

Liturgical Introduction to Holy Week
Workshop for Liturgical Ministers at Our Lady of Guadalupe in Laredo, TX
March 15, 2012

Some resources: Holy Bible, *Paschales Solemnitatis*, Benedict XVI “Jesus of Nazareth” vol. 2, Paul Turner “Glory in the Cross”.

Although an extensive introduction on the foundation of the spirit of the liturgy would not be feasible in a workshop this short, it is nevertheless necessary for us to focus briefly on the meaning of the liturgical action in order to understand the foundations of our Holy Week. A word that appears in the New Testament frequently is *mysterion* (μυστήριον). For us in the modern world it may evoke feelings and connotations of something that is completely unknown to us. However, the Biblical notion takes us much further. A mystery is certainly unknown to us, but through that mystery God reveals His life to us and invites us to participate in it. Therefore, we as Catholic Christians do not perform ritual actions as if it were some magic trick. We do not do things to gain God’s favor or grace. God has already done something for us and the reception of that grace evokes from within us a response which we call faith which then elicits a prayerful response through our liturgical action. In fact, then, it is not us who do something to receive something from God, but rather it is God who does something that brings up within us this response of worshiping Him in “spirit and in truth” (Jn 4,24). The liturgy is, therefore, a participation in the Paschal mystery, the very life of our God. At every liturgy we are invited to participate in this mystery which is a foretaste of what awaits us in Heaven (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 8). A symbol that portrays wonderfully what the Paschal mystery is has become popularly known as the “Witness” symbol . He came, he died, he arose, he ascended, he will come again. We participate in this mystery every time we gather as a liturgical assembly. What does this have to do with Holy Week? Everything! Holy Week is the holiest of all weeks for us Christians. Not only do we participate in the Paschal Mystery as we do at every Mass, but through our contemplation of the events of the passion and resurrection of Christ we are brought to participate in his journey of suffering, death and resurrection. Fr. Paul Turner, in his book “Glory in the Cross” specifies: “it evokes a participation in the events of Holy week, not a mere rehearsal of historical events”. It is we who are walking the streets of Jerusalem and seeing it all happen before our eyes. Like every liturgical action, we are not mere spectators but participants in the mystery (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 14).

Date of Easter:

I would first like to focus on the dates of Holy Week on our calendar. Some of us may remember on Epiphany Sunday “The Proclamation of the Date of Easter” which clearly states that from the date of Easter all other feasts are derived. But how do we determine the date of Easter? We are dealing, essentially with a mix of calendars. We know historically and Biblically the date of the death of Christ. He suffered, died and was buried during the celebration of the Jewish Passover (*pesach*), which takes place on the 15th day of Nisan in the Hebrew calendar. In the year 325, the first Council of Nicea fixed the date of Easter on Sunday. Furthermore, the date of Easter takes place on the first Sunday after the first ecclesiastical full moon (14th day after the new moon) that occurs after the vernal equinox (March 21). All this is done to commemorate, as close as possible, the events of Holy week during the actual time in the calendar. In 1582 Pope Gregory XIII reformed the calendar which is the one we use today and which helped to more accurately

keep the dates. The Hebrew calendar does not always coincide with our calendar because of a 13 day difference, meaning that the Jewish Passover does not always fall on the same days as Holy Week. This year, 2012, we will be celebrating the Passover and Holy Week at the same time. The best image I can give is of a birth date. Which is more accurate: celebrating your birthday on the actual date or perhaps on the same weekday of the same week every year? At least with our current calendar the position of the sun should be the same at every date of every year. This is the idea. But the theological meaning is more profound: we are participants at that same moment in history.

