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Holy Week: "He Loved Them to the End"

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At the heart of the Liturgical year lies the Paschal Mystery, the Triduum of our Lord's Crucifixion, Death and Resurrection. The whole history of

salvation revolves around these holy days, which went unnoticed by most of mankind, and which now the Church celebrates “from the rising of the sun to its setting.”[1] The whole liturgical year, a summary of God’s interaction with men, stems from the “memory” the Church conserves of Jesus’ “hour”: when *having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*[2]

During these days the Church, in her maternal wisdom, sets us within the decisive moments of our redemption. Provided we don’t resist, we are attracted by the prayerful recollection with which the liturgy of Holy Week leads us into the Passion; the reverence with which we are urged to keep watch beside our Lord; and the outburst of joy in the Easter Vigil. Many of the rites that we observe during these days are rooted in very ancient traditions; their power is attested by the piety of

Christians and the faith of the saints
for two thousand years.

Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday is, as it were, the door that precedes and prepares us for the Paschal Triduum. “Now that we are at the threshold of Holy Week, and so very close to the moment when the Redemption of the whole human race was accomplished on Calvary, it seems to be an especially appropriate time for you and me to reflect on how our Lord Jesus Christ saved us, and to contemplate this love of his—this truly inexpressible love—for poor creatures like us, who have been made from the clay of the earth.”[3]

When the early Christians heard the liturgical proclamation of the Gospel narrative of the Passion and the homily by the bishop, they knew they were not simply present at a mere representation: “for their pious

hearts, there was no difference between hearing what had been proclaimed and seeing what had happened.”[4] In the narratives of the Passion, Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem is, as it were, the official presentation that our Lord makes of himself as the desired and hoped-for Messiah, apart from whom there is no salvation. His is the gesture of the savior King who enters into his own house. Among his own, some failed to receive him, but others did, acclaiming him as the *Blessed One* who comes in the name of the Lord. [5]

Our Lord, always present and active in the Church, renews in the liturgy, year after year, this solemn entrance on “Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord,” as it is called in the Missal. Its very name implies a two-fold element: on the one hand triumphal, and on the other sorrowful. “On this day,” we read in the rubrics, “the

Church celebrates Christ's entrance into Jerusalem to accomplish his Paschal Mystery.”[6]

His arrival is surrounded with acclamations and cries of jubilation, although the crowds do not yet know Jesus' real destination, and they will be confronted with the scandal of the Cross. We, however, living in the time of the Church, do know where our Lord's steps are heading: he is entering Jerusalem “to accomplish his Paschal Mystery.” Therefore, we Christians who have acclaimed Jesus as Messiah in the Palm Sunday procession are not surprised to find ourselves taken straight to the sorrowful events of our Lord's Passion.

The liturgy's conjunction of lights and shadows in God's plan holds great meaning for us. Palm Sunday does not simply juxtapose two separate celebrations. The entrance

rite of the Mass is the procession itself, which leads directly to the Collect prayer: “Almighty and ever-living God,” we say to the Father, “who caused our Savior to take flesh, and submit to the cross...”[7] Here everything already speaks to us of what is going to happen in the coming days.

Holy Thursday

The Paschal Triduum begins with the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper. Holy Thursday comes between Lent, which is ending, and the Triduum, which is beginning. The connecting thread of this day’s entire celebration, the light illuminating everything, is Christ’s Paschal Mystery: the very heart of the event that is renewed in the sacramental signs.

The sacred action centers on the Supper in which Jesus, before giving himself over to death, entrusted to

the Church the testament of his love, the Sacrifice of the eternal covenant. [8] “While he was instituting the Eucharist as an everlasting memorial of himself and his paschal sacrifice, he symbolically placed this supreme act of revelation in the light of his mercy. Within the very same context of mercy, Jesus entered upon his passion and death, conscious of the great mystery of love that he would consummate on the Cross.”[9]

The liturgy leads us in a real and vivid way into this mystery of Jesus’ self-giving for our salvation. *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.*[10]

Our Lord’s *fiat* that is the source of our salvation becomes present in the Church’s celebration. Thus the Collect has no hesitation in including us, in the present tense, in the Last Supper: *Sacratissimam, Deus,*

frequentatibus Cenam..., the Latin says succinctly, “O God, who have called us to participate in this most sacred Supper...”[11]

This is “the most sacred day on which our Lord Jesus Christ was handed over for our sake.”[12] Jesus’ words, *I go away, and I will come to you . . . it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you,*[13] point us towards the mysterious tension between our Lord’s absence and presence that presides over the whole Paschal Triduum and, from there, the Church’s entire life.

