

## The Meaning of Holy Week

Holy Week is at the heart of the entire Church year, the time when more than ever we celebrate the great mystery of our redemption in Christ. We have prepared for this greatest week of the Church Year by 40 days of prayer, fasting and works of mercy. During the first week of Lent, the Church placed this prayer on our lips:

*Lord, may our observance of Lent  
help to renew us and prepare us  
to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.  
(Friday, First Week of Lent)*

And now, with the whole Church, we are standing on the threshold of Holy Week. We dedicate ourselves to prayerfulness, that we may live this week with Christ in union with the Heart of His Mother. The Catholic Catechism tells us that “all that Christ is—all that he did and suffered for all men—participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times.” (CCC #1085) This means that we can participate in Holy Week *as if we had been present when the events first happened.*

### ***Historical Background***

In the Latin (Western) Church, as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century, this was known as “Paschal Week” because the high point of the week is the celebration of the Paschal Mystery, that is, the death and resurrection of the Lord. The early Christians took over the annual celebration of the Passover, and gave it its Christian meaning. ***Christ is the true Paschal Lamb, the fulfillment of the Old Testament type.*** “Christ our Passover has been sacrificed.”

In the Eastern Church, this was called the “Great Week” because during it, great and mighty things were done by Our Lord (St. John Chrysostom). It was in this week that the redemption of the world was accomplished.

Our own term, “Holy Week” has also been in use since the 4<sup>th</sup> century, for this is the week made holy by the holiest of all actions, and also by the Holy One Himself, Jesus Christ.

St. Ambrose called Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday “the Sacred Triduum.” Our present day liturgy calls this the “Easter Triduum.”

The Church’s understanding is that the Triduum begins with the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday evening. According to the Jewish reckoning of days—a new day begins at sunset, or with the appearance of the first star on the day before.

Therefore, Good Friday has already begun by the time we celebrate Mass on Holy Thursday. This demonstrates how the Last Supper and the Sacrifice of Jesus on the cross are ***one and the same redemptive mystery.***

From the earliest days of Christianity, the Church has always delighted in celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus that took place during this time of year. The Sacred Triduum ***was the first Christian celebration, solemnity or feast.*** Only later did the Church begin to celebrate the other events in the life of Jesus.

The annual commemoration of Holy Week ***was seen by the early Christians to be so intimately bound up with the Christian life itself, that no one was considered a true Christian who did not actively participate in it!*** Not to join with the Christian community and participate in this sacred celebration was considered to be a break with Christianity itself! ***The early Church deeply understood that these sacred events concerned each and every Christian for the following reasons:***

- Each Christian is obliged to give thanks to God for the grace of salvation received through the death and resurrection of Christ.
- It is through this Holy Week celebration that we lay hold in an ever-deeper way of these gifts of grace.

***The celebration of Holy Week is not a mere rejoicing over past events. It is a true re-living with Jesus of these salvation-filled events.*** We relive “the unique event of history which does not pass away.” (CCC #1085)

*“This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that **Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only after He had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there.** Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits.*

*This is the faith from which generations of Christians down the ages have lived.” (Pope John Paul II: Ecclesia de Eucharistia #11; in further quotes this will be indicated by EE)*

*Pope John Paul II says that **the Paschal Triduum***

***“is gathered up, foreshadowed and concentrated forever in the gift of the Eucharist.***

***In this gift, Jesus Christ entrusted to His Church the perennial making present of the Paschal Mystery.***

***With it, He brought about a mysterious oneness in time between that Triduum and the passage of the centuries.***

*This thought should lead us to profound amazement and gratitude.*

*In the Paschal event and the Eucharist which makes it present throughout the centuries, there is a truly enormous capacity which embraces all of history as the recipient of the grace of the redemption.*

*This amazement should always fill the Church assembled for the celebration of the Eucharist.” (EE 5)*

Yes, the liturgy of Holy Week is an external observance, but it should also be a true **internal experience of what we celebrate, and particularly of the very Jesus whom we celebrate.**

The Paschal Mystery is meant to become our own. We are meant to take part in it as if we had personally been there.

Jesus’ passing over to the Father, His death and resurrection, are communicated to us in a special way during this holiest week of the Church year.

The heart of the Christian life is the ***living of the Paschal Mystery in its entirety - that is: the mystery of continually dying and rising with Christ.*** (Mystical death and Divine Rebirth) It is only through immersion in this mystery by baptism, Eucharist and the other sacraments, as well as by prayer and union with Christ, that we can live the Christ-life at all.

When we take an active part in the celebration of Holy Week, we truly share in the experience of Jesus in His Passion, death and resurrection. We truly lay hold of this mystery, make it more and more our own, and further in ourselves and in the Church, the work of our salvation.

“The liturgical rites of Holy Week not only have a unique dignity. They have a sacramental power and effectiveness to nourish the Christian life. No other devotion can substitute for them.” (*Maxima Redemptionis Nostrae, Nov 17, 1955 - this was the document of the Church on the restoration of the Holy Week liturgy*)

*CCC #1085 - In the liturgy of the Church, it is principally his own Paschal Mystery that Christ signifies and makes present. During his earthly life, Jesus announced his Paschal Mystery by his teaching, and anticipated it by his actions. **When his Hour comes, he lives out the unique event of history which does not pass away: Jesus dies, is buried, rises from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father once for all. His Paschal Mystery is a real event that occurred in our history, but it is unique: all other historical events happen once, and then they pass away, swallowed up in the past. The Paschal Mystery of Christ by contrast, cannot remain only in the past, because by his death he destroyed death, and all that Christ is—all that he did and suffered for all men—***

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*participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times while being made present in them all. The event of the Cross and Resurrection abides and draws everything toward life.*

*CCC #1169 - Easter is not simply one feast among others, but the “Feast of feasts,” the “Solemnity of solemnities,” just as the Eucharist is the “Sacrament of sacraments” (The Great Sacrament). St. Athanasius calls Easter “the Great Sunday” and the Eastern Churches call Holy Week “the Great Week.” The mystery of the Resurrection in which Christ crushed death, permeates with its powerful energy our old time, until all is subjected to him.”*

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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.