

THE
EASTER LITURGY

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION AND
EXPLANATION OF THE CHURCH'S
EASTER CEREMONIES

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5 Gt. Denmark Street, Dublin,

PRINTED BY THE LEINSTER LEADER, LTD.

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Preparation

Why this was written

Last year the times for the various ceremonies of Holy Week and many things in the ceremonies themselves were changed. The reason was three-fold:—so that many more ordinary Catholics would be able to attend the Church's ceremonies on those days and profit by them; so that the ceremonies themselves would be more impressive and full of meaning for those attending them and thus be sources of greater grace for them; and so that by restoring the ceremonies to their original times, the full meaning of their rich symbolism (which was gradually lost over the centuries), would be again clear and thus effective. In this country, thank God, the response and the reaction to these changes were very striking and encouraging. People seemed particularly caught by the new times; and they showed their great interest and enthusiasm, in the huge numbers attending the ceremonies and receiving Holy Communion on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. God alone knows how great was the undoubtedly very great spiritual fruit.

In many churches it was possible to have instructions and commentaries given on the meaning of what was going on, and the people liked them. Many people wanted to know more about the meaning of Easter beforehand. And that is the reason for these few pages—to try to explain a little more what happens at Easter, and what it means.

For Sodalists

The changes at Easter are meant to benefit all Catholics. They will have their effect only if Catholics prepare themselves to benefit by them. But whatever about others, Sodalists, who are supposed to be first-rate Catholics and people giving good example and a lead to others, should be well prepared. They should know what Easter and its ceremonies are all about, and be able to explain it to others. According to Rule 33 they should know what is the Church's mind about Easter, and do all they can to make it known.

The first thing is that Sodalists should be ready and able to give a hand, if necessary, to those responsible for the various preparations. If they know and understand what the ceremonies are about, and what the Church wants, they will be able to do this properly. For example, the Palm Sunday procession; the various responses the congregation is supposed to make (here you can give

a lead, provided you know what is wanted); the singing of hymns; the preparation of the Altar of Repose—the new regulations state that it should be very simple, decorated with just a few flowers and candles.

But perhaps for various reasons you will not have some of the ceremonies, like the Palm Sunday procession, in your church—or they may be done in simplified form: or the people may not be able to take the part they should in singing and giving responses to the prayers, etc. In that case you will have to make up yourself for what is lacking in the meaning of the ceremony, by knowing the meaning of what is supposed to be done, and using your missal to make up for its absence.

All during these days you should use your missal, the prayer book of the Church, and pray its prayers and try to live the meaning of the actions done during the ceremonies.

Read and study, if you can, the story of the Passion, the Old Testament prophecies of Our Lord's sufferings and glory, St. John's whole Gospel. Every Sodalist who really wants to understand and follow the ceremonies should get a copy of the "Holy Week Manual" published by Burns and Oates.

Second Sunday in Passiontide

PALM SUNDAY

The important thing about the ceremony before the Mass on Palm Sunday is not the blessing and distribution of palm, but the procession of the people carrying the palms in their hands. In the new instructions and regulations, this has been stressed by making the blessing shorter and less important, and insisting on the procession. Another new thing is that the blessing of the palms is now done with the priest facing the congregation—and the people may bring their own for blessing.


The Procession Why the procession? Because this Sunday commemorates the triumphal entry of Our Lord into Jerusalem, the Sunday before His death. That day, when He set out for Jerusalem from the nearby village of Bethany, a large crowd of His followers and admirers went with Him, singing and proclaiming Him Son of David, coming in the Lord's name. But the following Friday there were none to stand by Him but His mother and one apostle.

Our procession this day is to recall the scene to us. And so in the procession we are supposed to carry palms in our hands and sing hymns of praise, as was done that first Palm Sunday. But why should we take part in the procession? To show publicly our love and gratitude to Our Lord, our devotion to Him; to show our loyalty to Him now that He (and we with Him), is going to enter into His glory. But first must come the Passion and Death—and so we listen to the story of His sufferings in the Gospel of the Mass which follows. While

it is being read, according to new regulations, we do **not** hold palms in our hand; but we should be thinking over in our minds the meaning of what we proclaimed during the procession.

