



THE THREE DAYS

A Liturgical Guide

by Lawrence J. Johnson

Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions

Acknowledgements

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The Three Days: An Introduction

Historical Survey

Origins

To have been a member of the early church was far from a private venture. Essentially it concerned belonging to a group of people who shared a common belief in the teachings and message of Jesus Christ, the Christ who died, whose body was placed in the tomb, who arose from the dead on the third day, and who returned to his Father with a promise to come again. Furthermore, these early believers also shared a common lifestyle, a pattern of living and acting which both baffled and intrigued their contemporaries. A striking characteristic of this minority religious group was that once a week, Saturday evening till Sunday (on what was called the “first day of the week” or the Lord’s Day) its adherents assembled together — listening to the sacred texts (the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets) and then sharing a common eucharistic meal together. It was this weekly cycle, based on Sunday, the day of the Lord’s triumph over death, which was the community’s sign of what it was and what it hoped to be. Certainly not all the converts were present for this weekly assembly. Nonetheless, the ideal was still beautifully expressed years later by the martyrs of Abitna, a town in Africa: “We cannot live without the Sunday gathering.”

Yet already in the second century and in Asia Minor we find another feast developing, this time an annual celebration of Christ’s victory over death by means of his resurrection. It is very likely that the early converts from Judaism continued to observe the Passover, a feast which was so important in their Jewish religious lives. Furthermore, these new Christians surely viewed this traditional Jewish observance through the eyes of their new-found faith in the Lord. The gospel accounts tell us that the passion, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ occurred at the time of the Jewish Passover. Jesus, we are told, died at the very hour when the paschal lambs were being sacrificed in the temple. The Lord’s last meal was in all probability a Passover meal. “Christ our paschal lamb has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7). There can be little doubt that the early Christian converts from Judaism gradually and increasingly came to link their new religious outlook with their Jewish religious heritage and practice with their new religious outlook. Although explicit documentary evidence is scant, there is convincing testimony pointing to a solemn annual observance, linked to the Passover, on the part of the Christian community.

Date of the Feast

One area giving us indirect evidence as to the existence of this annual feast is a dispute concerning its date. We know that early in the second century the Jewish Christians living in Asia Minor observed this annual feast on 14 Nisan according to the Jewish calendar. The Jewish Passover always fell on 14 Nisan, and so these Jewish converts celebrated the feast on the 14 Nisan, no matter on what day of the week this occurred. Called quartodecimans (from the Latin for 14), their focus was more on the death of Christ, and they claimed that their celebration on this date came from no other authority than that of St. John the Apostle. Other churches (including Rome) focused more on the resurrection and celebrated on the Sunday after 14 Nisan. Factions were soon to arise (the idea of a highly unified church in the early centuries is pure romanticism); Pope Victor (c. 189–198) intervened; threats of excommunication ensued; some bishops called for mutual toleration; a synod was called. At any rate, by the third century the question seems to have been settled, especially after the Council of Nicaea (325), which determined that the celebration should take place on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. Nonetheless, the quartodecimans survived down to the fifth century. Whatever else may be said about this dispute, it shows how seriously the early Christians viewed this feast. Differences concerning the calculation of this annual feast (Easter) continued for centuries. For those following the Gregorian calendar, formulated by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, the celebration may occur between 22 March and 25 April; for those eastern Christians who follow the more ancient Julian calendar, the feast usually occurs after the western observance.

The Name

From early on this annual feast of Christ's death and resurrection was called the Pascha or Pasch (from the Greek *paska*, which in turn comes from the Hebrew *pasa[c]h*). The Hebrew, literally meaning "passage," relates to Exodus 12:11 and Numbers 28:16 where Yahweh or Yahweh's angels pass over the homes of the Israelites in Egypt. The term Pasch was used for both the ancient Jewish as well as the new Christian observances.

