



Re-entering the Paschal Mystery Anew

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Each time we cycle round to preparing for Holy Week, memory carries me back to my childhood and the surprising Holy Week reforms of 1955. In the parish elementary school where I sang in the choir beginning in the third grade, my first lessons in the real meaning of liturgy came with the final revision of the Holy Week liturgy that year.¹ Not only did the choir learn the new music, but our enlightened choir director also meticulously explained the reason for the changes. Similarly, my mother bought every pamphlet printed on the subject of the Holy Week reforms, so even as young children we were not merely observers of the changes,

¹*Acta Apostolica Sedis* [AAS] 47 (1955): 838-847. The unexpected experimental revisions to the Holy Week liturgy came as a one-year trial in 1951, and extended the following year for another three years. See AAS 43 (1951): 130-137; AAS 44 (1952): 48-63.

but we entered into them, learned them by heart and lived them deeply in the moment.

Mother also imposed another liturgical practice on her daughters. Saturday nights after we had our baths and our hair had been washed and curled in preparation for being our Sunday best, Mother would have us read the Sunday gospel. At the time it seemed like a huge imposition on our free time, which we would have rather spent reading Nancy Drew or some other novel. Now I see just how devout Mother was, and how she unknowingly shaped me into a student of liturgy.

Holy Week is unlike any other week in the Liturgical Year. We do not just recall or reenact the events of Christ's passion, death and resurrection; we actually step into these mysteries as a believing community. As Paul Turner has written, "Holy Week invites the entire church into the emotional experience of loss, fear, and redemption. We remember the One who died for us. We accompany his waning days, attentive to his final words and actions, discovering anew our love for one who is lost—and the joy of one who returns."² It is as if the entire parish community is invited into a time of spiritual retreat for that week. The liturgies are the same annually, but each year we are different as individuals, as local church communities, and as members of the global church. We bring all that with us into the mystery anew each year.

When the Sisters of Mercy Convent in Whitestone, NY was opened on February 2, 2011 as home to sisters in need of assistance in the tasks of everyday life, its foundresses, Sisters

² Paul Turner, *Glory in the Cross: Holy Week in the Third Edition of The Roman Missal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011) xv.

Lenore Guirrerri and Mariette Schmitt, decided that it would be important to celebrate the Holy Week liturgies that year as fully as possible. Few of the sisters would have been able to participate in local parish liturgies, but all would have been shaped over the years by entering into those sacred mysteries. Having lost so much during that year in divesting and moving, it would have been devastating to lose Holy Week celebrations as well.

When they invited me to sing the *Exsultet* during the Easter Vigil, tears welled up in my eyes immediately. It would not be the first time I had the privilege of singing that glorious ancient hymn. Before I entered the Sisters of Mercy I was an active member of my local parish and studying for a doctorate in Theology. Each year the pastor invited me to do something to help with the parish celebrations of Holy Week. Over the years I had written pastoral introductions and transitions for each of the services, but that year instead of telling me what he wanted me to do, the pastor asked me what I would like to do. "Sing the *Exsultet*!" was my instant response, surprising even me.

The pastor's initial reaction was stunned silence, but he warmed to the idea rather quickly. Neither the parish priests nor the deacon sang very well and I had been a leader in the parish folk group for many years. They all knew I could sing and there is nothing in the Roman Missal that precludes a lay person from singing the *Exsultet*. The preference is for a priest or a deacon, but even the text allows for someone who is neither to sing the hymn. Instructions are minimal with quality being the defining characteristic, emphasizing that it should be sung as worthily as possible. Had the desire to sing this ancient prayer been harboring inside me for a long time, maybe decades? I had no idea! The words tumbled out before I had a chance to

think about them, which is quite unlike me. Instead I have been pondering that question for more than 35 years now.

The *Exsultet* is a lengthy, powerful, poetic summary of salvation history and a preview of the themes found in the readings which follow the rest of the Vigil. It has been sung as we know it today since the 9th century. Filled with exuberance the cantor sings, “Let this holy building shake with joy!” It recalls key moments of salvation history and remembers that this brilliant Light of Christ has dispelled the darkness of sin and death for all time. Fairly exhausted by remembering it all, the community then sits to hear some of the key texts, responding with psalmody.

The drama of entering into all the liturgies of Holy Week appealed to me even as a child when those celebrations were all in Latin. How much more meaningful they are now in English! Celebrating them with the sisters at our convent in Whitestone has deepened my appreciation of them over the years. Because we need to be attentive to the needs of the community gathered, in planning the liturgies we make some accommodations. Our celebrations, for example, take place earlier than recommended by diocesan guidelines. Ideally the Easter Vigil begins after sundown, but we probably end by sundown. While we have the Washing of Feet on Holy Thursday, we might only have four sisters willing to participate. I would probably prefer to use all seven of the Old Testament texts during the Easter Vigil, but we limit it to three.

The convent in Whitestone has never had a resident chaplain. We have been fortunate over the years to draw on the goodness of priest friends and local presbyters who celebrate

Eucharist Sunday through Friday. While finding celebrants for all Holy Week presents some challenges, so far we have always been fortunate. Sisters of Mercy from other convents share in the celebrations as do men and women from other religious communities and friends and family in the area. Yes, our holy building even shakes with joy.

I cannot imagine not celebrating all the liturgies of Holy Week. Perhaps that is because they have been so meaningful to me in my life, or maybe it is because I have come to know how meaningful they have been in the life of the Church throughout the centuries. That is the faith that grounds me and calls me forth to a fuller life each year.

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