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Gathering the scattered community and experiencing death and resurrection together enriches the sacred three days.

The Triduum in Cluster Parishes: Gathering the Community to Celebrate

Paul Turner

When a priest has responsibility for worship at more than one location, planning the Sacred Paschal Triduum poses additional challenges. The liturgies over these three holy days imagine that one single congregation gathers in the same single location. The existence of cluster parishes usually results from shifting demographics that leave worthy buildings where the number of Catholics has dwindled, and where the number of priests has dwindled more. No one aspires to cluster. Parishes prefer autonomy. Yet clustering rescues the lost. Consequently, each cluster parish tells its own story of death and resurrection. It can relate to the Triduum.

In urban areas, the church buildings in a cluster may stand in close proximity. In rural areas, they may stand many miles apart. Some of them are divided by language and culture, history and neighborhood. Some clusters are one parish with one or more mission churches. Others enfold several churches that remain parishes in their own right. Some churches feel competitive, fearful that theirs could be the next to close. Many members feel abandoned because the bishop has not sent them their own priest. Clusters hold in common a disquiet over inadequate staffing and finances, yet a will to survive.

At the Triduum, one priest ideally celebrates each of the services one time. But where does he go? Do the services move from church to church? Does one church host them all? Does the host church change from year to year?

THREE OPTIONS

There are three paradigms: (1) everyone gathers in the same church for the entire Triduum, (2) the celebrations move from church to church, or (3) the number of services is multiplied. Each paradigm has strengths and weaknesses.

The Roman Missal gives direction in its introduction to the Sacred Paschal Triduum. The third paragraph states that these celebrations are to be carried out “only in those churches in which they can be performed with dignity, that is, with a good attendance of the faithful, an appropriate number of ministers, and the means to sing at least some of the parts.” Not every church can supply those numbers. The Missal, therefore, offers this advice: “Consequently, it is desirable that small communities, associations, and special groups of various kinds join together in these churches to carry out the sacred celebrations in a more noble manner.”

Sometimes the size of the buildings determines everything. One church may be the only one large enough to accommodate the combined worshippers. Or one church may have the most accessible location and sufficient parking. The interior of one church may offer the best visibility for the participation of the people. One church may have the worthiest baptismal font.

If the cluster parish gathers different language groups, further decisions await. Some churches provide printed multilingual worship aids. Other churches, having secured the copyright permissions, project words and music on the wall. Worshipping in a multilingual community can be a broadening experience, but patience and charity are needed to enter the mysteries.

When the same church hosts each service, members of other churches would fittingly share ministerial roles. If the host parish enlists greeters from the other churches, for example, anyone entering the building may see a familiar face. If music is sung and Scriptures are proclaimed in multiple languages, each worshipper may feel at home.

Alternatively, the celebrations of the Triduum may rotate through different churches. Everyone then shares convenience and inconvenience. In this scenario, each church is the host and members of each church travel. Distances in urban areas are usually close; however, some people at home in their own church shy away from going to another. Frequently, each host church draws the highest attendance. In rural areas, where distances are greater, members are often accustomed to traveling. If they want to participate in the Triduum, they may drive to wherever the community gathers.

Most likely the ministers of the host parish are the best ministers for each service. They are familiar with the local routines. They have served faithfully throughout the year, and their leadership at the Triduum acknowledges their sacrifice. Ministers of the environment, elsewhere working long hours for three days, are less stressed if they decorate a church for just one of the days.

Another solution is to increase the number of services. The third paragraph of the Missal’s introduction to Holy Thursday states, “Where a pastoral reason requires it, the local Ordinary may permit another Mass to be celebrated in churches and oratories in the evening and, in case of genuine necessity, even in the morning, but only for the faithful who are in no way able to



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The Paschal candle from each church in the cluster may be lighted at the Easter fire, but only one Paschal candle leads the procession into the church.

participate in the evening Mass.” Thus, a cluster could schedule more than one Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper. The introduction continues, “Care should, nevertheless, be taken that celebrations of this sort do not take place for the advantage of private persons or special small groups, and do not prejudice the evening Mass.” Ideally, the community gathers as one.

