Opinion
NCR Voices



People in Washington pray at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle on Good Friday, April 15, 2022, during the celebration of the Liturgy of the Lord's Passion. (CNS/Catholic Standard/Andrew Biraj)



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This week, I feel sorry for those Christian churches which are non-liturgical and rely solely on the preaching of the Word of God in their worship and eschew the rituals of Holy Week. Can you imagine, only reading about the Mandatum rite instead of witnessing it and participating in it?

Here is a liturgy war I fight!

For many parishes, the paschal triduum, which begins on Holy Thursday, is ushered in with Tenebrae tonight. This service, which emerged in the early Middle Ages, brought together matins and lauds from Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, turning them into a kind of vigil of the triduum celebrated in the evening of Spy Wednesday. The gradual extinguishing of the candles on the hearse foreshadow, in reverse, the filling of the church with candlelight at the Easter Vigil. The lamentations that are sung foreshadow the cross: At St. Matthew's Cathedral, they always sang the hauntingly beautiful "Lamentations of Jeremiah" set to music by Thomas Tallis. The slamming of books at the end of the service, the *strepitus*, recalls the earthquake when Christ died. As we shall do on Good Friday, the congregation departs in silence.

Holy Thursday warrants special attention this year because the church in the United States is preparing for its Eucharistic Revival. I recently received an email from Word on Fire Ministry, the multimedia ministry that is the brainchild of Bishop Robert Barron, announcing a eucharistic congress in his new Diocese of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota. The announcement is also posted on the website for the congress. In it, Barron says, "The Eucharist is not a what, but a Who: the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of our Lord Jesus."

That is not wrong, but it is inadequate. The Mass of the Lord's Supper reminds us that the Eucharist is a noun because it is first a verb, a thanksgiving that yields the Real Prescence, not a Real Presence divorced from the sacrifice of the Mass. Starting with the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures linking our Eucharist with Passover, binding the Eucharist with that divine love exhibited in the Mandatum rite, through the actions of the Mass itself, the liturgy instructs us that the Eucharist is a participation in, and a thanksgiving for, the paschal mystery. We are not onlookers or bystanders.



Pope Francis washes the feet of an inmate during the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper at a prison April 14, 2022, in Civitavecchia, Italy. (CNS/Vatican Media)

This important sacramental fact, that the Eucharist is first a verb, is attested by the three words that are added to the Eucharistic Prayer at the Mass of the Lord's Supper. At every other Mass, the celebrant says, "on the night he was betrayed" or "at the time he was betrayed." But at the Mass of the Lord's Supper, the celebrant says, "on the night he was betrayed, that is tonight." Tonight. We enter into God's eternal time. Our Mass and the Last Supper 2,000 years ago are one event, the eternal sacrifice, the everlasting thanksgiving, the one paschal mystery.

The Liturgy of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday is unlike any other. We know it the second we walk in the church and see that the tabernacle is open and empty. In that great novel about God's providence, *Brideshead Revisited*, Cordelia Flyte tells Charles Ryder about the day the priest closed the chapel at the family home:

> They've closed the chapel at Brideshead, Bridey and the Bishop; Mummy's requiem was the last mass said there. After she as buried, the priest came in — I was there alone. I don't think he saw me — and took out the altar stone and put it in his bag; then he burned the wads of wool with the holy oil on them and threw the ash outside; he emptied the holy water stoup and blew out the lamp in the sanctuary and left the tabernacle open and empty, as though from now on it was always to be Good Friday. I suppose none of this makes any sense to you, Charles, poor agnostic. I stayed there till he was gone, and then, suddenly, there wasn't any chapel there any more, just an oddly decorated room.

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Just as we should remember always that Eucharist is first a verb, we should not belittle our Catholic devotion to the Real Presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Catholics always genuflect when they enter a church, whether the tabernacle is on the main altar or not. They know that God is present and that they are in the presence of something holy. On Good Friday, when the tabernacle is empty, we

kneel when we venerate the cross.

There is no Mass on Good Friday but there is a Communion service. I remember my liturgy professor, Dominican Fr. Gerald Austin, explaining that the Communion service was added to the rite in the early centuries of Church history because the people of God demanded it. They could not be without the Eucharist on this most solemn of days. This year, as the synodal process invites us to retrieve the ecclesiological conception of the church as the people of God, this liturgical history reminds us that the image is not novel. Like all of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, it was retrieved from the tradition.

One recent liturgical change is regrettable. Growing up, during the reading of the Passion, the congregation was tasked with shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Now, one of the readers relates the crowd's words. The old way was better, reminding us that our sins brought Jesus to the cross, not the sins of some people long ago and far away. His blood is on us and upon our children. How could it be otherwise? We want that blood on us and on our children because his is the blood that redeems.



Parishioners at Corpus Christi Parish in Miami decorate the platform of the Christ of Mercy (Cristo de la Misericordia) for the Good Friday procession April 15, 2022. The cedar wood sculpture made by Juan Manuel Miñarro, who studied the Shroud of Turin and the Sudarium of Oviedo, depicts Jesus Christ crucified. (OSV News/Florida Catholic/La Voz Católica/Rocío Granados)

The Easter Vigil has so many wonderful and unique aspects, the lighting of the Easter fire, the singing of the *Exsultet*, the passage from darkness and shadows to light echoing the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The readings tell the history of salvation, which for us Christians, is also the history of the Jewish people. My favorite is the reading from the 55th chapter of Isaiah:

> For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
> neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.
> For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
> so are my ways higher than your ways
> and my thoughts than your thoughts.
>
> For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
> and do not return there but water the earth,
> making it bring forth and sprout,
> giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
> it shall not return to me empty,
> but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
> and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

That chapter was read at both my parents' funerals and it will be read at mine. If there is a more beautiful chapter of Scripture, I do not know it.

The Easter Vigil was restored by Pope Pius XII in 1951. We do not think of Pius as an innovator, and some skeptics of Vatican II yearn for the days of Pius as if they were a golden age of traditionalism. Arguably, it was this decision of Pius that really focused the church on the centrality of baptism and the priesthood of all believers. The center point of the Easter Vigil liturgy are the sacraments of initiation and the Order of Christian Initiation for Adults, the former RCIA, is one of the great fruits of the council. Thank you Pope Pius XII!

After the catechumens are baptized and confirmed, the rest of the Mass is more or less standard, as it should be, reminding us that all time now stands in the shadow of the cross and on the stone rolled away from the now empty tomb. Every Sunday is now a little Easter.

There is so much to love about the Catholic Church: our wonderful pope, our worldwide communion across the continents and through the centuries, our theological tradition, so rich in wisdom and insight, our works of mercy, but in these most holy days, it is our liturgy that I love the most. High church or low, pipe organs or guitars, our liturgy during the triduum discloses the essence of the faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Why only read about it when you can participate in it?

A blessed triduum to one and all.