

# A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Sacred Paschal Triduum

## Outline of Approach

As the title of this presentation might suggest, what I will present here is only a brief sketch of the Paschal Triduum. It is certainly not exhaustive, nor is it going to tell communities how the Triduum *must* be celebrated. The variety of pastoral circumstances we face in our diocese is simply too broad for that to work, and it is not my place, nor that of the Diocesan Liturgy Council, to impose one way of celebration on any community.

This presentation then is going to look at two fundamental questions in connection with the celebration of the Paschal Triduum: firstly, what are we celebrating? Secondly, how do we celebrate? In answering those questions I have gone to the official sources, the various liturgical rites and documents that are relevant to the celebration of the Paschal Triduum, rather than the actual implementation of the Paschal Triduum liturgy.

During this presentation I will only highlight some major points. The full text of the presentation will be made available at the end of this session and will, because of the limitations of time, contain more detail than I will be able to present face to face.

Given the amount of content to be found in this presentation I will pause occasionally to give you some space to ponder, and perhaps to chat briefly with those around you. Questions will no doubt arise, and, while welcomed, I would ask you to note them down and add them to the Question Board that will be addressed this afternoon in the Forum. This process will allow the opportunity for broader discussion that will hopefully be of benefit to everyone.

## Introduction

When most people – myself included – hear the term “Triduum”, our immediate thoughts are turned to the ‘big events’ of those holy three days. I’d like to suggest that such a development is entirely understandable. After all, if you happen to be involved in the liturgical preparations for the Triduum – as musicians, sacristans, clergy, RCIA Team members, or any number of other roles – you would like to know exactly what’s happening, who is doing what and when, and which bits am I going to be responsible for.

No doubt, if you’re like me, you might also breathe a sigh of relief at the end of the great Easter Vigil and be heard to say, “Thank God that’s over for another year!”

Such an approach to the Paschal Triduum, however, is an impoverished one and, while entirely understandable, is at risk of missing the reality of what we celebrate during these three Holy Days that stand at the very centre of who we are as Christians, and as Catholic Christians in particular.

In this presentation, it is my hope that as we walk through the three days that come at the end of Holy Week, we might begin to see that the Paschal Triduum is much, much more than just the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord, and the Easter Vigil in the Holy Night. It is my further hope that, in taking a look at the significance of the Triduum in the life of the Church, we might be moved to look at the way in which we celebrate this momentous occasion during the liturgical year.

## What Are We Celebrating?

It’s a very good question to begin with and, depending on who you ask, there might be any number of different answers. Even here in this room, if I was to ask exactly what it was that we were celebrating during the Triduum, what might we hear in response?

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* addresses this question in Chapter V on the Liturgical Year, and the opening paragraph of that chapter is worth repeating in full:

Holy Mother Church is conscious that she must celebrate the saving work of her divine Spouse by devoutly recalling it on certain days throughout the course of the year. Every week, on the day which she has called the Lord's Day, she keeps the memory of the Lord's resurrection, which she also celebrates once in the year, together with His blessed passion, in the most solemn festival of Easter.

Within the cycle of a year, she unfolds the whole mystery of Christ, from the incarnation and birth until the ascension, the day of Pentecost, and the expectation of blessed hope and of the coming of the Lord.

Recalling thus the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens to the faithful the riches of her Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present for all time, and the faithful are enabled to lay hold upon them and become filled with saving grace. (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 102)

This understanding of what we celebrate is repeated in the first paragraph of the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*.

We are talking here about the Paschal Mystery. It's a phrase we hear often enough, and it refers to

Christ's cross and Resurrection [which] stands at the centre of the Good News that the apostles, and the Church following them, are to proclaim to the world. God's saving plan was accomplished "once for all" (Heb 9:26) by the redemptive death of his Son Jesus Christ. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 571)

The danger that comes along with this understanding of the Paschal Mystery, however, is of seeing an historical event that occurred over two thousand years ago and which we now remember only as an historical event that has very little claim on us in the here and now. Such an understanding diminishes the liturgical celebration of the Paschal Mystery, especially during the Paschal Triduum, reducing it to a simple re-enactment rather than a remembering and re-presentation of the reality of Christ's death and resurrection that is not bound by anything like the constraints of time and place.

The Paschal Mystery is a *present* reality, something that is as meaningful for today as it was for the first Christians. As Eamonn Bredin puts it so powerfully

The resurrection event is neither reported nor described in the Scriptures. It is first and foremost a matter of faith; not an occurrence that can be observed, a reality more real than the observable. For the early Christian community the resurrection was not a dogma to be believed but a **daring, decisive, power-filled call to live as Jesus lived; a distinctive way, the way of kingdom obedience.**

Thus in the mystery of the resurrection: we are not faced with something over and done with, something imprisoned in the past, but an intensely present reality...