Therefore neither Holy Thursday nor the days that follow it are simply days of sadness or mourning: to see the Holy Triduum in that way would be to go back to the situation of the disciples before the Resurrection.

“This is the source of the joy we feel on Holy Thursday—the realization

that the Creator has loved his creatures to such an extent.”[14] To perpetuate in the world the infinite affection concentrated in his Paschal Mystery, in his passage from this world to the Father, Jesus makes a gift to us of his entire being, with his Body and his Blood, in a new memorial: the bread and wine that are turned into “the bread of life” and “our spiritual drink.”[15] Our Lord tells them that, in the future, they are to do what he has just done, in commemoration of him.[16] And thus the Paschal celebration of the Church, the Holy Eucharist, is born.

Two moments in the celebration are very eloquent, if we consider them in their mutual relation: the washing of the feet and the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament. The washing of the feet of the Twelve makes manifest, a few hours before the Crucifixion, the greatest love: laying down one’s life for one’s friends.[17]

The liturgy renews this gesture, which so surprised the apostles, in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the possibility of washing the feet of some of the faithful. At the conclusion of the Mass, the procession to reserve the Blessed Sacrament and the adoration of the faithful reveals the Church's loving response to our Lord's humble kneeling before the Apostles' feet. These moments of silent prayer, extended into the night, invite us to remember Christ's priestly prayer in the Cenacle.[18]

Good Friday

The Good Friday liturgy begins with the priests' prostration, in place of the customary initial kiss. It is a gesture of special veneration for the altar, which is bare, empty of everything, evoking the Crucified Lord at the hour of his Passion. The silence is broken by an ardent prayer

in which the celebrant appeals to God's mercy—*Reminiscere miserationum tuarum, Domine*—and beseeches the Father for the eternal protection that the Son has gained for us by the shedding of his blood, that is, by giving his life for us.[19]

An ancient tradition reserves for this day the proclamation of the Passion according to St. John as the culminating moment of the liturgy of the Word. This Gospel narrative highlights the lofty majesty of Christ, who “gives himself up to death with the full freedom of Love.”[20] Our Lord responds courageously to those who come to seize him: *when he said to them ‘I am he,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.*[21] Later we hear him tell Pilate, “*my kingship is not of this world,*”[22] and therefore his followers haven't fought to free him. *Consummatum est,*[23] it is finished: our Lord is faithful to his Father right

to the end, and thus he overcomes the world.[24]

After the proclamation of the Passion and the universal prayer, the liturgy directs our attention to the *Lignum Crucis*, the tree of the Cross: the glorious instrument for mankind's redemption. The adoration of the holy Cross is a gesture of faith and a proclamation of Jesus' victory over the devil, sin and death. With him, we Christians have also won, because "*this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.*"[25]

The Church envelops the Cross with honor and reverence. The bishop comes up to kiss it without chasuble or ring.[26] Then comes the adoration by the faithful, with songs celebrating its victorious strength: "We adore your Cross, O Lord, we praise and glorify your holy Resurrection, because of the wood of a tree, joy has come to the whole

world.”[27] It is a mysterious blending of death and life in which God wants us to share: “Sometimes we renew the joyous impulse that took our Lord to Jerusalem. Other times, the pain of the agony which ended on Calvary... Or the glory of his triumph over death and sin. But always, the love—joyful, sorrowful, glorious—of the Heart of Jesus Christ!”[28]

Holy Saturday and the Easter Vigil

An anonymous text from Christian antiquity condenses for us the mystery that the Church commemorates on Holy Saturday: Christ’s descent into hell. “What is it that takes place today? A great silence envelops the earth, a great silence and stillness. The earth trembles and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has come to raise all who have slept ever since the world began.”[29] Just as in

Genesis we saw God resting after his work of Creation, now our Lord rests from his redemptive toil. For the paschal feast, which is about to dawn in the world, is “the feast of the new creation:”^[30] it cost our Lord his life to restore Life to us.

