

# THE PROCESSIONAL NATURE OF HOLY WEEK

January-February 2007

Processions give Holy Week a distinctive quality. People nearly numbed by the humdrum of weekly worship quickly figure out something is up with Holy Week. It isn't just the processions. The reading of the Passion, the washing of feet, the singing of special prayers, and the rites of initiation all contribute to the richness of these ceremonies. The practice of fast and abstinence and the rearrangement of the parish's regular schedule of worship also remind us that these days are special.



The liturgical processions of Holy Week conspire to draw believers more deeply into the meaning of their ritual. Processions make each one of the faithful a participant in a larger drama. They perform the function of anamnesis: By recalling the significant events surrounding the end of Jesus' life, we become present to his passion, death and resurrection. We enter this mystery, and it enters us. We become one with the dying and rising of Christ.

Some processions are functional. They happen because people need to move from point A to point B. But all processions attract a deeper meaning when placed in the context of a specific time and ritual.

Some processions are non-liturgical. In some places, the faithful take the processions of Holy Week into the streets. They decorate the road with flowers and colored sawdust. They arrange Mannerist statues on platforms, and groups of civic leaders bear each of them aloft on solemn shoulders. They process through the community amid incense, prayer and celebration.

More commonly at home, many parishes observe the non-liturgical procession of Stations of the Cross on the Fridays of Lent. A procession of ministers forms and walks from one station to the next while the events of the Lord's passion are recalled in a way that inspires contrition and prayer. In some churches the stations are located too close to each other to mount much of a procession. In others they are spaced so far apart that the entire body of believers may join the procession with the ministers. The stations originated as a substitute for those who desired to walk in the actual footsteps of Jesus, but who could not overcome the obstacles of distance or health preventing travel to Jerusalem. The Stations of the Cross popularized a notion that Holy Week nobly achieves – walking is prayerful. Moving one's entire body can be as spiritual as singing songs and making acclamations. Processions naturally express faith.

In the months before Holy Week, the liturgy offers two other processions. The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord (February 2) begins with a blessing and procession with candles. The First Sunday of Lent may begin with a penitential procession including the singing of the litany of the saints. (See the *Paschale solemnitatis* #23 and the *Ceremonial of Bishops* #261.) But Holy Week engages the faithful with a series of occasions to express their faith in action, a variety of circumstances compressed in a narrow window of time, in which the wonder, fear and relief of the paschal mystery come into focus.

These unique processions integrate belief, drama and universal prayer. They take place during the Mass of Palm Sunday, the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, the celebration of the Passion on Good Friday, and at the great Paschal Vigil.

## Palm Sunday Procession with Palm Branches

The fourth century pilgrim Egeria recorded in her diary a procession she witnessed down the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem on the Sunday before Easter. Hers is the earliest recollection of Christians observing a procession to commemorate the triumphal entry of Jesus into the holy city. Outside Jerusalem, however, there is no record of this practice in the Roman Rite until the ninth century.

At that time Bishop Amalarius of Metz described a procession of palms on the Sunday before Easter, and the best poet in Charlemagne's court, Theodulf of Orléans, composed a hymn for the occasion. He called it *Gloria, laus*. It still appears in the liturgy, and it has been rendered in English as the popular hymn "All Glory, Laud, and Honor." The translation and the tune are more recent, but the original version of this hymn goes back to our earliest observance of Palm Sunday in the West.



The idea of processing on this day spread after a description of the liturgy appeared in the tenth-century Roman-Germanic Pontifical (99:162-206), a book for bishops that influenced the later development of the Roman rite. This pontifical presents two versions of the liturgy to the reader. The first is more elaborate, including an exorcism and blessing of the branches before the people receive them and process to the church. Theodulf's hymn already has a place in this pontifical, indicating how quickly beloved his poem had become.

Today the missal offers three options for opening the Palm Sunday mass with the commemoration of the entry of the Lord into Jerusalem. The first form is the procession, and it is followed by the solemn entrance and the simple entrance.

In the first option, everyone gathers in a secondary church or another appropriate place outside the main church, toward which the procession will return. The faithful already hold branches in their hands. They are joined by the priest and deacon. The priest may wear a cope.