What we celebrate in the Paschal Triduum then is the call to embrace the saving power of Christ and to live as people who have been saved and redeemed by that saving power. Each and every time we celebrate the Paschal Triduum – and any liturgical moment for that matter – we are being strengthened to live as Jesus lived, right here, right now.

In short, when we celebrate the Paschal Triduum we look back to Christ's death and resurrection made present here and now in our lives and, having been strengthened and encouraged by our participation in Christ's paschal mystery in the here and now, we are propelled forward into the world to live as Jesus lived, as the Body of Christ in the world. Our participation in the celebration of the Paschal Triduum – fully, consciously, and actively – is a continuing rehearsal, not of the past, but rather of the way in which we are meant to live now.

Living the resurrection has very practical consequences, very real calls on what we care about and what we do. As Ralph Kuehner and Joseph Juknialis have pointed out

resurrection happens whenever love transforms life; when someone offers forgiveness despite a burning desire for vengeance; when a nation begins to value and protect the rights of all, not just a few; when the poor, hungry, homeless and disenfranchised are attended as brothers and sisters; when immigrants and refugees are not left to drown or incarcerated but are welcomed as the children of God.<sup>1</sup>

## How Do We Celebrate?

So now that we know what we are celebrating during the Paschal Triduum, let's look at how we celebrate. To assist us in this endeavour we can rely heavily on a 1988 Circular Letter from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments entitled *Paschale Solemnitatis* "Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Easter Feasts" (hereafter referred to as *PS*). Given the date of this document we need also to be aware of the requirements for the Paschal Triduum noted in the latest edition of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* from 2012.

When it comes to understanding the requirements of the *General Instruction*, I would strongly recommend the book by Paul Turner, *Glory In The Cross: Holy Week in the Third Edition of The Roman Missal*, and published by Liturgical Press. The caveat with this book, as good as it is, is that it refers to the US version of the third edition of *The Roman Missal*, which is slightly different in some places from our version.

Let's begin with sketching out the basic structure of the Triduum, and then stroll our way through each of the three individual days and their associated liturgical celebrations.

The *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* tells us, "The Easter triduum begins with the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, reaches its high point in the Easter Vigil, and closes with evening prayer on Easter Sunday" (no. 19). This brief description of the scope of the Triduum might surprise many first readers, if for no other reason than there is no mention of the Celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday *and* it mentions evening prayer on *Easter Sunday* – by which time most people involved in the liturgical celebrations associated with Easter are often recovering.

The scope of the Paschal Triduum is shown in diagram form in figure 1.

---

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Sanchez *An Evolving Church* <http://ncronline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections/evolving-church-0>

