

## HISTORY OF THE HOLY WEEK LITURGY

Holy Week is observed during the final week of Lent. It begins on Palm Sunday and reaches its liturgical climax at the Easter Vigil the night of Holy Saturday. Holy Week commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), his Last Supper with his closest disciples, including the one who would betray him (Holy Thursday), his Passion and Crucifixion (Good Friday) and his Resurrection (the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday). The final four liturgies of Holy Week—the evening Mass on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday—are called the Easter Triduum, three days leading up to and including Easter Sunday itself. The key venue for the early celebration of Holy Week was in the city of Jerusalem, and the earliest record we have of this celebration is a fourth-century travel diary kept by a European woman whose name, Egeria, is known by all liturgical scholars and their graduate students. She had been part of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the year 383. According to Egeria, the Palm Sunday liturgy began in the afternoon with an elaborate procession which started outside of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. The bishop reenacted the role of Jesus, while children waved palm branches as the procession wound its way through the entire city. On Holy Thursday night, after the Eucharist had been celebrated in the afternoon, the events of Jesus' Passion were reenacted: his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest there, and his trial before Pontius Pilate. On Good Friday there were four hours of veneration of the cross, beginning just before noon, followed by a solemn afternoon Liturgy of the Word that concluded with a reading of the Passion according to John. The Easter Vigil began in mid-afternoon on Holy Saturday, with the final preparation of the catechumens. That night, while the catechumens were being baptized, the rest of the faithful kept vigil. As soon as the newly baptized were led into the church, the celebration of the Easter Eucharist began. By the fifth and sixth centuries the highly influential churches of Rome and Constantinople (modern Istanbul) had adopted these Holy Week liturgies, which were subsequently spread to other local churches within their vast jurisdictions, both in the West and the East. Unfortunately, the linkage between the liturgies of Holy Week and the original times and places of the sacred events became obscured in the medieval West. The situation was not remedied until the restoration of Holy Week mandated by Pope Pius XII in 1956. The restoration of Holy Week remains one of Pope Pius XII's greatest achievements. We can thank him and the liturgists he wisely consulted for the spiritually meaningful ceremonies which we will celebrate at this week.

## EASTER UNDER PAIN OF SIN EVERY DAY IN LENT IS A DAY OF FAST AND ABSTINENCE

All days of Lent (except Sundays) are days of fast and at least partial abstinence. Total Abstinence from any and all meat is required on all Fridays of the year, and on Ash Wednesday. Partial Abstinence (meat is allowed once, at the main meal of the day) is required for all other days of Lent. Abstinence is to be observed by all those over seven and older. Fasting is required of all adults between the ages of 21 and 59. Those infirm are not required to fast during the time of their infirmity. Fasting means that only ONE main meal may be taken, either at noon or in the evening, at which meat may be taken (except on Ash Wednesday and all Fridays). Two smaller meals, which together may not equal the amount of food in the main meal, may be taken at other times during the day. No solid foods or snacks may be eaten between meals. All forms of liquid (including frozen liquids) may be taken at any time. During Lent, we

ought to refrain from amusements, e.g. music, movies and parties. Today there is a real craze for distractions that steals from us the attention due the repose of our soul.

**Mourning** A character of mourning was always an important feature of the season of Lent as we mourn our sins and make straight the way for Christ in our soul giving up certain pleasures, entertainments, and festivities. Even within the liturgy this mourning is clearly expressed; no flowers decorated the altars, the organs went silent, weddings and other solemnities were banned, and the liturgical colors (purple and black) proclaimed the spirit of penance and grief. In medieval times, people would forgo all private entertainments at home that were of joyous and of a hilarious nature.

At the royal courts in past centuries, Lent was an official period of mourning. The monarchs and their households dressed in black, as did most of the nobility and people in general. England remained loyal to this custom even after the Protestant fall; Queen Elizabeth I (1603) and the ladies of her court wore black all through Lent. In Russia, up to the twentieth century, all secular music ceased in Lent. During the first and last weeks all public amusements were forbidden. In the rural sections of Poland, dancing and singing still cease on Ash Wednesday. Both men and women don clothes of dark and somber color; the girls relinquish their finery and multicolored ribbons, and an atmosphere of devout recollection descends over the entire village. In many countries, the expressions of mourning are now restricted to the last days of Holy Week, as in the Latin nations where women dress in black on Good Friday. In Malta, the men, too, wear black.

**Confession** The Church imposes on its members the duty of receiving the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion at least once a year, from Ash Wednesday till Trinity Sunday after Pentecost Sunday. Though most of the faithful approach the sacraments oftener, the "Easter confession" is still singled out in various countries as a solemn rite. It is usually made in Lent, and the Church provides special services of preparation, such as annual missions for the congregations. The original purpose of the Lenten missions was to help people prepare for a good confession.

In Russia, the faithful kept an especially strict fast during the whole week preceding their Easter confession. Starting on Monday, they attended two services a day. On Saturday, before going to confession, they would bow deeply to each member of their household, including the servants, and utter the age-old phrase, "In the name of Christ, forgive me if I have offended you." The answer was, "God will forgive you." Thus prepared, they made their confession on Saturday, and went to Communion on Sunday. Coming home from Mass and Communion, they again faced their whole family; but this time everyone embraced them with smiles and congratulations. Flowers decorated the room and the breakfast table, and the entire household shared in the joy of the one who had received his Easter Communion. Similar traditions are still observed among the other Slavic nations. It was a custom in Austria for men and boys coming home from their Easter confession to decorate their hats with flowers and distribute pretzels to all in the house while receiving congratulations and good wishes.

