

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion Commemoration of the Lord's Entrance into Jerusalem

Since Holy Week is not a mere commemoration of past events, but a true celebration that demands our participation in the great mystery of our salvation, we should desire to take an active part—with our minds and hearts open to all the graces being offered, and our bodies ready and willing to take part in the rituals.

The whole Church enters into the Passion, death and resurrection of her Bridegroom Jesus Christ, by celebrating the liturgies of Holy Week. These rites are not only of unique and singular dignity, but they have a sacramental power and effectiveness all their own (*Maxima Redemptionis Nostrae*).

This greatest and holiest week of the Church year is begun by one of the most impressive of these rites—the solemn procession with palms in honor of Christ the King. This is a triumphal proclamation of the Church in honor of her Messianic King, who on this day enters his holy city to begin the work of redemption.

(Note: Scott Hahn explains that this was the day when the lambs for the Passover sacrifice were being brought into the city of Jerusalem! This is “Lamb Day.” Other scripture scholars explain that it was “politically incorrect” and dangerous for the disciples of Jesus to be shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David” - the title which everyone knew belonged to the rightful Davidic heir to the throne, the Messiah. To proclaim Him King was to spark a revolution. Ironically, within 6 days, the Jews themselves would cry out: “We have no king but Caesar!”)

The Palm Sunday liturgy is not a mere dramatization of the historical event known as the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. *“Christian liturgy not only recalls the events that saved us but actualizes them, makes them present.....In each celebration there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that makes the unique mystery present.”* (CCC #1104) The Palm Sunday liturgy is the anticipated celebration of his victory on the cross and his glorious resurrection from the dead. We are truly proclaiming and honoring Jesus Christ as the Messiah King as we take part in this liturgy. By his Paschal Mystery, Jesus won a kingdom for himself. The procession interprets the inner meaning of this event.

The reformed liturgy gave back to this Sunday its ancient name: “Passion Sunday.” ***This reminds us that the contemplation of the Passion is the first theme not only of this Sunday but of the entire week.*** One who takes part in the Palm Sunday liturgy, becomes aware of an abrupt and sharp transition occurring as the procession moves into the Mass.

- The procession is marked by triumphant joy—an anticipation of Easter.
- The Mass is filled with an atmosphere of majestic somberness, heavy with the thought of the imminent Passion of Jesus.

For instance, in the responsorial psalm we cry out with Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” And the Gospel is the solemn reading of the Passion which we also do on Good Friday. Today prepares us to celebrate Good Friday in the proper manner.

History of Palm Sunday:

The procession of the palms dates back to 4th century Jerusalem where it began as a commemoration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to inaugurate the last phase of his redemptive work on earth. It was a dramatization of that entry. The bishop took the part of Jesus, while the people took the part of the crowd that once acclaimed Jesus with “Hosannas”. The Christians would go out to the Mount of Olives where they sang hymns and read appropriate scripture passages.

Then the bishop led them back into Jerusalem. Note that this is the one procession of the Church year when the priest leads the procession. This is to remind us of Our Lord going ahead of his disciples to

Jerusalem. The people followed the bishop, waving palm branches and singing, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” When they reached the Holy City, it was already evening, and so they gathered in the Church for a simple service. The procession formed the major part of the entire ceremony.

From Jerusalem, this pious custom spread to other parts of the Church. By the 7th century it had reached the West. There during the Middle Ages, it developed into an elaborate ceremony, and gradually the people’s active participation was lost.

The Procession:

One of the aims of the reform of the Holy Week liturgy, was to restore the active participation of the faithful, and by this participation to make them aware that the liturgy is truly the activity of the entire Church in which each has a part to play. *“As the work of Christ, liturgy also...involved the conscious, active and fruitful participation” of the Church.. (CCC #1071)*

Palm Sunday is the great doorway into Holy Week. During the days of this week, we will relive the saving events of the first Holy Week. The procession of palms is a ***triumphal march in honor of Christ the King and Redeemer***. The priest wears red vestments, the royal color of Christ the King who won redemption by His most precious Blood. *“As I looked, a white horse appeared; its rider was called ‘The Faithful and True.’ Justice is his standard in passing judgment and waging war....He wore a cloak that had been dipped in blood, and his name was the Word of God. The armies of heaven were behind him, riding white horses and dressed in fine linen, pure and white.” (Rev. 19:11-14)*

The procession ***is a powerful proclamation that Christ Crucified shows us the way to the Father, the rough and narrow road to life (cf Matt 7:14)***. The way to victory is to follow a Crucified Messiah. (cf Matt 10:38) The very palms in our hands are symbols of that eternal victory. (cf Rev 7:9)

The procession gives public witness to our faith that the way to the new and eternal Jerusalem is to follow Jesus through death to glory. In the procession, we commemorate his triumph and associate ourselves with it.

