

The origins of Holy Week liturgies

Richard McBrien | Apr. 18, 2011 Essays in Theology

I have been writing this weekly column now for almost 45 years. Thanks to my friend and former graduate assistant Kern Trembath, his two sons Alex and Cal, who are about to graduate this year from the University of California Berkeley, his step-daughter Emily, and, of course, my own longtime (25 years and 6 months) assistant Donna Shearer, all of these columns are now saved electronically and can be retrieved by subject matter at www.richardmcbrien.com.

I regularly consult the Web site as I approach key topics, like anniversaries or major liturgical feasts, such as Christmas and Easter, liturgical seasons, such as Advent and Lent, and major annual observances, such as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

I am surprised, however, by how few times I have devoted entire columns to Holy Week, even though there have been over 275 references to Holy Week since this column began in July 1966.

For those who might wonder about the column's origin many years ago, it was thanks to an invitation from the late Msgr. John S. Kennedy, then editor of *The Catholic Transcript*, the weekly paper of the Hartford, Conn., archdiocese. The archdiocese also happens to be my own ecclesiastical home.

I have written only two full columns on Holy Week, in 2005 and again last year. For both columns I was indebted to the work of my colleague at the University of Notre Dame, Professor Nathan Mitchell, a liturgical scholar of the first rank.

Prof. Mitchell did an entry on Holy Week in a work for which I served as general editor, the one-volume Harpercollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism, published in 1995.

Holy Week is observed during the final week of Lent (technically Lent ends at Mass on Holy Thursday evening), beginning on Palm Sunday and reaching its liturgical climaxes at the Easter Vigil and on the feast of Easter itself.

Holy Week commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), his Last Supper with his closest disciples, including the one who would betray him (Holy Thursday), his Passion and Crucifixion (Good Friday), and his Resurrection (the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday).

The final four liturgies of Holy Week -- the evening Mass on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday -- are called the Easter Triduum, three days leading up to and including Easter Sunday itself.

The key venue for the early celebration of Holy Week was in the city of Jerusalem, and the earliest record we have of this celebration is a fourth-century travel diary kept by a European woman whose name, Egeria, is known by all liturgical scholars and their graduate students. She had been part of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the year 383.

According to Egeria, the Palm Sunday liturgy began in the afternoon with an elaborate procession which started outside of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. The bishop reenacted the role of Jesus, while children waved palm branches as the procession wound its way through the entire city.

On Holy Thursday night, after the Eucharist had been celebrated in the afternoon, the events of Jesus' Passion were reenacted: his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest there, and his trial before Pontius Pilate.

On Good Friday there were four hours of veneration of the cross, beginning just before noon, followed by a solemn afternoon Liturgy of the Word that concluded with a reading of the Passion according to John.

The Easter Vigil began in mid-afternoon on Holy Saturday, with the final preparation of the catechumens. That night, while the catechumens were being baptized, the rest of the faithful kept vigil. As soon as the newly baptized were led into the church, the celebration of the Easter Eucharist began.

According to Nathan Mitchell, these Jerusalem-centered liturgies eventually caught on throughout the then-Christian world. By the fifth and sixth centuries the highly influential churches of Rome and Constantinople (modern Istanbul) had adopted these Holy Week liturgies, which were subsequently spread to other local churches within their vast jurisdictions, both in the West and the East.

Unfortunately, the linkage between the liturgies of Holy Week and the original times and places of the sacred events became obscured in the medieval West, as any former altar boy can attest if he ever served on Holy Saturday morning, with its long readings in Latin and very few worshippers.

The situation was not remedied until the restoration of Holy Week mandated by Pope Pius XII in 1956, and the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council a few years later.

The restoration of Holy Week remains one of Pope Pius XII's greatest achievements. We can thank him and the liturgists he wisely consulted for the spiritually meaningful ceremonies which we will celebrate at this week.

[Correction: An earlier version of this column had a misspelling in the url for Fr. McBrien's web site. The correct url is www.richardmcbrien.com [1].]

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