

General Extracts from *The Rites of Holy Week*

The Rites of Holy Week—Ceremonies—Preparations—Music—Commentary

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Introduction (pp v-ix)

Sanctity is the purpose of the “new Holy Week.” The news accounts have been concerned with the radical changes, the upset of traditional practices,** and the technical details of the restored Holy Week services, but the real issue in the reform is the development of true holiness in the members of Christ’s Church. This is the expectation of Pope Pius XII, as expressed personally by him. It is insisted upon repeatedly in the official language of the new laws—the goal is simple: that the faithful may take part in the most sacred week of the year “more easily, more devoutly, and more fruitfully.”

**When the rites of the Sacred Triduum ceased to be offered at the times when Christ enacted His sacred Passion, Death and Resurrection, various devotions developed (e.g., Way of the Cross processions) to fill the void. The restoration of the proper times of the liturgical functions made it impractical for such devotions to be practiced as before. This matter is addressed at length in the document, “Pastoral Extracts from The Rite of Holy Week”, “Popular Devotions”. To give a brief extract:

In order that popular devotions may be in harmony with the restored liturgical rites, local Ordinaries and pastors should see to it that such exercises are clearly secondary and subordinate to the solemn services; that the faithful are encouraged to participate in them only in addition to the principal services; and that the popular devotions are suppressed if they keep the people from the liturgical rites. Moreover, the spirit of popular and extra-liturgical devotions should be in agreement with the liturgical sense of the sacred days and should encourage the faithful to assist at the holy liturgy.

Certainly the changes now commanded by the Apostolic See are extraordinary, particularly since they come after nearly four centuries of little liturgical development. This is especially true of the different times set for the principal services. On Holy Thursday the solemn evening Mass now becomes a clearer and more evident

memorial of the Last Supper of the Lord on the night before He suffered. On Good Friday, when Holy Mass is not offered, the liturgical service is placed at three o'clock in the afternoon, or later, since three o'clock is the "ninth hour" of the Gospel accounts of our Lord's Crucifixion. And, most important of all, the chief feast of the Church year is celebrated with a solemn night watch late in the evening of Holy Saturday, with the first Easter Mass as its climax, ordinarily at the midnight which ushers in the morning of Easter Sunday. Instead of the premature anticipation of the holy Easter night on the morning of the day before Easter, the most sacred of all Christian vigil services is now returned to its proper place.

These changes make good sense; they will make the Holy Week liturgy more genuine and sincere, more vivid and clear. But the intention of the Holy Father goes much deeper. It is to give the faithful an opportunity to "take part in this celebration with intelligence and devotion." In the past, the solemn procession of Palm Sunday has been neglected, churches have been nearly deserted for the function of Good Friday and for the rite of Holy Saturday, even on Holy Thursday comparatively few have assisted at the solemn Mass of the parish community. In most cases, those who were present understood little of the unique rites of Holy Week. Even worse, they took no part in the worship that is to honor God and sanctify men.

All this, the sparse attendance and the insufficient knowledge, will now be changed, in the Providence of God. But it requires preparation and instruction, needs recognized by the Holy See. Bishops and priests who have the care of souls are therefore directed to teach the faithful the liturgical sense and the pastoral purpose of the Holy Week observance—the celebration of Christ's Passion, burial, and Resurrection, the effective renewal of our own baptismal passage from death to life, from darkness to the light of Christ.

What is the sense of the Second Passion Sunday, as it is now called? It is to be a public testimony of love and gratitude to Christ the King, a pledge of homage and loyalty centered about the solemn

procession celebrating the mystery of Christ's regal entry into the Holy City of Jerusalem.

What is the significance of Holy Thursday? It is the commemoration of the institution of the Holy Eucharist, principally through the celebration of the Mass of the Lord's Supper in the evening, when priests and people, clergy and laity, come to receive Holy Communion from the celebrant of the solemn Mass. Yet even here the pastoral purpose of the reformed Holy Week makes new provision for the needs of the people, and Bishops may permit one or two low Masses in addition to the parochial solemn Mass, so that as many as possible may assist in the offering of the Holy Sacrifice.

Holy Thursday is the day of Christian charity, shown in the common reception of the Eucharist which binds us to Christ and to one another. This charity is further demonstrated by the rite, recommended but not of obligation, in which the celebrant washes the feet of a dozen men after the Gospel, to recall the fraternal charity taught by Christ when He washed the feet of the Twelve.

