Entering into the Mystery: The Three Days

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At the end of the forty days of Lent, the Church moves into the shortest and the most important liturgical season of the entire year: the Sacred Paschal Triduum – the Three Days. The Triduum stretches from the evening of Holy Thursday until the evening of Easter Sunday. Through the liturgies of the Triduum, we walk with Christ from the upper room of the Last Supper, to the place of crucifixion, to the garden where he was buried and raised from the dead. The Triduum is not a passion play or an historical reenactment. Rather, these liturgies are a solemn act of remembrance of the central mystery of our faith: that Jesus lived, suffered, died, and rose again for us. And when the Church remembers, God makes something happen here and now.

The three major liturgies of the Triduum—the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, the Passion of the Lord on Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil in the Holy Night on Holy Saturday—are really like one great liturgy, spread over three days. They show us the face of Christ and invite us to take our place in the story of his dying and rising. They lead us to the heart of our faith and prepare us to celebrate Easter. In the words of Pope Francis, "we cannot live Easter without entering into the mystery. It is not something intellectual, something we only know or read about… It is more, much more! 'To enter into the mystery' means the ability to wonder, to contemplate; the ability to listen to the silence and to hear the tiny whisper amid great silence by which God speaks to us." The Three Days are the Church's annual invitation to enter more deeply into the mystery of Christ.

HOLY THURSDAY

The Triduum begins with the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper. "On the day before he was to suffer, he took bread." We hear the words of the Eucharistic Prayer so often, but on this night, the familiar takes on special urgency. Jesus is about to be handed over to trial and crucifixion—and he knows it. He knows his disciples will be scattered. He knows one of them will betray him and one will deny him. And yet his concern is not for himself, but for them. He reassures and consoles them and promises them his abiding presence. And he puts his love into action: he takes the bread and wine of the Passover table and offers them to his disciples as his own Body and Blood. Through the Eucharist, which the Church has never failed to celebrate in his memory, Jesus continues to reassure, to console, to be present, and to sustain his beloved flock. As the Church remembers the institution of the Eucharist, we also mark the inauguration of the priesthood. In washing of the feet of some Cathedral parishioners, Father Ryan and Archbishop Etienne do what Jesus did on the night of the Last Supper—and show us what servant leadership looks like.

The Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper ends with the Transfer of the Holy Eucharist. The ciborium (a vessel containing consecrated hosts) is carried to the "altar of repose" in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, where Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament continues until midnight. Traditionally, this time of Adoration recalls Jesus' hours of agony in Gethsemane. By our prayer and presence, we respond to Jesus' invitation to "remain here and keep watch with me."

GOOD FRIDAY

In the early evening of Good Friday, the Church gathers again for the solemn liturgy of the Passion of

the Lord. This liturgy is different from any other in the entire year. It is not a Mass: Good Friday is the only day of the year when the Church does not celebrate the Eucharist. "There is no sacrifice on this day, for all is sacrifice," wrote the English priest Robert Hugh Benson in a wonderful 1904 essay on Holy Week. "Today all the world is Calvary."

The liturgy of Good Friday begins starkly and unforgettably with the prostration of the clergy before the altar. As the Archbishop and Father Ryan prostrate themselves in silence, the entire assembly kneels in prayer. Contemplating the death of Jesus, we kneel in humility, prayer, and adoration. We touch the dust from which we came.

And yet, even on Good Friday, joy is never far away. The first reading—one of the Servant Songs from Isaiah—takes us to a place of hope: "he shall see the light in fullness of days" (Isaiah 53:11). Good Friday is about death and life, about sorrow and hope.

All of this becomes visible in the Veneration of the Cross. We come forward as a community for veneration, we touch the cross, we contemplate the sorrows of Christ, and we recognize in the cross our source of life, our only hope. "Because of the wood of a tree joy has come to the whole world," says an ancient chant in the Roman Missal.

HOLY SATURDAY

The Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday is the most ancient and the most important of the Church's liturgies. As we keep vigil for the Resurrection of Christ from death, the liturgy takes us to the heart of what it means to be human. The essentials of life—fire, water, oil, bread, wine—are taken up, transformed, and made holy.

The Easter Vigil begins with the blessing of fire, which is used to light the Paschal or Easter Candle, the sign of Christ's Resurrection. On the candle, the Archbishop traces a cross, within which he marks the numbers of the current year. This rite is a powerful expression of the Church's faith that Christ's Resurrection does not recede in time like other historical events. These mysteries are present among us. That is why the great Easter proclamation, the Exsultet, reminds us again and again that "this is the night"! "This is the joy of the Easter Vigil," said Pope Benedict XVI. "The Resurrection is not a thing of the past, the Resurrection has reached us and seized us."

The scripture readings at the Easter Vigil take us from the creation account in Genesis through the whole story of God's love relationship with humanity. Through all our struggles, wanderings, and sins, God has loved us and drawn us towards life in his Son. The readings culminate in the proclamation of the ultimate



good news, the Gospel account of Jesus' Resurrection. And after our long Lenten fast, the Alleluia returns, our Christian song of rejoicing and praise.

The Easter Vigil is the time for the initiation of new members into the Church. Tonight, our Elect - who have been preparing for this night for many months – receive the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. We do not need to be their family members, friends, or sponsors to participate and rejoice in this moment. In the baptism of new members, the Body of Christ grows; the Resurrection is made visible.

The Easter Vigil is the first and most important of our Easter celebrations, which continue throughout the day on Easter Sunday. Easter is an invitation to start fresh: to "clear out the old yeast," says St. Paul in the Second Reading on Easter Sunday, and "celebrate the feast!" (1 Cor 5:7, 8)

CONCLUSION

Participating in the journey of the Triduum brings us face to face with the mystery of Christ's dying and rising. We are not mere spectators. By our baptism, we have a place in this mystery. We are sharers in the living, dying and rising of Jesus, called to wash one another's feet, to lay down our egos and even our lives for others, to rise from the tomb of our sins to new life in God.

There's no doubt about it: participating in the Triduum is a commitment. It means sacrificing our time and rearranging our schedules. It means letting other things go. In the words of Pope Francis, "to enter into the mystery means going beyond our own comfort zone." But there is no better way to renew our Easter faith, and no better way to enter into the mystery that guides our lives and gives them meaning.