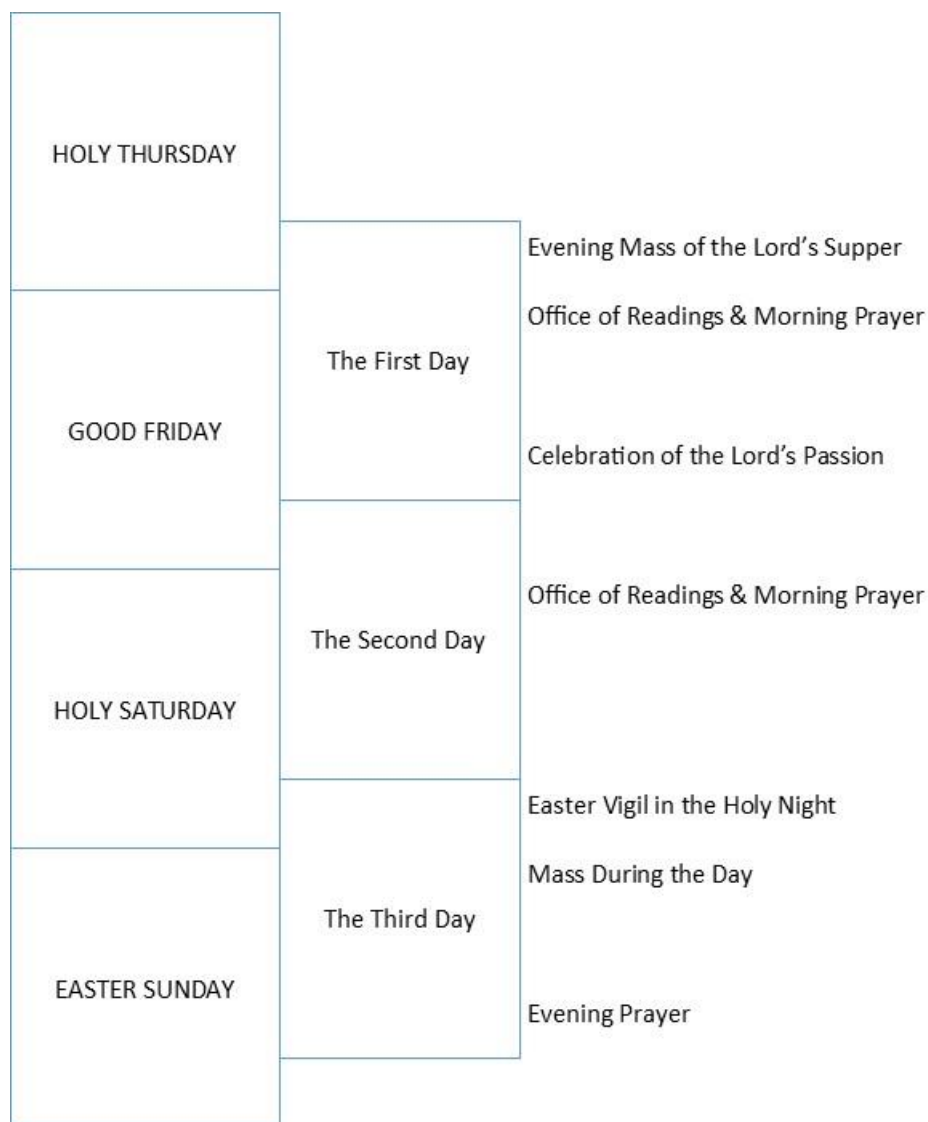


Figure 1: General Structure of the Paschal Triduum

In this diagram we also see one of the difficulties often encountered when attempting to reckon liturgical time as opposed to calendar time. Drawing on the Jewish roots of Christianity, liturgical time is calculated from sunset to sunset so that, as we can see above, Easter Sunday begins at sunset on the preceding Saturday evening. This technically means that there is no Triduum-related celebration on Holy Thursday – Good Friday has already begun. No wonder people can get confused!

### The Easter Triduum in General

A number of general observations are appropriate at the beginning of our stroll. Firstly, even though Lent is concluded with the beginning of the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening, the practice of fasting continues on Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Good Friday, of course, is a day of abstinence and fasting as we well know, but the Paschal Fast also continues through Holy Saturday so that the Church might "be ready to celebrate the joys of the Sunday of the Resurrection" (PS, 39). The often televised visitation to the local fish market on Good Friday always strikes me as being just a little out of kilter with the nature of the Paschal Fast.

There is a strong recommendation that on Good Friday and Holy Saturday there be communal celebrations of the Office of Readings and Morning Prayer (formerly known as Tenebrae) so that the Church can meditate upon "the passion, death, and burial of the Lord while awaiting the announcement of the

resurrection” (PS, 40). This recommendation, often overlooked, reminds us – liturgically at least – that the Triduum is more than just three major liturgical events. The Triduum, when celebrated in its fullness, is an almost continuous meditation on the events that are at the very heart of our faith. When we focus on the major liturgies – an easy temptation – we run the risk of missing everything else.

*Paschale Solemnitatis* also contains a number of very practical considerations:

- “It is necessary that there be a sufficient number of ministers and assistants who should be prepared so that they know what their role is in the celebration” (41). This has implications for both the preparation of the celebration, and the execution of the celebrations. The question of how many ministers are needed will vary from community to community, but there’s a clear intention that every celebration should have sufficient to allow for the appropriate level of solemnity.
- “The chants of the people, and also of the ministers and the celebrating priest, are of special importance in the celebration of Holy Week and particularly of the Easter Triduum because they add to the **solemnity** of these days and also because the texts are more effective when sung” (42, emphasis added). One of the workshops today will explore this in more depth.

The document also addresses a number of practical considerations that might have significance for various pastoral situations we face in our own diocese. It is appropriate to quote these at length.

It is fitting that small religious communities, both clerical and lay, and other lay groups should participate in the celebration of the Easter Triduum in neighbouring principal churches.

Similarly, where the number of participants and ministers is so small that the celebrations of the Easter Triduum cannot be carried out with the requisite solemnity, such groups of the faithful should assemble in a larger church.

Also, where there are small parishes with only one priest, it is recommended that such parishes should assemble, as far as possible, in a principal church and participate in the celebration there.

On account of the needs of the faithful, where a pastor has the responsibility for two or more parishes in which the faithful assemble in large numbers, and where the celebration can be carried out with the requisite care and solemnity, the celebrations of the Easter Triduum may be repeated in accord with the given norms. (43)

That last one, in particular, is enough to give anyone who knows just what’s involved in preparing and celebrating the Easter Triduum pause for thought.

### Holy Thursday Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper

The first ‘act’ of the liturgy of the Paschal Triduum is celebrated on the evening of Holy Thursday, “at a time that is more convenient for the full participation of the whole community” (PS, 46). This Mass commemorates three distinct mysteries (see PS, 45):

- The institution of the Eucharist;
- The institution of the priesthood; and
- Christ’s command of brotherly love.

Attempting to balance these different aspects of the Paschal Mystery will not be easy for those who are responsible for the preparation of, and carrying out, the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper. The necessity for one liturgical event to bear the weight of three such mysteries will require a great deal of care to avoid any one aspect of the celebration being seen to take a priority over the others.