With the coming of Good Friday, the point of the celebration turns to the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ. This is centered upon the liturgical service of the afternoon—the reading of the lessons and Passion, the common prayers for the Church and all mankind, the public veneration of the Holy Cross by clergy and people in their turn, and the simple Communion service.

For centuries it has been the practice that only the celebrant should receive Holy Communion on Good Friday. Now the faithful are invited to the Lord's table. The reason? That by receiving the Body of the Lord which was delivered up for all on this day, "they should obtain more abundantly the fruits of redemption."

What is the meaning of the restored Holy Saturday? It is a day of sorrow, as the Church recalls the burial of Christ and reflects upon His Passion and Death. It is a day of fast, now extended through the entire day until midnight. And then the sorrow gives way to the very

greatest joy, the gladness of Easter in the Resurrection of Christ from the grave. The sacred Vigil of Easter is the high point of the Christian year. We are united to Christ in His burial and in His Resurrection. We pass with Him from death to life. This is the paschal mystery. This is the heart of the Christian religion.

No rite of Catholic worship needs understanding more than the Easter Vigil. Its profound liturgical meaning is this: our life comes from the Lord's Death.

This is first recalled in the Easter candle, the light of Christ risen to scatter the darkness of sin and death. It is more deeply renewed in the sanctification of the waters of holy Baptism—for this is the water in which Christians are buried with Christ unto the death of sin and rise again with Christ “in the newness of life.” Holding candles lighted from Christ's candle, the clergy and the people renew the promises of holy Baptism. Where possible, new Christians are baptized in the holy Easter night.

The rites of Easter Eve come to an end with Holy Mass. It is midnight, Easter Sunday is at hand, the fullness of Christian joy is celebrated and accomplished in the first Mass of Christ's Resurrection. If the faithful have been suitably instructed and if they have taken a genuine and interior part in the sacred worship of Holy Week, they are assured of God's grace in abundance.

The origins of the restored Holy Week may be sought in the liturgical reforms initiated by Pope Saint Pius X. In 1911 he took what he called “the first step in the correction of the Roman Missal and Breviary.” His successor, Pius XII, has continued the reform which Pius X did not live to accomplish.

In 1947 [via [*Mediator Dei*](#)] the present Holy Father indicated clearly that liturgical development is not a thing of the past. Rather, it is “a proof that the immaculate Bride of Jesus Christ is vigorously alive.” A whole series of reforms, from a new version of the Psalter to evening Masses, is the practical application of this teaching.

No change thus far introduced is equal to the reform of Holy Week in its extent and significance, and no change is of greater spiritual and pastoral worth. In 1951 the Holy Father decreed the restoration of the Easter Vigil on an optional and experimental basis. This was renewed in 1952 with certain revisions, and the term of the experiment was extended to 1954.

Wherever the Vigil was celebrated, it met with the greatest spiritual success. Bishops and priests who took part in the Vigil expressed to the Holy See their satisfaction and that of the people committed to their care. At the same time, it became clear, from petitions offered publicly to the Holy See and from the warm reception given by the Holy Father to proposals for liturgical reform, that the Easter Vigil was only the beginning of a pastoral and ritual revision of the entire Holy Week.

The severe illness of Pope Pius at the end of 1954 postponed the publication of the restored Holy Week, and the Easter Vigil was merely renewed for the year 1955. With the happy recovery of the Pope, the reform was quickly completed and promulgated in a Decree of November 16, 1955. The Decree itself was accompanied by a lengthy pastoral and ritual Instruction by the Congregation of Sacred Rites, issued on the same day. These documents were followed by the publication of a new liturgical book, the *Ordo Hebdomadae Sanctae Instauratus*, in January of 1956. This book replaces the Roman Missal [of prior editions] for Holy Week and is of obligation for all who follow the Roman rite.

Perhaps the feature of the new *Ordo* of Holy Week which is most striking concerns the participation of the faithful in the solemn rites. The rubrics of the *Ordo* refer constantly to the responses to be made by the members of the congregation and to their activity in the carrying out of the holy liturgy. This is of course a notable departure from the rubrical norms of the Roman Missal. The Missal rubrics were prepared at a period when popular appreciation of the sacred liturgy and actual participation in it were at a low ebb.** Now the active participation of the faithful, urged repeatedly by the Pontiffs

of this century, is made a matter of rubrical law and incorporated into the very text of the new liturgical book. The Roman Missal speaks rarely of the part to be taken by the *laici*; the new *Ordo* is insistent that the faithful should express openly, by word and song and deed, the interior worship which they offer to Christ and through Him to the Father.