To begin the liturgy a song is sung, and everyone makes the sign of the cross. After a greeting, an instruction and a prayer of blessing, the priest sprinkles the branches with holy water. If someone invites the people to hold their branches aloft, it makes everyone look more ready to process. The gospel of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem is proclaimed – Matthew in year A, Mark in year B, and Luke in year C. John's gospel is proclaimed each year on Good Friday.

A brief homily may happen at this time, though it is usually omitted. A reference to this homily exists in the twelfth century ritual, and even though it is rarely done, tradition keeps the option in the liturgy. If the preacher wanted to develop the theme of this gospel, he is free to do so, but the people are probably standing, the procession has not yet begun, the realization of the length of this mass is dawning upon them, and they would probably not be the most receptive audience.

After these opening ceremonies a priest, deacon or lay minister invites everyone to join the procession using words such as, "Let us process in peace." And all respond, "In the name of Christ. Amen."

The procession begins. It may be led by incense, cross and candles. The cross may be decorated with palm branches. The deacon carries the book of the gospels, the priest takes his place in line, and all the faithful with branches follow the ministers into the church. If the priest is wearing a cope, he exchanges it for a chasuble when he reaches the sanctuary.

Meanwhile, songs are sung. Psalms 23 (24) and 46 (47) are recommended, along with Theodulf's ever-popular *Gloria, laus*.

This is a wonderful procession, and it usually works, although there are some challenges. Before it begins, you must choose the proper space for the start of the liturgy and equip it. Every church is different. You may start this liturgy in a narthex, the great outdoors, or a building separate from the church. Will people be able to see? How will they hear? Do you have sound reinforcement for them? Do they need participation aids to join in the singing?

A great challenge is getting people to the right place for the beginning of the service. Once you find a good space, use it year after year so that a tradition is formed. Announce the location for the start of this Mass at the previous weekend's liturgies. Several minutes before Mass begins, announce to those who have entered the church as usual where they should now go. Distribute the branches there, not in the church. Station ushers and greeters by the door, and give them instructions to direct people kindly to the proper place for the start of Mass.

Be sure that musicians and ministers have worked on their cues together. This is not a difficult liturgy, but everyone needs to know who starts what and when. Musicians make the first sound. They also lead singing for the procession. Do they know when to start? What is their cue?

The procession may be a little disorderly. If you process a long distance, do not expect everyone to sing the same thing at the same time. Processional music rarely works that way. Everything will come together once you enter the main space.

The procession is the first of three options for the beginning of Palm Sunday's liturgy. The second option, the solemn entrance, envisions people gathering at the door of the church or inside, holding branches in their hands. The final option, the simple entrance, begins with the priest in the sanctuary. The procession is expected only at the principal Mass. But some parishes use it more than once because it is hard to identify one Mass as principal.

## Holy Thursday Procession of the Blessed Sacrament

The Mass of the Lord's Supper concludes with a procession of the Blessed Sacrament, and this custom developed much later than the procession for Palm Sunday. The idea of reserving and adoring the Blessed Sacrament on Holy Thursday dates to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. And a procession is not noted until the sixteenth.

In those days, Mass normally ended with a dismissal, a blessing and a reading of the Last Gospel (the opening of John). But these were omitted on Holy



Thursday. Instead, the priest removed his chasuble, put on a cope, and prepared to carry the leftover consecrated communion breads from the altar to a place of reposition. The procession moved from the main altar to a side altar or chapel within the same church. Cloths and candles would appropriately decorate the area of reposition. The ministers carried incense, cross and candles to accompany the reserved sacrament. The hymn *Pange, lingua* was sung, concluding with the familiar strains of *Tantum ergo*. At the end of the procession, the priest or deacon placed the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle or another similar small box. The ministers returned to the sacristy.

Today the Mass of the Lord's Supper concludes in a similar way, with the carrying of the Blessed Sacrament. After communion, the leftover consecrated bread from this Mass is placed in a ciborium or similar sacred vessel and set on the altar. Following the communion prayer, the priest places incense in the thurible, and then he kneels and incenses the Blessed Sacrament three times. He puts on a white humeral veil, stands, takes the vessel and covers it with the ends of the veil. Cross, candles and incense lead a procession through the church to the place of reposition, which may be inside the church or in another chapel appropriated decorated. *Pange, lingua* and *Tantum ergo* are still recommended to be sung while the priest and deacon place the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle. (Other eucharistic hymns may be used.) Then the ministers leave.

