

HOLY WEEK - GETTING INVOLVED

This Sunday named Passion Sunday rather than Palm Sunday as of old, begins the greatest liturgical celebration in the liturgical year of the Church. The liturgical year is very much like a fiscal year which can begin at any time to fit the basic work of a company or organization. The Catholic liturgical year begins four Sundays before Christmas with the beginning of Advent. Lent begins forty days prior to Easter. Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal (spring) equinox. All other celebrations fall between these two fixed time periods.

The word liturgy most often is understood as a fixed way of doing some function in a church. It is generally quite formal and has evolved over the centuries. Changes in liturgy are rare. The Second Vatican Council brought about a number of significant changes which have become somewhat controversial today, with some wanting to return to pre-Vatican times and others wanting to continue making changes. While this may be very distressing for many, one should never lose their faith in the Church and they should remember Christ's promise that he will be with us until the end of time. It is still the church Christ founded.

Holy Week has changed little over the centuries and has some of the most impressive liturgies in the Church. The most significant change in the Holy Week liturgy came about through Pope Pius XII in the 1950's. He restored the liturgy to what it had been a century before and eliminated all the variations which had crept up in its celebration. The basic intent of Holy Week has remained unchanged almost from the time of Christ. The basic intent was always to reenact in a formal and liturgical manner all that had happened in the final week before Christ gave his life on a cross to save a world. Holy week begins with the celebration of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem sitting on a donkey while all of his followers cheered and waved branches in his honor. To commemorate this scene, palms are blessed at the Mass so that all present can in a real way become involved in what had happened so long ago. It is easy to understand how this Sunday was called Palm Sunday. Today it is referred to as Passion Sunday because at this Mass the Passion narrative in the Gospels is read - the longest Gospel in the year. In order to cover as much Scripture as possible at the Mass, there are today three cycles of readings, A, B, and C based on the first three of the Gospels. The passion according to the Gospel of John is reserved for Good Friday each year. This year we are in cycle C and the Passion is taken from the Gospel of Luke.

In order to have everyone in the church participate as much as possible in the Liturgy of the Mass and the Readings, all present should be holding blessed palms during the reading of the Passion. In most parishes today, the Gospel Passion is read by three readers, the Priest Celebrant reading the words of Christ, a lay reader reading the narrative words and another lay reader taking the part of the occasional individuals who have some words to say, such as the woman in the courtyard, the High Priest and Pontius Pilate. And then there is the congregation who take the part of the rabble, the ordinary people shouting for the death of Christ. Note that everyone is standing rather than sitting during this rather long narrative or the acting out of the Gospel scene. By standing, it becomes obvious that everyone has a part to play, a part that helps them to really get involved in the whole story of the events which took place so long ago. It cannot help but make one think of how just maybe they were in a very real sense involved as they cry out, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" One cannot just

say they are playing a role; rather, it should make one realize that every time they commit a deliberate sin, they are in a very real way, screaming out with the rabble at the trial of Jesus.

This should not just be one's feelings only on Passion Sunday. Rather, one must be involved in all the special liturgies during this week as much as possible, the Mass of the Last Supper on Thursday evening, the Solemn Liturgy of the Passion on Friday Evening and then the overwhelming joy of the Resurrection in the Solemn Easter Vigil and Easter Mass on Saturday evening which must take place after sunset when it is dark. To simply be present and not get involved misses the whole point of the liturgical celebration of just what Easter is really all about - the triumph of Christ over death, the open outpouring of all his infinite love on every single human being he has and will create before the end of time.

There is the blessing of the Baptismal Water during this Vigil Celebration and in many places there will be baptisms of those who have been preparing for this over the past year, (the RCIA program which has been going on over the past year in preparation for this final event.) And then after the baptisms, or immediately if no baptisms, everyone in the congregation is sprinkled with the newly blessed baptismal water as a reminder of their own baptism and their renewal of their baptismal promises on this evening. Again, it is all a matter of getting involved in the celebration, in this ancient liturgy of the triumph of Christ and his outpouring of love on everyone. This is a time for everyone present to personally within their hearts once again profess their return of love to their Lord, their God, their Savior. It is a time for each one present to realize ever deeper just what God has done for them personally, not just as a part of a group. Christ being God and thus being infinite, had every single human being in his mind as he gave his life to save them all individually. And in fact, if you were the only one he created, and you had done what Adam and Eve did to go against their God, Christ would have suffered everything exactly same way just for you. There is much to think about in this and hopefully begin to realize one's own personal involvement in this greatest work of God's infinite love and one's unique place in the mind and love of their God.

All this takes some effort on one's part. All the evidence is there; one's faith is there; and deep down in each person's psyche, there is that hope that all this is really true! Yes, one's faith may be strong, but one must also face the fact of just how real and strong it is . As humans everyone is so often tried by doubts which usually are easily ignored, yet which do touch on the reality of just where does one stand in their faith. While it may all appear to be strong, there are always lingering doubts. Christ made it very clear when he said, "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it will be opened." Just how often have we asked, sought and knocked and seemingly nothing happened? To simply say that Christ said "no" and then go on is really not quite true. Christ meant what he said and he does answer. However, it is most often not in the way one expected or wanted. Think about this. Look back and see that everything did somehow work out. Then remember how you prayed. Just maybe, your prayer was answered and you just didn't see it. Perhaps the best prayer is "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" But for the moment, get involved in this Holy Week celebrations. Be open and let the Lord come to you in his way. You may see nothing! But you may also just see everything a bit clearer.

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