

PREPARATION

Easter Triduum, the mysteries of life and death interrogate world today

ECCLESIA

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Last Supper

1. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday: these are days profoundly permeated by the memory of the Passion and death of Christ, already introduced by the liturgy of

Holy Wednesday, which leads us to the Upper Room where the evangelists record the brief dialogue that took place between Jesus and Judas. "Rabbi, is it me?" the traitor asks the divine Master, who had foretold: "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me". He replies: "You have said it" (cf. Mt 26:14-25). And the fourth gospel closes this account that evokes Judas' betrayal with a lapidary remark: "And it was night" (Jn 13:30). When Judas leaves the Upper Room with his heart besieged by the darkness of inner confusion, he finds himself in a deep night with his mind now set on the betrayal of the Master. It was night also in the hearts of the other apostles who were lost and confused because they did not understand what was happening. It was also night in the heart of Christ who by now saw the decisive hour of his mission approaching and knew he had to make the sacrifice of his life to the last drop of blood.

In the days of the Holy Triduum we relive the apocalyptic clash between life and death, between light and darkness, between hate and love. All this is not history of the past, but a very current drama that involves each of us, called upon to decide what destiny to give to our existence. A choice that entails being aware of the 'night' that dwells within us, because of our sins. The Paschal Mystery, namely the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord is renewed until the end of the world in every Eucharistic celebration. At Mass, therefore, we do not go just to pray, but to relive the Paschal Mystery and it is as if we were returning to Calvary - in fact, it is the same reality - to participate by faith in what Christ has accomplished for the redemption of the world.

2. The Easter Triduum begins on Holy Thursday in the afternoon/evening with the Mass "in Cena Domini", the commemoration of the Last Supper. Actually, in the morning the Chrism Mass is already celebrated, which can be anticipated for pastoral reasons on one of the previous days. It is celebrated by the Bishop of the diocese together with the deacons and priests, his closest collaborators, who, surrounded by the People of God, renew the promises made on the day of their priestly ordination. It is a moving moment for the bishop and the priests because it highlights the ever undeserved gift of the ministerial priesthood that the Lord left to his Church on the eve of his death on the cross. One feels the close and permanent communion, born of ordination, between the bishop and the priests, and it is a stimulus on this eve of the Passion to acquire evernew awareness of the richness of the sacrament of the Eucharist and the Priesthood. In addition, the Oils for the celebration of the Sacraments are blessed: the Oil of Catechumens for those preparing for Baptism, the Oil of the Sick for the elderly and the sick, and the Sacred Chrism with which the bishop or priest anoints the baptised, administers the Sacrament of Confirmation, anoints the hands of the presbyter and the head in the consecration of the bishop.

On the evening of Maundy Thursday, as we enter the Easter Triduum, we relive the Mass that is said in Cena Domini, that is, the Mass where we commemorate the Last Supper and what happened there, at that moment in the Upper Room. It is the evening when Christ left his disciples the testament of his love in the Eucharist, but not as a remembrance, but as a memorial and as his everlasting presence. In this Sacrament, Jesus replaced the sacrificial victim - the paschal lamb - with himself: his Body and Blood set us free from the slavery of sin and death. And on the same evening he delivered to us the new commandment of love that asks us to love one another by making us servants of one another, as he did by washing the disciples' feet. A gesture that anticipates his death on the cross in the sacrament of bread and wine changed into his Body and Blood. The evangelist John does not recount the institution of the Eucharist but the washing of the disciples' feet, the gesture by which He, having loved His own, wished to express His love to the end (cf. Jn 13:1). It is the testament of the love that he left to the disciples as their badge: to grow in the humility of service and loving people concretely to the point of giving his life for each of them. The gesture of washing feet also anticipates the gift of the sacrament of reconciliation or penance that he will hand over to the apostles on the day of resurrection when he appears to them and says: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Those whose sins you forgive will be forgiven; those whose sins you do not forgive will not be forgiven".

At the end of the Mass in Cena Domini, the liturgy invites the faithful to pause in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, reliving Jesus' agony in Gethsemane where the disciples slept, leaving him alone. Even today we often sleep, we, his disciples, and on this sacred night of Gethsemane, we want to commit ourselves to be more vigilant so that we can better understand the mystery of Holy Thursday, which encompasses the threefold supreme gift of the ministerial priesthood, the Eucharist and the new commandment of brotherly love, which is expressed above all in forgiveness given and received.