The Passion When the Passion came, where were all those crowds who had rejoiced in His glory and shouted their praises and showed signs of devotion the previous Sunday, when it was safe enough to do so? And are we only interested in Christ's glory, and not in the supreme act of His love for us, His Passion and Death? As Thomas a Kempis says: "Jesus has now many lovers of His heavenly kingdom, but few bearers of His Cross. All desire to rejoice with Him, but few are willing to endure anything for His sake." Are we prepared, as we should be as Catholics that are worth their salt, to stand by Christ in everything, to praise Him not only with our words and hymns where there is no difficulty or danger, but in action even when it costs us something, when we may have to share His sufferings and sorrow, when there is some danger and difficulty, when it is not as safe for us as it is on Palm Sunday where, lost among the crowd we sing Hosannas, and "Glory, praise and honour to Christ our King and Redeemer."

At the end of the procession, when we put our palm aside to bring them home after Mass, the priest, facing the congregation, sings a new prayer we could well use to remind ourselves now of what Palm Sunday means, and later why we brought those palms home and keep them in our houses:


"Lord Jesus Christ, our King and Redeemer, we have sung solemn praises in your honour as we carried these palm-branches in our hands. Graciously grant us now, that the grace of Your blessing may come wherever we bring these branches, and that Your power, overcoming every wickedness and evil suggestion of the devil, may protect those You have redeemed."

Holy Thursday

After Palm Sunday, Thursday is the first big day of Holy Week and one of the loveliest in the whole of the Church year. The theme is that of the week—the Love of Our Lord—but seen under two aspects, that of the Passion and Death and the institution of Mass and the Blessed Eucharist. We commemorate Christ's gift of himself **for** us, and His gift of Himself **to** us. It is fundamentally a day of sadness but the greatest joy keeps breaking through and is probably more predominant in the end. Today is a sad day because it recalls the **Last** Supper of Jesus with his disciples, the Agony in the Garden where Jesus saw **my** sins, and the betrayal by Judas with a sign of love—a kiss. The man who would have been happier unborn. Think of what he did. He handed over his God to men, and they killed Him. We too have betrayed Jesus, professed our love and then slapped His face. Let us approach this ceremony with our souls washed clean in Confession, as the feet of the disciples were washed by Jesus. That is the sad note of this evening's Mass and yet it is not altogether

tragic for by Christ's death life came back to the world. The introit begins: "It is for us to **glory** in the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in Whom is our salvation, life and resurrection." We are sad and still we rejoice, we are ashamed and yet we are glad. But not until Christ rises again can we fully celebrate.

God with us The cause of our joy is really other. You will notice that the vestments are white (not purple), that there are flowers on the altar, that at the Gloria the bells are all rung and the organ plays at full volume. Why all this in the middle of Holy Week? This is the evening of the Last Supper. Jesus before His Passion gave us a lasting memento—a ritual which would not just "remind" us that God once lived on the earth for a short period in history, but one that would prolong His Real Presence **in fact**, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. "The Word was made flesh," says St. John, "and dwelt among us"; He still **dwells** among us and always will.

The Blessed Eucharist On that evening, with His own hands Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, gave **Himself** under the form of their ordinary food and drink to His apostles. For the thanksgiving after that first Mass He gave them a beautiful talk (Jn. 14-17) which you should read and absorb carefully. After your own Communion on this and any other day hear Jesus talk to you these same words. Today there is only one Mass, so that like the Apostles, all of us, priests and laity, will go to the same Communion table together, receive Our Lord together, and in that way stress the unity of love that should exist between us all, through this wonderful sacrament. "Charity," says St. Paul, "that is the bond which makes us perfect." Today you have no end of material for meditation—Christ's utter love for us, the gift of Himself to us this day especially, and **every day** of our lives if we want it.

The Blessed Eucharist is finally honoured when after Mass, It is brought with great ceremony in procession to the Altar of Repose. Lights are carried, the Eucharist is continually incensed by two thurifers and the choir (and people too, if possible) break out into the triumphant and magnificent Pange Lingua, with its two familiar final verses—Tantum Ergo:

"Sing my tongue the Saviour's glory,
Of His flesh the mystery sing."

A mystery, yes, God first made man, and then appearing in the form of our daily bread. We have plenty to pray and think about and understand.

The Message of Love There is a final part of the ceremony which may not be done in your church but is altogether intrinsic to the spirit of the day—that is, the washing of the feet or the Maundy. Today is often called Maundy Thursday, because

of the "*mandatum*" or *command* of Jesus at the Last Supper: "I have a new commandment to give to you, that you are to love one another; that your love for one another is to be like the love I have borne you. The mark by which all men will know you for my disciples will be the love you bear one another." The gospel of the Mass recalls the scene and the lesson, when Jesus took off His outer garments and washed the dusty feet of the Apostles, the protesting Peter and the treacherous Judas alike—a job given to the lowest servants in the house. "You hail me as the Master and the Lord and you are right . . . If I have washed your feet, I who am the Master and Lord, you in your turn ought to wash each other's feet; I have been setting you an example which will teach you in your turn to do what I have done for you."

