

Holy Week

Overview

Holy Week is the heart and center of the church year. The word “Holy” highlights the week as being very special with its roots to the early church at Jerusalem. In this country were the actual sites where Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection occurred. Holy Week concludes the 6 weeks of somber Lenten penance, fasting, prayers and special devotions.

The Pascha or Passover

The early church celebrated the Pascha as a single and separate celebration from Easter. The word Pascha comes from the Hebrew “*pesach*” which means a “passing through” that became popularized as Passover. This celebration commemorates the time when the Israelites were saved from the angel of death that swept over Egypt – taking the lives of every first-born child – but passed over the people of Israel.

Palm Sunday

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday – also called Passion Sunday, because of the theme of Jesus’ suffering and death. This day is an imitation of the triumphant entrance or parade (see Mathew 21:1-13) into Jerusalem by Jesus – with parishioners carrying blessed palms as a procession into the church. The tradition of using palms or olive branches for festivities was common at the time of Jesus – especially for important people. Sadly, in a manner of just a few days – Jesus would be mocked and abandoned by these same people.

Preparation Days

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week are a preparation for the days to follow. During the early church, sinners were absolved from their sins after 6 weeks in a public penance service.

Holy Thursday

Holy Thursday begins the Triduum – 3 days of celebration - which became the norm after the 4th century. The theme is the Lord’s last supper – which he and his apostles celebrated on the Jewish feast of Passover. The ritual of the “washing of feet” by the celebrant commemorates the action of Jesus – as a symbol of humility and service. At the end of

the service, the altar is stripped and is prepared for several hours of Eucharistic Adoration.

Good Friday

The origin of the term is thought to come from a corruption of the phrase “God’s Friday” and commemorates the day Jesus died on the cross. This is the only day of the year when Mass is not celebrated - emphasizing the death of Jesus on the cross. The celebration includes a Veneration of the Cross as the faithful approach a crucifix with reverence.

The Easter Vigil

The Easter Vigil is celebrated on the evening of Saturday – begun by the early church, which believed that Jesus would return during these night hours. It was natural for those present to be waiting. An impressive blessing and lighting of the Easter Fire

begins the vigil – with its roots to the ancient pagan practice of fires to announce the beginning of spring and to ensure good crops. The early church forbade this pagan practice and replaced it with the Easter Fire. During this service, the Easter

Candle is lighted and the Holy Water is blessed – in preparation for bringing the RCIA candidates into the church – a practice common in the early church.

With the closing of these services, the church now prepares for the 50 days of Easter – leading up to Pentecost Sunday.