The rubrics never mention the rest of the faithful, but if the procession is moving to a place outside their range of vision, it would be most fitting for the people to join. They may sing along the way, and they may begin their time of private prayer when they arrive at the place where the liturgy concludes.

This procession recalls the night Jesus left the upper room and walked to the Mount of Olives, where he asked his disciples to watch and pray with him. This connection becomes clearer if the procession moves away from the space where the eucharist was just celebrated into a separate place where reposition of the Blessed Sacrament will remain throughout the early hours of the night. A narthex, a large sacristy, or an appropriately decorated room in a separate building may serve the purpose just fine.

Again, the music will be difficult to hold together if the procession is long. But the important thing is to invite people to walk with Jesus on this night before the Passion. The music recommended for the procession – either in Latin or in the vernacular – deserves a place in every parish's repertoire.

## Good Friday Adoration of the Cross

The idea of venerating the cross of Jesus dates all the way back to the discovery of what the Church believes to be the relics of the true cross. The finding is attributed to St. Helena, the mother of Constantine. Our observance of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross on September 14 each year recalls the day that the relics were first put on view in the fourth century.

The incorporation of adoring a cross during the Good Friday liturgy appears in the eighth-century Gelasian Sacramentary, probably recording a practice that developed somewhat earlier. At the conclusion of the Good Friday service, the body and blood of the Lord consecrated the previous day were brought to the altar along with the cross of the Lord. The priest adored and kissed the cross. He offered an oration and led the Lord's Prayer. Then all the faithful adored the holy cross and received communion.

Today a cross is brought forward for the adoration of the faithful after the solemn petitions and before the communion rite. Only one cross should be used. The showing of the cross to the faithful may take one of two forms: by unveiling or in procession.

In the first form the cross is covered with a violet veil, and it is brought to the sanctuary between ministers carrying lighted candles. The priest stands at the altar and removes the cloth a third at a time while he, the deacon or the choir sings, "Behold the wood of the Cross". All respond, "Come, let us adore." Everyone kneels for silent adoration each time.

In the second form the priest carries the unveiled cross through the body of the church. The same dialogue takes place, the people kneeling in adoration each time.

The cross is placed in the sanctuary between lighted candles. The priest goes first. He may remove his chasuble and shoes if he wishes. He genuflects or kisses the cross, or makes some other sign of reverence. Other ministers and the faithful do the same.

The liturgy never mentions ushers here, but their presence may help move the procession along and create some order. Even though people are accustomed to processing up the aisle for communion, the Good Friday procession sometimes throws them off. They may need encouragement to break out of single file, or to approach the cross from two or more sides. Ushers can help keep the procession moving solemnly and reverently.

The cross should be located in a place where people can reach it. It should be accessible to those who cannot stoop, as well as those in wheel chairs. Upon arriving at the cross, people should feel free to venerate it any way they wish. They may genuflect. They may touch it. They may kiss it. They may even process up the aisle without their shoes.



A variety of musical selections is recommended, including the traditional *Improperia*, but these have been little used in recent years because they sound like an indictment of Jews for the crucifixion. The missal now recommends singing *Stabat Mater*, the song frequently used at Stations of the Cross. This choice will help link a popular devotion to one of the principal liturgies of the church year.

A piece of trivia: after the adoration of the cross, people passing in front of it anytime after this service and before the Easter Vigil are to genuflect to the cross of Christ. It is the only occasion when Catholics genuflect to anything other than the body and blood of Christ as it is consecrated on the altar during Mass or reserved in the tabernacle.



## Easter Vigil Procession with Fire

The use of fire at the start of the Holy Saturday liturgy can be found in *Ordo 23*, an order of Mass probably dating to the eighth century, but compiled in a ninth-century manuscript. The text presumes that fire was used during the Good Friday liturgy, probably for the sake of visibility, and that it was hidden in the sacristy afterward. Deacons and subdeacons brought the fire back into the church to begin the celebration of Holy Saturday.