3. Good Friday is a day of penance, fasting and prayer. A very sober liturgy gathers us on Calvary to commemorate the Passion and redemptive Death of Jesus Christ through the texts of Holy Scripture, especially the Passion according to St John, and liturgical prayers. This is followed by the rite of adoration of the Cross, meditating on the way of the innocent Lamb sacrificed for our salvation. It is a time to bring to prayer the sufferings of the sick, the poor, the rejected of this society of ours. We will remember the "lamb sacrificed", the innocent victims of wars, of dictatorships, of daily violence, of abortions. Contemplating the Cross we will pray for the many, too many crucified of today, who only from Jesus can receive comfort and give meaning to their suffering. From that first Good Friday, Christ took upon himself the wounds of humanity and his infinite love irrigated the deserts of our existences and illuminated the darkness of our hearts. On Calvary Jesus immersed himself in the pain of the world and took it upon himself, freeing us from the power of the darkness of evil and death. By His wounds we have been healed (cf. 1 Pet 2:25), says the Apostle Peter, by His death we have been regenerated, all of us. And thanks to Him, abandoned on the cross, never again is anyone alone in the darkness of death. Never, because God is always beside us: we must, however, open our hearts and allow ourselves to be looked upon by Him. The Good Friday liturgy ends in a simple manner with communion, consuming the sacred species preserved from the Mass in Cena Domini of the previous day.

This commentary on Good Friday, attributed to St John Chrysostom, is interesting: "Formerly the cross meant contempt, but today it is a venerable thing, formerly it was a symbol of condemnation, today it is the hope of salvation. It has indeed become the source of infinite good; it has freed us from error, it has dispelled our darkness, it has reconciled us with God, from being God's enemies it has made us his family members, from being strangers it has made us his neighbours: this cross is the destruction of enmity, the source of peace, the casket of our treasure" (De cruce et latrone I,1,4). Still today, Christian tradition promotes many manifestations of popular

piety, including the well-known Good Friday processions with their evocative rites repeated every year. There is also the pious exercise of the 'Way of the Cross', which offers us throughout the year the opportunity to impress ever more deeply in our souls the mystery of the Cross and inwardly conform ourselves to Christ. St Leo the Great writes that the Way of the Cross educates us to "look with the eyes of the heart at Jesus crucified, so as to recognise in his flesh our own flesh" (Sermon 15 on the Lord's Passion). And therein lies the true wisdom of the Christian.

4. Holy Saturday is the day of silence: a great silence descends over the whole Earth; a silence experienced in weeping and bewilderment by the first disciples, shocked by the death of Jesus that they could never have imagined. Life is in the tomb and those who had hoped in Jesus feel abandoned, feel like orphans, perhaps even orphans of God. This Sabbath is also the day of Mary who may be weeping, but her heart is full of faith, hope and love. She had remained with her son all the way to the foot of the cross, her soul pierced. And now that everything is over, she continues to keep vigil with a heart full of hope because she keeps in her soul the promise that God raises the dead. Thus, in the world's darkest hour, Mary becomes Mother of believers, Mother of the Church and sign of hope for all humanity. Sustained by her intercession, we find the strength to continue carrying the weight of the cross, especially when it becomes too hard for each of us.

5. The Easter Vigil. On the night between Saturday and Sunday, the veil of sadness, which shrouds the Church at the death and burial of the Lord, is shattered by the cry of victory: Christ is risen! He has defeated death forever! And with the rites of the solemn Easter Vigil, joy and light illuminate our assemblies as they raise in chorus the festive song of Alleluia. It will be an encounter in faith with the risen Christ, and the Easter joy will be prolonged throughout the fifty days that follow, until the coming of the Holy Spirit. He who was crucified is risen! All questions and uncertainties, hesitations and fears are dispelled by the certainty that Christ is risen. For he gives us the certainty that good always triumphs in the end over evil, that life conquers death, and our end is not to descend lower and lower from sorrow to sorrow, but to ascend with confidence to the heights. The Risen One is the confirmation that Jesus is right in everything: in promising us life beyond death and forgiveness beyond sins even though the disciples, because they doubted, found it hard to believe him. The first to believe and see was Mary Magdalene, the apostle of the Resurrection sent to spread this good news to the disciples who then also saw the Lord. And did the guards, the soldiers, who were in the tomb see him? We do not know, but they certainly took notice and the mystery of this mystery remained with them. There are various versions of this in the apocryphal

gospels and in the writings of certain mystics from the earliest centuries of Christianity. One thing is certain, however: from that moment on, it is no longer important to try to see Jesus with one's eyes, but to meet him with one's heart, trusting in his word. In the Upper Room he took leave of the apostles with these words: "In the world you will have tribulation, but take courage: I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). I wish everyone to live the Holy Triduum 2024 with faith!

*** *Bishop Emeritus of Ascoli Piceno***