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# Seasoning the Seasons™

The Institute for Christian Formation, Inc.

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The Sacred Paschal Triduum

## The Sacred Paschal Triduum

At sundown Holy Thursday the Season of Lent comes to an end. It is with the entrance antiphon at the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on this evening that we begin the Sacred Paschal Triduum, what you could say are the "high holy days" at the center of our entire Church Year. Over the next three days we will celebrate in a profound way the passover of our Lord Jesus Christ from death to life.

The Hebrew word for passover is *pesach*, which is where we get the words *pascha* and *paschal*. Pascha and paschal are words for Easter. The Paschal Mystery - the Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension into Spirit-filled Glory of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ - is at the center of our Christian faith.

The word *triduum* is Latin for *three days*. Three is a significant number. Recall, for example, that Jonah was in the whale's belly for three days (see Jonah 2:1). We measure the three days of the Triduum from sundown to sundown, as Jewish people do. The Triduum begins at the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday and it concludes with Evening Prayer (Vespers) on Easter Sunday.

In our experience of liturgy we enter eternal time. Unlike a Civil War reenactment, the Triduum liturgies are not a historical account of past events in Jesus' life. Rather, we are experiencing these events *now*. The sacrifice Christ made once and for all is happening today in us. That is why at Easter we can sing out with joy that *Jesus Christ is Risen Today!* (*Surrexit Christus Hodie*, Latin, 14th century).

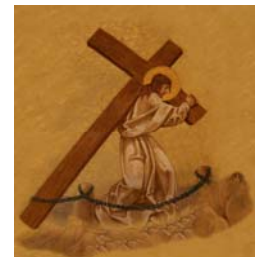


See the Place Where the Lord Lay (16th Century)

Iconographer: Theophanes the Cretan; Stavronikita Monastery, Mt. Athos

## Paschal Triduum

- \* The Paschal Triduum is at the center of our entire Church Year.
- \* The word *Paschal* comes from the word for Passover. We are celebrating the Passover of our Lord from death to life.
- \* The word *Triduum* means "three days." We count these days from sundown to sundown: sundown Holy Thursday to sundown Easter Sunday.
- \* The Triduum is best understood as one celebration with various components.
- \* We cannot fully appreciate Easter unless we have fully celebrated the Triduum.



## Three in One

While we talk about the Triduum being three days, liturgically it is best viewed as a whole. Thinking in musical terms, the three days are like various movements of one composition. This becomes obvious if you think of how our liturgy is structured. Think of the celebration of the Mass. This celebration has four parts: Introductory Rites, Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Eucharist, and

Concluding Rites. While we begin the Triduum with Introductory Rites at the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, there is no "dismissal" at the conclusion of this Liturgy. Nor is there either an entrance antiphon or a dismissal at the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord. And again, there is no entrance antiphon for the Easter Vigil in the Holy Night, the first Mass of

Easter. It is not until the conclusion of the Easter Vigil that we are "dismissed" or "sent."

The liturgies of the Triduum are like the movements of the one musical composition. While each movement has its own beauty, it is difficult to appreciate the entire composition without experiencing it in its totality.

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# Sundown Thursday-Sundown Friday

The very early Church celebrated the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord at the one Easter Vigil celebration. But from the 4th century, what was celebrated at the Easter Vigil became part of a Triduum, or three-day celebration.

Keep in mind the metaphor of a musical composition. The first movement is sundown Thursday to sundown Friday, the first of the three days. In measuring time in this man-

ner, we realize something interesting. The Mass of the Lord's Supper on Thursday evening and the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord on Friday afternoon are part of the same "day," the same *movement* in our musical composition.

This can be very helpful in understanding the gift of himself Jesus gives us in the Eucharist. We talk of the Eucharist being a meal, and we talk of the Eucharist being a sacrifice.

When we look at the flow of this first "day" of the Triduum, we see clearly this unity of meal and sacrifice. This last supper which Jesus shares with his disciples anticipates his upcoming death. And Jesus' death gives profound meaning to this meal. As Jesus' body is broken and his blood is poured forth for us, a new and everlasting covenant is established.

