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Blessed Palm

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

What do you call the sixth Sunday of Lent...the Sunday which begins Holy Week...the Sunday before Easter? Many of us refer to this Sunday as Palm Sunday, others call it Passion Sunday. In our liturgical year, this Sunday involves both Palms and the Passion, as its very name suggests. It is *Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion*.

Recall that at the center of our faith is the Paschal Mystery - the Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension into Spirit-filled Glory of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The sixth Sunday of Lent - Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion - we commemorate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem to accomplish this. At Mass on this Sunday we receive palm branches which are blessed with holy water. At the procession with palms or the solemn entrance, we hear one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. During the Liturgy of the Word, we hear the Passion of Christ proclaimed.



Each of the four Gospels include an account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. You can read these accounts in Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19: 28-40; and, John 12:12-19. It is interesting to note that it is only in John's Gospel that the word *palm* is used to identify the branches which the crowd used to welcome Jesus (John 12:13). Matthew and Mark do not specifically say what type of branches were used (see Matthew 21:8 and Mark 11:8). And in Luke's Gospel account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, there is no mention of branches at all!

But from early on in our liturgy we have used palm branches to commemorate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, where he would fulfill his mission for the salvation of the world!

Palm & Ashes

- * The ashes we receive on Ash Wednesday come from the blessed palm branches we received last year on Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion.
- * Palm branches are a symbol of victory.
- * Ashes are a symbol of penitence.
- * Blessed palm and blessed ashes are sacramentals of our Church.



Sacraments and Sacramentals



A sacrament is an outward sign of God's grace; God's life with us. We encounter Christ in the sacraments. In our Roman Catholic Church we have seven sacraments.

A sacramental is also an outward sign - something tangible - that the Church gives us to help open us to the grace of the sacraments. We have many

sacramentals in our Church, such as candles, holy water, icons, and incense.

On Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion we receive palm branches which are blessed with holy water. This Blessed Palm is also a sacramental. Because it is blessed, it is something holy and we treat it as such.

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Victory!

Palm branches have made their way into much of our religious art, especially in the Western Church. For example, you will often see holy cards or paintings of the Saints that include palm. And this has been true for a long time, as you can see in this 6th century mosaic of Saint Agnes. What is so special about palm? Palm signifies victory!

In ancient Israel, palm

branches were carried by those who were victorious in conquering enemies (1 Maccabees 13:51). And by his death and resurrection, Jesus conquered the greatest enemy, death! That is why you will often see paintings of the resurrected Jesus holding palm branches. In art, the Saints are often pictured with palm branches because of their own victory. Recall that in the Book of Revelation, the elect in heaven

are holding palm branches, indicating their own triumph in remaining faithful to Jesus in the time of great persecution, even though it cost them their earthly life (Rev. 7:9).

The Israelites also used palm branches in the celebration of the Feast of Booths (Leviticus 23:39-40), and in the Purification of the Temple (2 Maccabees 10:5-8). As Judeo-Christians, palm has been an important part of our religious heritage for centuries!



Saint Agnes Mosaic - Ravenna, 6th Century

Shrove Tuesday Burning of Palm



Very quickly, the fresh blessed palm branches you received last year on Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion become very dry and brittle. During the weeks prior to Ash Wednesday, you can take these blessed palm branches from your homes, classrooms, or wherever you have placed them, and bring them back to your parish church.

Then on Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday, you can gather at your parish church again for the Burning of Palm. *Shrove Tuesday* is not a title that we officially find on our Liturgical Calendar. Rather, *shrove* or *shriven*, are words that meant having your sins forgiven in the sacrament of reconciliation. It used to be a custom in many areas for

Catholics to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation the day before Lent began, which is where we get the term *Shrove Tuesday*.

On Shrove Tuesday, when we burn our blessed palm branches, the ashes from the fire will cool overnight, and will then be gathered to be blessed and distributed at the Ash Wednesday liturgies the next day.

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the season of Lent. For those of us who are cradle Catholics, we have most likely been going to church on Ash Wednesday to receive ashes since we were infants. But perhaps many of us did not realize that these ashes came from burned palm branches. We probably are aware, however, that the ashes are placed (or imposed) on our forehead in the sign of a cross.



The rubrics, or directives in the *Sacramentary*, or *Roman Missal*, for Ash Wednesday are interesting. While it clearly states that the ashes come from the blessed palm from the past year's Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, and these ashes are put on people, nowhere does it specify that they are put on the forehead or in the sign of a cross!

These ashes are blessed, and thus are another sacramental of our Church. As such, we treat them with reverence. We do not remove them when liturgy concludes, but we keep this visible sign on our person throughout the remainder of the day.



