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Recruiting ample volunteers is essential to ensure graceful liturgies of the Triduum.

Choreographing the Liturgies of Holy Week and the Triduum

Mary Patricia Storms

The Triduum always requires careful attention, planning, and preparation. Just as a dance choreographer ensures that movement is graceful, appropriate to the message conveyed, and engages the senses of the audience, those who organize the liturgy of the Sacred Paschal Triduum work to prepare graceful and meaningful opportunities for worship.

PRIMARY PLAYERS

Begin by calling together the decision-makers for all that will occur at the Triduum, including the pastor, associate clergy, liturgist, director of music, and the catechumenate director. Purposely keep the group small; this gathering should include people who can delegate, recruit, and communicate with other staff and volunteers. Set the meeting well in advance of Holy Week, allowing sufficient time prior to the meeting to review the notes from the previous year, especially if a new pastor or staff member is involved.

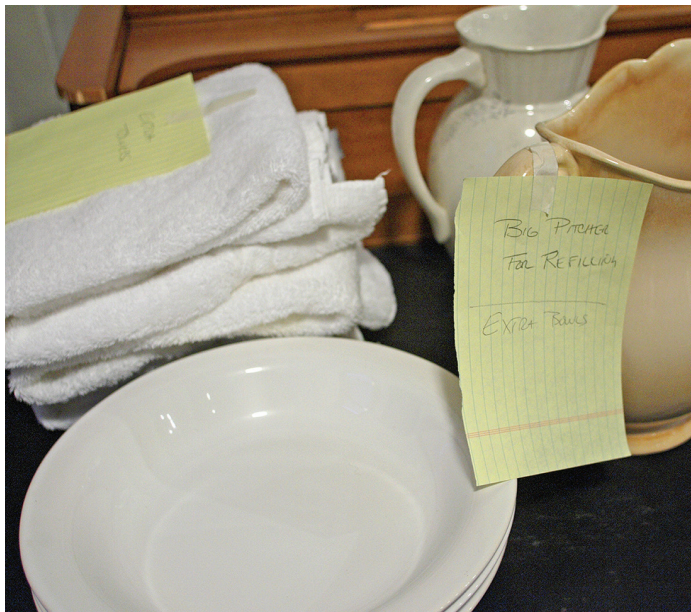
Vigilant attention to detail helps the week move gracefully. Members of the assembly may not recall the specifics of last year,

but they will notice if action stalls while someone goes in search of the thurifer, if words of Scripture are mispronounced, or if ministers miss their cues.

From Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, note what went well in the previous year and what needed more attention. It is helpful to work from the preceding year's orders of service along with photographs, task lists, and worship aids rather than memory alone. Before the meeting, talk with those who create your art and environment. Determine what new ideas they may have for the Triduum and bring them to the group. It may also be prudent to obtain (or create) an at-scale map of the parish church to plan for the services where extra seating will be set. This can help staff to anticipate any effect additional chairs may have to the liturgical action (such as the flow of processions) or raise awareness of additional equipment needed.

REVIEW THE RUBRICS

Using *The Roman Missal* as your guide, review the rubrics with the group. Interspersed with the prayers, the rubrics detail movement and materials. Careful reading ensures that you notice any needed changes. For example, some optional actions in the prior missal are now required, such as cutting a cross, an



Clear labeling of supplies helps sacristans keep celebrations running smoothly.

alpha and omega, and the year into the paschal candle, as well as the places where the deacon (or other suitable minister) sings the proclamation, “The Light of Christ.” Unity in prayer with the universal Church is ensured when all study and implement the rubrics faithfully.

Though not part of the Triduum, Palm Sunday begins Holy Week. Include the day in your preparation, especially since many of the materials (such as outdoor sound systems and red fabrics) and movements (including processions from the start of liturgy outdoors into the church) will be used again during the Triduum.

The Sacred Triduum begins with the evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday, continues with the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord on Good Friday, reaches its high point in the Easter Vigil, and closes with Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday. Both Holy Thursday and Good Friday conclude with the faithful and ministers departing in silence as they ponder the mysteries packed into these days. In advance, take care to advise those present of the need for silence as they depart.

As you review the rubrics, note any changes required to your current practices. Consider publishing short narratives in the bulletins during Lent or on your website or social media accounts to catechize the observant faithful, preparing them for any necessary adjustments. Including movements, practices, or prayers during the Triduum in your bulletin further assists parishioners in their participation.