We who eat and drink at the Eucharistic banquet know that we, too, must be broken and poured forth in self-sacrificing service.



## Mass of the Lord's Supper



Christ Washing St. Peter's Feet  
Iconographer: Manuel Panselinos  
Late 13th Century  
Church of Protaton, Mt. Athos

On Holy Thursday evening, the Triduum begins with the celebration of the Mass of the Lord's Supper. There will be no other Mass in the parish on this day. It is presumed that the **entire** parish community will come together to celebrate the Triduum liturgies.

The entrance antiphon for this Liturgy speaks of the centrality of the cross of

Jesus (see Galatians 6:14), and sets the "theme" for the entire Triduum.

At the Liturgy of the Word this evening we hear of religious rituals: the prescription for the Passover ritual (Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14); the institution of the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 11:23-26); and Jesus' washing the disciples' feet (John 13:1-15). The homily is followed by

the washing of feet. We are to be servant leaders, following Jesus' example of service.

At the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the Mass ends with the Prayer after Communion, with no concluding rite or dismissal.

There is a procession as the Eucharist is transferred to an altar of reposition, where the faithful are encouraged to pray in adoration.

## Take, Bless, Break, Give

In the New Testament, or Christian Scriptures, there are four accounts of the institution of the Eucharist at the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples: Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:14-20, and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. At the Mass of the Lord's Supper we hear the account from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

As Catholic Christians, we do not take every word of the Bible in a literal sense, as do the fundamentalists. However, over the past almost 2000 years we have been very literal in doing what Jesus commanded at the institution of the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is an action: Jesus **took** the bread, **blessed** it, **broke** it, and **gave** it to his friends. He did likewise with the cup. This is the same action we do each time we celebrate the Eucharist. The bread and wine is brought forward and **taken**; it is **blessed** at the Eucharistic Prayer; the Body of Christ is **broken** at the fraction rite; and in the communion rite, the Body and Blood of Christ is **given** to the faithful.

It is important to be aware and very clear that the Eucharist, which means "to give thanks," is an action. In a communion service we are not **doing** this action, and therefore a communion service is **not** the Liturgy of the Eucharist.



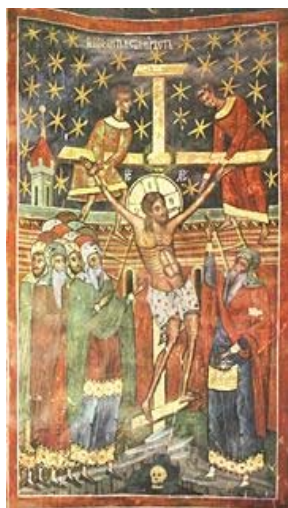
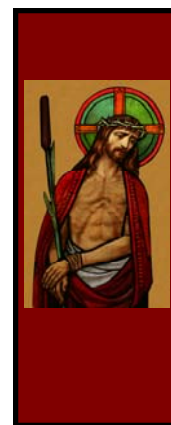
Mystical Supper (14th Century)  
Vatopedi Monastery, Mt. Athos

# Celebration of the Lord's Passion

The second major liturgy of this first “movement” or “day” of the Triduum is the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord on Good Friday. This liturgy most appropriately takes place in the afternoon at about 3:00 p.m. The sanctuary is “stark.” The altar was previously stripped. There are no “Introductory Rites” for this Liturgy. The priest (and deacon) enter in silence, and approach the altar where an act of reverence is performed, usually a full prostration. There is then a prayer, and we immediately begin with the Liturgy of the Word. We hear the “suffering servant song” of Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Hebrews 4:14-16:5:7-9; and, the Passion of Christ according to Saint John (John 18:1-19:42).

Following the Gospel (the Passion), there may be a brief homily. The Liturgy of the Word then concludes with the Solemn Intercessions. There are ten intercessions this day, coming to us from the early Church and following a set formula. Usually we kneel for a time during the praying of each of these intercessions.

