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# The Paschal Triduum

BY MICHAEL P. FOLEY

The Paschal Triduum, the last three days of Holy Week, originally was geared towards catechumens, those being initiated into the faith on Holy Saturday night. But the customs of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday continue to hold great significance for the Church as a whole.

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**A**t the heart of the Christian gospel is what came to be known as the *Paschale sacramentum* or “Paschal Mystery” — the saving passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Pope St. Leo the Great (d. 461) was not alone in thinking of the Paschal Mystery as that in which “all the mysteries of our religion come together.”<sup>1</sup> This *sacramentum* is no mere series of past historical events but an ongoing, life-giving reality into which we are called to enter every day of our lives and especially during its annual commemoration. In one of his Lenten sermons, Leo admonished the congregation: “Because the entire Paschal Mystery was instituted for the remission of sins, let us imitate what we hope to celebrate.”<sup>2</sup>

A key part of what Leo and his flock were hoping to celebrate was the Triduum, the last three days of Holy Week, from Thursday evening to Sunday evening, which mark what the early church called (and what the Eastern churches continue to call) the Passover or Pasch of the Crucifixion and the Pasch of the Resurrection. In some respects the Triduum was primarily geared towards catechumens, those being initiated into the faith on Holy Saturday night. But as we shall see, the ceremonies and customs of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday also held great significance for the Church as a whole.

## LENTEN BACKDROP

The Triduum is best seen against the backdrop of the season of Lent, and Lent is best seen through the eyes of an early Christian catechumen. For someone entering the Church in the fourth century, Lent was an extraordinary boot camp for the soul. Catechumens were frequently interrogated about their knowledge of the faith at events called “Scrutinies,” often during all-

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night vigils that left them exhausted. At one Scrutiny (at least in St. Augustine’s diocese of Hippo), they had to stand on a goatskin, symbolizing sin and the animal clothing of Adam and Eve, while the bishop or an exorcist would breathe and hiss into their face, adjuring the Devil to depart. It was also during Lent that catechumens learned the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, which they

had to memorize and publicly recite on Holy Saturday afternoon (see below).<sup>3</sup>

In addition to fasting from sunrise to sunset, candidates for baptism had to abstain from conjugal relations and from bathing for the whole of Lent. They were finally able to visit a Roman bathhouse in preparation for the Triduum on the Thursday of Holy Week. On the same day, the bishop would prepare for the catechumens’ reception into the Church with a special “Chrism Mass” during which he would bless the holy oils to be used for their initiation on Holy Saturday night.

Another group that bears mention is the public penitents – those Christian sinners whose notorious or especially scandalous trespasses elicited conspicuous penance. Like the catechumens, the penitents fasted, abstained from bathing, and did penance for forty days. Dressed in sackcloth and ash, they were also forbidden from shaving, wearing shoes, or sleeping in their own beds. The public penitents’ ordeal ended on Maundy Thursday during a “Mass of Remission.” The bishop would take the unwashed, unshod, sackcloth-wearing penitents into the church where, after the reading of the Gospel, he would absolve them of their sins. After Mass, they would hurry home to bathe, shave, and return to their normal lives. This practice ended centuries ago, but it has left one mark on our language: the period of the penitents’ exclusion was sometimes called a “quarantine,” from the medieval French word for forty days.<sup>4</sup>

Over time, as the faithful reflected on their own need for repentance in preparation for the Paschal Mystery, they came to adopt some of these

ascetical practices. The forty-day fast of Lent (known in the East as the Great Fast) may, as the Orthodox churches claim, be a practice of apostolic origin, but it may also be the application of the catechumenal fast to the already-baptized flock. Similarly, some Christians began to abstain from certain forms of carnal pleasure and bodily hygiene in imitation of the penitents and catechumens, leaving behind a curious linguistic imprint. In English, Maundy Thursday was originally called “Shere Thursday” (meaning sheer or clean), and in Scandinavian it is still called *Skaertorsdag*,<sup>5</sup> presumably because the Thursday of Holy Week was the appointed day to shave and bathe. Even the Lenten fast was relaxed on this day to give the faithful the strength to freshen up.<sup>6</sup> And, of course, the ashes worn by public penitents survive today in the customs of Ash Wednesday.