**This comment of Fr. McManus seems to be based upon a misconception of the rubrics commonly found in liturgical books printed after the Council of Trent. Namely, that they did not explicitly include rubrics for the laity, though many were in fact implied, not only by the instructions given to the clergy in attendance (*in choro*), but also by the indication of “R.” for a response intended to be made by all in the church. Furthermore, in the period just after the Council of Trent and inclusive to the 18th century, the faithful commonly participated at Mass either by singing at Solemn Masses or responding at Low Masses. For more on this point, see the articles [“On the Dialogue Mass”](#) for some historical references.

The reform of Holy Week has been sought during the last few years by priests engaged in pastoral and parochial work, by students and experts anxious to make Catholic worship a vital part of everyday life, and especially by Bishops throughout the world. But above all stands the apostolic figure of the Supreme Pontiff, Pius XII. Through his zeal and concern for the holy people of God this renewal and restoration has been accomplished. On the Good Friday of 1956—and no less in succeeding years—the Christian people will pray with the greatest fervor for the Holy Father, that God “may keep him safe and sound for the welfare of His holy Church, to rule God’s holy people.” And on the sacred night of Easter they will ask God’s protection upon the zealous Pius XII, who is, in the phrase of Archbishop Cushing, “the Pope of holy Baptism.”

Time of Services—Holy Thursday (pp 4-6)

The morning Mass of Holy Thursday may be celebrated only in those cathedrals and other churches where the holy oils are blessed. The Mass of the Chrism should begin after Terce, at the usual time for feast-day Masses. As many as possible of the priests of a diocese should assemble for this Mass celebrated by their Bishop. The texts of the Mass formulary suggest that the Mass of the Chrism is

intended to be the occasion for priests to gather around their Bishop, join with him in the offering of the Holy Sacrifice, and receive from him the holy oils blessed and consecrated for their use in the coming year. The presence of large numbers of priests in the cathedral church is made easier in the new rite, since Holy Thursday morning has been left free of any parochial liturgy.

(...)

[*Concerning the evening Mass of the Last Supper of the Lord*]

In determining the hour of the Holy Thursday Mass, it is obviously necessary to consider the period required for the Eucharistic fast (three hours from food, one hour from liquids except water, beginning with midnight from alcoholic drinks), since everyone at the evening Mass should be able to receive Communion on this commemoration of the institution of the Most Holy Eucharist. Possibly another consideration would be the time after the evening Mass devoted to the public adoration of the Eucharist. In places where it is difficult for people to be out of their homes late at night, there might be reason to have the evening Mass early (at 5 or 5:30 p.m.) and so leave a somewhat longer period for adoration.

Certainly decisions of this kind should be made on the basis of allowing as many of the faithful as possible to assist at the solemn commemoration of the Lord's Supper. One time will be best for certain members of a parish, another time for others. The parish priest must choose a time most satisfactory for the larger number of the faithful.

Private Masses are entirely forbidden on Holy Thursday.[8] Thus all the clergy, including priests, should be present at the evening parochial Mass, and should approach the altar to receive Holy Communion.[9] Yet low Masses, *in addition to* the principal chanted Mass, may be celebrated on Holy Thursday, with the permission of the local Ordinary.

There are, however, several limitations upon this power of local Ordinaries.

(...)

[Regarding the general prohibition of private Low Masses with some pastoral exceptions.]

The pastoral reason is spelled out as follows: “That all the faithful may be present at the sacrifice of the Mass and may receive the Body of Christ on this sacred day.”

It must be insisted that the additional low Masses which are within the power of the local Ordinaries to permit are *public* Masses, and may be celebrated only for the public reason mentioned. The intention of the legislator is clear: that the faithful should have the opportunity of assisting at Holy Mass on the day of the Lord’s Supper, even though this means in some places a change in the venerable practice of the single community Mass on Holy Thursday. The Holy See is desirous that the faithful should not merely receive the Body of Christ on this day, but that they should assist at the evening Mass and receive Holy Communion at Mass.

[8] The concessions made to Cardinals and others in the Code (e.g., canon 239, §1, n. 4) are not revoked.

[9] Priests may not receive Holy Communion outside of Mass on Holy Thursday, as indicated below.