The second part of the Celebration of the Lord's Passion is the Adoration of the Holy Cross (see article below). The third part of this Liturgy is Holy Communion. This is **not** a Eucharistic celebration (see bottom of previous page). We commune from the Blessed Sacrament which was reserved at the Mass of the Lord's Supper. Following a prayer over the people, all depart in silence. There is no concluding rite.



**Nailing to the Cross**  
15th Century  
Dragomirna Monastery  
Roumania

## Adoration of the Holy Cross

The second part of the Celebration of the Lord's Passion is the Adoration of the Holy Cross. We have reports from the fourth century of pilgrims gathering in Jerusalem on Good Friday to venerate the true cross of Christ, which tradition says had been discovered earlier in the century by Saint Helena.

When, in the Celebration of the Lord's Passion, we reverence the cross today, recall once again that in liturgy we are in “eternal” time. This is not a reenactment; rather we are liturgically present at that eternal moment when Christ died once and for all. We are reverencing the cross on which Christ died for us. Listen carefully to the words being pro-

claimed as the cross is brought forward for adoration, ***“Behold the wood of the Cross...”***

As we reverence the cross, we keep in mind the incredible self-sacrifice of Jesus for us. We might genuflect or bow before the cross; we might embrace and kiss the cross.

*Beneath your cross abiding*

*Forever would I rest,*

*In your dear love confiding,*

*And with your presence blest.*

*(O Sacred Head Surrounded,*  
Text attributed to Saint Bernard of  
Clairvaux)

## Sundown Friday-Sundown Saturday

In the Nicene Creed, we profess that Jesus “*suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day...*” In the Apostles’ Creed, between burial and resurrection, we profess “*He descended into hell.*”

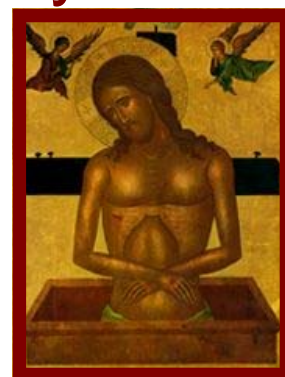
The Descent into Hell is a difficult concept to grasp, unless we understand that here *hell* refers not to a place of eternal punishment, but rather *Hades*,

the underworld or the place of the dead (see Philippians 2:10). The gates of paradise were closed following the expulsion of Adam and Eve, and were not yet open to those who had died.

Notice in the icon to the left that Jesus’ eyes are closed in death. His body bears his fatal wounds. There is a silence as he descends to the realm of the dead. This is the silence that the

Church keeps this second full day of the Triduum, sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Christ is in the tomb. Christ descends to the dead. Christ has died, but has not yet risen.

There are no major liturgical celebrations during this time. We keep the Paschal Fast. We fast from food and from the noise and business of everyday life. In our prayer and in our daily lives we are very attuned to the stone-cold silence of the tomb.



**Extreme Humility**  
16th Century  
Russian



# Sundown Saturday-Sundown Sunday

The third “day” of the Triduum, the third and final movement, if you will, of our “musical composition,” goes from sundown Saturday to sundown Sunday.

It is important to keep in mind how we are reckoning time - we are counting these days from sundown to sundown. Therefore, the Easter Vigil - the pinnacle of not only the Triduum but the entire Church Year - is the first Mass of Easter Sunday.

The Easter Vigil **must** take place entirely at night. Directives are sent to every parish each year noting the earliest time which the Vigil may begin, determined by the time of sunset on the date in question. The Vigil must conclude before sunrise Sunday morning.

In the early Church, through the end of the fourth century, the Vigil lasted the entire night, and therefore there was no evidence of another Mass on

Easter day. This is difficult for us to imagine, since for many of us Mass on Easter Sunday morning was the highlight of Easter.

The Easter Vigil, what Saint Augustine called “*the mother of all holy vigils*”, is the highpoint of the entire Church year. For that reason we will concentrate on the Vigil, rather than Mass on Easter Sunday morning.

