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When parishes hold a food drive or establish a food pantry, the act of service can be connected to Jesus' words, "Do this in memory of me."

Preparing for the Triduum: Connecting the Paschal Mystery to the Daily Life of the Assembly

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The liturgical time that spans the bulk of the wintry season in the northern hemisphere contains several weeks of Ordinary Time and the forty days of Lent. As the month of January leans into the days of February, the sun grows noticeably stronger, as daylight increases bit by bit. Although this can be a time for vicious weather, sure is the hope that spring is near and that soon the earth will come alive again.

This time between the great feasts of Christmas and Easter offers the Church a wonderful opportunity to provide catechesis on the most important days of the liturgical year, the Sacred Paschal Triduum. Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday memorialize Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. *The Roman Missal* states: "In the Sacred Triduum, the Church solemnly celebrates the greatest mysteries of our redemption, keeping by means of special celebrations the memo-

rial of her Lord, crucified, buried, and risen."¹ The paschal mystery is proclaimed as the centerpiece of the Christian community and its liturgical year, and these days bring to life the attitudes embodied by the Lord Jesus. During these days, Christians rehearse the story of salvation intensely with word and action. Such practice is far from play-acting; rather it is an annual apprenticeship in the worldview we profess by our common baptism into Christ.

To prepare for the celebration of the Triduum and to encourage full participation in the one continuous liturgy enacted over the course of these days, it is beneficial during Ordinary Time in winter and Lent to make connections between the paschal mystery and daily living. In other words, great opportunities for catechesis can be found in gathering Christians around simple "daily and domestic"² projects that help the faithful understand that they are called to die to self in order to be raised up anew for others. Such a pattern in daily

life—of turning preoccupation with the self to attentive sacrifice for others—is true participation in the paschal mystery. With action and accompanying catechetical reflection, the weeks leading up to the Triduum can serve to ready the Church for the transformation and joy that comes with celebrating Christ’s victory over the grave.

HOLY THURSDAY: A SUPPER OF SERVICE

The twenty-first century cultural milieu in which we live devalues time spent around the kitchen table. Rushing from one activity to the next, many in the United States eat their meals on the run. Few people seem to have the luxury of time to plan and prepare a dinner that is an artful work.

If we are to enter the Paschal Triduum with renewed appreciation of the sacrificial nature of the Last Supper, the weeks leading up to this great festival ought to provide catechesis on the theological value of sharing food. John Baldovin, SJ, writes of the great reversal that takes place at the Lord’s final meal with his disciples; around that banquet table, Jesus overturned the selfish narrative of clinging to food (as represented in the story of Adam and Eve, Genesis 3:1–13) to one of sacrifice. Baldovin writes: “If sin is grasping, then redemption is letting go. If sin means symbolically grabbing at food, then redemption means sharing it and giving it away.”³ Our relationship to both the consumption of food and the pattern of our eating needs to be reconsidered. Perhaps a parish might sponsor a food drive, or better yet, it might begin a food pantry that would be a permanent sign of the commitment to feed the hungry. Catechesis would center on the theme that such work is not simply an act of justice but is an action lived out in response to the Lord’s command “Do this in memory of me” (Luke 22:19).

The entrance antiphon that marks the start of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper on the evening of Holy Thursday proclaims: “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.”⁴ We must “glory in the Cross” to experience the joy of resurrected life. The Mass of the Lord’s Supper provides a ritual activity that would best be mirrored by acts of concrete charity in the days leading up to Holy Week. The physical gesture of washing feet is not simply to remember Jesus’ humility but is to make the statement that all Christians are called to bend low and offer themselves to others. On Holy Thursday, we hear in John’s Gospel the great mandatum—Jesus’ command: “As I have done for you, you should also do” (John 13:15). As this evening’s Mass celebrates the institution of the Eucharist, it is a celebration of the baptismal priesthood of all the faithful. All Christians, and not simply the ordained, are called to wash feet. Once again, in the weeks prior to the Triduum, the parish would do well to organize opportunities for communal works of charity that could then be reflected on in terms of baptismal mission.



In the weeks before the community gathers during the service of light at the Easter Vigil, the gifts and power inherent in fire can be discussed.