Processions (pp 15-16)

There are many places in which, unfortunately, the solemn procession of palms (although of obligation in parish churches) has been neglected in the past. For this reason the new *Ordo* of Holy Week, as well as the Decree and Instruction, places the greatest emphasis upon the procession of the Second Passion Sunday as a public tribute to Christ the King. The same popular character is also attributed to the solemn procession of the paschal candle at the Easter Vigil and, to a lesser extent, the solemn transfer of the Holy Eucharist to the place of reposition on Holy Thursday. In addition,

the approach of the faithful for the Adoration of the Cross on Good Friday is described as a kind of procession.

In every church the faithful should take part in these processions, as the rubrics indicate clearly. The participation of the faithful is not satisfied by a procession in which only the school children are permitted to walk. As in every other aspect of the restoration, it is the deeper and stronger piety of the faithful which is sought, and this is to be attained by giving them a greater share, both external and internal, in the celebration of the holy liturgy.

In large and crowded churches it may well be physically impossible to have the entire congregation take part in the procession of palms or the *Lumen Christi* procession—especially if there is no way for the people to march outside the church itself. In such cases, as many of the faithful as possible should be given the opportunity to take part. Leaders in the parish, officers of parish societies and organizations, representatives of various groups and elements in the parish, as young married couples, young men and women, working people, professional men, etc.—all these may be invited, depending on the local circumstances and conditions. The important thing is that some laypeople take part in the processions, lest the entirely false concept of a profession as something exclusively clerical be perpetuated.

In brief, pastors and rectors of churches should not be satisfied with the least possible number of the faithful walking in the processions of Holy Week. On the contrary, they should make every effort to assure the people of this opportunity to exercise the right and power of their baptismal character by this sacred form of Catholic worship. Only in this way will the people appreciate the meaning of the triumphal entry of the King and Messiah into His Holy City or of the Light of Christ leading the members to the heavenly kingdom.

Names of the Days (pp 19-21)

The restored *Ordo Hebdomadae Sanctae* makes certain changes in the official names for the various days and rites of Holy Week. To begin with, the term *Hebdomada Maior* [The Great Week] is abandoned, in favor of *Hebdomada Sancta*, which is of course the common usage in English: “Holy Week.”

Palm Sunday is given the name of “Second Passion Sunday” or “Second Sunday of Passiontide.” The reference to the palms is included only in second place, as an explanation: *Dominica II Passionis seu in palmis*. The reason for the change is apparently to delineate the liturgical sense of the day more carefully, as the celebration of the Lord’s Passion, begun by the triumphant entry into Jerusalem which anticipates the joyous outcome of the Passion. The change also minimizes the significance of the palm branches, in order to restore the solemn procession to its proper position [That is, the blessing of the palms exists for carrying them as an *accessory* to the procession, just as they were for Christ’s triumphant entrance into Jerusalem—Ed.].

Holy Thursday retains the name used in the Roman Missal, *Feria Quinta in Cena Domini*, the “Thursday of the Lord’s Supper.” The term *mandatum* (from which our “Maundy” Thursday is derived) is no longer used for the washing of feet, which is called simply *lotio pedum*. A careful distinction is made between the morning Mass of Holy Thursday, which is called the “Mass of the Chrism,” and the solemn evening “Mass of the Lord’s Supper.”

For Good Friday the title used in the Roman Missal, *Feria Sexta in Parasceve*, and the name *Missa Praesantificatorum* are both suppressed, and the day is called *Feria Sexta in Passione et Morte Domini*, the “Friday of the Lord’s Passion and Death.” The function of the afternoon is called a solemn liturgical *Actio* or service [Or now commonly called in English, Solemn Afternoon Liturgy]; and each of its four parts is given its special title:

- 1) Lessons,

- 2) Solemn Prayers or Prayer of the Faithful,
- 3) Solemn Adoration of the Holy Cross, and
- 4) Communion.

The term *Sabbatum Sanctum* is used as before for Holy Saturday and the rite is called the Paschal Vigil, ending with the “Solemn Mass of the Paschal Vigil.” In this connection, a word of caution is perhaps needed. The solemn Mass which concludes the Vigil, even though it takes place at midnight, should never be referred to in announcements, etc., as a “midnight Mass.” This might suggest that this Mass resembles the Christmas midnight Mass; it neglects the Vigil feature. In the past, great harm has been done to popular appreciation of the sense of Holy Saturday by speaking of the “blessing of the new fire and the Easter water” before the Holy Saturday Mass. Every effort should be made to explain that the entire rite is one: a solemn Vigil or night watch in honor of Christ’s Resurrection and to celebrate Christian Baptism, all concluding with the Easter Mass. If the faithful should come only to the Vigil Mass, the papal restoration of the sacred Easter Eve would be hopelessly thwarted.

