

Falling In Love With The Triduum

Very Rev. Scott E. McCue, V.F.

I have always loved the Triduum. I got my start in the “Triduum Business” in my home parish of St. Mary of the Assumption in Elizabeth, NJ. My friend, Fr. Joe Mancini and I were the “MC’s” or “Masters of Ceremonies” for these days. I can remember that we were always immersed in these three sacred days. Our job was to make sure everything was where it was supposed to be and that all of the altar servers knew what they were supposed to do. We had a check list hanging in the sacristy of everything we needed for each of the days. Joe and I would spend much of our Holy Week at church (which is where we spent most of our time anyway!) There was just something about the allure of Holy Week. From the washing of the feet, to the veneration of the cross, to the Easter Fire, these days were exciting for us as teenagers and later in college. One of the priests I grew up with, Msgr. Bob Slipe of the Newark Archdiocese, who has now gone home to God. Msgr. Slipe would even give us a rating of 1-10 based on how he thought we performed as MC’s over these three days. And so, I guess it was there, growing up in that parish that I fell in love with the Sacred Paschal Triduum. Now maybe that sounds weird. But for me and I suspect of Joe it does not. If we really understand what the Triduum is all about then how can we not fall in love with it?

Here I will offer some liturgical catechesis and reasons as to why I love the Triduum so much in the hope that you too will come to love these three sacred days we celebrate each year.

Rev. Michael Kwatera, OSB, a monk, teacher and liturgist wrote this: *“The wonder of the Easter Triduum begins with the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday and ends with Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday. The services in-between forms a single liturgy: our solemn celebration of the paschal mystery, God’s plan for our salvation in the dying and rising of Jesus.”*

The Triduum is about The Paschal Mystery: Christ’s dying and rising. It is about the core mystery of our faith that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. The Triduum is the most important thing we do as Catholics with the Easter Vigil Mass as its ultimate summit. I love the Triduum because there is so much to savor, so much to take in, so much to absorb.

HOLY THURSDAY

“Holy Thursday is really that last day of Lent, a last opportunity to complete the Lenten preparation for the Great Feast beginning that evening.” (Fr. Kwatera)

The Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper has three focal points: the Presentation of the Oils, the Washing of the Feet and the Commemoration of the Institution of the Last Supper. At the beginning of the liturgy the Oil of the Sick, Oil of Catechumens and the Sacred Chrism are presented to the community. These oils will have been blessed and consecrated by the Bishop at the Chrism Mass earlier in the week. We are reminded that these oils will be used to bring healing to the sick, to anoint the catechumen and to anoint the newly baptized, those to be confirmed, the hands of the newly ordained and the walls of a new church and altar. The Washing of the Feet reminds us of the Lord’s humble act of service as he bent down and washed the dirty, grimy feet of his apostles. In this action Jesus taught us a lot about service. As he has done so also must we do.

As the first part of the Triduum liturgy draws to a close on Holy Thursday, the Eucharist is transferred to a place of reservation after a solemn procession throughout the church. There the Eucharist remains in reposition usually until midnight. Growing up, Joe and I would always hang around the church as we waited for the midnight hour to come and the solemn praying of Night Prayer. There was something about waiting each year for midnight to come and the dawn of Good Friday. I loved too the great procession around the church complete with incense, candles, tons of servers and clergy and of course, the people. This was all part of my love affair with Triduum.

GOOD FRIDAY

“While the liturgy on Good Friday focuses our attention more specifically on the Lord’s suffering and death, it cannot let us forget his resurrection: Good Friday and Easter are two complementary aspects of the one mystery of salvation.” (Fr. Kwatera)

On Good Friday mass is not celebrated. Rather a Liturgy of the Word with the distribution of communion takes place. The liturgy opens in silence with the presider and perhaps the deacon prostrating near the sanctuary as the people kneel. We do this in humble reverence for our God as we prepare to reflect on his suffering and death leading to his resurrection. On this day we hear the account of the passion from St. John. Later we move to the homily and intercessions and then the adoration of the Cross takes place. The priest or deacon carries the plain cross up the aisle and sings three times: “Behold the wood of the Cross, on which hung the salvation of the world.” Three times we respond, “Come let us adore.” This action is a parallel to what will happen at the Easter Vigil when three times the new Paschal Candle will be lifted high as the acclamation “The Light of Christ” is sung as we respond “Thanks be to God.” We go forth then and adore the cross, mindful of the Lord’s sacrifice. We then move the distribution of communion and a prayer. The Celebration of the Lord’s passion ends as it began-in silence.

HOLY SATURDAY

“... Pope Pius XII restored the Easter Vigil to its supreme dignity in the liturgical year, yet many Roman Catholics have never experienced the Vigil’s sense of expectancy and fulfillment.” (Fr. Kwatera)

Holy Saturday, what can I say? It is the greatest of all nights! For the Roman Catholic, there is no more important night than this one. Everything we do as a Catholic people leads up to this night and all of our power flows from it. I would dare say that if you have not been to an Easter Vigil, you are missing an essential piece of Catholic life! There is nothing more beautiful than a well celebrated Easter Vigil. The liturgy begins in the darkness of night with the blessing of the Easter Fire and the lighting of the Paschal Candle. That candle is carried into the darkened church as those acclamations are sung, I wrote about earlier. Then one by one, the people’s candles are ignited as the church burns bright with the light of Christ. Then the Exultet or the Easter Proclamation is sung. This is the Church’s song which proclaims the wonder of this night that we gather to celebrate. We then hear the history of our salvation in Christ through readings

from the Old Testament, Psalms and New Testament. Following the liturgy of the Word we move to the Rite of Baptism. The Elect and their godparents move to the font lead by the great Paschal Candle as we invoke the intercession of the Saints. Then the Elect make a solemn profession of faith and are baptized. They become a new creation. They receive their white garments and baptismal candles. They are confirmed and receive the Eucharist for the first time.

I can't explain what it means to be able to preside at the Vigil. My job used to be to make sure everyone knew what to do. Now I am entrusted with the responsibility of doing some of those things. To be able to look into the eyes of the Elect, to ask them if they believe in God, the saints, the resurrection of the dead, the church, etc. and then to baptize them is a very moving experience. For years I learned the ins and outs of the vigil. What was needed, what came next, who did what. Now I get to live my dream of presiding at the liturgy. I love that we open around a fire dispelling the darkness of the night and that it is from that fire that the Paschal Candle is ignited for the first time. Growing up there would be a huge fire built by my Boy Scout Troop out in the garden area of the church. We would stand by the fire which would illuminate the faces of the Elect anticipating their baptism as we began our sacred ritual.

I have fond memories of the Triduum growing up. These rituals were instilled in my mind at an early age and my appreciation for them deepened as I got older. Now I preside over these rituals and my appreciation for them grows all the more. The Sacred Paschal Triduum has so much to teach us about Christ's death and resurrection and also invites us to enter into and become part of that mystery. In doing so we can learn much about our own dying and rising. I can honestly say that I love the Triduum, everything about it. The Triduum is ultimately the story of our faith. It is who we are as a Christian people. Long ago I fell in love with these three sacred days and that love story continues to this day. I invite you to take the plunge and fall in love with the Triduum so that you can ultimately be transformed by it!