The Meaning

A close examination of the few early documents that have come down to us shows that different areas focused their theology or understanding of the feast in different ways. Jewish tradition understood the Passover in two ways: that of God "passing over" and that of the Jewish people passing from slavery to freedom. In Christian tradition it becomes the "passover" or passion of Jesus Christ and the Christian passing over from death to life. Although a unity of the mystery of salvation is always seen, the spiritual filter often changes from church to church.

As already noted, for Asia Minor it was the death and suffering. For St. Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200) in Gaul, an area which observed the feast on Sunday, the resurrection seems to have been highlighted. In some areas emphasis was on Christ's passage; elsewhere it was our passage with Christ; in other places it is Christ's descent into hell and his struggle with the powers of darkness. Often there is a pronounced eschatological thrust: Christ's resurrection is the pledge of our future resurrection.

Shape of the Vigil

Due to the dearth of sources, we have little knowledge as to the details of the shape or structure of the celebration. We do know, however, that it was a night watch, a full vigil extending to sunrise the following morning. The first part of the service consisted of readings, psalms, preaching, prayers. This was followed by the eucharist, still part of a meal or separate from it. In time baptism came to be celebrated during this night, the newly baptized being, as one author puts it, "breathing icons of the risen Christ." The first explicit testimony of baptisms celebrated during the Vigil seems to have been given by Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220) in Africa, with the practice of baptizing at Easter, and in some areas also at Pentecost, becoming common in the fourth century.

Fasting

One of the most expressive elements of the early Pascha was that the faithful fasted one or two days (in some areas even up to a week) before the celebration. This fast, called the "core" of every Christian fast, was serious business indeed. It was very, very strict and uninterrupted. If unable to be kept at the regular time, the discipline was, at least in some places, observed after Pentecost. It was only with the Vigil that the fast was broken. The meaning of this ascetical practice, at least according to Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220), was that a person fasts because the bridegroom has been taken away. The Christian goes from fast to feast. The fast is eschatological, broken by participation in the eucharist which is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

Pentecost

From at least the early years of the third century the feast of the Lord's resurrection extended onward for fifty days (Pentecost). This period of time, the oldest liturgical season of the church year, was, as it were, a continuous feast, an extension of Easter joy, a Sunday extending for fifty days, a prolongation of what had been celebrated. It was a time when customary penitential practices like kneeling and fasting were put aside. These days, constituting a week of weeks, were seen as prefiguring eternity. The fast is over; now is the time to rejoice since the

Savior has risen. By the end of the third century more and more emphasis was placed on the concluding days of the observance, and from the middle of the fourth century there began to appear special commemorations of the Ascension and Pentecost Sunday itself.

Jerusalem

After Constantine the Great (274 or 288–337) granted freedom to Christianity (contrary to what is sometimes stated, he did not make Christianity the official state religion), the church no longer existed as a persecuted and marginal group. The Emperor, although baptized only shortly before his death, was a pious, believing man who constructed buildings for worship. Consequently people could express their faith in public, not only in Rome and Constantinople but also in Jerusalem where most of the inhabitants were now Christians; the Emperor Hadrian (117–138) had forbidden Jews not only from living in the city but also even from visiting it. At certain times of the year Jerusalem's Christian population swelled as pilgrims from Europe came to visit the holy sites. One such visitor, a Spanish nun named Egeria, left us a narrative, unfortunately incomplete, of her visit to Jerusalem and elsewhere in the east. Probably written between 394 and 417, the document describes the Jerusalem liturgy and especially the liturgies of Holy Week when the faithful gathered on Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter night, etc. What we find here is a type of "travelling" liturgy as the people moved from place to place, from shrine to shrine or church to church connected with the actual events of the Lord's passion and resurrection. What some see here is a historicizing tendency, a celebration of each step taken by Christ on the way to the resurrection. Several times a day (for example on Holy Thursday and Good Friday) the people gathered for prayer or for liturgical celebration. As pilgrims like Egeria returned home to the west, they brought with them the memories of what they had seen in Jerusalem. And so a liturgical migration took place. What was done in Jerusalem influenced western local practice. The primitive paschal celebration continued to be celebrated, but people also began to hold, following Jerusalem practice, liturgies on the Thursday and Friday before the Vigil.

