

# **Pastoral Extracts from *The Rites of Holy Week***

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

Fr. Frederick R. McManus; St. Anthony Guild Press, 1956

## **Preparing for Holy Week (pp 1-2)**

There are several ways of preparing for Holy Week, and it may be well to mention them and to distinguish them before going on to summarize the new Decree and Instruction issued by the Apostolic See in November of 1955 [[\*Maxima Redemptionis Nostrae Mysteria\*](#)].

The first preparation is pastoral and spiritual. It is the education of the clergy and faithful, imposed as a serious obligation upon local Ordinaries and all who have the care of souls. This does not mean a merely technical understanding of the ritual as found in the restored *Ordo* of Holy Week. It means a thorough appreciation of the sense of Holy Week and a communication to the people of the mysteries we celebrate during these sacred days. Catholic liturgy is not a matter of externals or ceremonies or rubrics; not merely the material side of worship. Such a view has been clearly rejected by the Roman Pontiff Pius XII. Catholic liturgy has as its principal element the interior worship which Christians in union with their Head offer to God. Bishops and priests must explain how the outward expression of such worship may be made genuine and sincere, especially during the celebration of the chief mysteries of the Christian religion. For this a chapter on “Sermons and Instructions”—to restore to the faithful their rightful part in Catholic worship—has been provided below.

The second element in preparing for Holy Week, of lesser significance, is the material—the vestments, books, sacred furnishings, decorations, and the like. For the most part, these are already at hand in churches, and it is only necessary to follow the lists provided below in the chapter “Preparations.” Since, however, there are notable changes in the Holy Week rites, some few material preparations should be made in advance.[1]

The final element in the preparations may be called *ritual*. This means the careful training of clergy and servers in the ceremonies and external rites, so that these things will be done in a worthy and orderly fashion. It means also the musical preparation of the people and of the choir or schola. For this, other succeeding chapters will be helpful.[2]

[1] These are described under “Preparations.” Briefly, the new altar *Ordo Hebdomadae Sanctae Instauratus* must be secured, together with booklets or translations for the people; also a very large crucifix with a violet veil, a large brazier for the paschal fire, a small stand for the paschal candle, a large vessel for baptismal water (distinct from the font), and (possibly) a larger urn or movable tabernacle for the place of reposition.

[2] “Ceremonial Directions,” “The Order of Standing and Sitting,” “The Music of Holy Week.”

## **General Directions—Holy Communion**

### **Holy Thursday—Consecration of Particles (pp 11-12)**

It is of the greatest importance that all the Sacred Hosts distributed at the evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper should be consecrated at *that* Mass.[14] The reason for this is explained by Pope Pius XII in the encyclical *Mediator Dei*:

That it may be more evident that by receiving Holy Communion the faithful take part in the sacrifice.

The same Pontiff, recognizing that on some occasions this ideal must yield to other needs, adds:

While the Church makes concessions in her motherly desire to meet the spiritual needs of her children, these on their part must do all in their power to conform to what the liturgy recommends and, unless there is some reasonable cause to the contrary, do everything that may clearly manifest at the altar the living unity of the Mystical Body.

These concessions, allowing the distribution of Holy Communion with pre-consecrated Hosts or outside of Holy Mass, are not applicable on Holy Thursday. Nothing should prevent the faithful

on this day from receiving Holy Communion *ex hac altaris participatione*. [15]

[14] The rubrics also require the hosts for the Good Friday service to be consecrated at the Holy Thursday evening Mass of the Lord's Supper.

[15] Beyond question the faithful should be told this, and instructed concerning the meaning of the practice. It may not be out of place to add that consecration at Holy Mass of Hosts to be given to the faithful at that very Mass, while required by the rubric of Holy Thursday, should be observed on every other occasion, so far as possible. This may possibly create some difficulties in large parishes at the crowded Masses when it is difficult to estimate the number of communicants. There is, however, no difficulty in observing the norm set by the Holy See in most circumstances—in small parishes, at Masses with a limited number of the faithful, and in communities and institutions. In summary, every effort should be made to see that as many of faithful as possible receive Holy Communion from Hosts consecrated at the same Mass.

