Opinion
Guest Voices



Young people hold candles during the Easter Vigil at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford, Conn., in 2015. (CNS/Bob Mullen)



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One year on Good Friday, my youngest child vomited all over me just minutes before the liturgy was supposed to start. During this solemn, sacred and silent time, people were treated to the sights and sounds of the Fountain of Tommy. Church ladies, including my mom, cleaned up the pew before the liturgy began. I rushed home to clean us up and returned before Communion.

This is par for the course in my family, as far as Holy Week goes.

We always know it's Holy Week because a bunch of us get sick. One year, our oldest son fainted during Mass on Palm Sunday. Influenza, pneumonia, the common cold and norovirus have all made an appearance. After a short hospice stay, my dad died on one Holy Thursday. Sickness during Holy Week has become as much a part of our family faith tradition as candles in Advent.

I've come to realize, though, that the seeming clash of normal family life with the sacredness of Holy Week has the capacity to bring us closer to Jesus.

Holy Week can help us grow even amid the absurdities of daily life, not despite them. We may have heard the story of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection; we may know it intellectually, but attending the Holy Week liturgies allows one to experience it personally. It brings the story alive.

> The Holy Week liturgies invite us to experience all of our humanity, just like Jesus did.
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In the triduum, all the senses are engaged. We breathe in the combination of chrism and fresh spring air. The thrill of Palm Sunday is followed by what, for me, has always felt like a diocesan family reunion at the chrism Mass. We feel the hugs of friends and family. We are reminded of people who practice this faith many miles away from us. We see the bright liturgical colors. We hear magnificent music. We leave with the taste and scent of incense.

The red of Palm Sunday looks different from the stark, sad use of the same color on Friday. The triumphant procession with waving palms and sprinkling holy water

gives way to publicly laying face down in a quiet, stripped sanctuary a few days later. We are drawn in and participate in the original story, as we chant, "Crucify him!"

Several years ago, while hearing the Passion at Mass, my son Teddy looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, "It's just such a sad story."

The Holy Week liturgies invite us to experience all of our humanity, just like Jesus did. Our family was often called upon to recruit people to have their feet washed on Holy Thursday, and we once recruited a friend who had six toes as a little surprise for Father. There is something humble and vulnerable about taking your shoes and socks off in front of the church; it creates an unusual realization that the liturgy is about real, human life.



Parishioners at the Basilica of Ste. Anne de Détroit participate in a Good Friday reenactment of the Stations of the Cross in Detroit April 15, 2022. (CNS/Jim West)

Each year, our parish choir sings, "Stay here and keep watch with me, the hour has come," and Roger, the cantor, sings, "My heart is nearly broken with sorrow." His expressive voice always makes me feel the pain of Jesus when his friends fall asleep. I want to stay the entire evening in adoration with Jesus. And even though I don't spend the whole night, because I have kids to take home and take care of, I am able to feel that desire to be with Jesus that is within me.

I remember one Good Friday homily that began, "Tonight, we commemorate the humiliation of God." That phrase hit me hard, and still hits me many years later. We humiliated our Savior, spitting on him, splitting up his clothes, making him carry the weapon he would be executed upon. He redeemed us anyway.

And after these liturgies, we have the Easter Vigil: the Super Bowl of Catholic worship.

Arriving early to regular Sunday Mass was a rarity for us, but we always arrived an hour before the vigil to secure a spot to sit and because our kids needed to arrive early for altar service. My grandparents served for years as confirmation sponsors. Our parish RCIA leaders, who seem to get shorter as our kids grow bigger, quietly direct the candidates and catechumens on where to sit and what to do. They have served in this ministry for so long it seems it wouldn't be Easter without them.

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There have been times when the microphone has picked up the nervous giggles of our son and our priest as they struggled to light the fire in the spring winds of Northeastern Minnesota. We have caught another son dripping candle wax onto friends in the pew in front of us. One priest we knew called the Easter Vigil "the Menor Family's jam." He was right. We love it, and we've tried to embrace both the reverent and irreverent sides of it.

Perhaps the most exciting part of the vigil is the singing of the Exsultet. Sung in dramatic darkness with only a tiny light for the cantor to see the page, it is all hope and joy and celebration. As I hear it chanted, I feel connected to everyone who has heard this ancient prayer sung across hundreds of years: my mom, the saints, the early church, people in prisons.

"Exult, let them exult, the hosts of Heaven!" it begins. There's no lead-up; we jump right into the rejoicing of the Exsultet once the procession is completed. And as it begins each year, I feel the energy of the Easter miracle enliven my soul once again. I feel like a little girl again.

It is magnificent storytelling, repeating the phrase, "This is the night," five times to build our excitement in the story of light over darkness. This is first and foremost a song of jubilation, where the sadness of Jesus' death is over, "knowing an end to gloom and darkness." We are extolled to "let this holy building shake with joy, filled with the mighty voices of the peoples."



Deacon Jeff Prickette, pastoral leader at Prince of Peace Parish in Bellevue, Wis., holds the pascal candle in the church sanctuary during the Service of Light, part of the Easter Vigil liturgy held April 8, 2023. (OSV News/Sam Lucero)

The Exsultet is also a history lesson, musically illustrating our shared salvation story and reminding us of the original Passover. I hear "shod" and remember my grandpa talking about his cows and horses, and I imagine the people walking their livestock

across the Red Sea. Thinking of Adam's sin as a "happy fault," comforts me, knowing that God can bring goodness even out of sin.

We are prompted to reflect on what sins we have committed, and how God has turned them into something wonderful. What sins have been committed against us that eventually lead to something marvelous? Does that help us heal and forgive? These are the questions that the Exsultet can raise within us, turning what seems dead or lifeless into something bright and full of hope.

As our individual candles are lit from the Easter candle, which continues to glow with the same original brightness, we light up the entire church. God's graciousness is never dimmed when shared, but is multiplied and expanded.

If you don't usually go to the triduum services, consider this your invitation to drop everything and attend. It doesn't matter if your kids vomit, or if they do some other embarrassing thing. The light you hold will brighten the church. Whether you attend regularly or are a first timer, may you feel the holy building of your inner chapel shaking with joy.