

## **Symbols Used During Holy Week Liturgies**

### **By Bishop Patrick J. Zurek**

#### **Palm Sunday**

Palms are blessed and used in procession to commemorate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. They also symbolize His victory over sin and death. Hence, they have come to symbolize a martyr, also. In the East, this custom dates back to the fourth Century. This custom is not found in the western Church until the eighth Century.

#### **The Chrism Mass**

This Mass is usually celebrated in the morning of Holy Thursday, but is often transferred to a day earlier in the week. In the Diocese of Amarillo it is celebrated Tuesday of Holy Week in the evening.

Oil extracted from the olive was very common in the Palestine of Jesus' time. It was medicinal and was used in the dressing of wounds. Often wine would be poured over the wound, probably as a cleansing agent for the wound. Then olive oil would be poured over it to prevent infection; hence its use for the Oil of the Sick.

Olive oil is also used for the Oil of Catechumens. "By the Oil of Catechumens the effect of the baptismal exorcism is extended. Before they go to the font of life to be reborn the candidates for baptism are strengthened to renounce sin and the devil." (Book of Rites, Vol. 1, p. 518) This anointing begs God to "give wisdom and strength to all who are anointed with it; a deeper understanding of the Gospel, and help to accept the challenge of Christian living." (Rites, Prayer of Blessing, p. 523)

Olive oil was also used for ceremonial anointing; kings, priests and prophets would be anointed. Perfumes were often mixed in the oil as a sign of joy. Hence its use as the Sacred Chrism which is used to anoint the newly baptized, for the gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, for the anointing of the hands of a newly ordained priest and for the anointing of the head of a newly ordained Bishop (again symbolizing the outpouring of the Spirit). It is also used to anoint a newly constructed Altar and for anointing a newly dedicated Church. Only bishops have the right to consecrate the Sacred Chrism.

The strength giving richness of the oil and the fragrance of the balsam, represent the fullness of sacramental Grace and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit as well as the sweetness of Christian virtue.

#### **Holy Thursday**

The Empty Tabernacle is a powerful symbol as you enter the Church for the Mass of Institution that is celebrated in the evening. The Church is awaiting the tremendous gift of the Eucharist. All the bread that is to be consecrated and distributed as Holy Communion on Holy Thursday and Good Friday must be consecrated at this Mass. The "Eucharist is the prolongation in time of the Paschal Mystery." (Pope John Paul II, Luminous Mysteries of the Rosary)

The Washing of Feet is symbolic of what the Eucharist means. St. John, in his Gospel has no narrative of the Institution of the Holy Eucharist. Chapter 6 describes the Eucharistic bread as His “flesh for the very life of the world.” Chapter 13 describes the action of Jesus after the Last Supper. He “washes the feet” of His disciples. He gives the fullest meaning of the Eucharist; we are to wash each others’ feet, “If I, then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other’s feet.” (Jn 13:14-15) Followers of Jesus are called to serve others.

Bread and Wine were the staples of Mediterranean life at the time of Jesus. Every culture has some form of bread, though made from different grains. The same cultures also produced wine from the grape. Jesus said that “one does not live by bread alone.” So he used the staples of His culture to nourish us not only with His Word, but with His Body and Blood, and so bringing us into a deep communion with Himself and with all others who receive Communion. Ordinary bread becomes the Bread of Life and ordinary wine becomes His Blood, the “Cup of Salvation.” (Eucharistic Prayer)

The Solemn Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is scheduled immediately after the Mass of Institution. The faithful are invited to “come and stay” with the Eucharistic Lord and pray with Him as He invited the Apostles to “stay awake and pray with me.” This solemn adoration usually ends at midnight.

The Altar is stripped of cloths and decoration. The Church is in mourning with Her Lord. He began His agony after the supper and so the Church enters into a period of sober prayer with Christ.

Incense is used as a symbol of reverence, and honor, a symbol of our “prayer rising up” to the Lord and as a means of purification. Used for the Blessed Sacrament, incense becomes a sign of devotion and adoration.

## **Good Friday**

On this day Silence becomes the pre-eminent symbol. The celebrant, bishop, priest or deacon enters solemnly in silence, without the Cross or candles. They prostrate before the altar in silent prayer. There is no Sign of the Cross or Apostolic Greeting; the Church is in mourning! Then the presider immediately begins the Opening Prayer. After the Service is completed, the ministers leave in silence.

No Mass Celebrated on this day. From the earliest days of the Church, Mass has not been celebrated on this day. The prayer of the Church is three fold: the Liturgy of the Word in which the Passion is read, the unveiling and veneration of the Cross and a Communion Service. The Liturgy begins and ends in silence. It is a time of mourning the loss of the Savior and repentance for our sins.

On this day the Bishop does not wear his Episcopal Ring. This, too, goes back to the early Church; it is another sign of mourning.

## **Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday**

The Dark Church becomes the first symbol one encounters upon entering the Church. Darkness is experienced to highlight the Service of Light in which the Easter Candle is blessed, lighted and carried into the Church as the symbol of the Risen Lord. He is the LIGHT of the world. We, too, are called to be lights to the world and so we light candles from the Paschal Candle. It is a powerful symbol of the power of many lights...of many committed followers of Jesus, the Risen Lord, sent into the world through Baptism.

The Vigil of Readings follows. The readings from the Old Testament call us to remember all the incredible things that the Lord did for our ancestors in the Faith. Through this "remembering" we are made present to the religious events of our ancestors. It helps us to know that God never abandons His Holy People.

After the homily Water becomes the dominant symbol. It is solemnly blessed by the priest presider as the Paschal Candle is lowered into it, symbolizing the power of the Holy Spirit descending upon it to make it holy. Water can be destructive...Baptismal Water destroys Original Sin. It is also necessary for life...Baptismal Water is the vehicle for giving the New Life of Grace, a share in God's life.

Those to become Christians make their profession of faith and are baptized. Those already baptized renew their baptismal promises and are sprinkled with this Baptismal Water.

Interestingly enough, in the early Church Baptismal Fonts were placed at the entrances of Churches. As people entered they used this water to make the sign of the Cross. By doing this, they renewed the baptismal commitment to Jesus. Eventually, as baptismal fonts were moved to other locations, this water was placed at all entrances to the church and became known as "holy water". The older symbolism is much richer.