### **Blessing of Branches (pp 16-18)**

With regard to the branches to be blessed on the Second Passion Sunday, the Instruction makes it clear that these may come from palm, olive, or any other trees which may be available in a given locality. There is thus no need to secure palm branches from a great distance in order to satisfy this accidental aspect of the day's liturgy.

Two methods of blessing the branches are offered in the Instruction and in the rubrics of the restored *Ordo*. First, the branches may be prepared by the faithful and brought by them to the church, where they are blessed before the procession. Or the branches may be prepared in the church, blessed, and then distributed to the faithful for the procession. [21] For several reasons, the first alternative may be preferred. The rite of the Second Passion Sunday is lengthy and the distribution of palms to all the people in the course of it might make the liturgy of the day too burdensome. Moreover, the evident purpose of the restoration is *to* reduce the emphasis on the blessing and distribution of the branches and *to* enhance the significance of the procession itself. Possibly the best solution would be to give the (unblessed) branches to the people as they enter the church. Then, after the blessing of these branches held by the people, they would be ready for the procession. Wherever it is the custom for the faithful

to prepare or obtain branches for themselves and then take these branches to church with them, the precise practice commended by the rubrics is verified.

[21] In any case the branches for the clergy and servers are not distributed to them until after the blessing.

While the blessing of branches has been greatly reduced, the importance of the branches as a sacramental for private devotion and use in homes, etc., is not at all discountenanced.[22] Yet there seems to be no justification for any blessing of the branches apart from the procession. The branches are blessed so that they may be used in the solemn procession in honor of Christ the King; *after* that procession they may be taken *to* the homes of the faithful and there kept for the devotion of the people. Here, as in the case of the so-called Easter water, it is important that the sacramental object should not detract from the liturgical action with its vastly deeper meaning.

[22] The collect concluding the procession of palms has this phrase: *ut, quocumque hi rami deportati fuerint, ibi tuae benedictionis gratia descendat....*

A further alternative is provided in connection with the blessing of branches. If there is another church or oratory at which the blessing of branches and the Gospel can be held, the procession should proceed from that church or oratory *to* the principal church. It is in the principal church that the concluding collect of the procession is chanted and Mass celebrated.

This alternative has obvious advantages. There *is* an evident and visible progress from one place to another, namely, to the church which is the Holy City of Jerusalem. The somewhat confusing solemn entry into a church which the procession has just left, is also eliminated. The use of a second church or oratory *is* of course possible only where such a place is conveniently located. If a church has a large chapel, a crypt church, a chapel on the parochial property, or even a parish hall which is used as a secondary church, it will be very fitting to have the blessing of branches and the Gospel in that place, followed by the solemn procession to the principal church. Wherever there is no difficulty involved in having a procession

traverse the public streets, a neighboring church, chapel, or shrine may well be used for the first part of the ceremony.

### **Popular Devotions (pp 18-19)**

One of the principal problems connected with the observance of Holy Week in the past has been the substitution of certain popular exercises of piety for the liturgical rites, the latter being poorly attended in consequence. To correct this, the chief functions of these days, and especially of the sacred triduum, have been placed at hours convenient for the faithful and also appropriate to the mysteries being observed. Thus it may be hoped that the people, with careful instruction, preparation, and encouragement, will assist actively at the services which celebrate the principal mysteries of Redemption.

Nevertheless the Decree and Instruction on the restored Holy Week contain no prohibition of those popular devotions which may be customary in various places. If they appear to foster solid piety, local Ordinaries and priests with the care of souls should prudently accommodate them to the new rites. Practices or customs which do not encourage genuine piety, and those which are incompatible with the new rites (for example, a service in honor of the Resurrection on Holy Saturday afternoon), must of course be eliminated.

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.