Next, list everything you need for each service: ministers, vessels, music, colors, floral arrangements, a chapel of repose, and the sacred oils; if the *mandatum* is included, add pitchers, bowls, and towels. Think about any other aspects of the liturgies or adjacent celebrations that may take place during this time. For example, which cross will you use for veneration? Is a second cross needed for those unable to walk to the central cross? With what and how will it be veiled? Should you offer stations of the cross on Good Friday? If so, these should be separate from the Good Friday celebration.

Quoting from the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, 144, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops addresses forms of popular piety, such as the *Via Crucis*, under “Questions on the Sacred Paschal Triduum,” on its website. Answering the query about devotions on Good Friday, the statement advises, “Care should be taken, however, to point out to the faithful that a Passion Play is a commemorative representation, and they are very different from ‘liturgical actions’ which are anamnesis, or the mysterious presence of the redemptive event of the Passion.”¹

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Take time to create a map of movements necessary to the celebration of the Triduum. How should ministers approach the ambo or the sanctuary and when? Determine the path for processing the Blessed Sacrament from the church to the altar of repose. Instruct the assembly for their posture during the time priests and deacons are prostrate on Good Friday. Since the Vigil begins outdoors, the Book of the Gospels will not be carried in procession as usual. Plan who will make sure it is placed on the altar, assign ministers to carry whatever is required for the procession, and train ushers to seat people in a darkened church. Who will turn on the lights in the church? Do they know the appropriate time? Who knows where the hose is located should the Easter fire get out of control? Who will tend the fire until it is safely extinguished? Will there be a reception afterward to welcome the newly baptized members? Who is taking care of that? What time on Saturday will the preparation rites for the catechumens be celebrated? (Decorators need to be aware so that they don’t interrupt the rites.) The Vigil offers a plethora of volunteer opportunities. Invite as many parishioners as possible to assist, taking their gifts and abilities into consideration as you plan.

Despite its importance, many Catholics don’t participate fully in the Triduum, except when a family member is initiated. The sheer length of the service is daunting for many. Even so, begin encouraging participation in the Triduum soon after the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Brainstorm ways to personally invite people and to catechize during homilies, in the bulletin, and on the parish website that these are our holiest days. Alert the assembly that “the Sacred Paschal Triduum of the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord shines forth as the high point of the liturgical year.”²

At the urging of our pastor, participating in the Easter Vigil became our family custom when our youngest was three. As we gathered around the baptismal font to watch his best friends and their mother enter the pool, I put Max on my shoulders to give him a better view. A few minutes later, a friend hit me on the head. When I looked at her, puzzled, she explained that enthralled by the view before him, Max wasn’t paying attention to the lit candle in his hand and set my hair on fire. During her high school years, our thespian daughter woke up anyone dozing during the nine readings with her proclamation of Baruch. “Hear, O Israel” are not words to be whispered. Years later, Max brought a college friend from Philadelphia home for Easter. Pat, born and raised Catholic, had never attended an Easter Vigil. He was mesmerized by the experience, even asking if he could take his candle home.

None of these memories would have been formed if we only worshiped on Easter Sunday.

Yes, the Easter Vigil is long. So are the Super Bowl and World Series. When your team is in the running, you don't want to miss a second of the action. For the Triduum, Christians definitely have reason to celebrate the paschal mystery, to keep watch at the Vigil, to await the resurrection. Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection merit our attention. Urge parishioners to give the Triduum a try. Participation will imprint memories with parishioners just as it did with my children.

After finishing your review, decide who will be the point person for the various responsibilities. Supplies need to be ordered and organized. Once recruited, readers, servers, greeters, and other ministers need to be trained. Musicians need to practice. Decorations—indoors and out—need to be organized and staged. Banners and fabrics that will be used may need to be cleaned or pressed. Flowers and plants need to be ordered and organized. Scripts and worship aids need to be produced.

Among your tasks, select a date after Easter for the group to meet again and assess for next year. Leave nothing ambiguous and agree on a plan B for every mishap you can conceive. One year, the deacon at our parish fell on Palm Sunday and injured his knee, requiring him to use crutches. Without an associate or another deacon available, someone quickly recruited a suitable lay minister to help with lighting and processing the paschal candle. Another year, the fabric suspended above the processional aisle fell. We are humans trying to do God's work; we don't always get it right. Expecting glitches of this sort and responding with flexibility makes for tranquil celebrations.

