The Easter Triduum – the three great days of the liturgical year - begins on Holy Thursday evening and finishes on Easter Sunday evening. The Easter Triduum is also called the Paschal Triduum because it is the church’s greatest celebration of the paschal mystery - the death and resurrection of Jesus - and it is ‘the culmination of the entire liturgical year.’

The paschal mystery
The paschal mystery is so named because the earliest Christians understood Jesus’ death and resurrection in terms of a new Passover. The word ‘paschal’ comes from the Greek “pascha,” which is derived from the Hebrew and Aramaic words referring to the annual commemoration of the original Passover.

For over 4000 years, the Passover has been celebrated annually by Jews as a festival of redemption. At the Passover feast, the original events are recalled: God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and made them the People of God.

From the very early days of the Church, Christians used Passover imagery to understand Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus was the new Passover lamb sacrificed for the redemption of the People of God. During the Passover festival in about A.D. 56, St Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians saying that ‘our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed’ (I Corinthians 5:7, NRSV).

For Jews, the Passover festival is not just a memorial of events long ago; they believe that in commemorating those events, they are participating in God’s redemptive act in the present moment. So too, when Christians celebrate the sacraments (particularly Eucharist) they believe that they are participating in God’s greatest redemptive action - the death and the resurrection of Jesus - in the present moment.

1 Identifying the paschal mystery only with the death and resurrection of Jesus is a convenient compromise. All aspects of Jesus’ life, including his ministry, death and resurrection are paschal, since they involved sacrifice. Further, the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is part of this mystery. It is the Spirit – at work in us through the sacraments, particularly Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist - who empowers Christians to live out the paschal mystery in their everyday lives. This is why the sacraments of initiation are so important at the great Paschal Vigil.


4 See Exodus 12

5 See Corinthians 5:7
The ‘paschal mystery’ was the title that the Church gave—millennia ago—to the saving events of Jesus’ death and resurrection. ‘Mystery’ does not imply that the meaning behind these saving events is unknowable; rather, that God is revealing these truths to us over time. So today, our understanding is only partial; but in every moment of every day God is revealing the mysteries of heaven and earth to us. The greatest moment of revelation was in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, our Pascal lamb.

Celebrating the paschal mystery
Every Christian liturgy is a celebration of the paschal mystery and, as James Empereur writes, ‘it is what marks every Sunday as a little Easter, or what marks Easter as a great Sunday.’ The Easter Triduum liturgies, however, are the highpoint of the liturgical year.

The Easter Triduum is a festival of three days, during which there are three major liturgical celebrations: the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday; the Celebration of the Lord’s Passion, on Good Friday; and the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday evening.

1. Mass of the Lord’s Supper

The Mass of the Lord’s Supper, on Holy Thursday evening, opens the Easter Triduum. The festive mood of the celebration is expressed in the white vestments and the sung Gloria.

The opening prayer of the Holy Thursday liturgy sets the scene:

God our Father, we are gathered here to share in the supper which your only Son left to his Church to reveal his love. He gave it to us when he was about to die and commanded us to celebrate it as the new and eternal sacrifice. We pray that in this eucharist we may find the fullness of love and life.

The mass commemorates Jesus’ Last Supper, so called because Jesus shared the meal with his disciples on the night before he died. It was at this meal—held during the Passover festival time—that Jesus instituted the Eucharist.6

The first and second readings7 draw Jesus’ Last Supper and the Jewish celebration of the Passover into alignment. In the gospel reading we hear John’s account of the washing of the feet.8 Jesus washes the feet of the disciples before the meal and says to them, ‘So if I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you’ (John 13: 14-15). Here Jesus shows his friends what true discipleship means: ‘self-sacrificing love in the service of others.’9

In response to the gospel reading, there is a foot washing ritual. This link between Eucharist and Christian service is a major theme expressed in the Holy Thursday liturgy. It is also a call for everyone present to live out the paschal mystery in their everyday lives by putting others first and by working for peace and justice in the world.

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6 It is not certain if the Last Supper was actually a Passover meal, but it was celebrated within the context of the Passover festival.
2. Celebration of the Lord’s Passion

The solemn Celebration of the Lord’s Passion takes place at about three o’clock in the afternoon on Good Friday. Red vestments are worn. This is a very simple, low-key liturgy in three parts: Liturgy of the Word, the Veneration of the Cross and Holy Communion.

The first reading is the fourth of the Suffering Servant Songs from Isaiah. Here the chosen one of God is likened to a silent lamb sent to be slaughtered, but ultimately he is rewarded for being faithful to his calling: he ‘poured himself out to death,’ while at the same time praying for sinners. In the second reading from Hebrews, Jesus is the ‘supreme high priest’ who ‘learnt to obey through suffering.’ The gospel reading is John’s account of the passion. The general intercessions conclude the Liturgy of the Word. These are ancient prayers, some of which date back to the 4th century.