A particular instance of such a popular custom is the devotion of the Three Hours on Good Friday afternoon. This devotion may be retained unless it detracts from the solemn liturgical service of the day. If, for example, those who assist at the devotion will in fact take

part in the liturgical service at three o'clock; or if the liturgical service is postponed for pastoral reasons until five or six o'clock and the need is felt for a service in the early afternoon of Good Friday; or if some service must be provided for those who find it impossible to assist at the liturgical rite, there would be reason for keeping the Three Hours devotion. On the other hand, if the people neglect the solemn service in favor of the devotion, they should be properly instructed and the devotion should in every case yield to the solemn service. Needless to add, the Three Hours devotion should not contain anything out of harmony with the observance of Christ's Passion and Death, nor should it be a sacred concert for the display of musical talent.

As a practical norm in determining these matters, the following may be suggested. Whatever will help develop the true liturgical spirit of Holy Week in the people should be retained; whatever will interfere with the papal restoration should be omitted. In this connection, the Instruction of the Congregation of Rites insists that the faithful should be taught the supreme value of the holy liturgy. They should be instructed that the liturgy always surpasses by far any other customs or devotions, even the best. This is particularly true of the days of Holy Week, as it is true of the entire ecclesiastical year.[23]

[23] The doctrine is made very clear in n. 23 of the Instruction of the Congregation of Rites.

### **Instructions and Sermons (pp 25-31)**

The services of Holy Week are actions to be done, worship to be offered, rites to be accomplished, by the whole Christian family, priests and people together. If these celebrations are to please God and to call His graces down upon His family, preparation is necessary. This is obvious with regard to the material and ritual preparations; it is vastly more important with regard to the spiritual and intellectual preparation of those who are to have a part in the sacred services which celebrate "the greatest mysteries of our Redemption."

Education, instruction, enlightenment—these are the essential preliminaries if the restored Holy Week is to achieve its pastoral purpose. When the Easter Vigil was introduced as an experiment, the Holy See offered a word of counsel: that the people be instructed beforehand, during Lent. Now, in the regulations for the “new Holy Week,” the Lenten instruction of the faithful is made obligatory, so that their part in the holiest Week of the Christian year may be more fruitful. According to the new law:

Local Ordinaries are to provide carefully that priests, especially those who have the care of souls, are well instructed, not only concerning the ritual celebration of the restored Order of Holy Week, but also concerning its liturgical meaning and pastoral purpose. Let them, therefore, see to it that the faithful also are more suitably instructed during Lent in the proper understanding of the restored Order of Holy Week, so that they may take part in this celebration with intelligence and devotion.

### ***When and Where?***

First the priests (and other teachers of the faithful) must learn the true sense of Holy Week, then the people must be instructed. Time and place for instructions are not specified by the Holy See, which says only “during Lent.” But the zeal of priests, sisters, and lay teachers of the people will seek out occasions and opportunities for this preparatory instruction. To begin with, the Sunday sermon is a chance to explain why and how the faithful should assist at the chief services of Holy Week. The Sundays of Lent (and perhaps those beginning with Septuagesima) provide at least this beginning of the necessary preparation.

More important, because a longer instruction is possible, are the usual Lenten evening services. At these a considerable number of the faithful can be taught—in perhaps six half-hour talks—the profound value of the Holy Week liturgy for the glory of God and the spiritual growth of the Church’s members. We must prepare the people; we must not neglect the opportunity given by the Lenten services. No moral exhortations, doctrinal explanations, or other

sermons are complete during Lent unless they are centered on the coming observance of Holy Week.

Such general instructions can and should be supplemented in many ways. The meetings of societies, sodalities, the Holy Name Society, parish youth organizations, study clubs and groups, all are occasions for Lenten preparation for the graces of Holy Week. In schools and Sunday schools, at Christian Doctrine classes and the like, priests, sisters, and lay teachers should explain the mysteries which we recall each year during Holy Week, and prepare young and old to take a sincere and devout part in the holy rites.

It would be a tragedy—and it is one which the Holy See clearly fears—if the new rites were celebrated before a listless and ignorant congregation. To forestall this and to clear the way for the working of God’s grace is the purpose of these Lenten instructions.

