

This column was originally printed in the April 2014 issue of New Earth, the newspaper for the Diocese of Fargo.

Holy Week and Easter

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On Ash Wednesday, Catholics in the Diocese of Fargo and around the world began a time of prayer, penance, and works of mercy that remind us of our perennial need for repentance and conversion. These 40 days are a graced time, but they lead up to an even more significant time in the life of the Church: Holy Week and Easter.

These last days of Lent - Holy Week and the Sacred Triduum - are an intense period of personal prayer and sacred liturgy that allow us to enter personally into the central mysteries of our redemption. During these sacred days, we are invited to walk even more deliberately with Jesus as he makes his way to the culmination of his mission on earth. The liturgies of the Sacred Triduum, rich in symbolism, are rooted in the ancient tradition of the Church. Every element of the Sacred Triduum puts us in touch with the saving work of Christ, and every Catholic should make the most sincere effort to participate in these celebrations. Just as we wouldn't think of attending a play without staying for the final act, neither would we want to observe the season of Lent without sharing in its climax.

At the Mass of the Lord's Supper, celebrated on the evening of Holy Thursday, we spiritually enter the Upper Room, where the apostles joined Jesus for the Last Supper. There, we recall the poignant moment when Jesus stooped down to wash his disciples' feet, the humble act of a servant and an example for all who would call themselves his followers. This liturgy also recalls the institution of the Eucharist, along with the establishment of the priesthood through the institution of Holy Orders. At the Last Supper, Jesus gives his own body and blood to the apostles as a foreshadowing of his sacrificial death the next day. He then commissions them to "Do this in memory of me." In other words, he commands them to continue what he has begun, to carry on this memorial act that will allow the faithful to partake of his sacrifice until the end of time. As we receive Holy Communion at the Mass of the Lord's Supper, we are present in spirit at that first Mass where Jesus first gives his body and blood to the Church. The Mass concludes with a Eucharistic procession through the church and solemn reposition of the Blessed Sacrament at a place set apart from the tabernacle, to remind us that Jesus was handed over by his betrayer and taken away. In a beautiful custom, believers often will keep vigil before the Blessed Sacrament in an act of spiritual solidarity with our Lord.

By ancient custom, Good Friday is the only day throughout the year when Mass is not celebrated. Rather, the faithful are invited to participate in the solemn Celebration of the Passion of the Lord. In this liturgy the Passion of our Lord from the Gospel of John is proclaimed, and we come face to face with the terrible suffering and death that Jesus underwent for our sins. The faithful also join in prayers of intercession for the Church and the world, and then make a solemn act of veneration of the cross. The veiled cross is brought into the church and slowly unveiled to reveal to the faithful the wood on which our Savior was crucified and died. And finally, the faithful approach the altar to receive Holy Communion so that they might share sacramentally in our Lord's sacrifice. The liturgy ends in simplicity and silence, and the sanctuary and altar are stripped, to express the mourning of the Church for her Lord. All is still and laid bare.

Holy Saturday is a day of silence, a day of waiting. After the sadness and pain of Good Friday, the followers of Jesus wait and watch in expectation. In keeping with the practice of the early Christians, the Church begins the Easter Vigil on the evening of Holy Saturday, after sundown. The vigil begins in total darkness and commences with the blessing of the new fire and the Easter candle. Then follows the *Exultet*, the great Easter proclamation of Christ's resurrection. In the light of the Easter candle, the Church first proclaims the good news: Christ is risen! The darkness and sadness of Good Friday give way to joy and exultation. The Liturgy of the Word offers a series of readings that recall the great moments in salvation history, and the Gloria and Alleluia are sung once again, making clear to all that the somber forty days of Lent have ended, and Easter joy has come once again to God's people. With the reading of the Easter Gospel during that night of the Easter Vigil, we hear at last what we have waited to hear: Christ, who died for our sins, now lives forever!

One of the most beautiful events of the Church year occurs within the Easter Vigil: the baptism and reception into the Church of the catechumens and candidates who have prepared so diligently over many months for this moment. It is always touching to witness this solemn step taken by men and women who desire fervently to be in communion with the Catholic Church. Solemnity and joy are joined together in these moments when brothers and sisters are added to our family of faith. It is difficult to be unmoved by the commitment of these newly baptized and confirmed Catholics, who also receive the Holy Eucharist for the first time. How fitting it is that these new Catholics should share fully in the sacramental life of the Church during the Sacred Triduum, which presents the fullness of the mysteries of our redemption. Their enthusiasm for the faith, along with the celebration of the resurrection of the Lord, make this a joyous moment, and should inspire all who are present to give thanks for the gift of faith and the unmerited grace of God that we have all received.

The Easter Vigil is called the "mother of all vigils," the greatest liturgy of the year. It may be somewhat lengthier than most Sunday Masses, but why shouldn't it be? What better use of time could there be than the joyful celebration of our Lord's resurrection and our redemption? Hopefully, we will not be deterred by time when we would willingly spend as many hours watching a movie or a football game. As the Church celebrates our Lord's resurrection on this holy night and then continues its celebration throughout Easter Sunday and Easter Week, we are all invited to renew our own baptismal faith and to celebrate once again the mercy of God, which conquers sin and death. It is a hope-filled time that reminds us of the love of God for all his people and of our own eternal destiny, which is to dwell forever with him in heaven. May the celebration of Holy Week and Easter be for all of us an experience of the sublime grace of our Lord, who has died and is now risen. With the early Christians, we too can proclaim: "The Lord is risen, he is risen indeed! Alleluia!"

A blessed Holy Week and a joyous Easter to all!