There is a number of directions and instructions contained in *The Roman Missal* and *Paschale Solemnitatis* that highlight the unique dimension of this particular celebration of Eucharist. In order for that unique nature to be clearly identifiable, they should be followed with great care.

Firstly, the Blessed Sacrament is removed from the tabernacle before the Mass begins, and communion should be received only from hosts consecrated during the Evening Mass (PS, 48). Turner suggests that,

although not specifically mentioned in *The Roman Missal*, the sanctuary lamp should be extinguished and the doors of the tabernacle flung wide open in order to highlight the particular nature of this Eucharist (*Glory in the Cross*, 59). *Under no circumstances* should communion be received from the reserved Sacrament during the Triduum: as Paul Turner notes, “Whatever remains of the Blessed Sacrament before this Mass could be stored in a ciborium in the sacristy or another suitable place out of view – and reach” (*Glory In The Cross*, 59). I would go so far as to suggest that the natural conclusion of this instruction would be the consumption of the Blessed Sacrament. In addition to the needs of the Thursday evening Mass, a sufficient number of hosts should also be consecrated so as to permit communion on Good Friday.

Secondly, the place of reservation for the Blessed Sacrament should be prepared in such a way as to foster meditation and prayer, and be marked by an appropriate sobriety in decoration (*PS*, 49). If the usual tabernacle in the church building is located in a separate chapel, then it is appropriate for it to be used for the place of reservation (*PS*, 49). Any resemblance to a tomb – and the use of the word ‘tomb’ – are to be avoided: “the chapel of repose is not prepared so as to represent the Lord’s burial but for the custody of the eucharistic bread that will be distributed in communion on Good Friday” (*PS*, 55).

The Blessed Sacrament is contained in a ciborium or a closed tabernacle, and never in a monstrance (“Under no circumstances”), and members of the Church should be encouraged to spend some time (“a suitable period”) in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. In extended times of adoration, readings from Chapters 13 – 17 of John’s Gospel could be read aloud (*PS*, 56).

Other instructions to be noted include:

- The use of bells during the *Gloria*, and then they are to remain silent until the Easter Vigil. Also included here is the direction that “During the same period, the organ and other musical instruments may be used only for the purpose of supporting the singing” (50).
- While *The Roman Missal* indicates that the washing of the feet is an optional part of the liturgy (the phrase used is “where a pastoral reason suggests it”), *Paschale Solemnitatis* suggests that “This tradition should be maintained, and its proper significance explained” (51). Both *The Roman Missal* and *Paschale Solemnitatis* use the term ‘men’ (the Latin is *viri*) yet the prevailing custom in most places would see the group perfectly acceptably extended to males and females. As Turner suggests, “Because the entire ceremony of washing men’s feet is optional, it is difficult to say what must be done” (*Glory in the Cross*, 64). There is, however, no mention of a specified number; twelve has clear connections with the number of disciples, but again there are no clear directions and the number chosen would be dependent on the size of the community that gathers for the celebration.
- While the structure of the ritual of the washing of feet would embrace a wide variety of interpretations as to how it is celebrated, the focus needs to be clear. Turner suggests that staying close to the rubrics associated with the ritual of the washing of the feet is important to ensure that the intention of this ritual – the communication of a symbol of service to the gathered community – is not missed in a more ‘creative’ approach (qv *Glory in the Cross*, 64-65).
- It is appropriate that gifts for the poor – “especially those collected during Lent as the fruit of penance” such as Project Compassion boxes etc. – may be presented in the procession of gifts (52). This clearly means not simply collected, but brought forward to the sanctuary. This has been significantly clarified in the third edition of *The Roman Missal*.
- Communion to the sick or infirm should be taken directly from the moment of communion, and not at the end of the Mass (as would be the case on Sunday) (*PS*, 53). This instruction is a new addition to the third edition of *The Roman Missal*, and there may be some flexibility as the *Missal* simply mentions “an appropriate moment during Communion”.
- “After Mass, the altar should be stripped. It is fitting that any crosses in the church be covered with a red or purple veil, unless they have already been veiled on the Saturday before the fifth Sunday of Lent.” This should not be ritualised in any way; it is simply a practical task that needs to be completed. The *Roman Missal* mentions “a convenient time” for this to be completed, and I would suggest that this would necessitate waiting until a majority of the people who had gathered for the celebration have departed rather than immediately following the completion of Mass.

- In addition, holy water stoups may be emptied at this point, to be refilled after the Easter Vigil with newly blessed water. Lamps should not be lit before the images of saints” (PS, 57). In keeping with this, the lighting of votive candles should also be avoided.