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In our privatized age, people are very much aware of their personal space and are often uncomfortable with touch. Many people bristle at the idea of their feet being washed, let alone reaching out to wash another’s feet. How, then, might a parish community enact service that embodies the spirit of foot washing? When I was a seminarian many years ago, I had the good fortune of working at a homeless center in downtown Portland, Oregon, that provided a ministry of care to the poor of the inner city. Once a week, I would cut hair in the lobby of a dark and dingy single-room occupancy hotel. As I provided free haircuts to men and women, it became apparent to me that this might be the only touch they had received in days. This was foot washing for me. I am not suggesting that our parishes ought to turn church vestibules into barber shops, but I am promoting the idea that we need to develop forms of ministry that directly honor the poor. Ways need to be found to physically immerse ourselves in the lives of the poor, seeking to become one with them, and thus recognizing the love and care that Christ gives to the poor. This type of deep immersion is a form of catechesis in and of itself.

GOOD FRIDAY: ADORATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

In our disposable culture, consumerism lures buyers into purchasing a product for quick consumption so as to be drawn to yet another, even more desirable, commodity. Vincent Miller writes: “Consumer desire is, surprisingly, not really about attachment to things, but about the joys of desiring itself. It is the joy of endless seeking and pursuit. Actual consumption always comes as something of a disappointment, as the object can never live up to its promise.”⁵ In other words, we are trained to desire and to quickly move on to yearning for something more.

Christians operate according to a very different principle. We are called to “glory in the Cross” and to embrace the demands it entails; this is not a disposable obligation. Jesus’ summons in Luke 9:23, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me,” continues to be a daily duty of Christian life. Thus, the liturgy of



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Reflection and catechesis on the solemn intercessions of Good Friday will help the faithful unite their personal experience of Christ's cross with the mission of the universal Church.

the Triduum presses on after the celebration of the Lord's Supper with Good Friday and the proclamation of the passion in conjunction with the adoration of the cross. During this time of communal prayer and throughout the hours of this day, Christians are invited to contemplate not only the sacrifice Christ made but also the way in which our lives are patterned on such self-emptying.

Because the praying of the solemn intercessions on this day is quite different from the way in which petitions are offered on Sundays, reflection on these ten invocations as part of a catechetical plan would help Christians unite their personal experience of Christ's cross with the mission of the universal Church. The praying of these intercessions is an exercise of the priestly ministry of all the baptized, as they lift up prayer for the various orders of the Church, for those who do not believe in Christ or God, and for all those who suffer from any sort of tribulation:

Let us pray, dearly beloved,
to God the Father almighty,
that he may cleanse the world of all errors,
banish disease, drive out hunger,
unlock prisons, loosen fetters,
granting to travelers safety, to pilgrims return,
health to the sick, and salvation to the dying.⁶

Parishioners might be given one prayer each week leading up to the Triduum and be asked to make it part of their private prayer, creatively considering how the Church might better respond to each plea that it is addressing to "Almighty ever-living God." Such work is to "glory in the Cross."

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord marks the transition between the Christmas season and the few weeks of Ordinary Time that precede Lent. This feast is the perfect time to preach and catechize on the baptismal priesthood and the call to serve in union with Christ, who was anointed priest, prophet, and

king.⁷ While the season of Lent is intended to be a period of preparation for the baptism of the elect and for the renewal of baptismal promises on the part of the already baptized, there is no reason that discussing the nature of baptism should not begin with the celebration of the Lord's baptism in the Jordan River. From this day forward, the parish could initiate a process whereby members are invited to ponder the prophetic nature of their baptism. There is nothing disposable about our baptism; it is far from a mere commodity that can be chosen and then quickly forgotten or thrown out. Our relationships with one another need to be reaffirmed. During these weeks of Ordinary Time, moving into the Lenten season, the faithful might be invited to discern the health of the relationships that make up the Body of Christ.

A parish community that is invested in preparing itself to celebrate the Sacred Triduum, whereby it deepens its participation in the paschal mystery and is ready to welcome new members into the household of faith, is one that celebrates the diversity of the community. This is best done when the community discerns its charisms together. Growing together as the Body of Christ means recognizing that all parts, from the least to the greatest, have a role to play in promoting unity. This is really what Good Friday is about. We would do well to discuss with one another what we can do to promote this unity within the Church and within the wider world as well. This is the work of venerating the cross as our one, true hope.