### **MAUNDY THURSDAY**

The Mass of Remission is a memory of the distant past, but the Chrism Mass is still celebrated the morning of Holy Thursday in the Catholic Church and in the Anglican communion, and so too is the third service handed down from antiquity, the Mass of the Lord’s Supper. Celebrated in the evening, it consists of several memorable ceremonies, including the washing of twelve men’s feet by the celebrant and the stripping of the altars in preparation for the sorrowful austerity of Good Friday. The former custom is the inspiration behind the term Maundy Thursday, “Maundy” coming from the *Mandatum novum* or “new commandment” that Christ gave his Apostles as he washed their feet: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Our Lord’s gesture was clearly one of service, which is why Christian monarchs once washed the feet of the poorest of their subjects on Holy Thursday in a separate ceremony.<sup>7</sup> But the foot-washing can also be seen as an analogical presentation of the Eucharist in John’s Gospel<sup>8</sup> and as a purification of the ordained priesthood into which Christ had just initiated his Apostles, for the freshly-minted institution had been polluted moments earlier by Judas’ perfidy.<sup>9</sup>

The ceremonies of Holy Thursday in the Roman rite taught not only by addition but also by subtraction. Prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Kiss of Peace was omitted during the Mass of the Last Supper, since the image of Judas’s despicable manner of identifying Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane was too vivid in the minds of the faithful to be imitated on this sacred night.<sup>10</sup>

### **TENEBRAE**

Another form of traditional worship associated with Holy Thursday is Tenebrae, from the Latin word for “darkness.” Tenebrae is the Office of Matins and Lauds celebrated in the pre-dawn hours of Maundy Thursday or the night before,<sup>11</sup> but with one distinction. The service involves the use of a

“hearse,” a triangular candelabrum holding fifteen candles.<sup>12</sup> After the chanting of each psalm or canticle, a candle from the hearse is extinguished until the entire church is enveloped in almost total darkness. Only the topmost candle remains lit, which is then hidden by the side of the altar. Worshippers then make a banging noise, usually with their books on the pews, for several moments; after silence is restored, so too is the lit candle

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to its place on the hearse. The extinction of the fourteen candles calls to mind the holy men mentioned in the Bible who, from the foundation of the world to the threshold of Christ’s ministry, were slain by their own brethren (see Matthew 23:35). Similarly, the hiding of the fifteenth candle signifies the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and his burial in the tomb; the banging noise commemorates the confusion

of nature when its Creator died (Matthew 27:51); and the restoration of the candle anticipates Christ’s glorious resurrection.

Tenebrae was popular in Catholic parishes before Pope Pius XII changed the rules governing Holy Week in 1955,<sup>13</sup> and lately different versions of it have begun to reemerge in some Catholic parishes. Some Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, and Anglican and Episcopalian communities (especially the latter two) also celebrate a form of Tenebrae.

### **GOOD FRIDAY**

Ever since the Church emerged from the catacombs and most likely even before that, Good Friday has been kept as a “day of lamentation and not festivity”<sup>14</sup> and a day of “bitterness” and fasting.<sup>15</sup> In the second century the faithful kept an intense forty-hour “Passion Fast” that began at the hour when Christ died on the cross and ended on the hour that he rose from the dead.<sup>16</sup> Even after the forty-day Lenten fast became universal, believers would observe Good Friday with added rigor. In Ireland, Catholics would often keep a “Black Fast” in which nothing was consumed, except perhaps for a little water or plain tea, until sundown.

Ironically, special foods also came to be associated with Good Friday. The once-widespread custom in Catholic countries of marking every new loaf of bread with the sign of the cross took on a special meaning on Good Friday. In Austria, *Karfreitaglaib*, bread with a cross imprinted on it, was served on this day. And in England, hot cross buns, which first appeared

in 1361, would only be distributed on Good Friday. The hot cross bun was such a familiar feature of the English Lent that it continued after the Reformation as a seasonal food—and as an occasion for superstition. Hot cross buns were kept throughout the year for their curative properties; if someone “fell ill, a little of the bun was grated into water and given to the sick person to aid his recovery.”<sup>17</sup> Some believed that eating them on Good Friday would protect their home from fire, while others wore them “as charms against disease, lightning, and shipwreck”!<sup>18</sup>

The centerpiece for most Christians on Good Friday is some form of worship. Historically, these services developed gradually. In the Latin West, Good Friday worship was the coalescence of three different practices: a Roman *synaxis*, a kind of prayer meeting with biblical readings; the adoration or veneration of the cross, borrowed from the ancient liturgy of Jerusalem; and the “Mass of the Presanctified,” in which Holy Communion (consecrated from a previous Mass) was distributed.<sup>19</sup>