We should remember that liturgical practice often differed from one local church to another. Strict liturgical conformity was not an object of concern. Certainly there were general ritual patterns: for example, all Christians shared the table of God's word and participated at the table of the eucharist; baptism included a water rite together with some type of baptismal formula; a bishop was ordained by the laying on of hands and an invocatory prayer. Yet at an early period regional patterns of liturgy developed, often centered around an important city (for example, Milan, Toledo, Alexandria, Jerusalem). There was no liturgical office in Rome overseeing liturgical developments. The bishop was trusted to know what

was appropriate for his diocese. And so it was that much diversity and local freedom existed as local churches in the west began to observe Holy Thursday and Good Friday before the all-important Saturday night Vigil. The history of the celebrations prior to the Vigil and even the rites of the Vigil itself form a mosaic of local traditions and general practice.

The Triduum

The most ancient designation for the days on which the church observed, either by ritual, by fasting, or by both, the death and resurrection of Christ is *triduum* (*tres dies*, i.e., three days). St. Ambrose (c. 339–397) speaks of a “sacred triduum” on which Christ “suffered and rested and rose.” In Africa St. Augustine (354–430) speaks of the “most holy triduum of the crucified, buried, and risen Lord.” The days designated by *triduum* were Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. But once the ceremonies of the Vigil were, during the Middle Ages, shifted to Holy Saturday morning, Holy Thursday became part of the triduum in order to fill out the span of three days: Thursday, Friday, Saturday. It was only in the 1930s that the expressions “Easter triduum” and “Paschal triduum” came into use. Today the *triduum* begins on Holy Thursday evening and concludes with evening prayer on Easter Sunday.

Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages the triduum underwent a period of disintegration whose aftermath would continue down to the middle of the twentieth century. The services came to be celebrated early in the morning, with only a few pious people attending. Priest, servers, and a few of the laity gathered at a time of day that *anticipated* events in Christ’s life, for example, the commemoration of the crucifixion early on Friday morning. Furthermore, the powerful symbolism (e.g., that of light and darkness) was simply lost when celebrating what was to be a night vigil at 7:30 in the morning.

Such anomalies were carried over into the 1570 Missal of Pope Pius V, which was issued after the Council of Trent. This was the book to be followed by all the churches of the Roman Rite except for those possessing a local liturgy that was over two hundred years old.

Modern Reforms

Historical investigation into the origins and development of Christian worship began well before the nineteenth century. Study of the sermons, dogmatic tracts, and other writings of the Church Fathers, research upon various early church documents and early medieval liturgical books — all contributed to an increasing

understanding of the church's liturgical traditions in both east and west. Especially in the twentieth century there developed an interest in the pastoral aspects of liturgy, with a focus on liturgical instruction and participation by the people. These two currents, one historical and the other pastoral, resulted in what has been called the "liturgical movement." Contributing to this movement was an increasing interest in patristics, Scripture, and catechetics.

One of the earliest fruits of the liturgical movement was the 1951 reform, "by way of experiment" and at the discretion of the bishop, of the Easter Vigil, which was henceforth to be held in the evening. Then on 16 November 1955 a reform of all Holy Week was issued by Rome, a reform anticipating some of the postconciliar reforms that, as it were, came to be codified in the 1970 Roman Missal, the book containing the rites observed today for the triduum. One constant feature of all these reforms is the primacy of the assembly, from the times appointed for the celebration of the various liturgies to emphasis on the active participation of the people.

