



WHAT IS THE

Triduum

ALL ABOUT?

JERRY WELTE

*Christ humbled himself and
became obedient
to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is
above every name.*

—Philippians 2:8-9

Cover painting of *The Way to Calvary* by Marco Palmezzano

IT'S ABOUT THREE DAYS OF REDEMPTIVE PARADOX

*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain; but if it dies,
it bears much fruit. —John 12:24*



The word *Triduum* literally means “three days.” Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday/Easter are the holy and pivotal days of our redemption. To celebrate the Triduum is to embrace the truth that our salvation is born of paradox. The Paschal celebration of the table, the cross, and the tomb is the glorious fulfillment of Christ’s oxymoronic teachings: “Those who humble themselves will be exalted” and “those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

We live in a world that largely rejects paradox. We cling to life, status and belongings. We eschew anonymity, flee suffering and deny death. Popular entertainment is permeated with the illusion that prestige is gained by a process of triumphant elimination while advertising

promises pain-free existence and ageless vitality. The three days of the Triduum are the sacred yearly rites by which the Church soundly rejects the popular cultural mythology of rank superiority, carefree living, and earthly immortality. The triduum defies prevailing logic by insisting that true heroes are Christ-like champions of disparate communion, wounded healing, and defeated victory.

A Brief History of the Triduum Celebration

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the significance of these three holiest days of the Church year: “Beginning with the Easter Triduum as its source of light, the new age of the Resurrection fills the whole liturgical year with its brilliance.” Detailed descriptions



of early forms of these rites are found in *The Pilgrimage of Etheria*, (or Egeria), the account of a fourth century woman’s pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The earliest Holy Week practices date back to ancient celebrations in Jerusalem around the year 388. On Holy Thursday Christians partook of

the Eucharist, gathered at the Mount of Olives and kept a night vigil that continued until they returned to the city near dawn. The veneration of the True Cross—traditionally said to be found by St. Helena around the

year 326—was held on Friday before noon, followed by a three hour Passion service. Another vigil followed for those young or strong enough to observe it. The Paschal Vigil, including the baptism of children and catechumens, was then celebrated on Saturday evening.

These early liturgical practices in Jerusalem eventually expanded to the surrounding Christian world. By the fifth century, the prominent churches of Rome and Constantinople adopted these rites, which then gradually spread to other local churches in both the East and West. For numerous reasons, the vital symbolic connection these rites shared with the sacred events that inspired them became weakened over time. The time of the Easter Vigil, for instance, was gradually

pushed back to Saturday morning where it no longer had the look or feel of a night watch. In 1956, Pope Pius XII began the restoration of the Triduum liturgies, a renewal that was furthered by the Second Vatican Council. Pius specified the harm of celebrating the Vigil in daylight: *This disharmony was most glaring on (Holy) Saturday, which became liturgically the day of Resurrection instead of that day's eve, and a day of darkest mourning became a day of light and gladness.*



Holy Thursday: Communion out of Service

Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.

—John 13:18



The central paradox of Holy Thursday is one of ascendancy through humble service: “Whoever wants to be first must be the last of all and servant of all.” The Lord embodies this paradox in two ways. First, he sits down at table with the disciples. From the sinners of Christ’s time to the serfs of medieval Europe to the slaves of the American south to the servants of *Downton Abbey*, history reveals that masters do not eat

with servants. By sitting at table, the Lord confirms in action the startling good news that his words declare: “I do not call you servants any longer, but I have called you friends.” As Jesus “reclines” at table, he displays a willingness to lower himself so that we might be equals. Altars in many modern churches symbolically celebrate this paradox by gathering for Eucharist at a round table with no head or foot. These egalitarian feasts are foretastes of the heavenly banquet where kings and commoners, celebrities and outcasts, as well as Hatfields and McCoys will feast as one family in the communion of saints.