THE BIG PICTURE

During Lent, the restrained decor, music, and movement reflect the penitential nature of the season. After such a period, it is perhaps tempting to cover every inch of the sanctuary, nave, and narthex with fabric, plants, and flowers. Recall that the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* states: "The ornamentation of a church should contribute toward its noble simplicity rather than to ostentation. Moreover, in the choice of elements, attention should be paid to authenticity and there should be the intention of fostering the instruction of the faithful and the dignity of the entire sacred place."³

Keep in mind that Easter generally draws larger crowds. Fewer banners, fewer plants, and fewer flowers can be arranged for maximum impact while leaving space for crowds to assemble, see, and participate in the Mass. Use your budget wisely: the Easter season lasts fifty days. Order your blooming plants in stages, ensuring fresh flowers throughout the season. Plan for an



Consider inviting local scouting troops to assist with lighting the paschal fire.

eye-catching display outdoors to clearly communicate the importance of Easter to your neighborhood and those who pass by.

Working with your art and environment team, design the environment for each day of the Triduum carefully. Using a to-scale map, determine where decorations will be added, subtracted, or rearranged. The transition from the white and restrained decor for Holy Thursday to the stark red of Good Friday and then to the glorious white of the Vigil requires many helpers. A full crew also ensures that the work is completed easily. Remind your decorators that these liturgies naturally engage our senses through symbols: the incense-and-candle glow of Holy Thursday; the stark touch of the wood of the cross that is venerated; the blazing fire, flowing water, white robes, sacred chrism, candlelight, and Alleluia of the Vigil lavishly communicate the sacred mystery. Art and environment plans should complement rather than overpower these symbols.

RECRUIT

Intentionally recruit parishioners to assist with a myriad of roles. Carefully choose your volunteers as representatives of the community. Invite the old and young; families and widows; men and women, teens and college students, confirmandi and sponsors, new members and founding families. Extend invitations to people of every demographic your parish serves. Lectors, readers, servers, and extraordinary ministers of holy Communion are just the beginning of the list. Perhaps your parish has volunteers dress the altar on Holy Thursday. Do you process the sacred oils before the Holy Thursday Mass? Choose people who

serve in the ministries in which the oils are used. If the cross you venerate is substantial, strong people will be needed to carry it. Generate a list among team members and determine who will extend invitations. Also, no one person should serve in multiple roles at a single service. Avoiding duplication engages more parishioners and will boost attendance as family and friends join them.

Select team leaders for art and environment and empower them to recruit more volunteers. Enlist the help of parish groups for specific tasks: the Knights of Columbus and women's auxiliary could form a candlelit corridor for the Blessed Sacrament's procession from the church to the altar of repose. Ask members of the Christ Renews His Parish or *Cursillo* teams to carry items needed from storage. Scouts are apt to jump at the opportunity to build a fire, and firefighters can obtain any needed permits. Now is a good time to launder server robes: perhaps your parish has an altar society to take on this task, or a few parents of servers might be happy to launder the robes. Call on the pastoral council and finance committee members to greet, distribute, and collect worship aids at the various services. Deputize teen leaders to place and remove doorstops for processions in and out of the building.

REHEARSE AND REHEARSE

In many parishes, sacristans or Mass coordinators set up for Mass, ensuring that ministers have checked in, recruiting substitutes when needed, overseeing the collections and lines for Communion, distributing bulletins, and ensuring all will be ready for the next Mass. Weeks in advance, invite these people and their spouses for a meal. Thank them for their essential service, and ask them to sign up to help with the Triduum liturgy. More people than usual will be needed to attend to the details of the rituals. Before rehearsing with servers and volunteers, review each liturgy's details with these leaders. Pair those new to the ministry with veterans.

After inviting and preparing the sacristans for their role, recruit other volunteers for each liturgy, including the rehearsal time and date in your invitation. Everyone needs to rehearse, whether they will serve as lectors or ushers, process the sacred oils, or bring up the offertory gifts. In many parishes, the rehearsals are scheduled on Tuesday or Wednesday of Holy Week so that the details remain fresh in their minds. With preparation, the rehearsal time need not be long. Begin with prayer. Give clear directions. Let your volunteers know where and with whom they should sign in on the day of the service. Not knowing whether someone is there can be perplexing. Simple reminders via email can be helpful. Record cell phone numbers for last-minute reminders or check-ins.



Additional mats absorb water and ensure safety for those entering and exiting the baptismal font.

Servers also need to prepare for these special services. Set aside a time for the priest and deacon to rehearse with them. Pairing your best servers with younger ones provides continuity from year to year; using a few extra servers can be helpful. Make sure one of the servers is familiar with the process for using incense, and alert servers to any special processions, such as the one to the chapel of repose with the priest or deacon to retrieve the Blessed Sacrament for distribution of holy Communion during the Good Friday service.

