil flows better when all those joining the church that night have never been baptized. Their baptism is one of the signs of the resurrection. The baptized already participate in the risen life of Christ.

When I receive previously baptized candidates into the full communion of the Catholic Church at Sunday masses throughout the year, I honor their personal spiritual journey. The entire community rejoices to receive new members many times a year. And the practice lets Easter be Easter.

Easter Sunday

One of the dilemmas for Easter Sunday is when to sprinkle. Many priests accept the advice of the missal and replace the penitential act with the blessing and sprinkling of water on Sundays throughout Easter Time. However, in the United States, the renewal of baptismal promises may replace the Creed on Easter Sunday. In that case, the renewal includes a sprinkling. So what do you do?

There are several possible solutions.

* Do not replace the penitential act with sprinkling on Easter Sunday, but use one of the normal forms; then, sprinkle after the renewal of promises.

* Sprinkle both times - but that will seem redundant.

* Sprinkle at the beginning, and then have everyone proclaim the Creed instead of renew their baptismal promises.

I've done the third solution, and it is not bad. Even though many priests are quite familiar with the renewal of promises during the Easter Sunday masses, few realize that this was a permission granted to the United States over 40 years ago. The original Vatican II vision of Easter Sunday had everyone recite the Creed. If you wanted to renew your baptismal promises, which you should, then get yourself to the Vigil. That's when it takes place, right after the *making* of baptismal promises by the elect.

Regarding preaching, this is tough duty, but I usually prepare a separate homily for Easter Sunday. Many of the people who came to the Vigil come back on Easter. And they should. So I try to inspire them with another message. It's extra work, but I have always found it worthwhile.

Holy week is a blessed time of year. It demands attention to detail. The unique nature of these liturgies inspires some priests to introduce their own unique ideas. But I've come to realize that the group that prepared these rituals after Vatican II knew what they were doing. When I follow their lead, the paschal mystery comes alive not only for the people, but also for me, their priest.

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