### ***What to Teach***

Fortunately the Congregation of Rites has given directions, by authority of the Holy Father, concerning the matters to be covered in the Lenten sermons or lessons. In summary, these are the headings or titles which are to be developed:

I. In preparation for Palm Sunday (now called the “Second Passion Sunday”)—

- Procession of Palms, to praise and thank Christ the King;
- Sacrament of Penance, as a preparation for the Holy Week rites.

II. In preparation for Holy Thursday—

- Holy Eucharist, sacrament and sacrifice, memorial of the Passion;
- Adoration of the Holy Eucharist after the Mass of the Lord’s Supper;
- Washing of feet, the Lord’s commandment of brotherly love.

### III. In Preparation for Good Friday—

- Lessons, prayers, and Passion;
- Common prayers for the needs of the Church and the human race;
- Adoration of the Cross, trophy of our Redemption;
- Holy Communion of priests and people;
- Observance of recollection, abstinence, and fast.

### IV. In preparation for Holy Saturday and the Easter Vigil Day of meditation at the tomb of Christ—

- Easter Vigil, expectation of the Lord's Resurrection;
- Easter Vigil, life and grace coming from the Lord's death;
- Easter candle, the Light of Christ praised and glorified;
- Old Testament images of the Redemption;
- Burial and Resurrection in the waters of Baptism;
- Renewal of baptismal promises;
- First Mass of Easter.

The working out of these subjects indicated by the Holy See will vary from priest to priest, and from teacher to teacher. Perhaps it will be useful to suggest some of the approaches which may be followed.

### *Lenten Courses*

From one point of view, instruction may begin with an analysis of the several rites of Holy Week, with an explanation of the meaning of the celebration and the people's part in it. Such a series or course would embrace a description of the various services and the texts as found in the new Order of Holy Week:

**I. Palm Sunday**—simple blessing of palms, Gospel, solemn procession of clergy and people, Passion; Holy Sacrifice.

**II. Holy Thursday**—(consecration of Oils at the cathedral), texts for the Mass of the Lord's Supper, (washing of feet), Communion of celebrant, clergy, and people, adoration of Holy Eucharist in place of repose.

**III. Good Friday**—instruction service of lessons and Passion, solemn prayers for Church and mankind, veneration of the Cross by clergy and people, common recital of the *Pater Noster*, reception of Holy Communion by clergy and people.

**IV. Easter Vigil**—Light of Christ (blessing of fire, blessing of candle, solemn procession, Easter hymn), holy Baptism (lessons, canticles, and prayers; litanies; blessing of baptismal water and administration of Baptism; renewal of baptismal promises), Holy Mass and Lauds of Easter.

Such a plan of instruction will make intelligible the rites so little understood and will be a direct preparation for the actual participation by the people.

Nevertheless, a mere description of the ceremonies will not suffice, any more than a historical exposition or an enumeration of curious background details would serve to awaken an interior devotion in the faithful. When the actual functions are explained, this must be done in terms of the doctrines and mysteries which they express and celebrate.

The same can be said of preparatory instructions based upon the language of the Holy Week services. Not all the texts are of equal value or significance, but the principal texts for each rite do express the true liturgical sense of the celebration.

On Palm Sunday, for example, the chants in honor of Christ the Son of David, or the collect which completes the solemn procession. On Holy Thursday, the Gospel of charity, and the texts for the consecration of the Holy Oils. On Good Friday, the lessons and (of greatest importance) the solemn collects. On the Vigil of Easter, the Easter hymn or *Praeconium*, the four lessons, the Preface for the

baptismal water, and the instruction at the renewal of baptismal promises. It should go without saying that English translations of the holy rites should be in the hands of the faithful so that they may follow them and make the responses, etc., as indicated in the texts.