The Paschal Triduum concludes with Evening Prayer (Vespers) on Easter Sunday.



Resurrection  
16th Century  
Russian



## The Light of Christ!

There are four parts to the Easter Vigil, the first being the Lucernarium. The church is in darkness, and the assembly is gathered outside around the Easter fire. The priest and ministers go to the fire, carrying the Paschal Candle.

The fire is blessed, and the Paschal Candle is prepared and lighted from the Easter fire. The deacon or priest,

intoning “The Light of Christ”, then carries the lighted Easter candle in procession into the darkened church. Recall that Jesus is the Light of the World (see John 1:4-5 and John 12:46). The assembly follows in procession. All the baptized hold candles which are lighted from the Paschal Candle. The light of Christ shines forth in the dark church!

Once the procession is in church and the Paschal Candle placed in the sanctuary, the Easter Proclamation (*Exsultet*) is sung. This is a beautiful proclamation extolling the Passover of our Lord from death to life. Once the *Exsultet* is concluded, we move into the second part of the Easter Vigil, the Liturgy of the Word.

## Salvation History

The Liturgy of the Word is central to the celebration of the Easter Vigil. The readings this night proclaim salvation history from creation through Christ’s resurrection. Nine readings are prescribed for the Vigil, seven from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and two from the Christian Scriptures (New Testament). The first eight readings are the same each year. It is only the Gospel which changes depending on which lectionary cycle we are using in a given year.

We begin at the beginning. The first reading (Genesis 1:1-2:2) is the story of creation. Next (Genesis 22:1-18) we hear of Abraham’s sacrifice. The third reading (Exodus 14:15-15:1) is crucial. The Israelites pass through the Red Sea from slavery to freedom. The fourth reading (Isaiah 54:5-14) speaks of the love of God in taking back God’s people who had been in exile. The fifth reading (Isaiah 55:1-11) proclaims the everlasting covenant, salvation which is offered to all. The sixth reading (Baruch 3:9-15, 32-4:4) is about wisdom. In the seventh reading (Ezekiel 36:16-17a, 18-28), we hear of receiving a new heart and a new spirit.

At this point in the liturgy, the altar candles are lighted, the Gloria is sung, and the church bells ring. Then the eighth reading proclaimed is St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans (Romans 6:3-11) which speaks of dying and rising with Christ in baptism. At the Gospel acclamation, we sing the Alleluia, which has been silent during Lent. The Gospel for the current year is then proclaimed.



Creation of Adam/Naming the  
Animals; Late 17th century;  
Heritage: Bulgarian

## Dying and Rising with Christ

The third part of the Easter Vigil is the Baptismal Liturgy. Easter is about death and resurrection, and therefore Easter is about baptism. At this point in the liturgy, there is the procession to the baptismal font. The Paschal candle, carried by the minister, leads the way. The Blessing of Baptismal Water is another beautiful prayer recounting the stories of water throughout salvation history, and is another prayer worth spending time meditating upon. The Paschal Candle may be plunged into the water three times. When you think in terms of the baptismal font being the womb through which new Christians are born, this plunging of the candle into the water is very symbolic.

If there are candidates to be baptized, they are baptized at this point, and for those of catechetical age, confirmation follows baptism. All of us previously baptized also renew our baptismal promises. We renounce sin and profess faith, and are sprinkled with water to remind us of our baptism. As we heard in Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans, we die and rise with Christ in baptism. Death no longer has power over us. Look at the resurrection icon on page 4. Christ has trampled death. In his resurrection he has opened the gates of Paradise, closed since the fall. In the icon, Christ rises from the realm of the dead, grasping Adam's hand. Christ has conquered death, and Adam and Eve are raised from their graves.



## Go in Peace!

The fourth part of the Easter Vigil is the Liturgy of the Eucharist, which proceeds in the usual manner. Those who have been baptized and confirmed at the Easter Vigil join us at the Table for the first time this night.