HOLY SATURDAY: "THE MOTHER OF ALL VIGILS"⁸

The Triduum continues throughout the day on Saturday in a spirit that calls for keeping watch at the Lord's tomb. The Easter Vigil itself, which was revamped in 1951 under the direction of Pope Pius XII, is intended to be celebrated in the darkness of evening.⁹ The liturgy begins with the service of light, in which the community gathers around a "blazing fire" that is truly able to destroy the darkness of the night.¹⁰ Good preparation should ensure that a team of parishioners is responsible for providing materials for and planning the execution of the paschal fire—a fire with a caliber that poses destructive possibilities. Beforehand, it would be helpful for the community to discuss the nature of fire and light, examining not only the natural gifts that these offer (fire provides warmth and light and makes deciphering surroundings possible) but also the way in which fire has the ability to destroy life. For example, parishioners might reflect upon the ways in which fire has proven disastrous within the past year and bring these occasions to a time of prayer.

As the community gathers around the fire, they are presented with candles that will be used in the communal procession into the empty church as well as for the renewal of baptismal promises. The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, celebrated on February 2 and falling within the brief period of Ordinary Time between the Christmas season and Lent, would be a perfect opportunity to invite the community to participate in the making of candles. Just as the paschal candle is to be made of wax so that it can truly burn down and be renewed each year, so too are the candles, which are to remind us of our baptism in the Lord, meant to decrease as our faith increases.

In conjunction with the production of these candles, a community could discuss the text of the Exsultet, contemplating together the cosmic nature of this annual hymn sung in praise of the Easter candle.¹¹ Phrases from the Easter Proclamation, such as “this is the night,” “pillar of fire,” “O truly necessary sin of Adam,” “O happy fault,” “when things of heaven are wed to those of earth,” and “the work of bees and of your servants’ hands,” merit our communal reflection. Perhaps a catechetical session on the Exsultet could begin with the community learning how to chant it together with the deacon or a cantor and then be invited to share with one another how the parish might be enlightened once again by “the one Morning Star who never sets.”¹²

Another aspect of the service of light at the outset of the Easter Vigil is the procession that takes place from around the fire into the darkened Church. It should be noted that the procession is a significant gesture of the Triduum as a whole, as the community processes with the Blessed Sacrament at the end of the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper and again in the communal movement to venerate the cross on Good Friday. The procession that takes place at the Easter Vigil, however, is particularly significant. Symbolically, it moves the Church from darkness into light and subtly reminds us that this is the very nature of Christian living: to move from the occasion of sin back into the fullness of God’s grace. Mark Searle reflects:

What is procession?
 It is journey distilled—journey at its heart,
 a gathering into one movement
 of a Church on the way:
 a pilgrim people, a dusty, longing people,
 yet walking with heads high;
 knowing ourselves, showing ourselves
 to be the royal nation, the holy people
 won by the Son,
 called by his Word,
 gathered around his table.
 There we discover again,
 from age to age, from east to west,
 for all our journeys,
 the source, the ground, the companion, the way.¹³

The weeks leading up to the Sacred Triduum are an opportune time to reflect on the importance of procession in the practice of our faith. Any procession is an act of humility, as it is not meant to single out any one member of the community but instead focuses our attention on the Body of Christ as a unified whole. In our company are men and women, young and old, “of



Prior to engaging in the many processions of Holy Week, it will be beneficial for the assembly to contemplate what it means to process as God’s people.

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every race and tongue,”¹⁴ and we are awed by the gathering that the Holy Spirit inaugurates. It would be helpful to glean from the assembly images and experiences of our processing as God’s people.

The second part of the Easter Vigil, the Liturgy of the Word, is unlike any other hearing of God’s Word. Seven readings are taken from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament. Understood as a collective whole, these readings are arranged so as to provide a sweeping account of salvation history.¹⁵ Kevin Irwin writes: “The dynamic of hearing the texts, responding in psalm and collect prayer, is meant to foster abiding gratitude and awareness of how salvation is effected among us, especially through word and sacrament, particularly baptism and eucharist.”¹⁶ The time and the attention required to celebrate well the Liturgy of the Word at the Easter Vigil requires thoughtful preparation. “Gratitude and awareness” will only come if the assembly understands the structure and movement of these readings. The assembly, thus, might be asked to contemplate the various natural symbols that are found in the readings. How has God revealed his goodness through the mysteries of the natural world?