That is the second great lesson of today—the love we owe to every single person is proportionate to the love Jesus has shown to me. The grace from this evening's ceremonies will be the deepening of the union between Christ and all my brothers and sisters and myself. Why? Because through Communion "I live, now not I, *Christ lives in me.*" During the washing of the feet the choir sing a beautiful hymn you should know and pray:—

"Where charity and love are, there is God. The love of Christ brings us together as one."

You could do no better before the Altar of Repose than read and pray your missal in the presence of Christ who loves you.

Good Friday

What happens on Good Friday?

First of all there is no Mass on this day, which is called in the new missal "Friday of Our Lord's Passion and Death." What used to be called the "Mass of the Pre-Sanctified" (wrongly, because it was not a Mass at all, though there were some similarities with an ordinary Mass) no longer exists. Instead we have a Communion Service so that the faithful may receive more fully the fruits of their redemption by devoutly receiving Christ's Body on this afternoon when It was given to suffering and death to save us. But this Communion Service is only part of the day's solemn action of the Church, which we as Catholics share in.

The Readings The rite begins with various Readings. After a few moments of silent prayer, during which we should recall what we are commemorating now, and what we are about to do, the priest recites this prayer for us:

"O God, by the sufferings of Christ, Your Son and our Lord, You have released us from the sentence of death incurred by the sin of our first parents and passed on to us as their children. Grant that we may become like Christ, and being made holy become reflections of Your heavenly grace, just as until now we have had only earthly natures to show."

We all say "Amen." Then follow some readings from the Old Testament, which give us some thoughts suitable for this day. After that we have the story of Our Lord's Passion and Death as told by St. John. As we listen, let us remember that all this which happened one Friday afternoon long ago is what we are commemorating **this** Friday afternoon.

**The Church's
Family
Prayers**

The next part of the rite is the Solemn Prayers. We must remember that these are **our** prayers, and the Church has tried in her new regulations to bring that home to us more. These prayers or similar ones used to be said at all Masses once upon a time. They are the family prayers of the Catholic Church and we should try to enter into their spirit and really pray them. The priest, singing, first announces the intention we pray for: then for a few moments we all kneel down to pray for that intention in our own words; one of the celebrants then tells us to stand up again, while the priest puts our prayer into a general public form which he chants for us. There are nine of these intentions and prayers altogether—some of them are well worth our learning off and using during the year for ourselves. The first intention we are asked to pray for is our Holy Church: "Dear brethren" the priest says, "let us pray for the Holy Church of God, that our Lord and God may be pleased to give her peace, to preserve her unity and to guard her throughout the world, subduing principalities and powers under her sway: and that He will allow us to lead a peaceful and tranquil life, to the glory of God the Almighty Father." The second intention is for our Holy Father the Pope; the next for all the clergy and the faithful. Then comes a new intention and prayer, for the Rulers of Countries: "Let us pray too for all rulers of states, and for their ministers and deputies, that our God and Lord may guide their minds and hearts according to His will and to our lasting peace." And the prayer:

"Almighty, everlasting God, in whose hand lie all governments and the rights of every nation, look graciously upon our rulers, so that all over the world religion and public safety may stand whole and unimpaired under the shelter of thy hand, through our Lord Jesus Christ . . ."

The fifth prayer is for Catechumens, the sixth for those in danger and trouble—the prayer is a very good one:

"Almighty, everlasting God, comfort of those who sorrow, support of those who toil, may the prayers of those who cry to Thee in any trouble reach Thy ear, and may they all rejoice that Thy mercy has been with them in their hour of need."

Then we pray for heretics and schismatics, for the Jews (who rejected Our Lord,) and for the pagans.

**Adoration
of the
Cross**

The third part is the Adoration of the Cross, the most important part of this afternoon's ceremony. It originally began in Jerusalem after the finding of the true Cross, and then the custom spread and the ceremony we now have

developed. When the priest begins to unveil the Cross, we are all supposed to sing together "Venite Adoremus"—"Come let us worship." After the celebrants have venerated the Cross, it is brought to the entrance of the sanctuary for all the people to come and kiss the feet of the crucified Christ. While this is happening the choir sings the "Reproaches"—sentences, very moving ones, taken from the Old Testament and considered as addressed by our Saviour to His ungrateful people. Read them, if you can, while the veneration of the Cross is going on, before you go up to kiss the Cross or after you come back. This part ends with the hymn "Crux Fidelis"—a triumphal hymn about the Cross, because the Cross was not merely an ignominious death, but the means to Christ's Resurrection and triumph.