The Washing of Feet (p 21)

The washing of feet on Holy Thursday is not of obligation, although it is highly suitable to imitate the Lord’s example as a sign of the fraternal charity which should characterize the day. According to the new *Ordo* the rite takes place at Mass after the Gospel and Homily, either in the sanctuary or in the body of the church. It is still permissible, however, to perform this rite outside of Mass.

Wherever the washing of feet is introduced, the faithful should be adequately instructed beforehand in its deep religious significance, and it should be made the model of other acts of fraternal charity on Holy Thursday. There is no regulation concerning the choice of men whose feet are to be washed. They may be laymen, clerics, young boys, depending on local circumstances and customs.

The Music of Holy Week (pp 32-34)

Very little of the Holy Week music is new, but the entire musical spirit of the restored rite is changed, at least for many parts of the Church [That is, in places where the faithful were not singing]. From the *Gloria, laus* of the Second Passion Sunday to the threefold Alleluia of the Easter Vigil Mass, there is constant reference in the *Ordo Hebdomadae Sanctae* to popular singing of the liturgical texts and responses.

This repeated mention of the faithful in the rubrics is of course only the practical application of the teaching of recent Popes. Beginning with the first days of the pontificate of Pope Saint Pius X, the Holy See has been insistent that the people should be united to the holy mysteries through singing the liturgical texts—and especially by alternating with the priest at the altar and with the special choir or schola. The meager success which these papal pronouncements have met in some lands has only increased the concern of the Roman Pontiffs.

When a choir [alone] chants those parts of Holy Mass or other rites which belong to the people, the faithful are not doing what they are appointed by their baptismal character to do—namely, worship God as members of Christ. In the restored Holy Week, the clear directions indicate again and again that the people should not be denied this right. The new Holy Week is interior worship of God, but that worship must be expressed exteriorly as well, through the medium of sung prayer, chanted in unison by the faithful members of Christ.

The People's Part (pp 32-34)

The *Ordo* for Holy Week lists the minimum of musical activity on the part of the faithful. In addition to all the simple responses (*Amen, Et cum spiritu tuo, Ora pro nobis*, etc.), other chants are specifically assigned to the people. The following is a list of the principal references to the faithful (apart from the simple responses):

- Hymn to Christ the King (*Gloria, laus*) in the palm procession
- *Christus vincit*, or other hymns to Christ the King, for the palm procession
- *Venite, adoremus*, at the unveiling of the Cross
- *Deo gratias*, at the *Lumen Christi* procession
- Responses to the litany invocations
- Threefold Alleluia at the Easter Vigil Mass

To these should be added at least part of the *Pange, lingua, gloriosi Corporis mysterium*. Since this hymn is ordinarily well known to the people, the first stanza might be used as a refrain.

If permitted, the people will join in the responses. If encouraged, they will sing the simple chants. They should, moreover, be given the opportunity to take those parts in Holy Mass which properly pertain to the people: *Kyrie, Gloria, Creed, Sanctus, Agnus Dei*.^[1] For this participation, which is intended to be expressive of interior worship, simple music, whether Gregorian chant or not, must be chosen and a certain amount of preparation is necessary.

In any event, the faithful should be provided with booklets which give, in addition to the translation of the rites, the Latin text and music for the responses and chants they are to sing. Experience shows that congregations will make at least the brief responses with only this slight prompting. Obviously, a greater degree of participation can be achieved if a priest or other person leads the responses and chants, indicating to the people what is expected of them. If a short commentary is interspersed throughout the Holy Week rites, the commentator may easily direct the chanting of the people.

The special choir, which is trained for the more elaborate music, should assist the faithful in every way. This is particularly important in places where the congregation may be hesitant about singing.

There the trained choir may lead and encourage the people—and above all, never seek to restrict the participation of the faithful. If on occasion this means that the responses, for example, may not be sung perfectly, the act of worship on the part of the assembled people will nevertheless be pleasing to almighty God. And the strong and united worship of the whole Church must never be subordinated to technical perfection of music.

[1] “That the faithful may take a more active part in divine worship, let Gregorian chant be restored to popular use in the parts proper to the people.”—Pius XI, [*Divini cultus*](#), 9; Pius XII, [*Mediator Dei*](#), 192.