Certainly, one of these mysteries is water, which plays a primary role in the third part of the Easter Vigil, the baptismal liturgy. At this time, water is blessed, used for the immersion of those to be baptized, and sprinkled upon all who recommit themselves to the Christian faith through the renewal of their baptismal promises. Kevin Irwin writes on the paschal meaning of water:

Staying hydrated when we are ill (as well as during exercise) is simply a life and death issue. So too, baptism is a life and death issue. Water can be a frightening element because of the possibility of drowning and flooding. People who fear

the water may envision their possible deaths too vividly by floods or by an undertow that can cause us to lose our footing, submerge, and die. In effect, the cosmic element water manifests a cosmic struggle between life and death. Water is indeed a paschal element from our common home.¹⁷

From the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord through the forty days of Lent, the assembly may be invited to reflect deeply upon the gift of water in our lives. Do we cherish water as a great life-sustaining gift, or do we drink it, wash in it, and even waste it without ever considering how fortunate we are to have it? Millions of people around the globe must search far and wide to find sources of drinkable water. This symbol of our entrance into the Christian life should be considered with reverence. Perhaps ruminating on the words and images of the blessing of baptismal water during the weeks before the Triduum would give members of the assembly a more profound appreciation for this gift that is so often taken for granted.

CONCLUSION

Each year the Church celebrates the Triduum, which begins with the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday and concludes with vespers on the evening of Easter Sunday. These seventy-two hours of ongoing liturgical celebration rehearse the attitudes contained within the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. We must remember in our bodies that we are immersed into a pattern of life framed in the willingness to die to self in order to live anew in Christ for the world's salvation. Our participation in the Triduum is paramount for our apprenticeship as Christ's disciples. To participate well in the actions, symbols, and words of these holy days, however, requires preparation.

This essay has examined only a few of the ways in which catechesis on this continuous liturgy might take place. Indeed, many more facets of the Triduum deserve exploration and attention. Nevertheless, we ought to have no doubt that the time between the end of the Christmas season through the annual Lenten journey is an important time to connect the fabric of daily life with a deepened attachment to the paschal mystery. In this way, our assemblies will better embody Easter joy. The prayer over the offerings at the Mass during the day on Easter expresses the mission of our discipleship perfectly: "Exultant with paschal gladness, O Lord, / we offer the sacrifice / by which your Church / is wondrously reborn and nourished."¹⁸ Sacrifice of self leads to endless joy. ♦

Notes

1. *The Roman Missal*, the Sacred Paschal Triduum, 1.
2. See Kevin W. Irwin, *Context and Text: A Method for Liturgical Theology*, revised edition (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 153. Irwin attributes the phrase "daily and domestic things" to David Power. Irwin writes: "Symbols and symbolic gesture in liturgy reflect and are derived from actions performed in human life."
3. John Baldovin, *Bread of Life, Cup of Salvation: Understanding the Mass* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 7.
4. *The Roman Missal*, Thursday of the Lord's Supper, 6.

5. Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 7.
6. *The Roman Missal*, Friday of the Passion of the Lord, 13.
7. See my *Anointed for Mission: Exercising Your Baptismal Call* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2022).
8. Augustine, Sermon 219, in vol. 38 of *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.P. Milton (Paris: Apud Garnier, 1844), 1088.
9. See Paul Turner, *Glory in the Cross: Holy Week in the Third Edition of the Roman Missal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 113.
10. *The Roman Missal*, The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night, The Solemn Beginning of the Vigil or Lucernarium, 8.
11. See my "When Things of Heaven Are Wed to Those of Earth: Cosmic Praise in the Easter Vigil's Lucernarium," *Catechumenate: A Journal of Christian Initiation* 35, no. 1 (2013): 8–16.
12. *The Roman Missal*, The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night, 19.
13. Mark Searle, "Processing," *Assembly* 6, no. 3 (1979): 75.
14. *The Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II.
15. See my "The Easter Vigil Readings: Our Story of Salvation," *Pastoral Liturgy* 44, no. 1 (2013): 4–9.
16. Kevin Irwin, *Easter: A Guide to the Eucharist and Hours* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 65.
17. Kevin Irwin, *Ecology, Liturgy, and the Sacraments* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2023), 86.
18. *The Roman Missal*, Easter Sunday of the Resurrection of the Lord, 73.

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