Holy Communion After the Veneration of the Cross, one of the celebrants goes and gets the Blessed Sacrament from its place of repose since Thursday evening, and when he comes back the preparation for Holy Communion begins. We are all supposed to say the Our Father out loud with the priest (in Latin)—at least let us say it thoughtfully to ourselves in English: it is the best prayer of preparation we could say, for it is Our Lord's own. After Holy Communion, the priest says three prayers for us, to which we should all say Amen. This is the first of them:

X "We entreat thee Lord to send down thy abundant blessing upon thy people who have devoutly recalled the Passion and Death of thy Son. Grant them pardon; give them comfort. May Holy faith increase, and their eternal salvation be assured.

With that, the Good Friday ceremony is over.

Holy Saturday—1. The Vigil

We come now to the centre of all our Easter celebrations—this night is Easter, the night Christ rose, the most important date in the Church's year. What we do tonight is what all our preparations and all the other ceremonies have been leading up to. **This is the commemoration and reliving of our salvation and redemption from sin by Our Lord's Sufferings and Death.** The ceremonies of this night, with all the rich meaning behind their many symbols, are meant to bring this home to us and help us to profit by it. But before examining the various ceremonies themselves, let us dig deeper into the meaning of the **Vigil.**

Darkness and Dawn The ceremonies of Holy Saturday are supposed to take place late in the evening so that it will already be Easter Sunday morning when the Mass is finished. In ancient times, the whole night would be spent in prayer, and the Easter Mass celebrated just before dawn. The idea of celebrating the resurrection and triumph of Our Lord with a night watch is connected with the idea of Christ as the Light of the World, the True Sun who shines His light on the world; after the darkness of the night (symbolising sin) came the light of dawn, dispelling the darkness.

Light of Grace Because the Light of Christ is given to man through the teaching of His Church, the custom grew of admitting people to the Church this night, by the Sacrament of Baptism. That is why the idea of Baptism is so prominent now, in the restored rite, at Easter and why there is a whole new ceremony of renewing our baptismal vows during this vigil. The fact that it is to be done in English (or Irish) stresses its importance in the eyes of the Church. The idea of Baptism as the sacrament which brings us the Light of Christ is also the reason why a lighted candle is, even still, handed to a new baptised person.

Looking out and Looking Forward Another reason for the **night** watch is Our Lord's parable about His second coming. He always stressed the night as the time to be on guard, watching for His coming. This night we remind ourselves of that too—we are now looking forward to and want to be prepared for His next coming: while at the same time we commemorate how He came and fulfilled the longing and expectations of other times. Like the Jewish people of other times celebrating their Passover, we are looking back this night to a day of deliverance which we commemorate and are recalling how we became a chosen people; and we are looking forward too, like them, to another but different coming of God among His people. The true Catholic's outlook includes this longing for Christ's second coming—but it should not be in a spirit of fear or dread. After all, we have been ransomed from the power of the devil, and when we commemorate Christ's resurrection at Easter we also look forward to our own resurrection **with Him** on the last day, which He has now made possible.

Freedom of Redemption The whole Easter festival recalls the great Jewish feast of the Passover which prophesied it. The Passover commemorated the night of the escape of the chosen people from slavery in Egypt, to begin their journey to the promised land. Easter night also commemorates a passover, a night of escape from slavery of sin to freedom of God's redeemed children, for on this night Christ Our Lord rose from death and by that and His obedience, He bridged (as only He could do, because He was God) the gulf that Adam had caused between God and man by his sin of disobedience.

The important thing about the Vigil is **not** that we have Mass at Midnight, like at Christmas. The Vigil itself, with its various ceremonies and what they stand for is the important thing: the Resurrection Mass comes at the end as the only fitting conclusion, for it sums up for us everything we have been celebrating and looking forward to.

Holy Saturday—2. The Ceremonies

All the ceremonies of Holy Saturday night are rich with symbolism. Here we cannot do much more than point out the more important meanings of the principal things we do this night. There are two main divisions of the rite, the first concerned with the Paschal Candle and the idea of fire and light; the second concerned with Baptism and our life as Catholics.

