

A photograph of three altar servers in white robes carrying a large processional cross and candles in a church. The background shows a large, ornate church interior with many people seated in pews, some holding books. The lighting is warm and focused on the servers.

Come to the Feast: Increasing Participation in the Triduum

Ricky Manalo (with contributions by Denise Anderson)

The assembly may fill the church during the Sacred Paschal Triduum as they are formed to enter into the liturgy and as the parish evangelizes through their website, personal encounters, and social media.

Time and again, I hear parish leaders bemoan the small numbers who celebrate the Sacred Paschal Triduum, compared with the drove of worshippers on Easter Sunday morning. Triduum, Latin for “Three Days,” begins with the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday, peaks at the Holy Saturday Vigil Mass, and ends with Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday. Admittedly, it is a lot of prayer, but well worth the effort. Where exactly is everyone? Among the reasons frequently noted by the absentees are the following:

- The Sunday liturgies aren’t that great. Why would I want to go to *more*?
- The services are too long! I just don’t have time.
- I don’t know anyone being baptized this year. Why would I go?

I find it somewhat ironic that far more worshippers come out for Mass on Ash Wednesday than during the whole of the Triduum, “the culmination of the entire church year.”¹ Although neither Ash Wednesday, nor any of the Triduum liturgies are Holydays of Obligation, Catholics somehow feel compelled to respond to Ash Wednesday’s call to prayer. It would seem that this instinct to participate during the liturgy would continue through the Triduum, as Tom Richstatter observes:

The fact that Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil are not “Holy Days of Obligation” does not mean that they are not important or that we do not need to make an effort to attend the solemn liturgies on these days. . . . These are the most important liturgies of the Church year and each of us should place our participation in these celebrations among our most important religious practices and obligations.²

I would like to offer five considerations for how parishes can increase the number of worshippers during the Triduum.

CULTIVATING AN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE TRIDUUM

Place the Triduum Within the Framework of Sunday Liturgy

Since the Triduum liturgy is the culmination of the entire year, it makes sense that the community’s Sunday experience influences their anticipation of Triduum. If your assembly is not engaged by music, preaching, hospitality, or other sacramental encounters at the Sunday liturgy, they are not likely to seek out more of the same. It is common to think of our Sunday liturgies as “Little Easters,” particularly because we celebrate the Risen Christ in every liturgy. Perhaps we also could consider Easter Sunday, and thus Triduum, as “One Great Big Sunday”³ that is integrally connected to all other Sundays of the year. This larger framework can inform how we plan, prepare, celebrate the Triduum, and balance the dialogue between Easter Sunday and all of the Sundays of the liturgical year.

We can apply this idea to the complaint, “The services are too long! I just don’t have time.” If the length of the liturgy during the Triduum is a concern, expectations about the length of



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the liturgy throughout the year need to be challenged. It is also important how such complaints are handled, and to do so with a positive approach, beyond any unintentional messages of guilt.

Our Experience of Ritual Time

Sunday celebrations of Christ’s Resurrection, otherwise known as the Lord’s Day, mark time differently than our civic, political, or academic calendars. These interrelationships are identified in Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter *Dies Domini* (The Day of the Lord):

Until quite recently, it was easier in traditionally Christian countries to keep Sunday holy because it was an almost universal practice and because, even in the organization of civil society, Sunday rest was considered a fixed part of the work schedule. Today, however, . . . changes in socioeconomic conditions have often led to profound modifications of social behavior and hence of the character of Sunday. The custom of the “weekend” has become more widespread, a weekly period of respite, spent perhaps far from home and often involving participation in cultural, political, or sporting activities that usually are held on free days. *This social and cultural phenomenon is by no means without its positive aspects if, while respecting true values, it can contribute to people’s development and to the advancement of the life of society as a whole. All of this responds not only to the need for rest, but also to the need for celebration which is inherent in our humanity.* Unfortunately, when Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of a “weekend,” it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see “the heavens.” Hence, though ready to celebrate, they are really incapable of doing so. (4; emphasis mine)

This passage testifies to balance, rather than neglect of one experience of time over another or pitting Sunday obligation against other timely demands. Sunday worship needs to be placed



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The more parishioners are involved in the lives of those preparing for initiation, the more likely they are to support them by attending the Easter Vigil.

in dialogue with what is important in parishioners' everyday lives, and other encounters with time: rest, play, and work, along with the many forms of daily worship. The article of the apostolic letter goes on to explain how to nurture this balance:

This will require a genuine spiritual maturity, which will enable Christians to “be what they are,” in full accordance with the gift of faith, always ready to give an account of the hope which is in them (cf. 1 Pt 3:15). In this way, they will be led to a deeper understanding of Sunday, with the result that, even in difficult situations, they will be able to live it in complete docility to the Holy Spirit.