MANAGE MATERIALS

Many physical items are needed to make the Triduum flow seamlessly. Inventory yours and purchase whatever is required promptly. Reserve several rooms near the worship space, or section a larger room so that you have separate spaces for items needed for Holy Thursday, Good Friday, the Easter Vigil, and Easter Sunday. Mark the areas, and place the unique materials required together for the appropriate day. Ask helpers to clean, fold, polish, and arrange the materials to be ready for use. Do as much ahead of time as possible. Preparations, such as placing the paper bobèches on the assembly's candles, putting various worship aids into baskets, or placing covers on potted plants, avoid last-minute rushing.

Make copies of your task list and timeline for each day and share them with your team members. Tape one to the appropriate space, and have another ready for volunteers to consult in advance, giving them time to ask questions. Keep a copy of the task list for your files, and make copies available to volunteers to check off the tasks as they finish.

As each day of the Triduum ends, return materials to their assigned spaces. After Easter Sunday:

- Make time to inventory the items for next year.
- Create a list of what needs to be ordered.
- Ask for help cleaning what needs to be laundered, polished, or counted.
- Assign volunteers to help return items to their storage places.

New volunteers will appreciate a diagram illustrating where objects are stored.

STRATEGIZE SETUP

Once items are staged, determine which are used for multiple services and which are unique to a particular liturgy. Using photographs or illustrations, show where each service's materials will be placed in the church. Determine the timeline for each setup, and confirm with those attending. Many items will be needed for rehearsals, requiring them to be moved multiple times. When possible, place these items on carts that can easily move back and forth.

In some parishes, decorating the church space for the services is done on the day of the service. Others find it easy to transition at least part of the environment and liturgical materials shortly after one service. Whichever is the custom of your parish, be clear with volunteers about the times and places they are needed.

Are florists delivering floral arrangements? Someone will need to meet them and oversee the placement. If arrangements are ordered for Palm Sunday, ask for a sturdy composition that can be reused. Holy Thursday calls for a restrained number of floral arrangements. For that liturgy, the red of Palm Sunday is replaced with white, only to return for Good Friday. The plants or flowers used on Holy Thursday are removed for Good Friday and may be placed again for the Easter Vigil.

Consider the location of your baptismal font and the number of catechumens who will be baptized. Does your parish baptize by immersion? Are extra towels or floor mats needed to prevent someone from slipping on the water? A few volunteers could provide directions to rooms where the neophytes can change into dry clothing. Who can clean and refill the font after the Vigil to prepare for Easter Sunday? Could arrangements placed in corners of the nave be moved near the baptismal font after the Vigil to welcome Easter Sunday parishioners and guests? Apprise volunteers of these matters in advance. Delegating seasoned volunteers to oversee the work of new helpers ensures that items are placed and removed at appropriate times.

ASSESS ANNUALLY

During the first few weeks of Easter, make a point to thank your volunteers and request their opinions about what went well and to share ideas for improvement. Information can be elicited through individual conversations before or after Mass or through an emailed online survey. You might consider expanding the questionnaire to include musicians, choir members, Mass coordinators, others involved in the liturgies, and some randomly selected parishioners to gain a broader perspective.

On the date previously selected, meet with your primary team. Begin by reviewing each liturgy and making notes for the coming year. Were there typos in the worship aid? Did you run out of a particular supply? What gaps need to be addressed regarding volunteers next year? After reviewing the tasks of preparing and celebrating the Triduum, reflect on questions such as "What was most meaningful for you this year?" "What should be changed, and what should remain the same?"

During a celebratory meal, review comments and compliments from parishioners and guests. At this time, thank all who volunteered, and shower with praise those who attended to moments discreetly, such as when an older adult needed assistance, a child became sick, or the Easter fire would not light. Preparing the liturgy of the Sacred Paschal Triduum is a labor of love for pastoral ministers. The preparation includes countless hours, numerous meetings, and meticulous attention to detail, but from it, lives can be transformed through the Holy Spirit. Joining ourselves to the redemptive action of our Lord Jesus while prayerfully preparing and then evaluating our efforts, we can, together with our teams, choreograph worthy celebrations while entering into the mysteries of the Triduum. ♦

Notes

1. "Good Friday," Questions on the Sacred Paschal Triduum, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year-and-calendar/triduum/questions-and-answers#good-friday>.
2. *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, 18.
3. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 292.

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At www.PastoralLiturgy.org

Find and share this article with parish staff and the liturgy committee at the following URL: <http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/ChoreographingHolyWeek.pdf>.