As scandalizing as it was for Christ to eat with sinners, he pushes the paradox even further by bowing on hands and knees to wash the disciples’ feet. Peter protests this unnerving defiance of status, but the Lord insists it is the only way to achieve true communion. Once again, Jesus is simply “walking the walk” of his spoken word: “When you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’” There are a variety of local customs in the modern practice of this ritual, though the pastor typically

assumes the role of Christ. Yet, this is not a mere historical reenactment or a solely clerical endeavor, but a living ritual of response to Christ's universal call to mutual service: "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Through the centuries, the Holy Thursday liturgy has come to celebrate three primary graces: the institution of the Eucharist, the Lord's call to service and the gift of the priesthood. Holy Thursday has often been called *Maundy Thursday*. Some scholars claim that this term derives from the English word "*maundy*" which in turn is taken from "*mandatum*," the Latin word for commandment. This is the great commandment given to us during the discourse of the Last Supper: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." Others believe that the word comes from a 12th century custom by which the King and Queen would give alms or "Maundy money" and wash the feet of the poor as a gesture of humility.

Holy Thursday also marks the end of Lent with its penitential tone. White vestments are worn by the priest and the *Gloria* is sung for the first time since the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. Additionally, bells may be rung during the singing of this hymn. After the liturgy, a tone of reflective silence returns until

the singing of the *Gloria* at the Easter Vigil. This is why the solemn days of the Triduum have historically been called *The Still Days*. At the close of the liturgy, the Eucharist is transferred in reverent procession to a fitting altar of repose. The altar is then stripped to create a mournful, barren environment for Good Friday.

Good Friday: Healing out of Woundedness

*Upon him was the punishment that makes us whole.
By his wounds we were healed. —Isaiah 53:5*



The paradox of Good Friday is the truth that Christ's wounds produce healing and the Messiah's suffering yields salvific relief. The Lord repeatedly spoke of this happy contradiction, but it did not sound like good news to a resistant Peter: "God forbid it, Lord! This

must never happen to you.” The centrality of this paradox to Christ’s mission is reflected in the Lord’s famously harsh rebuke, “Get behind me Satan!” Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen employed this paradox as the focus of his book, *The Wounded Healer*. So it is, for example, that alcoholics utilize their painful journeys to heal others in twelve step programs. Good Friday proclaims that all disciples are called to take up their cross and follow Christ as suffering servants and wounded healers.

Medieval monks sometimes engaged in unhealthy pursuits of pain with hair shirts and self-flagellation. Modern society makes the opposite error with hedonistic pleasures and neurotic extremes to forestall physical decline. Nonetheless, there are parallels to this paradox in the middle ground of human experience. Athletes in training have been known to motivate Spartan regimens with the truism, “No pain; no gain.” Counselors frequently urge disturbed clients to revisit painful memories to find healing closure. Peace and justice activists endure scorn and imprisonment to heal social ills, an application of Christ’s command to “turn the other cheek.”

Early Christians observed every Friday as a feast day of Christ’s cross, so the Friday of Holy Week was often called the *Great* or *Holy* or *Good Friday* to set it apart.

The precise origin of its name is uncertain, but it may be a derivative of “God’s Friday.” From earliest times, it has been common practice for Good Friday services to be held at three o’clock in the afternoon to mark the traditional time of Christ’s death. The environment and the ritual are both stripped down to their essence to reflect a somber mood and a sense of loss.

The Good Friday service is separated into four main parts: the liturgy of the word, the solemn intercessions, the veneration of the cross and the communion rite. The dramatic unveiling and veneration of the cross that inspired current liturgical practices were first introduced into the Latin Liturgy in the seventh or eighth century. Early documents refer to a rite called *Creeping to the Cross*, which involved approaching the cross on one’s knees and prostrating oneself the way priests and deacons prostrate themselves to begin modern Good Friday services. The faithful still venerate the cross today as a sign of reverence and a commitment to “take up your cross.”