This deeper understanding of Sunday points to the three-day culmination of what we experience each week. The Triduum annually raises up the fullness of our faith. Thus, parish leaders need to promote a “genuine spiritual maturity” of our collective understanding of time and how it is best spent. The distinction between *chronos* time and *kairos* time can help us appreciate “worship time” during our Triduum liturgies.

Chronos and Kairos

Chronos time has a beginning and an end, a start and a finish. It is time we can measure: how long we sleep or the time it takes to drive to work, cook breakfast, or “go to Mass.” As we manage our *chronos* time, we sometimes feel that we can fit more and more things into our lives. This can contribute to overscheduled lives and the idea that we can worship more efficiently.

When we participate in the liturgy, we enter *kairos* time. In this abstract understanding of time, we are present to an experience rather than marking time in a quantified number of minutes or hours. In liturgy, we are invited to embody *kairos* time in our ritual bodies, abandon our preoccupations with control, and surrender to God and encounters of the Risen Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Although we can imagine this concept in our heads, it's hard to let go and see where the Holy Spirit takes us—without worrying about kickoff time!

Ritual Time and Liturgical Formation

At a workshop I attended in 1993, Andrew Ciferni, OPRAEM, highlighted the Entrance Antiphon of the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper: “We should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life, and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered.” When workshop participants offered titles for the Opening Hymn, a question emerged about how often to change musical selections. Paraphrasing, Ciferni suggested: If the assembly is accustomed to singing a particular hymn during a specific point of the liturgy, year after year, and the setting works, then don't change it. However, when a better hymn comes along, you'll know it. That's the time to change it.

Ciferni proposed that a hymn works when the theology of the text is sound, the music invites participation, and the text and music are wedded to the ritual action and are appropriate to the cultural context of the local church. His insights affirm that repeated ritual actions help form our relationship with God and one another and shape our expectations for what will follow. I believe these ritual experiences lead us deeper into the realm of *kairos* time, not unlike when we sing the melody and words to “Happy Birthday.” Singing any other melody or text would violate our experience and ritual of the celebration. When we are in the moment, we abandon our concerns with measurable time or public display and sing. The same is true with liturgical ritual music.⁴

The formative repetition of music, art, gesture, words, and liturgical symbols throughout the year is applicable to ritual moments during the Triduum: the transfer of the Eucharist, proclamation of the Passion, veneration of the cross, the new fire, blessing and lighting of the Easter candle, blessing of water, initiation of the elect, renewal of baptismal promises, the sprinkling of the assembly, and the singing of “alleluia”—not heard since before Ash Wednesday. Ritual and repetition foster a familiarity that attracts, creates, and maintains relational bonds.

Should liturgical ministers feel that their service is beginning to seem routine, they may want to consider studies that would expand their theological knowledge, workshops that would enhance their skills, or exploring other ways to offer their gifts. Our call is to deepen what we celebrate year after year, not make changes just because we know a hymn so well. It takes much longer for any ritual moment, acclamation, or symbol to become embedded into the hearts, souls, minds, and bodies of the assembly—especially at the Triduum, since it is an annual celebration.

This does not mean that all elements of the Triduum liturgy needs to remain the same each year, however. Our local, national, and international contexts continually change to influence homilies, outreach programs, and the perspectives of our assemblies. A new hymn, art image, or symbolic gesture may emerge that better supports the readings, theology, ritual actions, or intercultural context. Remember Ciferni's axiom that you will know when something better comes along, and that is when a change should be made.