By the twelfth century, however, we have the first evidence for the blessing of a fire in the atrium of the cathedral in Rome. The newly blessed Easter candle was incised with the Greek letters alpha and omega, and the priest sang three times *Lumen Christi*, or "Christ our Light." So began the Paschal vigil in the twelfth-century Roman Pontifical (32:1-10).

Today the Paschal Vigil begins outside the church with a burning fire. The people gather there. If doing this presents difficulties, the celebration may begin indoors. But that is not the ideal, and the fire is supposed to be large enough to shatter the darkness of night. Going outdoors is best.

The priest blesses the fire, prepares the paschal candle and lights it. It is the only candle lit at this point. The deacon stands at the door of the church, lifts the candle and sings, "Light of Christ." All respond, "Thanks be to God." The priest lights his candle from the paschal candle, and the procession moves to the middle of the church, where this dialogue is repeated. All the other worshipers light their candles from the paschal candle and process to their places for the third singing of "Light of Christ." The deacon places the paschal candle in its holder, and the church is illumined, except for the altar candles.

For this procession to work, people need to gather outside the church, as they did on Palm Sunday. Keep the church dark before the service to discourage people from entering too early. The choir will have to rehearse elsewhere. Readers will have to know their place in the lectionary. Station ushers and greeters at the door. Have them encourage people to remain outside. Pass out candles to those waiting for the liturgy to begin.

The fire may already be blazing. The liturgy begins with a *blessing* of the fire, not a *lighting* of the fire. It can be a focal point while people gather for the start of the greatest liturgy of the church year.

This procession is designed in a way that people start walking in the dark without their candles lit. The idea is to recall the Exodus from Egypt, when a pillar of fire led ancient Israel by night on their flight to freedom through the waters of the Red Sea and into the Promised Land. The imagery is significant to interpret the meaning of the resurrection and the sacrament of baptism.

In some churches, the candles of the faithful are lighted earlier, as they begin to enter the building. It will take a while for the flame to spread. Awkward pauses characterize the opening of this liturgy, but the excitement of watching the church grow in light is palpable.

This procession proclaims a great mystery: darkness yields to light, death is swallowed up by life.





## Easter Vigil Procession to the Font

As early as the end of the first century, those desiring to be baptized had to go to a place where there was water – preferably running water, such as a stream (*Didache* 7). Fifty years later Justin the Martyr says those to be baptized were brought to a place where there was water (*First Apology* 61). Gradually this movement to the water became stylized, and it took the form of a solemn procession accompanied by music and ministers.

Today the procession to the font still performs the practical function of moving those to be baptized to the place of their initiation. The procession envisions that the font is separate from the main body of the church in a place large enough to accommodate everyone who participates in the Easter Vigil. The baptistry of the cathedral in Rome, for example, St. John Lateran, is completely separate from the church. The same is true in other cities, including Florence and Siena. In Pisa the stunning baptistry and cathedral are often overlooked by tourists interested only in climbing the famous leaning bell tower, which occupies the same area.

In other churches, the baptistry can be found in a small area near the front door, where baptisms are not visible to the entire congregation. In newer and remodeled churches, a font may be located in the main aisle by the front door.

If the usual font is in an area too constricted or removed from sight, a temporary font may be erected in the sanctuary for the vigil. If there are catechumens, they join the procession to the font. In most parishes, the procession covers a short distance, so it consists only of catechumens, godparents, and the necessary liturgical ministers. But if the font is really in a separate building, everyone would leave their places and follow along.

The music that accompanies this procession is the litany of the saints. If there are baptisms, this chant asks God to bring new life to those chosen for the grace of baptism. If there are no catechumens, it asks God to sanctify the font. During Holy Week, people have processed to imitate the joyful reception of Jesus in Jerusalem, to spend time with him in prayer at a place of Eucharistic reservation, to adore his cross and to follow his light to the promise of eternal life. Now they process to water, the place where belief and symbol meet, where Christ welcomes new members of the chosen people.

The final procession of Holy Week is one we make every week: the communion procession. At the Easter Vigil the newly baptized join this procession for the first time and complete their initiation by partaking of the body and blood of Christ. Although this procession may seem commonplace, it is new on this night – new because of those who join it, and new because of the time in which it takes place: the holy night of Easter, the night in which Jesus rose from the dead, processing from death to life, and breaking open the gates of heaven for all who walk with him along the way.

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