

How to make the most of Holy Week at home

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March 27, 2020

American Catholics are facing an unimaginable Holy Week this year. With the suspension of public Masses throughout every diocese in all 50 states, there will be no Palm Sundays in our parishes, no Triduum liturgies, no joyous Easter Sunday Mass. It's almost unthinkable — yet here we are.

Nothing can ever replace the solemnity and beauty of Holy Week in our churches, and so the absence of public worship during these holiest days of the year presents a moment of pause and pain. The void created in our spiritual lives by our lack of access to the sacraments can be seen to draw us closer to Christ's own solitude in his final agony and suffering. And yet, we cannot remain there. By our Easter faith, we know that Christ is alive and among us. "I am with you always," he promised (Mt 28:20). As the late Cardinal Francis E. George, O.M.I., reiterated: "The Risen Lord will never abandon his people. Those who find their personal identity in relation to him will never be alone." Knowing all things work for the good, let us not dwell in our sadness, but as Easter people, fervently pray for the grace given time Mary Magdalene on the first Easter morning, for the eyes to see the Risen Lord in our midst and the ears to recognize his voice as he speaks to us.

So while we are unable to celebrate Holy Week in our churches, here are some ways we might bring these holiest days of the year into being in our homes.

SPIRITUAL TREASURES

LITURGICAL LIFE AT HOME

In our homes — our domestic churches where the Faith is lived out mostly from day to day — we can connect ourselves more closely to the Church's liturgical life. This can be done even in simple ways, particularly by setting aside a special place to pray. One common practice in homes is to have a domestic prayer altar with a simple cloth, a crucifix or other sacred images, or a candle. Other items can be kept there as well, such as rosaries, the Bible or holy water. Other decorations related more directly to the day being celebrated are recommended as well. If colors of decor can be changed, use white on Holy Thursday and Easter, red on Palm Sunday and Good Friday, and purple in between.

A set place for common prayer in the home would be a great idea to help foster your family's prayer life, especially during the sacred days of Holy Week. You might invite friends and relatives to join you digitally in prayer.

Each of the days in Holy Week has its own character and traditions, some elements of which easily can be implemented at home.

Palm Sunday

In commemoration of the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, branches from the yard could be carried in procession throughout your yard or nearby outdoor space. It doesn't need to be elaborate. Take time to read Matthew 21:1-11, as might be done at the start of Mass. You can sing or play a hymn praising Christ our Lord and King along the way, such as the traditional "All Glory, Laud and Honor." No need to be quiet about it; when Jesus was told to silence the crowds on the first Palm Sunday, he replied, "I tell you, if they keep silent, the stones will cry out!" (Lk 19:40). End your procession at a home altar, where you can reflect upon the passion narrative (Mt 26:14-27:66) or livestream a Mass.

Holy Thursday

At the Last Supper, Jesus washed his apostles' feet, an act of sacrificial love and service by which he gave meaning to what he would accomplish on the cross the next day. Washing one another's feet would be a great way for loved ones to recall the Lord's Holy Thursday mandate to love one another as he has loved us. Begin by reading the evening's Gospel passage (Jn 13:1-15) and conclude with a simple meal.

In commemoration of the Lord's agony in the garden, it is customary to spend the night in Eucharistic adoration. While attending adoration at a church likely isn't an option for Catholics this year, there are livestreams of Eucharistic adoration available online. The time adoring Christ, even through the screen, can be spent in quiet meditation, reflection on relevant Gospel passages, recitation of the Rosary or making an act of spiritual communion.

Good Friday

The last several weeks have felt something like Good Friday, a day on which Mass is not celebrated, along with several other sacraments. For the veneration of the cross that takes place at this liturgy, we should choose a crucifix at home by which to honor Christ's passion and death. Gather together and read the passion narrative from the day (Jn 18:1–19:42), keeping the crucifix as a focal point in the room. It would be good for each person to venerate it with a genuflection or a kiss, according to custom. We say, "Behold the wood of the Cross, on which hung the salvation of the world. Come let us adore."

Good Friday is one of two annual obligatory days of fasting for Catholics. With life so jarringly altered, perhaps our fasting will take on new meaning this year, and perhaps we can increase our fasting for the good of all those suffering and caring for the sick throughout the world. Fasting certainly creates a void within us, so that we may recognize our dependence on God above all else. But it can also be an opportunity to open us up to the needs of others, particularly those who need our prayers during these days.

Easter

Even though we may not be together as a community to celebrate Easter, the Lord is risen! Let us rejoice, therefore, and be glad!

As you begin your Easter celebration, take time to read one of the Gospel accounts of when the tomb was found empty (there are several options). This is the center point of human history and should take on that significance in our lives. Be sure, also, to watch Mass on TV or online, if possible.

Because we can worship in all that we do, we celebrate Easter with all we have. Many traditional foods are associated with Easter from cultures around the world. Perhaps do some research and try to make a special paschal cuisine. Easter eggs, be they dyed or plastic, can be hidden in the yard or the house, and they remind us of the endless possibilities that flow from Christ's triumph over the grave.

Another special Easter practice is to adorn the cross (you could use the same one as used on Good Friday) with spring flowers, a visible reminder that God has transformed the meaning of even suffering and death. If flowers are hard to come by at home, another possibility is to encourage children to draw, color or paint such decorations. Perhaps large "Alleluia!" posters can be made to add a bit of Easter festivity to the home. Easter songs are not as well-known and popular as Christmas carols, but don't let that stop you from letting your alleluias ring out, for Christ is truly risen from the tomb. No matter the difficulty of crisis, Easter reminds us that God always wins — indeed, he's already won, and so no matter the sorrow around us, we can be filled with joy.

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