Lenten courses and instructions may also be arranged from another point of view—by explaining the principal mysteries of the Catholic faith, and then showing how in the services of Holy Week these doctrines are proclaimed and celebrated. The chief mystery of Holy Week is “Christ crucified, buried, and risen”; under this heading the entire Christian system can be developed, according to plans like the following:

### **I. Fall and Redemption;**

- Sacrifice and resurrection;
- Life of grace through Church and sacraments.

### **II. Holy Baptism—beginning of Christian life;**

- Washing clean from sin;
- Incorporation into the Body of Christ;
- Pledge of resurrection and life eternal;
- Character of Baptism—title to offer the Sacrifice;
- Character of Baptism—right to partake of the common Eucharist.

### **III. Baptism:** catechumens are washed in the waters of Baptism;

- Penance: sinners are washed in the “second Baptism” of Penance;
- Eucharist: believers are washed in the very Blood of Christ.

### **IV. Creation and Redemption** (1st lesson of the Easter Vigil);

- Passage of the Red Sea and Christian Baptism (2nd lesson);
- Holy City of God: Jerusalem and the Church (3rd lesson);
- Sin and remission of sin (4th lesson).

## **V. Christian Initiation;**

- Sacrifice of Christ the Head;
- Sacrifice of the members;
- Acceptance of the sacrifice: Resurrection and Communion.

## **VI. Christ the King (Palm Sunday);**

- Christ the Anointed One (Holy Thursday);
- Christ the Priest (Holy Thursday and Good Friday);
- Christ the Victim (Holy Thursday and Good Friday);
- Christ the Light (Easter Vigil);
- Christ the Life (Easter Vigil).

Suggestions of this sort may be extended indefinitely. The real significance of Holy Week is that the holy mysteries of the Christian religion are effectively renewed, but the rites are also a source of instruction. The relation of Old Testament to New, the meaning of the Church as the Bride of Christ and as the holy city of God, the essential relation of Baptism to the Resurrection of Christ, the meaning of the character of Baptism and Confirmation in connection with the priesthood of Christ, the bond of charity in the Holy Eucharist uniting the members to Christ and to one another, the sense of liturgy and its “supreme value” as the worship offered by Christ and the Church—all these things must be translated into popular terms if the restored Holy Week is to accomplish its spiritual purpose.

### ***Sources of Instruction***

The more obvious sources for an understanding of Holy Week by priests and teachers have already been mentioned. They are the actual liturgical texts of Holy Week contained in the new *Ordo* (with particular reference to the Easter Vigil instruction preceding the baptismal promises), and the official instruction of the Holy See on the matters to be taught to the people. Much information will be found in various articles and commentaries, as well as in Holy Week

booklets for the use of the people. One article of the greatest importance is “The New Holy Week Liturgy—A Pastoral Opportunity,” by Father Josef Löw, C.S.S.R., an official of the Congregation of Rites; it is found in the January 1956 issue of *Worship*.

Among the books and booklets on Holy Week, a few are outstanding. Father Howell’s *Preparing for Easter* (Collegetown, Minnesota: Liturgical Press) contains two excellent series of talks readily adapted for Lenten sermons. There are valuable reflections in *The Church’s Year of Grace*, Vol. II, by Pius Parsch (Liturgical Press); Bouyer’s *The Paschal Mystery* (Chicago: Regnery) is a profound and moving meditation on the Sacred Triduum; Gaillard’s *Holy Week and Easter* (Liturgical Press) is a helpful recent commentary. For background material, *The Sacramentary* by the late Cardinal Schuster may be highly recommended; it is unfortunately out of print at present [[Reprinted by Arouca Press](#)—Ed.]. For articles relating to the Easter Vigil itself, the 1952 Proceedings of the Liturgical Week may be consulted—*The Easter Vigil* (Elsberry, Missouri: The Liturgical Conference).

Whatever the sources employed and whatever the methods or plans followed, *fideles instruuntur*, the faithful must be instructed. Holy Week is a time of the greatest graces. To prepare Christ’s faithful for a deeper and fuller measure of His divine life is the purpose of the Lenten instructions preceding the celebration of the Holy Week, now restored to the Church by Pope Pius XII.