There is a new direction contained in the third edition of *The Roman Missal* that is worthy of note, particularly given the pastoral circumstances present in some of our parishes. I quote it here in full:

If the celebration of the Passion of the Lord on the following Friday does not take place in the same church, the Mass is concluded in the usual way and the Blessed Sacrament is placed in the tabernacle.

### Good Friday

The focus of Good Friday, and what is celebrated on that day, is manifold, including:

- Meditation on the passion of the Lord;
- Adoration of the Cross;
- Commemoration of the Church’s “origin from the side of Christ asleep on the cross; and
- intercession for the salvation of the world.” (PS, 58)

It is again obvious that the complex nature of the celebrations of Good Friday require great care in planning and preparation in order to honour this manifold nature of the day *and* the complexity of the Paschal Mystery that is celebrated in our liturgy. “Good Friday is a day of penance to be observed as an obligation in the whole Church, and indeed, through abstinence and fasting” (PS, 60) (which means no visits to the fish markets!). The nature of Good Friday is highlighted by a number of particular prohibitions that apply to this day.

Firstly, there is no celebration of Eucharist or any of the sacraments on this day (with the exception of penance and anointing of the sick), though funerals may be celebrated without singing, music or the use of bells (PS, 61). Given that Australia observes Good Friday as a public holiday, the chances of being requested to have a funeral celebrated on this day are remote.

Secondly, and as previously mentioned, there is a very strong recommendation that the Office of Readings and Morning Prayer be celebrated on Good Friday morning “with the participation of the people in the churches” (PS, 62). Such a suggestion might appear to be difficult to implement given the general unfamiliarity with the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours. Yet the nature of Good Friday as a day of quiet meditation makes the use of the psalms and scriptures as the basis of this meditation entirely appropriate. I would like to suggest that unless and until we encourage the use of the Liturgy of the Hours on days such as Good Friday, this treasure of the Church’s liturgical life will continue to be unfamiliar to the wider Church, and the Church will be the poorer for it.

The major liturgical act on Good Friday is the Celebration of the Lord’s Passion “which takes place in the afternoon”. Although 3pm is the customary time for this celebration to begin, there is considerable flexibility given in *Paschale Solemnitatis* 63, which mentions anywhere from midday to 9pm. The third edition of *The Roman Missal* removes the later limit so that it is possible for the Celebration of the Lord’s Passion to take place at a time that is pastorally appropriate for a local community.

When reading Paul Turner’s *Glory In The Cross* on the Celebration of the Lord’s Passion, you will note that he mentions a rubric found in the US edition of *The Roman Missal* that prohibits the celebration of this liturgy in the absence of a priest *and* the ability for the local ordinary to permit multiple celebrations in the same parish or in the case where a priest has care of more than one parish (p 79). While these rubrics are not found in the edition of *The Missal* we use here in Australia, and are therefore not binding on us, their presence in the US edition does raise the reality of the pastoral situations we face here in our own diocese.

The beginning of the Celebration of the Lord’s Passion is in silence. This is more than just an absence of music for the arrival of the celebrating priest; it is a silence entirely in keeping with the nature of the day on which we gather. As far as is humanly possible, the whole Church should assemble in and keep silence before the liturgy begins, and likewise at the conclusion of the liturgy.

It should also be noted that the third edition of *The Roman Missal* changes the rubric for the entrance of the celebrating priest and ministers. The direction now is simply to go to the altar, and no longer “through the church”. A movement directly from the sacristy to the altar would be entirely appropriate here, and again would be in keeping with the nature of fasting that permeates our celebration of Good Friday.

The Liturgy of the Word follows the usual pattern, and all readings should be read in their entirety (PS, 66). The proclamation of the Lord’s Passion (always using the Gospel of John) is proclaimed in the same way as on the previous Sunday. It should be noted that it is not obligatory for the Passion to be proclaimed by three voices; it is entirely possible for the whole Passion to be proclaimed by a Deacon or Priest. The involvement of the entire community as ‘the Crowd’ would appear to be without any rubrical authority. The sacramental nature of the proclamation of the Word, essentially an aural act, would also seem to mitigate against such a practice because the assembly would need to be focused on the text (in a missal or other form) rather than on the act of hearing the Word proclaimed.

The Solemn Intercessions are to follow the order and wording as contained in the *Missal*, and are not to be substituted for locally formulated versions. This is to “signify clearly the universal effect of the passion of Christ, who hung on the cross for the salvation of the whole world” (PS, 67). The diocesan Bishop, according to the third edition of *The Roman Missal*, may permit or prescribe special intentions in the face of ‘grave public necessity’ – but only the Bishop.

The cross to be used for adoration should be “of appropriate size and beauty” (PS, 68) and there should only be one cross “as this contributes to the full symbolism of the rite” (PS, 69). The cross should have no corpus, since it is the cross that is adored not Christ crucified.

When placed in the appropriate place for adoration by the assembly, the cross should be accompanied by two candles (to the left and right). This is a change in the third edition of *The Roman Missal*, and a return to an earlier practice.

