

## Notes from Fr. Nick

# Holy Week and Easter

Discussions at the Liturgy Committee and Parish Council unearthed some confusion about the liturgies of Holy Week and Easter. Now may be a good time to clarify the history and Church teaching about our worship at this core time in our liturgical year.

The liturgy of **Holy Thursday**, **Good Friday** and **Holy Saturday** comprises the **Paschal Triduum**, which is the summit of the Church year. I use liturgy in the singular because this is really one liturgy celebrated over three days. There is *no solemn blessing and dismissal at the end of Holy Thursday and Good Friday* celebrations because our worship only concludes at the end of the Easter Vigil.

Components of the Triduum are the **Mass of the Lord's Supper (Holy Thursday)**, **Passion of Our Lord and Veneration of the Cross (Good Friday)** and **Easter Vigil (Holy Saturday)**. Each is distinct but not separate. Other rituals during Holy Week are *devotions*. They have great merits, but are an optional addition to the Triduum Liturgy.

Prior to Vatican II (1962-1965), Holy Week worship was largely a mixture of accretions and historical accidents. The Church relegated the Easter Vigil—if celebrated at all—to Saturday morning at the Cathedral. In order to preserve the Communion fast, the most important celebration of the entire Church year was orphaned to a time and place where few people attended! This was a case of the 'tail wagging the dog'. A fast imposed by the Church late in history robbed the Vigil of its essence—hoping and waiting for Christ's resurrection through the course of the night.

Although mentioned in passing in earlier documents, the first, most complete, description of the Triduum comes from *Saint Cyril of Jerusalem* in the 4th century. Corroborating Cyril's teaching is the travel journal of *Egeria*, a fourth-century nun from Spain who attended Cyril's Holy Week liturgies. Yet over the centuries, the Triduum liturgy lost its prominence, and other Holy Week rituals asserted themselves in the hearts of the Faithful. *The Seven Last Words of Christ* and *Stations of the Cross* became more popular than Good Friday's Passion of the Lord and Veneration of the Cross. The liturgy of that time could not compete with the emotional weight of Jesus' death expressed in the devotion, the Stations of the Cross, which are modeled after the *Via Dolorosa* in Jerusalem (which also emphasized drama unmatched by the complex Prayers of the Faithful at the Good Friday liturgy).

**Tenebrae** is the celebration of the Church's Divine Office on Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Originally Tenebrae took place in the hours approaching dawn. The most dramatic part of Tenebrae was the gradual extinguishing of candles. Likely, this was originally practical, as light from the morning sun made them unnecessary. Later the extinguishing of the lights symbolized Jesus' passion and death. In 1955 *Pope Pius XII* suppressed Tenebrae in favor of restoring the Holy Thursday and Good Friday Masses, and he returned the Easter Vigil to evening.

The restoration of the Triduum is an intriguing story in itself. As the sciences of archeology and anthropology progressed during the 19th century, the Benedictine monks at the *Abbey of Maria Lac* in Germany examined Catholic worship and realized that it was a patchwork of accretions and anachronisms. Under the leadership of *Abbot Marmion*, and later *Dom Odo Casel*, they tried to uncover the purest form of the liturgy. They had originally assumed that the pinnacle of worship was in the Middle Ages, but the more the monks studied, the further back they went. They finally stopped at the 4th century, not because it was the purest then, but because there were very few earlier records.

Next the monks set about recreating rituals as close as those of the early Church as possible. *Saint Hippolytus* from the second century and *Saint Cyril* from the fourth were major influences. Hippolytus supplied the earliest Eucharistic Prayer (largely Prayer II) and Cyril gave us the process that after Vatican II became the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), which included the Paschal Triduum.

In 1949 *Pope Pius XII* gave Dom Odo Casel and the monks at Maria Lac permission to celebrate the restored Easter Vigil for the first time in hundreds of years. In one of the most dramatic endings to a person's lifework ever, Dom Odo Casel stood before the congregation, sang the *Exsultet* and dropped dead! His efforts were not, however, in vain: Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council primarily to restore Catholic liturgy.

What does all this history mean to us as a parish? Holy Week is a very busy time. In addition to the Triduum Liturgy, there are confessions, RCIA preparation, diocesan activities and the conclusion of Lent. When we add Tenebrae, the Seven Last Words of Christ, Stations of the Cross, our plate is not only full, but running over. This year I am essentially sticking with what has been done at St. Mary Magdalen in the past, but I'll be watching to see how our resources are marshaled and where our priorities lie, so that we can make reasonable adjustments in the future.