Roman tradition also backhandedly led to the creation of Passion Music. In the traditional Roman rite, all four Gospel narratives of the Lord’s Passion are chanted during Holy Week: the Passion according to St. Matthew on Palm Sunday, the Passion according to St. Mark on the following Tuesday, the Passion according to St. Luke on Spy Wednesday, and the Passion according to St. John on Good Friday. The music for these Gospels is an outstanding example of the power and beauty of Gregorian chant; understandably, then, it left a deep impression on the Western imagination even after the Reformation in large part did away with the liturgical setting of Holy Week. Nature abhorring a vacuum, composers soon began writing Passion oratorios to replace the music of solemn liturgy, the most famous of which are Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Saint John Passion” and “Saint Matthew Passion” in the eighteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

The Three Hours’ Devotion, or “Seven Last Words of Christ,” is another popular Good Friday service. Begun in 1732 by Father Alphonso Messia, S.J., in Lima, Peru, it quickly spread to all other countries in Central and South America and from there to Italy, England, and America, where both Catholics and Protestants embraced the devotion. The service, which alternates between homilies on the seven last statements of the crucified Christ and various hymns and prayers, has also inspired the composition of memorable music, including “The Seven Last Words of Christ” by Franz Joseph Haydn (1787), “Les Sept Paroles de Notre Seigneur Jesus-Christ sur la Croix” by Charles Gounod (1855), and “Les Sept Paroles du Christ” by Théodore Dubois (1867).

## **HOLY SATURDAY**

“From evening until the cock-crowing, stay awake,” the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* declares. “Assemble together in the church: watch and pray and entreat God. When you sit up all night, read the Law, the

Prophets, and the Psalms until the cock-crowing, and baptize your catechumens. Read the Gospel with fear and trembling, and speak to the people such things as tend to their salvation. And put an end to your sorrow."<sup>21</sup>

In the early church, the Easter Vigil service that began late Holy Saturday night and ended Easter Sunday morning was a remarkable experience.

Thomas Finn writes that the North African liturgies of Lent and the Triduum

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in St. Augustine's day were the "*spectacula christiana* — the new theatre, the new racetracks, and the new boxing ring. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of this long-extended ritual drama on convert and community alike."<sup>22</sup> This was especially true for Holy Saturday, not only in North Africa but throughout Christendom. At the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome, the service would begin with

the blessing of the fire, the blessing of the Paschal candle, the proclamation of twelve Old Testament prophecies, and the blessing of the baptismal font (in a baptistery separate from the basilica). Stripped down, catechumens would descend into the font where they were baptized (women were anointed and baptized separately by a "deaconess," a non-ordained woman appointed for this purpose). Rising out of the font, they would be clothed in white robes, symbols of their new purity and having "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14); they would then be confirmed or "chrismated" by the bishop. Next, the neophytes would enter the church carrying a lit candle as the congregation chanted the Litany of the Saints. As the dark church gradually filled with sparkling light, the Mass for Easter would begin.<sup>23</sup>

Officially, the daylight hours of Holy Saturday would be spent in rest and prayer as the faithful kept spiritual vigil at the tomb of our Lord. One exception to this rule was the final interrogation of catechumens that took place in the afternoon. The bishop would question them one more time, exorcise them, touch their ears and nostrils in imitation of Mark 7:34 and John 9:1-3 and in order to symbolize their opening up to the graces and Word of God, and hear their pledge of conversion. The catechumens would face the West, point to the sunset, and renounce Satan and all his empty works before turning to the East and affirming their belief in Jesus Christ. Each recited the Creed memorized during Lent and was then dismissed to spend their last few hours before baptism in prayer.<sup>24</sup>