All present should be given the opportunity to come forward and adore the cross, with the presiding priest going first (having removed his chasuble and shoes, if appropriate). The form of adoration is not specified other than “by a simple genuflection or by some other sign appropriate to the usage of the region, for example, by kissing the Cross” (*The Roman Missal*). There is a wide flexibility here that should be embraced to allow for both individual and cultural considerations.

Only if the numbers of those gathered are so great should a communal form of adoration be considered. What constitutes a ‘great number’ is a pastoral judgement, but the preference for all those assembled to be able to adore the cross individually should not be unduly ignored.

At the completion of the adoration of the cross, it is moved to an appropriate place at the altar surrounded by the candles. The idea is create a tableau that can remain in place after the celebration is completed.

Communion from the Blessed Sacrament that had been reposed following Holy Thursday’s Mass is distributed with minimal ceremony and following the general rubrics of *The Roman Missal*. The Blessed Sacrament is brought to the altar from the place of repose accompanied by two candles; it is taken to a “place outside the church” after communion is completed without candles.

The celebrating priest, other ministers, and the entire assembly, make a genuflection to the cross at the conclusion of the celebration prior to departing in silence. This is the only time in the liturgical year when a genuflection is made to anything other than the Blessed Sacrament.

In a similar way to Holy Thursday evening, the altar is stripped after the celebration is completed. The cross remains in place surrounded by four candles in order to provide additional opportunity for the faithful to continue their veneration and meditation. *Paschale Solemnitatis* suggests moving the cross to the same place where the Blessed Sacrament was reposed, while the third edition of *The Roman Missal* suggests the cross remain at the altar.

*Paschale Solemnitatis* addresses the issue of devotions on Good Friday in paragraph 72, which I quote in full:



Devotions, such as the Way of the Cross, processions of the passion, and commemorations of the sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary are not, for pastoral reasons, to be neglected. The texts and songs used, however, should be adapted to the spirit of the liturgy of this day. Such devotions should be assigned to a time of day that makes it quite clear that the liturgical celebration, by its very nature, far surpasses them in importance.

What this means in terms of the customary observance of the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday morning I will leave for possible discussion during the open forum later today.

### Holy Saturday

Holy Saturday is a day when the Church waits “at the Lord’s tomb, meditating on his passion and death and on his descent into hell, awaiting his resurrection with prayer and fasting” (PS, 73).

There is, again as on Good Friday, a strong recommendation for the celebration of the Office of Readings and Morning Prayer with the participation of the people. If this cannot be done, some other celebration of the word of God or some suitable act of devotion should take place. The preference for the Liturgy of the Hours should not be unduly ignored here, again for the same reasoning as mentioned in connection with Good Friday.

The Rites of Preparation from the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* for those to be baptised during the Easter Vigil should take place at some point during Holy Saturday, and this liturgical action should be publicly celebrated wherever possible. If the Office of Readings and Morning Prayer cannot be celebrated, these rites might be a suitable means of marking the morning.

There is a strict injunction against the celebration of Mass, along with all other sacraments except penance and the anointing of the sick. Marriages are forbidden on Holy Saturday (thankfully! though brides might not be happy). Communion may only be given as viaticum to the dying. Funerals are possible on Holy Saturday under the same conditions as Good Friday; again, the public holiday nature of that weekend here in Australia will make this a remote possibility.

*Paschale Solemnitatis* suggests that a suitable image – of Christ crucified or lying in the tomb, or the descent into hell, or an image of the sorrowful Virgin Mary – could be placed in the church for veneration.

### The Celebration of Easter: The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night

According to a most ancient tradition, this night is “one of vigil for the Lord,” and the Vigil celebrated during it, to commemorate that holy night when the Lord rose from the dead, is regarded as the “mother of all holy vigils.” For in that night, the Church keeps vigil, waiting for the resurrection of the Lord, and celebrates the sacraments of Christian initiation. (PS, 77)

And there we find the significance of what we do when we gather to celebrate the Easter Vigil: we are waiting for the coming of the Lord, for the resurrection of the Lord, “the solemnity of solemnities” (PS, 80). And the reason for the Church waiting, keeping vigil, is very simple:

For the resurrection of Christ is the foundation of our faith and hope, and through baptism and confirmation, we are inserted into the paschal mystery of Christ, dying, buried, and raised with him, and with him, we shall also reign. (PS, 80)

Because this night is holy among the holy, holy above all other nights, great care must be taken in preparing for this liturgical event.

Both *The Roman Missal* and *Paschale Solemnitatis* are clear that the Easter Vigil takes place during the night, not beginning before nightfall and ending before daybreak on Sunday. The language of *Paschale Solemnitatis* is among the strongest you can find when addressing alternate practices: “Reprehensible are those abuses and practices that have crept into many places in violation of this ruling, whereby the Easter Vigil is celebrated at the time of day that it is customary to celebrate anticipated Sunday Masses” (PS, 80). In short, don’t do it!