Good Friday offers a similar option. According to the fourth paragraph of the Missal’s introduction for that day, “In the United States, if the size or nature of a parish or other community indicates the pastoral need for an additional liturgical service, the Diocesan Bishop may permit the service to be repeated later.” In this case, “later” means after three o’clock, the preferred hour. One priest, then, could lead services in the afternoon and in the evening. The same paragraph cautions, though, that “this liturgy by its very nature may not, however, be celebrated in the absence of a Priest.” Deacons and lay leaders may not preside at the liturgy on Good Friday.

There is no provision for a second Easter Vigil. There is to be only one.

If the same priest celebrates more than one service on Holy Thursday or Good Friday, he may wear down physically and spiritually. He deserves to enter into the spirit of these three days with the same energy and sincerity as everyone else. Repeating the services may provide more opportunities for worshippers, but at a cost.

Not everyone who comes to Mass on Sunday attends the Triduum. That is why Palm Sunday celebrations include the proclamation of the Passion. Many people will not return until Easter Sunday, and they need to hear why Easter means so much. Numbers at Triduum liturgies are often smaller than parish leaders desire. Combining forces, gathering the scattered community, and experiencing death and resurrection together enrich the sacred three days.



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Adoration is included in the Holy Thursday service even when the community gathers at a different church on Good Friday.

HOLY THURSDAY

The Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper is one of the most satisfying celebrations of the year because it combines Eucharist, service, and adoration. Commemorating the night when Jesus instituted the Eucharist, this Mass draws worshippers into the heart of their religious practice.

As mentioned earlier, the Ordinary may permit another celebration, even in the morning. For example, an evening celebration may present a hardship for Catholics in hospitals or nursing homes. In cluster parishes where the distances are great, a priest could celebrate a Mass in a different location and time of day. Note, however, that he does this not on his own authority, but with permission of the bishop.

The Chrism Mass is also associated with Holy Thursday. A diocese may celebrate this on a different occasion—either a few days or a full week early. However, some bishops celebrate the Chrism Mass on the morning of Holy Thursday, early enough that concelebrating priests may return to their parishes for the evening Mass. Wherever this happens, anyone in the diocese could participate in a morning Mass on Holy Thursday at the cathedral. In some places, great distances make this unlikely. But in others, the practice opens a second option for participating in the Eucharist on the day of its institution.

In its preparations, the cluster parish will want to reflect on varied facets of the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper. First, let us consider the formal reception of the holy oils. At the end of the presentation of the Chrism Mass, the Missal states, “The reception of the Holy Oils may take place in individual parishes either before the celebration of the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper or at another time that seems more appropriate.” The US

bishops state on their website that “another time that seems more appropriate” could also include the offertory procession (as in the original ritual) or perhaps before the Penitential Act. This explanation and rubrics for the reception of oils can be found at www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/triduum/reception-of-holy-oils.cfm. When the oils are part of the offertory procession, they would be presented before the bread and wine. If the presentation of oils is to occur before the Penitential Act, the oils could be carried in procession and presented after the Sign of the Cross and Greeting. For cluster parishes, the presentation may involve representatives of the various churches. When deciding on who should present the oils, consider which parishioners have a connection to these oils, either because of their ministry or their celebration of the sacraments. Someone involved with the catechumenate or the preparation of parents for infant Baptism, or the parents of a child to be baptized this year might present the oil of catechumens. A person who tends the ill or who has been anointed might present the oil of the sick. Chrism could be presented by a seminarian, a candidate for Confirmation, parents of a newborn child, or parishioners who minister to or catechize such individuals. The procession with the oils would have even more meaning if the representatives had participated in the Chrism Mass.

If the priest plans to wash feet, representatives from the cluster could present themselves for the ceremony. There is no limit to the participants. Although traditionally the feet of twelve people are washed, the rubrics do not state that number.