Ashes and Dust

When we come forward to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday, the person imposing the ashes on us says one of two possible formulas when placing the ashes on our forehead. One of these reminds us that we are dust. What a strange thing to hear! To understand what this is about, we need to go back to the very beginning. The first book of the Bible is the Book of Genesis. In Genesis we hear the story of the creation of Adam and Eve. We also hear how they disobeyed God and were cast out of Paradise, what we sometimes call “the fall.” Because of this fall, or disobedience, humans are mortal - we will experience physical death. Genesis 3:19 reminds us that we were created from dirt (a reference to Genesis 2:7 and the creation of Adam), and we will return to dirt.

In our modern American culture, this often doesn't make sense to us because we do so much to deny death. Just think of how much cosmetic work is done on a corpse so the body will look “natural” at a viewing. But we also have a powerful reminder in our modern American culture that we all will return to dust and ashes. Recall the terrible terrorist act of September 11, 2001 and the number of victims' bodies which were never recovered because they were reduced to ashes at Ground Zero. The good news is that this is not our final fate, because by his death and resurrection Jesus triumphed over death. As we profess in the Creed, we believe in the resurrection of the dead, a bodily resurrection.



Sackcloth and Ashes

The other of the two formulas we might hear as ashes are imposed on us on Ash Wednesday has to do with living as Jesus wants us to do. We are called to conversion - turning away from one thing towards another. We are to turn away from sin and evil, and turn towards God. We are called to be faithful to the Good News, or Gospel, of Jesus Christ.

It is because we are all sinners that we are all called to turn away from sin. Lent is a penitential season in our Church, and ashes have long been associated with doing penance. In ancient Israel, those who had sinned would wear sackcloth and either cover themselves with ashes, or sit in ashes, as a sign of

their repentance. The Biblical Book of Jonah, chapter 3, gives testimony to this in the recounting of the conversion of the city of Nineveh. (Also see Jeremiah 6:26 and Matthew 11:21.)

There was even a time in the history of our Church when Christians who were guilty of committing public sins and causing scandals did *public* penance during the season of Lent. Having admitted their sin, for penance they were ostracized from their families and faith communities during Lent, and could be identified by their attire of sackcloth and ashes until they were absolved of their sins on Holy Thursday and welcomed back!



A Pilgrim People

We are a pilgrim people on a journey throughout this life, our ultimate destination being heaven.

In our Church's liturgy and in our devotional practices, we are often reminded of this as we physically move from place to place. That is why when we celebrate the Eucharist we come forward to commune in a communion procession. That is why on Palm Sunday of the

Lord's Passion, we have a procession with palms at our principal Mass. That is why on Ash Wednesday we process forward to receive the blessed ashes as a penitential sign.

On Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, we commemorate Jesus' Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem where he would take up his cross, die for the salvation of the world, and triumph

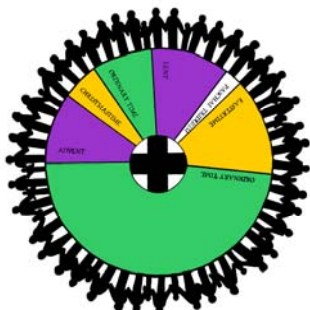
over death with his resurrection.

Palms and ashes remind us of our pilgrimage, our call to take up the cross and follow in Jesus' footsteps. For to achieve our final goal of heaven, we, like Jesus, must be willing to take up our cross daily, dying to self - experiencing our own passion and death - so as to rise again in glory!



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The Triumphal Entry

In our world today, even in our own community, there are, unfortunately, many people who are illiterate - who cannot read or write. In earlier times this was much more common than today. In fact, it was rare that the “common” people could read. That is one reason why beautiful Christian art, such as stained glass windows and icons, was created. They tell us a story - a story we can understand without reading the written word. Because icons, such as the one pictured here, tell a story, it is generally said that icons are *written* rather than *painted*. The icon here tells the story of Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, the event we commemorate on Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion.



Entry into Jerusalem
Mid 16th Century

Iconographer: George the Cretan
Location: Dionysiou Monastery,
Mount Athos

There are many details in a narrative icon, such as this one. You could spend hours...years...a lifetime meditating on such an icon, and still there would be more. So we will just take time to look at a few details in this icon.

Jesus enters Jerusalem, not on a majestic horse as ancient warrior kings would have done, but on an ass. This fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. Note that Jesus’ right hand is raised in blessing, telling us who he is. In his left hand, Jesus carries a scroll of Scriptures. Recall that Jesus *is* the Word of God. Jesus is sitting on the ass as though he were seated on a throne.

Pay special attention to the number of children in this icon. They are playing and waving palm branches. They are in the tree cutting palm branches. They are throwing cloaks on the ground in front of Jesus. (This gesture signifies welcoming a king, as in 2 Kings 9:13). While the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) state that the people in the crowd spread these cloaks, none specifies it was the children doing this. It is as if we are being reminded that only those of us who embrace the Kingdom of God like a child will enter it! (See Mark 10:15)