As a matter of interest, the time of sunset on Holy Saturday 2016 (27 March) is 6.55pm AEDT. Nightfall, however, is a different time, generally referred to as Nautical Twilight, which on 27 March 2016 will take place at 7.48pm AEDT. What time, then, should the 2016 Easter Vigil begin?

Though the structure of the Easter Vigil is well known, some comments might be appropriate on each of the constituent parts.

Firstly, the Solemn Beginning of the Vigil or Lucernarium:

- This part consists of symbolic acts and gestures which need to be performed in all their fullness and nobility so that the meaning of this part of the Vigil may be understood by the faithful.
- The church building in which the Easter Vigil is to be celebrated should be in darkness, or as close to darkness as is possible. The nature of vigil, of waiting for the resurrection of the Lord, suggests this: we are waiting for the light of the Resurrected Christ.
- A fire is prepared “outside the church” for the blessing of a new fire, which should be a ‘real fire’ that genuinely dispels the darkness and lights up the night. This suggests more a bonfire than a small container, something that gives off both heat and light that is ‘real’.
- A Paschal Candle is prepared. Made of wax, never artificial, renewed each year, and of sufficient size so that it may evoke the truth that Christ is the light of the world. Ultimately, the size of the Paschal Candle will be dependent upon the liturgical space in which it will be used.
- A procession of the newly blessed and lit Paschal Candle into the church building, with the light of the Paschal Candle gradually passed to the candles being held by those gathered to celebrate. After the third acclamation, the lights of the church building are turned on, but the altar candles are not yet lit.
- The Easter Proclamation (*Exsultet*) is proclaimed by the deacon, or a concelebrating priest, or, if needs be, by a cantor. The nature of the Proclamation means that it should be sung, and sung with due solemnity and nobility, so that the choice of who proclaims the Proclamation is determined as much by the ability to sing as anything else.

Secondly, the Liturgy of the Word:

- “The readings from Sacred Scripture constitute the second part of the Vigil. They give an account of the outstanding deeds of the history of salvation, which the faithful are helped to meditate calmly upon by the singing of the responsorial psalm, by a silent pause, and by the celebrant’s prayer.” (PS, 85).
- There are seven readings from the Old Testament, from the Law and the Prophets, and two from the New Testament, from Paul and the Gospels. When taken in totality, these explain Christ’s paschal mystery. “Consequently, wherever it is possible, all the readings should be read in order so that the character of the Easter Vigil, which demands that it be somewhat prolonged, be respected at all costs.” (PS, 85)
- The third edition of *The Roman Missal* says “where more serious pastoral circumstances demand it” the number of Old Testament readings can be reduced to three, “always bearing in mind that the reading of the Word of God is a fundamental part of this Easter Vigil”. When it comes to preparing for the celebration of the Easter Vigil, I would suggest that the question that needs to be asked is not ‘how many readings will we have?’ but rather ‘how many of these readings must we omit?’ The presumption is that all the readings will be proclaimed; the choice to do otherwise must be a deliberate choice.
- After each reading from the Old Testament there is a responsorial psalm that should be sung, followed by silence and a prayer prayed by the presiding priest.
- After the last Old Testament reading, the *Gloria* is sung, bells are rung, and the altar candles are lit (preferably from the Paschal Candle). This is followed by the Collect, and the first New Testament reading.
- The Gospel Acclamation, the *Alleluia* we haven’t sung for weeks now, heralds the proclamation of the Gospel, the proclamation of the resurrection of the Lord. This is the high point of the whole liturgy of the word and should be undertaken with appropriate solemnity.

Thirdly, the Baptismal Liturgy:

- This part of the Easter Vigil and its connection with the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* will be covered in more detail during one of the workshops later today, so I won't dwell too much on the intricacies of this part of the Easter Vigil.
- The structure of this part of the Vigil will depend on whether there are catechumens to be baptised or not. The former is a longer process; the latter consists simply of Blessing of Baptismal Water followed by the Renewal of Baptismal Promises (and the associated Sprinkling Rite).
- The Universal Prayer follows and concludes the Baptismal Liturgy, and the newly baptised participate in this priestly task for the first time.
- The question of the place of Candidates for Reception into Communion during the Easter Vigil is an interesting one. There is a strong case to suggest that these individuals, already baptised, should not be received into communion with the Church at the Easter Vigil because of the strong baptismal character of the Vigil. Another time, before the beginning of Lent or during the Easter Season, might be the most appropriate time for this to take place, and, indeed, the reception of baptised individuals into the full communion with the Catholic Church is not tied to the celebration of Easter. These acts could take place at any suitable time during the liturgical year.