There are three sacraments of initiation in our Catholic Church: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Notice the order in which these sacraments are celebrated this night: baptism, immediately followed by confirmation, and **then** the celebration of the Eucharist. This is the normative order for initiation - baptism, confirmation, then Eucharist.

For over one hundred years now, many of us have experienced these sacraments

"out of order", if you will, which can lead to some misunderstanding of initiation. It is the Eucharist, the sacrament we celebrate again and again, which is the culmination of initiation.

Recall how the Triduum began. At the Liturgy of the Lord's Supper, the washing of the feet preceded the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Our Lord gave us the example of what it means to live the Eucharist - we must serve others selflessly, making an offering of our lives. Tonight, for the first time in the Triduum, we will be "dismissed" - instructed to go. In Latin, this dismissal is "*Ita Missa est.*" *Missa*, which is where we get the word *Mass* means to be sent. We are sent to serve others as Christ.



## Easter Foods

Following the celebration of the Easter Vigil, we break our Paschal Fast. Certain foods have always been associated with Easter. Eggs symbolize new life, and are also said to be shaped like Christ's tomb. (Notice the egg-shaped mandorla around Christ in the resurrection icon at the top of page 4.)

Spring lamb and traditional Easter breads re-

mind us that Jesus is the Lamb of God and the Bread of Life. Sweet foods remind us of the promised land flowing with milk and honey.

Whatever your traditional Easter foods might be, plan to have everything purchased and prepared by sundown Holy Thursday (including the coloring of Easter eggs), so that you can keep the Triduum in a

quiet, prayerful manner and observe the Paschal Fast not only on Good Friday, but on Holy Saturday, as well. Remember how we are reckoning time. The second day of the Triduum Christ is in the tomb, and all is quiet.

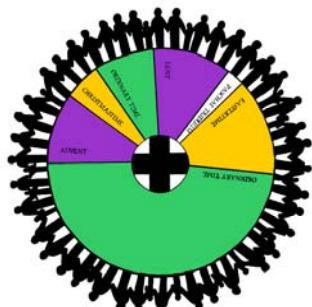
When you do break the Paschal Fast, don't forget the traditional Blessing of Easter Foods. And don't forget to bless yourself with the new Easter Water you have brought home from the Vigil!



An Easter Basket containing traditional foods will be blessed and shared following the Easter Vigil.

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## Christ, the New Moses

Exodus 12:1-20 recounts the Passover ritual being prescribed. Recall that the Israelites were in slavery in Egypt. Because Pharaoh was stubborn and would not let the Israelites go free, a series of plagues fell upon the land of Egypt. The tenth and final plague was the death of the first-born (animals included). The Israelites were to slaughter a lamb, and mark their houses with some of its blood. Their households would then be spared this death sentence. This event marked the beginning of the exodus of the Israelites from slavery to freedom. Excerpts from this passage in Exodus form the first Scripture reading we hear proclaimed at the first liturgy of the Triduum - the Mass of the Lord's Supper.

Throughout the centuries, our Jewish brothers and sisters have continued to keep the Passover ritual exactly as prescribed. The Gospels tell us that Jesus' Last Supper, Passion, Death, and Resurrection occurred during the Jewish celebration of Passover in Jerusalem.

Just as the blood of the slaughtered lamb spared the Israelites a death sentence when they were enslaved in Egypt, so, too, does Jesus, the Lamb of God...the Paschal Lamb, shed his blood to save us. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt through the Red Sea to the Promised Land. (This is the third reading we hear proclaimed at the Easter Vigil.) So, too, through the waters of baptism, we die and rise with Christ - we are led from death to new life.



*Where the Paschal blood is poured,  
Death's dark angel sheathes his sword;  
Israel's hosts triumphant go  
Through the wave that drowns the foe.  
Praise we Christ, whose blood was shed,  
Paschal victim, Paschal bread;  
With sincerity and love  
Eat we manna from above.*

*(At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing, text - Latin 4th century)*