It is important to approach our ritual patterns as a means to invite participation, rather than as a way to control assembly participation. Today's Catholics choose whether to attend Mass or worship and the extent to which to participate. It is better to promote through invitation. We need to celebrate prayerful

liturgies; liturgies in which God is experienced as the One who invites us to this privileged encounter. Liturgy is not so much the work of the people as it is “God coming to us in Christ.”⁵

Nurture Solidarity between New Catholics and the Parish Community

If individuals will be baptized or received into full communion during the Easter Vigil, it is critical to foster solidarity between the parish and these future Catholics. The more parishioners are involved in the lives of those preparing for initiation, the more likely they are to support them at the Easter Vigil.

We can begin to nurture this solidarity from within the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) as the Rite of Acceptance introduces the community to those beginning their journey to become Catholic, as well as outside of the RCIA process in the full life of the parish. Parishes do not need to wait until after catechumens or candidates are initiated to include them in their community service or social events. Welcome them now and expand their experience of being Catholic. This can become a valuable part of their formation.

The RCIA offers many opportunities to connect catechumens and the candidates to the larger community, such as the weekly dismissal to reflect on God’s Word; the Rite of Sending, before enrollment in the Book of the Elect; and the Scrutinies. Take advantage of the witness of these rites, and if they are celebrated at only one Sunday liturgy, consider ways to connect the RCIA with the parish community. The following are among the possibilities for doing this:

- Reference the RCIA in homilies during the other liturgies and at parish gatherings to raise awareness throughout parish life.
- During the Universal Prayer, include intercessory prayers for catechumens and candidates in your parish and throughout the world.
- Invite parishioners to pray for those preparing for initiation. Include those preparing for Confirmation, First Communion, or Reconciliation. Share their names with parishioners at Sunday Masses to create prayer partner relationships.
- Host receptions throughout the year for prayer partners to meet one another informally and promote ongoing conversations.
- Invite the parish council and parish committees to gather with candidates and catechumens to share their experience of leadership and service.
- Use announcements, parish bulletins, other communication, and events to help the community support those seeking new faith.

In short, highlight the RCIA process whenever possible. New members can remind the parish of their baptismal identity. Likewise, the assembly can witness to those new to faith.

Some of the most important participants beyond Sunday liturgy are those preparing for full initiation. The RCIA ritual calls on the assembly as an evangelizer of the faith:



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The celebration of prayerful liturgies throughout the year may inspire attendance at the Triduum liturgy.

Therefore the community must always be fully prepared in the pursuit of its apostolic vocation to give hope to those who are searching for Christ. In the various circumstances of daily life, even as in the apostolate, all followers of Christ have the obligation of spreading the faith according to their abilities. Hence, the entire community must help the candidates and catechumens throughout the process of initiation. (RCIA, 9)

Celebrate Holy Week

It can be helpful to promote all of Holy Week as a week of spiritual retreat with specific activities to prepare for the Triduum. Liturgist, author, and editor Bernadette Gasslein recommends the following activities:

- Shop for Easter dinner earlier this week so you can spend some time in prayer and reflection on Saturday.
- Bring a non-perishable food item for the Holy Thursday procession of gifts. One of the [Missal’s] rubrics for this night states, “At the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, there may be a procession of the faithful in which gifts for the poor may be presented with the bread and wine.” This puts into action what we have experienced in the washing of feet: “Let us love one another. . . .”
- Read the Scriptures of the Easter Vigil, individually or together as a family or household. These wonderful passages tell the story of God’s faithful love for us throughout history, from creation through to the Resurrection of Jesus.
- Plan reflective activities in preparation for Easter: go for a walk on your own, with a friend, or as a family and observe the signs of new life that are beginning to appear. Decorate a candle in preparation for daily prayer during Easter Time.⁶

Gasslein’s suggestions demonstrate how parishes can think outside the box. Attention to details before, after, and in between the liturgies are important as the Holy Spirit lives and breathes throughout our daily lives.

Community activities that occur around the major liturgies can also encourage participation in the celebrations. St. Agnes Church in San Francisco holds a potluck dinner two hours before the Mass of the Lord's Supper. Many parishes host receptions after the Easter Vigil Mass to welcome new members of the faith. Still others knock on doors to invite neighbors to Triduum and Easter Sunday. These activities, for all ages, provide little links for reflection and communal bonding. You don't want to overshadow the high holy days with too many extra events; however these events can nurture relationships, greater experiences of prayer, and a deeper understanding of our Lord's Death and Resurrection.