Our modern day Good Friday communion service has its origin in what was initially called *The Mass of*

the Pre-sanctified in the documents of the *Quinisext Council* in the year 692. This term derives from the practice of consecrating the Eucharist on Holy Thursday for subsequent adoration and then reception of communion the following day. From the earliest times it was the custom not to celebrate Mass on Good Friday as a symbol of Christ's absence in death.

Holy Saturday/Easter: Life out of Death

When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith. —Colossians 2:12



The central teaching of Christ is that we must die to ourselves in order to live, but perhaps the mantra

of modern society is to seek a life without death. So it is that *Google* recently announced an endeavor to extend the human lifespan, eliciting a *Time* magazine cover story, “Can Google Solve Death?” Christians proclaim a radically different solution by keeping Easter vigil outside a tomb. The paradoxical joy that we find in this sorrowful rite is beautifully expressed in the Vigil proclamation, the *Exultet*: “O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a redeemer.” At Easter, disciples of Christ celebrate the contradiction of a “happy death.”



Holy Saturday is a gathering at a tomb, but not for the sake of basking in darkness or relishing death. Modern news media swarm to the tombs of life to reap gapers block ratings, but Christians follow a Lord who “came that they might have life and have it abundantly.” The Easter Vigil does not celebrate death as an end, but as a path to fullness of life. We who are buried with Christ will die, but in doing so we will find a life that transcends mortal existence. Like the holy women on Easter morning, Christians revisit tombs out of an instinctive faith that physical death is not the end

of the story. With St. Paul we proclaim, “Where, O death, is your victory?”

The Easter Vigil Mass is comprised of four major parts: the service of light, the service of the Word, the service of baptism and the communion service. During the first six centuries of Church practice, the Easter Vigil was truly a night watch. In fact, Easter’s first “alleluia” was initially meant to coincide with Sunday’s dawn.



The lighting of the new fire is perhaps of Celtic or pagan origin, but is augmented and Christianized by the blessing of the paschal candle and the “lighting of the

lamps,” which in modern times are taper candles. When the vigil moved to daylight, however, this ritual lost much of its force, adding unintended irony to St. Cyril’s beautiful words: “The night shall be as clear as day.” The Paschal Candle dates back to early liturgical practice, including a reference in St. Augustine’s *City of God*. The exquisite hymn, the *Exultet*, sung to the light of the new Paschal candle, was probably composed between the fifth and seventh centuries.

In the early centuries, there were large numbers to

be baptized at the Easter Vigil, especially in major churches. On Holy Saturday in Constantinople in the year 407, three thousand catechumens were baptized in one church alone. The large numbers were the result of many converts, but also the fact that baptisms took place only on Holy Saturday and the vigil of Pentecost. After a period of decline in the *Catechumenate*, modern times have brought a restoration of Christian Initiation as a central part of Lent and the Easter Vigil liturgy. In the process, the importance of the baptismal renewal of all Christians was reestablished. Christians do not watch initiation as observers, but as veterans who are inspired by the neophytes to reenergize their own vowed commitment to the life-giving paradox of Christ.



Easter Sunday is the triumphant finale of the Triduum and the inseparable conclusion of the Holy Saturday Vigil. With sunrise services, fragrant flowers, and jubilant song, Christians celebrate the final paradox of the Paschal Mystery, that every ending is a beginning. The risen Christ immediately visits the disciples who are fearfully “buried” behind locked doors, a tomb more deadly than one fashioned of gravestone. True to

the pattern of nature and faith, the death of Christ is the birth of the Church, the body of Christ on earth. Moreover, Christians celebrate Easter, not as a day, but as a season. The forty days between Easter and Pentecost are referred to in the Catechumenate as a time of *Mystagogy*, a Greek word that suggests “going deeper into the mysteries.” The mysteries of Christ are intense realities of paradigm shift that require “unpacking” or debriefing over time. To celebrate Easter is to rise by going deeper into the paradox of faith, to embrace the process of reflective mystagogy that the Triduum initiates.

