

Good Friday of the Lord's Passion

Historical Background

Before the reform of the Holy Week liturgy, the liturgical books called today the "Parasceven" or the Day of Preparation, because Jesus died on the Jewish day of preparation. But everywhere else, today was called by names more indicative of the Lord's suffering and death. St. Ambrose called it the "Day of Bitterness." In Germany it may still be called "Sorrowful Friday."

It is indeed a day of great sorrow, but also the day of our redemption. This aspect has influenced its other names: "Holy Friday" and our own "Good Friday" (where "good" has the ancient meaning of "Holy").

The most striking manifestation of the sorrow and mourning is that today in both East and West, Mass was never celebrated. The ancient Christian writer, Tertullian, gives the reason: "It is not fitting that we should celebrate a feast on that day when the Bridegroom is taken from us."

The Good Friday Service:

The liturgy of Good Friday is made up of four distinct parts:

- the liturgy of the Word (readings, responsorial psalm, solemn reading of the Gospel of the Passion, oration, brief homily)
- the General Intercessions
- the Veneration of the Cross
- Holy Communion

The reading of the Passion

The proclamation of the Gospel of the Passion is perhaps one of the most dramatic rites in the liturgy. We are doing much more than reading of a *past* event. We are taking part in an action, an event. We are entering with mind and heart into the Word of God, and absorbing its saving power.

When the Church proclaims the Gospel, especially the Passion narrative, she is not merely recalling past events out of loving gratitude. She is doing much more than that.

The Church is describing present realities. Through the reading of the Gospel, we are made present at the events it describes. What is read in the Gospel is happening to us.

The Church's worship proclaims the death of the Lord until He comes. The Church proclaims it sacramentally but no less really in the Eucharist. She proclaims it as though for the first time in the Gospel. ***For the Passion narrative is not only the narrative of the event, but the commentary upon the meaning of that event. It takes us back to what Our Lord did and confronts us with it.***

Through the sacred texts we are carried back in time, and placed in immediate contact with the Word of God—both the word that came from His lips and the Word in Person.

Louis Bouyer wrote that had we been on the side of the road where He passed doing good, we would not have been nearer to Him, to each of His miracles, to each of His acts of mercy than we are when we hear His Church recount them to us.

Jesus Christ speaks to us and acts before us as directly as He did to the people who heard His words. The contact is no less real. In fact, because of grace, it is even more real than it was to the people in the Holy Land when He walked in their midst. Through the holy Word of God, we are associated with the mysteries of His life; we come into contact with the saving mystery of redemption.

From beginning to the end of the Passion narrative, the Person of Christ dominates the sacred narrative. ***He is in our midst as He was in the midst of His disciples. We contemplate the eternal High Priest and feed by faith on the Paschal Lamb. We look on Him whom we have pierced, and we draw the power of His saving Passion into our hearts that we may contemplate it not only from the outside, but reproduce its spirit in our lives.***

This is the whole point of the reading of the Passion Gospel: to bring about its accomplishment in us, as it was once accomplished in the Head of the Mystical Body.

St. John's Gospel account of the Passion has always been read on Good Friday in both East and West, because it is the most theological and meaningful of all the Gospels. No one has so penetrated the significance of these events or described them with all their richness as has St. John.

The General Intercessions

In these prayers, we are begging God for the full accomplishment of the work of human redemption. We gather around the Cross and plead for all classes of people, in union with the very prayer of our Divine High Priest who on this day "entered the Holy of Holies, having obtained eternal redemption for us through His Blood" and "who ever lives to make intercession" for us. (Hebrews 7:25)

These prayers are a work of mercy. The very prayer of the Heart of Jesus is ours, as with the entire Church we pray for all people everywhere, "for the sake of the sorrowful Passion" of Jesus. We truly stand before the Father in union with the prayer of the Divine Priest and Victim: "Jesus, because he remains forever, has a priesthood which does not pass away. Therefore he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he forever lives to make intercession for them." (Heb 7:24-25)

The Veneration (Adoration) of the [Relic of the True] Cross

(Note: The Catholic Church allowed the use of the word "adoration" of the true Cross because it was impregnated with the most Precious Blood of Jesus, and was as it were one with Him who had suffered upon it. Of course, the adoration was given to the Person of Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. All other crosses or crucifixes, which are only images of the true Cross, are venerated while we worship the One who died on a Cross.)