By taking part in the procession, we profess ***our commitment to follow Christ Crucified***. We make our grateful memory of the Passion especially ***visible*** today. To follow in his footsteps is to follow the way of love. True Christian love is always marked by cross-bearing in some form or other. True discipleship is inseparable from the cross. “If anyone wishes to be my disciple, he must take up his cross and follow after me.” Our crosses are symbolized by palms today, foretelling the victory over suffering and death that one day will be ours. Our sorrow and suffering will be turned into joy.

Matt 7:13 - Satan too has those who follow in his footsteps along the wide and easy way that leads to damnation. By taking part in the Palm Sunday liturgy, we proclaim to the world whose side we are on. We honor our King who won a kingdom for himself through obedience and sacrifice. We express our willingness to share his lot, to follow his way of love, obedience and sacrifice.

This is no play-acting or mere pageantry. ***This procession is a sacramental***. We are reliving this mystery with Jesus, entering with our Messiah upon the accomplishment of the redemption of the world. We are the people of God on the march to the promised land, to our Father’s house in heaven.

The Mass

Once the Mass begins, there is a stark change in mood. The Mass on this day is penetrated through and through with the thought of the imminent Passion of our Redeemer. The whole atmosphere of the Mass

contrasts sharply with the joy of the procession. In the readings and psalm, we contemplate the Son of God who goes forth to meet his destiny, his “Hour.”

In the 2nd reading (Phil 2:6-11) we learn the great aim of Holy Week—that we would *acquire the mind of Christ*. Identification with Christ, sharing his attitude, his spirit of sacrifice and obedience—nothing less than this is asked of each of us.

We are not merely to gaze upon the Passion from the outside, as spectators, but we are called to *identify* ourselves with it and live it in our own lives. The 2nd reading assures us of the happy ending of our personal sharing in the Passion: “Because of this, God greatly exalted him....” Because of our sharing in the Passion, God will one day exalt us with Christ in heaven. It will have a happy and glorious ending. Suffering is not the last word. It will end. Our sorrow will be turned into joy. God will wipe away all tears from our eyes.

The austere, somber tone of the Mass is intensified even more during the solemn reading of the Gospel of the Passion. There, we find ourselves active participants in the story of his great love. We enter into and become one with Jesus, in mind and heart. In the sacrifice of the Mass we become sharers in his Passion by joining the sacrifice of our lives to his great redeeming sacrifice. The mind of Christ becomes our mind. (Phil 2:5) The chalice of his sufferings becomes ours. (Matt 20:22) Our will to accept the Passion of our daily lives is merged with his, becoming one. Our daily prayers, works, joys and sufferings thus become part of the redemption of the world.

“And now, brothers, I beg you through the mercy of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, your spiritual worship....” (Rom 12:1)

Conclusion

The more we open ourselves to the meaning of the sacred rites of Holy Week, the more they can sanctify us. Reading over them in the Missalette beforehand can steep us in their meaning and help us enter into the liturgy in the way the Church desires.

During Holy Week, the Church wants us to enter more deeply into the Passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, and to grow in sharing his mind, his love, his desires, his commitment to the Father’s will. And the fruit of this will be a deeper union with him, a greater likeness to him in attitude, behavior, speech and values.

Holy Week is a very special grace for all of us. Let’s truly enter into the liturgy with all our hearts and souls, recommitting ourselves to be authentic disciples of the Lord.

A Practical Consideration for the Ritual

Hold the palm upright resting on your *right* shoulder. ***Palms are not held during the reading of the Gospel at Mass.*** The palms are used only during the procession. They are sacramentals then to be used in our homes.

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.