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

This name is one of the most ancient references to this day: *Dominica in Palmis de Passione Domini*. Much of how we celebrate the days of Holy Week come to us from the writings of a woman named Egeria, who traveled as a pilgrim to the Holy Land during Holy Week around the years 381-384. Many of those traditions continue to form part of our Holy Week liturgies. On this Sunday we commemorate the entrance of Jesus into the holy city of Jerusalem. There are actually two different liturgies on this day. Because Mass is celebrated immediately after the blessing of the branches and palms, many do not make any differentiation. Obviously they are linked, but the liturgy itself demonstrates the two different liturgies. First is the blessing of palms or branches and the procession that welcomes Jesus. The liturgical sense is that we are the Hebrew children carrying the branches, not just a mere reenactment. We are the: *Pueri Hebræorum, portantes ramos olivarum, obviaverunt Domino, clamantes et dicentes: Hosanna in excelsis*. Immediately afterwards Mass of the Passion of the Lord begins. If you notice, the Mass has little to do with “Palm Sunday”. The focus is predominantly on the Passion and death of Christ. Some people are not able to participate in the Good Friday celebration and this is the opportunity that the Church has to hear the Passion before the celebration of Easter. The Passion narrative leaves open participation for the faithful, bringing consciousness of their participative role in the event and not as spectators.

Weekdays

The weekdays are a wonderful moment to meditate on the four Suffering Servant oracles of the prophet Isaiah as found in the first reading. Actually only three are read and the fourth is read on Good Friday. These are found in Isaiah 42, 1-7; 49, 1-6; 50, 4-9a.

Holy Thursday

It is the custom of the Church to celebrate on the morning of Holy Thursday the Chrism Mass. It was originally the Mass at which the Bishop would bless the oil of Catechumens and the oil of the sick and consecrate the Chrism. The Chrism is consecrated because only a Bishop can do this. The other oils may be blessed by the priest when necessity arises. Many Dioceses have accepted transferring the Mass to another day, usually Tuesday of Holy Week, because of the necessity for priests to travel to concelebrate the Chrism Mass. Because priests collaborate with the Bishop and share in his authority of sanctifying the people of God through the sacraments, it is most appropriate that all priests concelebrate at this Mass in which the oils used for those sacraments are blessed and consecrated. It demonstrates the unity with the Bishop in this endeavor to build up, sanctify and rule the people of God, sharing continuously in the Bishop's ministry. During this Mass the Bishop also calls the priests concelebrating to renew their priestly

promises. Historically, Pope Paul VI added this to the Chrism Mass due to the exodus of many priests and religious. His purpose was to stabilize the faithfulness to the priesthood and challenge them to this renewal every year. This date is chosen because it is on Holy Thursday that Jesus instituted the Eucharist. These two rituals are in fact loosely linked to each other. It was instituted more for a practical reason: the fact that the priests and the bishop were already gathered together to concelebrate.

The Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper

The Sacred Paschal Triduum actually begins with the celebration of the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper. We must keep in mind that the Jewish day goes from sunset to sunset. The word Triduum is Latin for three days, although in reality the passion, death and resurrection of Christ seems to really take less than 36 hours. The Triduum as a whole is regarded as one celebration. This Mass is a commemoration of the Last Supper of Christ with his disciples. The second reading for this Mass from 1 Corinthians 11, 23-26, indicates the institution of the Eucharist. Oddly enough, the Gospel for this Mass, John 13, 1-15, does not mention the words of Institution. In fact, Paul's account predates that of any of the Gospels. John's Gospel, instead mentions the washing of the feet of the apostles. It is obvious that we are being reminded that the Eucharist is not only about eating and drinking but also about charity. The passion of Christ, his self-giving has to do with the service of charity. This is indicated by the fact that the priest takes his chasuble off and traditionally puts on an apron or ties a towel around his waist for the washing of the feet. At the end of the Eucharistic Celebration, the consecrated bread is not placed in the tabernacle. Instead, it is kept on the Altar in preparation for a procession to the Altar of reposicion. Enough bread must be consecrated at this Mass since priests cannot consecrate on Good Friday and there must be enough hosts for distribution of Communion. After the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, extraordinary ministers may take Communion to the sick who were not able to participate at this Mass. After the procession with the Blessed Sacrament the faithful are encouraged to spend a prolonged moment of adoration with the Lord, commemorating keeping watch at the Garden of Gethsemane.