A little while, and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me,^[31] our Lord said to the Apostles on the eve of his Passion. While we await his return, let us meditate on his descent into the darkness of death, in which those just men and women of the old Covenant were still submerged. Christ, bearing in his hand the liberating sign of the Cross, put an end to their sleep and led them into the light of the new Kingdom: “Awaken, you who are sleeping, for you did not believe so that you might remain captive in the abysm.”^[32] From the eighth-century Carolingian monasteries, the commemoration of

this great Sabbath spread throughout Europe: the day of awaiting the Resurrection, as the Mother of Jesus did so intensely, which led the Church to make every Saturday into a day of devotion to our Lady. Now, more than ever, Mary is the *stella matutina*,^[33] the morning star announcing the arrival of the Lord: the *Lucifer matutinus*,^[34] the sun arising from on high, *oriens ex alto*.
^[35]

In the night of this great Sabbath, the Church gathers in the most solemn of her vigils to celebrate the Resurrection of her Spouse, extending even to the first hours of dawn. This celebration is the fundamental core of the Christian liturgy throughout the whole year. A great variety of symbolic elements express the passage from darkness to light, from death to the new life in the Resurrection of our Lord: the fire,

the candle, the water, the incense,
the music and the bells....

The light from the candle is a symbol of Christ, the Light of the world, who illumines and inundates everything; the fire is the Holy Spirit, enkindled by Christ in the hearts of the faithful; the water signifies the passage to a new life in Christ, the source of life; the Paschal *alleluia* is the hymn of the pilgrims traveling towards the heavenly Jerusalem; the bread and wine of the Eucharist are a pledge of the eschatological banquet with the Risen One. While we take part in the Easter Vigil, we recognize with the eyes of faith that this holy assembly is the community of the Risen Lord; that this time is a new time, open to the definitive *today* of the glorious Christ: *haec est dies, quam fecit Dominus*,^[36] this is the new day our Lord has inaugurated, the day that “never sets.”^[37]

[1] *Roman Missal*, Third Eucharistic Prayer.

[2] *Jn* 13:1.

[3] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 110.

[4] St. Leo the Great, *Sermon on Passion Sunday* 52, 1 (CCL 138, 307).

[5] See *Mt* 21:9.

[6] *Roman Missal*, Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, no. 1.

[7] *Ibid.*, Collect.

[8] See *Roman Missal*, Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, Holy Thursday, Collect

[9] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae vultus*, April 11, 2015, no. 7.

[10] *Jn* 10:17-38.

[11] *Roman Missal*, Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, Holy Thursday, Collect.

[12] *Ibid.*, special form for *Communicantes*.

[13] *Jn* 14:28; *Jn* 16:7.

[14] Saint Josemaria, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 84.

[15] *Roman Missal*, Offertory.

[16] See *I Cor* 11:23-25.

[17] See *Jn* 15:13.

[18] See *Jn* 17.

[19] See *The Roman Missal*, Celebration of the Passion of the Lord, Good Friday, Collect.

[20] Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, Tenth Station.

[21] *Jn* 18:6.

[22] *Jn* 18:36.

[23] *Jn* 19:30.

[24] See *Jn* 16:33.

[25] *1 Jn* 5:4.

[26] See *Ceremonial for Bishops*, nos. 315, 322.

[27] *Roman Missal*, Celebration of the Passion of the Lord, Good Friday, no. 20.

[28] *The Way of the Cross*, Fourteenth Station, point 3.

[29] *Homily on the Great and Holy Sabbath* (PG 43, 439).

[30] Benedict XVI, *Homily on the Easter Vigil*, April 7, 2012.

[31] *Jn* 16:16.

[32] *Homily on the Great and Holy Sabbath* (PG 43, 462).

[33] The Litany of Loreto (see *Sir* 50:6).

[34] *Roman Missal*, Easter Vigil, Easter Prayer.

[35] Liturgy of the Hours, hymn *Benedictus* (*Lk* 1:78).

[36] *Ps* 117 [118]: 24.

[37] See *The Roman Missal*, Easter Vigil, Easter Prayer.

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