Proclaim, Advertise, and Market the Triduum: Ongoing Evangelization

While promotion of the Triduum should not overlook its theological richness, pastoral leaders can do well to grasp the power that today's media tools offer for evangelization.⁷ Although many parishes provide resources about the history, theology, and spirituality of the Triduum, along with details for the liturgies in their bulletins and websites, I cannot stress the importance of ongoing catechesis and promotion enough. Staff and some parishioners may be more aware of the meaning of Holy Week, but it is best to presume that many in the assembly do not even know what the word *Triduum* means or remember how the season and its liturgy fit within the liturgical year.

Social media, your parish website, Facebook, and Twitter offer avenues for encouragement, promotion, and connection with parishioners and visitors. Perhaps writers in your community can blog at particular times of the year or update Facebook and Twitter to promote coming events. If you have not explored this type of electronic evangelization, I urge you to do so. Social media is a huge part of our modern world and is a useful tool for reaching out to those who have no religious commitment or have left the Church, or to younger generations looking for a reason to come to church. It is vital that energy and money be devoted toward this outreach, so parishes do not lose touch with other members.

Attraction and Invitation

Sunday worshippers can also be witnesses in their neighborhoods, homes, and workplaces. We should leave our Sunday liturgies with a renewed spirit of evangelization and passion that announces the good news through our words and deeds. The single most important approach to attract more worshippers to the Triduum liturgy—personal contact and invitation.

We might consider how restaurants experience a swell in business after a food critic's favorable review and reflect on how such reviews of our parish may bring more people to the liturgy. Invite parishioners to recommend the parish to others—especially at Easter. If each parishioner were to invite even one person to the Triduum liturgy, the number of participants would greatly increase. Two or three parishioners could also meet with those invited after each Triduum liturgy and reflect on what they have experienced. The power of the Triduum liturgy and shared conversation can bring visitors to participate in Sunday celebrations and enter into *kairos* time within a welcoming community of believers who proclaim the Good News.

It is not easy to bridge the Christmas/Easter-only chasm or inspire parishioners to come out beyond a Sunday morning. Despite the frenetic pace of our North American culture, people still long for mystery and yearn for spiritual fulfillment—beyond even knowing what they seek to fill. Yet the pattern of the Paschal Mystery accompanies our joys and struggles each day. The Triduum liturgy embodies this reality in the fullest way imaginable to renew the whole Church. This is truly good news—and worthy of any effort required. We may be uncertain, like the disciples on that first Easter morn, but we are continually formed by the Holy Spirit to worship God through our encounters with the Risen Christ and with one another. Together, we celebrate this annual feast of heaven and earth! ♦

Notes

1. The *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the General Roman Calendar*, 18, states: "Since Christ accomplished his work of human redemption and of the perfect glorification of God principally through his Paschal Mystery, in which by dying he has destroyed our death, and by rising restored our life, the sacred Paschal Triduum of the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord shines forth as the high point of the entire liturgical year. Therefore the pre-eminence that Sunday has in the week, the Solemnity of Easter has in the liturgical year."
2. Tom Richstatter, "Spirituality of the Seasons: Triduum: How Much Love," *St. Anthony Messenger*, 102:11 (April, 1995), 56.
3. Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 16.
4. For more on liturgical ritual music, see Edward Foley and Mary McGann, *Music and the Eucharistic Prayer* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988); and Edward Foley, *Ritual Music: Studies in Liturgical Musicology* (Beltsville: Pastoral Press, 1995).
5. Robert Taft, "What Does Liturgy Do? Toward a Soteriology of Liturgical Celebration: Some Theses," *Worship* 66:3 (May 1992), 208.
6. <http://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2014/04/17/what-does-it-mean-that-so-few-attend-triduum-liturgies/>. Gasslein provides other useful suggestions that cover the span of these three days, including activities for children.
7. For resources on evangelization, see the website of Paulist Evangelization Ministries: <http://www.paulist.org/evangelization/paulist-evangelization-ministries>.

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At www.PastoralLiturgy.org

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