Documentation

Circular Letter "Paschalis sollemnitatis"

- 1 The order for the solemnity of Easter and all of Holy Week, which was first reformed by Pope Pius XII in 1951 and 1955, has been joyously received by all the Churches of the Roman Rite. Vatican Council II, particularly in its Constitution on the Liturgy, focused again and again from tradition on Christ's paschal mystery and reminded us that from that mystery all the sacraments and the sacramentals derive their power.
- 2 Each week has its beginning and high point in the celebration of Sunday, which always is marked by a paschal character. Similarly, the liturgical year reaches its shining culmination in the sacred Easter triduum of the passion and resurrection of the Lord, for which prepares and which a joyous cycle of fifty days prolongs.
- 3 In many parts of the Christian world the faithful together with their pastors attach great importance to these rites and take part in them in great numbers with genuine spiritual benefit. But in some regions the warm devotion with which the restoration of the Easter Vigil was welcomed at the beginning has begun to cool with the passage of time. In some places the very meaning of the Vigil has been so lost that its celebration is regarded as merely an evening Mass, celebrated in the same way and at the same hour as the usual Sunday Mass that is

anticipated on Saturday evening.

Elsewhere the proper hours for the sacred triduum are not observed.

And since popular devotions are scheduled at more convenient times, the faithful take part in these rather than in the celebrations of the liturgy.

Without any doubt such problems result above all from a still inadequate formation of the clergy and the faithful with regard to the paschal mystery as the center of the liturgical year and the Christian life.

- 4 The concurrence in many places of vacation time with Holy Week and the mentality of modern society also present obstacles to the faithful's participation in the triduum celebrations.
- 27 ...The Easter triduum begins with the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, continues on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, has its center in the Easter Vigil, and concludes with evening prayer of Easter Sunday...
- 38 The Church celebrates the great mysteries of human redemption each year from the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Thursday to evening prayer of Easter Sunday. This period is rightly named the "triduum of Christ crucified, buried, and risen"; it is also called the Easter triduum because during it the paschal mystery, that is, the passage of the Lord from this world to the Father, is represented and accomplished. In the celebration of this mystery the Church is immediately joined to Christ, its Spouse, through liturgical and sacramental signs.
- 41 A proper celebration of the Easter triduum requires a sufficient number of ministers and they must be carefully instructed in their functions. But pastors must also not fail to explain to the faithful in the most effective way the meaning and order of the celebrations and to prepared the faithful to take an active and fruitful part in them.
- 42 The singing of the people, the ministers, and the priest celebrant have a special importance in the celebration of Holy Week and especially during the Easter triduum. Singing befits the solemnity of these days and the liturgical texts have their proper impact when they are sung. The Conferences of Bishops are requested, if they have not already done so, to provide music for these texts and acclamations that should always be sung. These are:
 - a the general intercessions on Good Friday, the deacon's invitation, if it is used, and the acclamation of the people;
 - b the songs for the unveiling and adoration of the cross;
 - c the acclamations for the procession with the Easter candle and

the Easter proclamation (*Exsultet*), the responsorial *Alleluia*, the Litany of the Saints, and the acclamation after the blessing of water. The liturgical texts of chants for participation by the people are not to be omitted as an easy way out; the vernacular versions of these texts are to be set to music. If the vernacular texts for the liturgy are not yet available with musical setting, other similar texts may be used in the interim. A proper repertory for exclusive use in these celebrations should be composed as soon as possible. In particular the following should be provided:...

- c songs for the procession with the gifts at the Mass of the Lord's Supper and hymns for the procession with the blessed sacrament to the repository;
- d responsories for the psalms at the Easter Vigil and songs for the sprinkling with holy water.

The passion narrative, the Easter proclamation *Exsultet*, the blessing of baptismal water also should be set to suitable music that will facilitate the singing of these texts.

The rich treasure of sacred music, both ancient and contemporary, should be used in major churches, but some measure of participation should be left for the people.