Unofficially, there would be much activity the day before Easter as families prepared their homes and kitchens for an Octave of Paschal feasting (during Easter and the following week). The blessing of Easter foods by a priest, which in the Middle Ages often took place on Holy Saturday day, was a cherished custom in both the Latin West and Greek East, and it is still cherished by Eastern-rite Christians today. In Poland, boys would not only look forward to the new fare but say good riddance to the old. Taking a dead herring, which they had eaten in abundance during Lent, they would ritually execute it by hanging it from a tree and then bury it with glee in a mock funeral, all in celebration of their emancipation from the tiresome food.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most intriguing testimony to the power of the Triduum is its impact on the literary imagination. In the *Commedia* Dante famously begins his journey into Inferno on Holy Thursday and reaches Purgatorio on Easter Sunday morning. Before Dante's *Comedy* the Caedmonian *Exodus*<sup>26</sup> and the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* were both inspired by the Triduum: *Beowulf's* descent to the monsters' underwater lair, for instance, is deliberately evocative of Christ's harrowing of Hell, a scene that comes after a culminating series of Old Testament allusions recapitulating the Holy Saturday liturgy.<sup>27</sup> Even the various parts of St. Augustine's *Confessions* may be surmised in terms of the Triduum: the autobiography of his past in books 1-9 recounts his catechumenate and baptism on Holy Saturday, the autobiography of his present in book 10 hearkens to the Eucharist he received as a neophyte and his current vocation to the priesthood, and the commentary on the opening verses of Genesis in books 11-13 recalls his period of instruction during the Easter Octave as well as his duties as bishop to instruct the newborn "infants" in the Faith.<sup>28</sup> From the shenanigans of herring-hating boys to the writings of the greatest authors of the West, the Paschal Mystery of our redemption has been deeply felt through the ritual worship of the Church.

## NOTES

1 Leo the Great, Sermon 47.1. All translations are mine.

2 Leo the Great, Sermon 50.3.

3 See William Harmless, S.J., *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

4 The original use of the word "quarantine" was Jesus' forty-day fast in the desert; it was applied to periods of penance before it was eventually applied to the temporary isolation of those with contagious diseases (see "Quarantine, n.," *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition).

5 Francis X. Weiser, S.J., *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1958), 193 and 173.

6 See Augustine, Epistle 54.7.9-10.

7 It was the custom in England, for instance, for the monarch to wash the feet of as many people as they themselves were years old and to give to each as many coins. After the Reformation, the foot-washing was eventually dropped and only the giving of coins was retained. Today, the coins used are specially-minted commemorative pieces called "Maundy money."

8 Rev. Msgr. Anthony A. La Femina, "The Footwashing—Jesus Christ Establishes the New Covenant before Calvary," *Adoremus* 12:1 (March 2006), [www.adoremus.org/0306Footwashing.html](http://www.adoremus.org/0306Footwashing.html) (accessed November 18, 2013).

9 For the connection between priestly consecration and bodily washing, see Leviticus 8:6 and Exodus 30:17-21. For the interpretation of Christ's foot-washing as a moral purification and sanctification, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.22.

10 Michael P. Foley, "The Whence and Whither of the Kiss of Peace in the Roman Rite," *Antiphon: A Journal for Liturgical Renewal* 14:1 (2010), 45-94.

11 The Divine Office, or Liturgy of the Hours, consists of seven or eight designated times during the day in which the faithful chant or recite psalms, hymns, and spiritual canticles.

12 A hearse is a harrow, which is a spiked, rake-like tool used for tilling the ground. The candelabrum is so named because of its resemblance to the harrow, while the coffin bier and funeral vehicle take their names from the candelabrum, not the other way around.

13 See Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, where a verse from *Tenebrae*, *Quomodo sedet sola civitas* / How lonely sits the city (*Lamentations* 1:1), is a motif.

14 *Apostolic Constitutions* 5.18.

15 St. Ambrose, Epistle 23.12.

16 Weiser, 201.

17 Katherine Burton and Helmut Ripperger, *Feast Day Cookbook* (Montreal, QC: Catholic Authors Press, 2005), 52.

18 Weiser, 206.

19 Dom Gaspar Lefebvre, O.S.B., *Saint Andrew Daily Missal* (Saint Paul, MN: E. M. Lohmann Co., 1953), 490.

20 Weiser, 91 and 203-204.

21 *Apostolic Constitutions* 5.19.

22 Thomas M. Finn, "It Happened One Saturday Night: Ritual and Conversion in Augustine's North Africa," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58:4 (1990), 595.

23 Lefebvre, 519 ff., and 553.

24 The various exorcisms, interrogations, and rituals of the catechumenate during the Patristic era were preserved and compressed into a single rite of baptism kept by the Church of Rome and used for all baptismal candidates, infant and adult, until 1969.

25 Weiser, 208.

26 J. W. Bright, "The Relation of the Caedmonian *Exodus* to the Liturgy," *Modern Language Notes* 27:4 (April 1912), 97-103.

27 Allen Cabaniss, "Beowulf and the Liturgy," in Lewis E. Nicholson, ed., *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1963), 223-232.

28 Angela Pearson, "The Unity of the *Confessions* and the Octave of the Infants," Baylor University, December 2005, unpublished; Michael P. Foley, "The Sacramental Topography of the *Confessions*," *Antiphon* 9:1 (Spring 2005), 30-65.



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