Fourthly, the Liturgy of the Eucharist:

- This part of the Easter Vigil marks the high point of the Vigil, "for it is in the fullest sense the Easter sacrament, that is to say, the commemoration of the sacrifice of the cross and the presence of the risen Christ, the completion of Christian initiation, and the foretaste of the eternal pasch." (PS, 90)
- "Great care should be taken that this eucharistic liturgy is not celebrated in haste, indeed, all the rites and words must be given their full force" (PS, 91). Of particular note:
  - The gifts of bread and wine should, as far as possible, be brought forward by the newly baptised.
  - The solemn praying of the Eucharistic Prayer (preferably sung).
  - Eucharistic communion, under both kinds, as the moment of full participation in the mystery that is being celebrated.
- The Vigil concludes with the Solemn Blessing and the Dismissal with *Alleluias* (which continues during the Octave).
- After the conclusion of the Easter Vigil, the Paschal Candle remains near the Ambo or Altar for the duration of the Easter Season and should be lit "at least in all the more solemn liturgical celebrations of the season until Pentecost Sunday, whether at Mass or at Morning and Evening Prayer" (PS, 99).

### The Easter Vigil: Some Pastoral Considerations

Two suggestions contained in *Paschale Solemnitatis* are worthy of note here.

Firstly, the Easter Vigil should be celebrated so as to offer to the Christian people the riches of the prayers and rites. Authenticity is important and to be respected so that participation of all the assembly is promoted. The celebration should not take place without servers, readers, and choir exercising their roles (PS, 93). The clear expectation of all communities is that the Easter Vigil, above all other liturgical celebrations, will be celebrated to the very best of the community's ability, keeping in mind the size and situation of that community.

Secondly, where proximity or size of the multiple communities indicate it, they should join together in one church to allow for the "full and festive celebration" of the Easter Vigil that might not otherwise be possible (PS, 94). In some parts of our own diocese, this possibility already takes place, but should not be seen as an aberration but as entirely in keeping with the nature of the Easter Vigil being celebrated. Along similar lines, special groups should not have their own celebration but join with the broader church community.

### The Celebration of Easter: Easter Day

The conclusion of the Easter Vigil does not bring about the end of the Paschal Triduum, nor does it end or mitigate the level of solemnity that should continue to be observed during Mass (or Masses) on Easter

Sunday morning. For all those who are directly involved in the provision of music or other services on Easter Sunday, after having done the same for the Easter Vigil, my profound apologies and respect.

The only instruction given in *Paschale Solemnitatis* is for the use of “great solemnity” and the Sprinkling Rite using water blessed during the Easter Vigil (*PS*, 97). This Sprinkling can be, and usually is, accompanied by the Renewal of Baptismal Promises and can take place after the Homily in place of the Creed rather than as the Penitential Act. The call for “great solemnity” recognises that we are still celebrating the Day of the Lord’s Resurrection, and so that this Mass during the Day isn’t the ‘poor cousin’ of the Easter Vigil but an Easter celebration that has its own importance.

### The Celebration of Easter: Evening Prayer

The Paschal Triduum comes to its conclusion with the celebration of Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday evening. Again there is little in the way of direction to be found in *Paschale Solemnitatis* other than the strong encouragement to celebrate Evening Prayer.

The *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*, however, indicates that, in relation to Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday,

It is fitting that evening prayer be celebrated in a more solemn way to mark the ending of so holy a day and to commemorate the occasions when the Lord showed himself to his disciples. Great care should be taken to maintain, where it exists, the particular tradition of celebrating evening prayer on Easter Sunday in honour of baptism. During this there is a procession to the font as the psalms are being sung. (*GILOH*, 213)

The solemnity of this celebration of Evening Prayer could be enhanced by the singing of the Psalms, the use of silence at appropriate points, and the use of incense during the *Magnificat* to incense the Altar.

### Conclusion & Reprise

If you’re feeling a little overwhelmed by what you’ve heard and read here, you’re most definitely not alone. There are what appears to be lots of little details that can go into preparation for and celebration of the Paschal Triduum. It would be very easy – and entirely understandable – to get bogged down in those details in the hope that a community’s celebration of the Paschal Triduum is ‘worthy’ and appropriately ‘solemn’.

In trying to put all of those seemingly inane details into some sort of perspective, we return to our first question of this presentation: what are we celebrating?

At the heart of our celebration of the Paschal Triduum lies the Paschal Mystery:

Christ’s cross and Resurrection [which] stands at the centre of the Good News that the apostles, and the Church following them, are to proclaim to the world. God’s saving plan was accomplished “once for all” (Heb 9:26) by the redemptive death of his Son Jesus Christ. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 571)

The ability of the Church to enter into this Mystery that is central to who we are as Church is the inspiration for our celebration of the Paschal Triduum and the only critique of what we do liturgically. If we keep our focus on the Paschal Mystery in all its beauty, the celebration of the Paschal Triduum will come.

Andrew Doohan MTh MA(Liturgy)  
18<sup>th</sup> July, 2015.