- 43 It is recommended that small communities of religious, whether clerical or nonclerical, and also lay communities take part in the celebrations of the Easter triduum in some principal church. Similarly, in places where the number of participants, ministers, and singers is insufficient, the celebration of the Easter triduum should not be held, and the faithful should gather in some larger church. In the case where several small parishes are under the care of one priest, it is recommended that, if at all possible, the members of these parishes be brought together in one principal church to take part in the celebrations. In the case where a pastor has charge of two or more parishes where a good number of the faithful participate and the celebrations can be carried out with due care and solemnity, he may, for the good of the faithful, hold the celebrations of the Easter Vigil in each parish, observing those things that are to be observed. . .

1 Christ's saving work is celebrated in sacred mystery by the Church on fixed days throughout the year. Each week on the day called the Lord's Day the Church commemorates the Lord's resurrection. Once a year at Easter the Church honors this resurrection and passion with the utmost solemnity. In fact through the yearly cycle the Church unfolds the entire mystery of Christ and keeps the anniversaries of the saints. . .

18 Christ redeemed us all and gave perfect glory to God principally through his paschal

mystery: dying he destroyed our death and rising he restored our life. Therefore the Easter triduum of the passion and resurrection of Christ is the culmination of the entire liturgical year.... *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*

66 Solo playing of musical instruments is forbidden during...the Easter triduum... *Instruction "Musicam sacram" on music in the liturgy*

Reflection

The Paschal triduum, called the very heart of the liturgical year, contains the most solemn celebrations of the church year. Just as Sunday gives meaning to the week that follows, so the triduum is the focal point and very center of the church's yearly cycle of feasts and seasons.

God's plan for the world was revealed in Jesus Christ who took on human form so that he might "dwell among us" (Jn 1:14). While this human existence of the Word extended from the Lord's initial appearance on earth to his glorious ascension into heaven, the very core of Christ's mission is to be found in his death and resurrection. By dying and rising God's Son broke the bonds of death and was restored to life. He passed through pain and darkness so that he might lead us to the fullness of light.

Nonetheless, what Christ accomplished, his total self-giving, does not remain isolated in the past, shut up, as it were, in the confines of history. Nor is the triduum liturgy merely a commemoration of a past event, for the power of Christ's actions remain; it continues on. So it is that through the liturgy we participate in Christ's victory over sin and death. What Christ did some nineteen centuries ago has a presence, a power, an ongoing effect. It happens in us today, and it also looks forward to the future, to the time of Christ's second coming, to the time of our own bodily resurrection. During these holy days we celebrate not only Christ's passover but also — joined as we are to him — our own passover, for what we celebrate are not the historical moments of Christ's life but his saving mystery in which we participate.

The climax of the triduum is the Paschal Vigil during which the community welcomes and initiates new members through baptism, confirmation, and the eucharist. It was not by accident that initiation came to be associated with this celebration since it is by reason of baptism that we share in the power of Christ's triumphant resurrection. As St. Paul so wonderfully expressed it, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:3–4).

Suggested Questions for Discussion

- 1 When should planning for the Easter triduum begin?
- 2 Why is it important to plan for the overall season of Lent? Triduum? Fifty Days?
- 3 How can the celebration of the triduum be made to appear as a unitive celebration?
- 4 What principle or principles would govern the choice of what parts of the liturgy are to be sung?
- 5 May the triduum celebrations be repeated on the same day in a parish?
- 6 What special challenges exist regarding the triduum in parishes customarily having separate liturgies for various language groups?
- 7 Why is it especially important that the ministers during the triduum represent all ethnic groups in the parish? What qualifications should these ministers have?
- 8 Is the role of the deacon especially important during the triduum?
- 9 In places where there is no priest, may the deacon preside at any of the triduum celebrations? If so, what does this say about the triduum as a whole?
- 10 What part should the catechumens play in the Thursday and Friday celebrations of the triduum?
- 11 It has been said that the best catechesis of the triduum is its exquisite celebration. What does this mean in regard to the symbols used during these days?
- 12 Many processions occur during the triduum. What elements contribute to an orderly and well-planned procession?

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