Festival of Light Public reading of the Scriptures was always a part of the Church's prayer, and we have much of it at Eastertime. In the old days, when there was to be public reading during the night vigil, light had to be provided for the reader—and it was out of this that all the ceremonies connected with the Paschal Candle originally began; and new symbolic meaning was given to the actions.

The first section of the rite is the blessing of the new fire—the striking of a light from which the Paschal Candle will be lit. If this is done, as it should be, outside the church in the darkness of the night, it is very impressive. This is the Paschal Fire St. Patrick lit on Slane Hill and which King Laoghaire saw from Tara; it was symbolic that night, for it was the light of Christianity breaking the darkness over a pagan Ireland where that night, the eve of the great Spring feast of paganism, no fire was to be lit before the signal from Tara. When the druids saw Patrick's fire they said that if it was not put out that night, it would burn forever in Ireland. That Paschal Fire, the sign of Christ victorious over sin and death, was not put out.

The Light that is Christ Next follows the blessing of the Paschal Candle itself, which is to represent Christ. The priest cuts the sign of the Cross into it, with the words: "Christ yesterday and today, the Beginning and the End"; then the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and then the figures of the year, saying: "His are all ages and centuries, to Him be glory and power, for all ages of eternity." Five grains of incense are then inserted into the candle, to represent the five glorious wounds of Christ. A taper lit from the new fire is handed to the priest, with the words: "May the light of Christ, rising in glory, scatter all darkness of our hearts and minds"; and then the Paschal Candle is lit and blessed. That simple ceremony is full of meaning. Think about it, and think over the words that are used.

The single light of the Paschal Candle in the darkened church reminds us of Christ. He is the "Light of the world"; from Him we receive all the light—all the grace and love—we have; He is the "light shining in darkness. He enlightens every man born into this world." So it is from this great Paschal Candle that all our candles will be lit in a few moments. The lighted Candle representing Christ is carried in procession to the altar, reminding us, first, of how God in a pillar of fire, led the chosen people of old through the desert into the promised land of Israel; and second, how Christ carrying the marks of His Passion (the 5 grains) now leads us who follow Him here in 1957 (the date is on the Candle) to the Promised Land of Heaven. So when in the procession the priest sings "Lumen Christi" (the Light of Christ), we should all answer "Deo Gratias" (thanks be to God).

The "Exultat" When the Candle has been brought to the centre of the sanctuary, the great Easter hymn of praise is sung. It praises the light that is Christ, how He was victorious over the darkness of sin, and rose in triumph from the tomb;

it sings how blessed is this night when Christ rose, even how fortunate was the sin of Adam because its stain was to be washed away with such a demonstration of God's love for us; and the hymn ends with petitions for all of us present, our priests, bishops, Pope, and for the members of our government. Read this hymn and pray with it.

Lessons from the Past The next section is the four readings from the Old Testament, the first about the creation of the world and man, the second the delivery of the chosen people when they passed through the Red Sea (a symbol of Baptism where we, by passing through the waters of the Sacrament became God's chosen people), the third the purification of the chosen people (a symbol of the Church) and the fourth Moses' warning against infidelity to God (which we can now take as addressed to ourselves). A prayer follows each of these readings, whose original purpose was to serve as an instruction for the Catechumens just before their Baptism.

The first part of the Litany of the Saints follows. We ask the prayers of those who like us were baptized as God's chosen people, and who remained very faithful to Him, so that now they have reached the Promised Land to which we are still on our way. We have the same graces at our disposal as they had, in the Mass and the Sacraments, and we **can** become holy as they did.

Our Promises in Baptism The blessing of the Baptismal Water comes next, and in the new regulations this is to be done in front of the Paschal Candle, where the people can see. The various prayers of the blessing are the same as they were before. We have pointed out more than once the place and the importance of Baptism in the Easter Liturgy. Now comes the new ceremony of renewing our Baptismal Vows—and it is done in the ordinary language of the people so that they may have a closer and more active part in the ceremonies of this night. As we stand holding our lighted candles, the priest speaks to us about our Baptism and the promise we then made. He then asks us to renew the promise and the professions we made, and we should reply clearly and firmly: "We do" to his questions. We then say the Our Father, which is the special prayer of those who have been made God's children.

The second part of the Litany, calling on God's grace, help and protection, is now said, while the priests are preparing for the Mass which immediately follows. This Easter Mass sums up all we have been commemorating and praying for these few days. At this Mass and at every Mass until Ascension, the Paschal Candle is lit to remind us of the presence of Christ among us after His Resurrection when He completed the work of our Redemption.