At Communion during the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, the Missal states: “At an appropriate moment during

Communion, the Priest entrusts the Eucharist from the table of the altar to Deacons or acolytes or other extraordinary ministers, so that afterwards it may be brought to the sick who are to receive Holy Communion at home” (33). Ideally, the sick receive Communion not during the day on Holy Thursday, but at the conclusion of this Mass. Furthermore, they are given Communion “from the table of the altar,” not from the tabernacle. They share in the Communion consecrated at this Mass. In cluster communities, ministers from each church may carry pyxes to all the sick and homebound who desire to receive that night. The outreach proclaims the complete communion of the faithful on the night of the Lord’s Supper.

The Missal’s presentation of Holy Thursday concludes with a statement that gives pause to many cluster parishes (44): “If the celebration of the Passion of the Lord on the following Friday does not take place in the same church, the Mass is concluded in the usual way and the Blessed Sacrament is placed in the tabernacle.” Almost certainly this does not pertain to clusters. More likely, it refers to a celebration in a hospital chapel or some remote region of the diocese where the bishop granted permission for an additional Holy Thursday Mass. In those circumstances, no period of adoration follows. The Blessed Sacrament is placed in the tabernacle to conclude the liturgy, and everyone goes home. In clusters, however, the same community that gathers on Holy Thursday will regroup for Good Friday, though possibly in a different church. In that case, the argument for including adoration remains strong.

GOOD FRIDAY

As mentioned earlier, one solution for Good Friday is the celebration of two services, one in the afternoon and another in the evening. This may not be ideal, but the bishop may approve it.

There are devotional options. For example, many Catholics love Stations of the Cross. Others like services based on the last words of Jesus. Still others may attend a dramatic presentation of the Way of the Cross. Especially in some ethnic communities, these devotional exercises appeal more than the official liturgy. Still, even in clusters, participation in the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord should be encouraged.

A careful selection of readers for the Passion may enhance cluster participation. Readers representing the varied churches may draw everyone deeper into the proclamation.

Churches where the liturgy is not celebrated could remain open for adoration of the cross. The rubric at the end of the Missal’s presentation of the Good Friday liturgy says, “the Cross remains on the altar with two or four candlesticks” (33). This implies that other worshippers may enter the church later in the day for prayer, and the tableau on the altar (or near it) would inspire their devotion. Similarly, those who do not participate in the liturgy in another church could encounter a similar tableau at home, spending time in prayer on this day of fast and abstinence.

THE EASTER VIGIL

Perhaps the most vexing problem at the Easter Vigil concerns the Paschal candle. Each church in the cluster needs to have a Paschal candle in its worship space, yet the liturgy presumes that only one is lighted. The web site of the United States Conference

of Catholic Bishops has addressed the question: <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/triduum/questions-and-answers.cfm>. It proposes that all the Paschal candles be prepared in advance and “blessed alongside the main candle.” However, at the Vigil, the candle is not blessed. The fire is blessed. Still, the bishops’ office recommends that only one candle lead the procession into the church, and that the other Paschal candles be lighted together with congregational candles and then extinguished with them. This would preserve some of the symbolism, especially if the additional candles were held by members of the other churches in the cluster.

The many readings at the Easter Vigil may involve members of each part of the community. In paragraph 20 of the Easter Vigil in the Holy Night, the Missal states that the seven readings from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament “should be read whenever this can be done, so that the character of the Vigil, which demands an extended period of time, may be preserved.” Many parishes abbreviate the number of readings, but the full proclamation of the word and singing of all the Responsorial Psalms invite the engagement of all the in the cluster.

For the initiation rites, members of different churches will naturally stand out as the elect come forward. The deacon or catechumenate director could announce the names and churches of each. Parish leaders should remember that the Rite of Reception of Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church may be celebrated at any time of year when the candidates are judged ready. In that case, baptized candidates in formation at churches where the Easter Vigil does not take place could celebrate with their communities at a Sunday Mass during another time of the year, perhaps in February, May, or August—whenever they are ready for reception, Confirmation, and Communion.

Although the existence of parish clusters is never ideal, the community may celebrate both reality and hope, even at the most important celebrations of the liturgical year. Through mutual observance of the death and resurrection of Christ, members may bond through prayer and fasting, pilgrimage and patience, while celebrating the Sacred Paschal Triduum. ♦

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