

What is “Holy Week” and what should Christians do to properly recognize and participate in it?

Part 1 of 3

Holy Week stands at the head of our calendar, the holiest week of the entire liturgical year. Holy Week begins on Palm Sunday and continues until Easter Sunday. It celebrates the Paschal Mystery, the passion and death of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and his victorious resurrection, his triumph over sin and death and his glorification by his Father.

Palm-Passion Sunday is a dual feast, Palm Sunday because palm branches are blessed and carried in procession to commemorate the Lord’s entrance into Jerusalem, and Passion Sunday because the Passion Narrative is proclaimed. It is the only Sunday when two separate gospels are read. The Passion is the longest Sunday gospel of the year. The Mass has two jarringly different moods, jubilation at the outset, then lamentation. Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem was exuberant as the people joyfully cheered Hosanna to greet him, but moments later all is somber, first with the Suffering Servant who gave his back to those who beat him (Is 50:6), then with Jesus who obediently accepted death on a cross (Phil 2:8), and then with the Passion and his agony, scourging, and crucifixion (Mt 26:14-27:66).

Symbols. The primary symbol for Palm Sunday is palms, a sign that the people regarded Jesus as their victorious king. There are many symbols for the Passion: a single cross, three crosses, the cup of suffering, thirty pieces of silver, a lantern, swords and clubs, a blade and a severed ear, handcuffs or shackles, a rooster crowing, a scourging pillar, whips, a crown of thorns, a reed, three nails, hammer and pincers, a rope, the INRI inscription, a sprig of hyssop, three dice, a tunic, a lance, a ladder, an urn for spices, a shroud or burial linens, and a skull.

Discipleship Action Items. Take some palms home and use them to venerate a crucifix or decorate a statue, picture, or sacred object. Go off by yourself to re-read some or all of the Passion and meditate on it. If there are others at home, discuss what it would have been like to have been part of the Palm Sunday procession or to have been standing along the Way of the Cross as Jesus passed by or at Calvary when Jesus was crucified.

The Easter Triduum. The Triduum is the most solemn moment of the church year. It lasts three days. It begins on Holy Thursday evening with the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, continues with the celebration of the Lord’s Passion on Good Friday, and reaches its culmination with the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday, and it ends with Evening Prayer late Easter Sunday afternoon.

Discipleship Action Item. These days are the “high holy days” of our Christian faith, and as Jews would stream to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover in the Temple, ideally Catholics would stream to their local churches to celebrate these sacred mysteries with their parish communities. Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil are not holy days of obligation, but if there ever was a time that we should want to go to church, it would be for these three holy days. Triduum is the moment to place other things on hold while our faith gets top priority.