The ancient Roman rite had merely the liturgy of the Word and the General Intercessions. The veneration of the Cross came from the Church in Jerusalem, and this devotion arose from the discovery of the true cross in the 4th century by St. Helena.

An ancient pilgrim who left us a diary, says that the veneration of the true Cross took place on Good Friday morning at Golgotha in Jerusalem and was extremely simple. A chair was placed for the bishop behind the Cross at Golgotha. When he had taken his seat, a table covered with linen was placed before him. Deacons stood around the table and a silver casket containing the wood of the Cross was brought in. Both the wood of the Cross and the title Pilate wrote were placed on the table. The bishop held the wood in his hands, while the deacons stood guard lest anyone attempt to remove a piece of it. The faithful, along with the catechumens came one by one, and bowing touched the Cross and the title, first with their foreheads, then with their eyes. Then they kissed the Cross and moved on.

All was done in complete silence. No hymns or prayers were said. In time, other Churches imitated this pious custom, especially those who had a relic of the true Cross. Those who did not, used a wooden cross instead.

The practice seems to have reached Rome in the middle of the 7th century. The first description of this veneration of the Cross occurs in an 8th century Ordo. By the end of the 8th century, the Veneration of the Cross was part of the Good Friday liturgy in Rome. “Behold the wood of the Cross” was sung by this time, while the people venerated the cross. By the 10th century, in Germany the Reproaches were sung. During the 12th century, the showing of the Cross to the people was added, and not long after this, the showing took the three-fold form as we know it today. In our own time, it involves the change of place with each singing of the *Ecce Lignum Crucis*. This was introduced in the 14th century.

As we respond three times, “Come, let us adore!” we are truly looking by faith upon the One whom we have pierced. We are contemplating the overwhelming love of God who did not spare even His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all. We are also learning the enormity of sin that exacted such a price of redemption. Truly, the redemption of the world is a greater work than the creation of the universe!

It is fitting that we should adore the divine design of our salvation, and that we should fall down before Him who laid down His life for us.

The Reproaches (“O My People”) are of ancient Greek origin. More than any other part of today’s liturgy, they come closest to expressing the intense compassion for our Savior, and sympathy for His sufferings that marks the high Middle Ages. The singing of the *Agios O Theos*, (Holy God, Holy Strong One, Holy Immortal One), compels our awe-struck reverence at the terrible sight of God Incarnate dying on a cross of shame.

Yet the Church always sees the Cross with the glow of the resurrection upon it. “Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and so enter into His glory?” (Lk 24:26) is the commentary of Christ Himself on the true meaning of His Cross.

The Church and every member of it must go through the experience of the Cross. The experience of the Head is continued in His members. This is the Paschal Mystery which each of us must make our own. (cf Col 1:24 and Acts 14:22)

The Communion Service

As a sign of mourning, there was no Mass throughout the ancient Church on this day, nor did anyone receive Communion. In the reformed liturgy of Holy Week, this has happily been changed.

We are now privileged to eat the Paschal Lamb who has been sacrificed. We are now united around the altar where Christ Himself, alive and glorious, is present under the sign of bread. The Church on earth now prays the perfect prayer, the prayer of the beloved children of God, the Our Father.

As there is no Mass on this day, the hosts are those that were consecrated on Holy Thursday, thus demonstrating that Holy Thursday and Good Friday are one redeeming Sacrifice.

These reflections are compiled by Sister Catherine Marie, C.P. Her resources are [The Meaning of Holy Week](#) by Reverend William J. O’Shea, 1965 published by The Liturgical Press, [The Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) (CCC) and [Ecclesia de Eucharistia](#) (EE) by St. John Paul II.