Friday of the Passion of the Lord

On Good Friday the sacraments are not celebrated, except for the anointing of the sick and the sacrament of penance. The liturgy begins silently and solemnly with the prostration of the priests and deacons. The first reading for Good Friday is the fourth suffering servant oracle. The Passion narrative is always from the Gospel according to John. After the reading of the Passion and the homily, the solemn intercessions are read. These solemn intercessions take an ancient Roman form of intercessions. An introduction is given, the people pray in silence while kneeling and then stand for the prayer by the priest. Traditionally we pray for the Church, the Pope, for the faithful, catechumens, the unity of Christians, the Jewish people, those who do not believe in Christ, those who do not believe in God, those in public office, and those in tribulation. Immediately after this follows the Adoration of the Holy Cross. Ordinarily the cross is unveiled in three moments. At each moment the deacon or priest sings the *Ecce lignum crucis, in quo salus mundi pependit*. And the faithful respond: *Venite, adoremus*. After the priest and deacon have venerated the cross, the faithful are invited to do likewise. After the adoration, candles accompany the priest or deacon to retrieve the Blessed Sacrament consecrated at the Evening Mass on Holy Thursday. Meanwhile the altar is prepared with a cloth. Once the ciborium has been brought the priest invites the faithful to pray the Lord's Prayer and distributes Communion.

The Blessed Sacrament is then taken back to its place of reposition. Although a prayer over the people is indicated, there is no final blessing or dismissal. The ministers leave in silence. This indicates the continuation of the celebration of the Triduum into the Easter Vigil on Saturday evening.

Easter Vigil

The Easter Vigil is considered the Holiest of all nights for it is when the Church, after keeping watch at the tomb of the Lord, rejoices in the resurrection. In some places the Easter Vigil begins at midnight to keep in mind the resurrection of Christ in the early hours of the morning. The service begins in the darkness and should take place after the sun has set. The first ritual is the lighting and blessing of the Easter fire which reminds us of the ardent fire which burns within the faithful and the light which shines on the darkness...Jesus Christ who by his death and resurrection has conquered the darkness of death. Afterwards the Paschal Candle is blessed and lit. This Paschal Candle, present at baptism and at death, is the light of Christ which dispels all darkness. It is a symbol of the column of fire that led the Israelites through the desert at night after the Exodus from Egypt. Three times the deacon or priest proclaims to the people: *Lumen Christi* and they respond *Deo gratias*. Once all have gathered with their lit candles in the Church, the Exsultet is proclaimed. This is an ancient hymn praising this glorious night in which the savior of the world conquered death. There are a number of Biblical allusions linking the passion of Christ to the Exodus from Egypt. Traditionally, the Liturgy of the Word consists of seven readings from the Old Testament each followed by a Psalm and a prayer. Although the readings may be shortened to three there must remain Chapter 14 from Exodus and its canticle. After the seventh reading and Psalm the Gloria is sung and all the altar candles are lit. This is then followed by the Collect prayer and the reading of the Epistle. The Psalm that follows the Epistle serves as a prolonged Alleluia, which is proclaimed for the first time since the beginning of the time of Lent.

After the Gospel and the Homily the liturgy enters its third part, the Baptismal Liturgy. Because Baptism recalls the dying and rising to new life with Christ, it is most appropriate that Catechumens are received into the Church on this most Holy of all nights. The blessing of the Easter water is central in this ritual and the priest may insert the Paschal candle into the water indicating the infusion of the Holy Spirit on the water. The same water is then used to sprinkle the rest of the faithful gathered after they have renewed their baptismal promises, thereby also remembering their own and continual participation in the Paschal Mystery. The Catechumens then receive the sacrament of Confirmation by being anointed with Chrism. These same Catechumens receive their first Holy Communion at this Mass. The Mass is celebrated as usual with the dismissal including the double Alleluia.