Eucharist is not celebrated on Good Friday; but consecrated bread from the Holy Thursday liturgy is used for Holy Communion. After communion the priest says a prayer of blessing over the people and they all depart in silence.

The Celebration of the Lord’s Passion is solemn, but it is not mournful; rather, it is a remembrance of the death of Jesus which was, ultimately, a life-giving event. So, even though the liturgy focuses on the tragedy of the Cross, the triumph of the Resurrection is never forgotten.

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10 See Isaiah 52:13-53:12
11 See Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9
12 See John 18:1-19:42
3. Easter Vigil

The high point of the Easter Triduum is the Easter Vigil, which is celebrated on Holy Saturday evening. This celebration is the longest, the most elaborate and most beautiful of all the Triduum liturgies. The Vigil celebrates the resurrection of Jesus and looks forward to the final coming of Christ at the end of time. Further, the Vigil is "the most solemn moment for Christian initiation in the liturgical cycle."14

The Easter Vigil, also called the Paschal Vigil, is one of the oldest Christian celebrations – dating back to the 2nd century. At that time, the Bishop Melito of Sardis (in modern Turkey) wrote an Easter Vigil homily in which he identifies Jesus as the new Passover:

> The mystery of the pasch
> Is new and old,
> . . .
> For the sacrifice of the Lamb
> and the celebration of the Pasch
> and the letter of the Law
> have been fulfilled in Christ.
> . . .
> Born as Son,
> led like a lamb,
> sacrificed like a sheep,
> buried as a man,
> he rises from the dead as God,
> being by nature both God and man.15

The celebration has five parts: the Service of the Light; the Liturgy of the Word; the Liturgy of Baptism; the Liturgy of Eucharist; and the Concluding Rite.

The Service of the Light begins after nightfall.16 The lights in the church are extinguished and the people gather outside around a bonfire. The bonfire is blessed and the paschal candle is lit from the fire. The people light their own small candles from the paschal candle, then they process into the church following the new light. As the procession moves through the church, the priest or deacon sings "Christ our light" to which the people respond 'Thanks be to God.' This formula is sung three times and then the candle is placed in its stand, in a prominent place in the sanctuary.

When all are in their places, the ancient Easter Proclamation called the Exultet is sung:

> Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!
> Exult, all creation around God’s throne!
> Jesus Christ, our King, is risen!
> Sound the trumpet of salvation!
> . . .
> This is our passover feast,
> when Christ, the true Lamb, is slain,
> whose blood consecrates the home of all believers.
> . . .17

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16 GNLY, 21.
17 See the full text and music at http://saintmeinradmusic.org/downloads/Exultet.pdf
Then follows the Liturgy of the Word with seven readings from the Hebrew scriptures and two from the Christian scriptures.\textsuperscript{18} The readings draw a comprehensive picture of salvation history from the creation of the world to the Resurrection of Jesus:\textsuperscript{19}

- Genesis 1:1-2:2 (the creation)
- Genesis 22:1-18 (Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac)
- Exodus 14: 15-15:1 (the passage through the Red Sea)
- Isaiah 54:5-14 (the new Jerusalem)
- Isaiah 55:1-11 (the free offer of salvation)
- Baruch 3:9-15, 32-4:4 (the commandments of life)
- Ezekiel 36:16-28 (a new heart and a new spirit)
- Romans 6:3-11 (Paul’s baptismal theology)
- Year A Matthew 28:1-10; Year B Mark 16:1-8; Year C Luke 24:1-12 (the resurrection narrative)

The Liturgy of Baptism begins when the candidates for baptism are called forward with their godparents: the litany of the saints is sung, the baptismal water is blessed and the catechumens are baptised. Then the priest invites all the people to renew their baptismal promises:

\ldots through the paschal mystery we have been buried with Christ in baptism, so that we may rise with him to new life. Now that we have completed our lenten observance, let us renew the promises we made in baptism \ldots

After the people have given their assent to the promises, the priest takes some of the baptismal water and goes among the people sprinkling them liberally. Then the newly baptised are confirmed.

\textsuperscript{18} For pastoral reasons the number of readings may be reduced.
\textsuperscript{19} For more details see http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/eastervigil.shtml
The Liturgy of Eucharist follows the usual pattern except that the newly initiated bring forward the bread and the wine. It is customary for them to receive communion first. Communion is the culmination of their sacramental initiation: it is the ultimate sign of belonging to the Church and participation in the death and resurrection of Christ.

The great Paschal Vigil concludes with one of the usual dismissal formulas, but with an Easter accent:

Priest: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord, alleluia, alleluia.
All: Thanks be to God, alleluia, alleluia.

‘Alleluia’ is derived from an ancient Hebrew word. It expresses joy and means something like ‘Praise God!’

Bibliography


Preparation for Easter

Easter Triduum

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