

THE GREAT THREE DAYS

UNDERSTANDING AND CELEBRATING
THE EASTER TRIDUUM

TONY
ALONSO

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INTRODUCTION

AN INVITATION

This book is an invitation. It is an invitation for you to journey through three incredible days that tell the story of who we are as Christians. It is a story of life, death, and resurrection. It is a story of foot washing and meal sharing. It is a story of great sorrow and great rejoicing. It is a story of betrayal and acceptance. It is the story of the cross and the empty tomb. It is a love story between God and God's people. As followers of Jesus, it is our story.

A THREE-DAY RETREAT

Think of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday as a three-day retreat, a time to pray, reflect, and strengthen your relationship with Jesus. The most important activity of this retreat is your participating in the liturgies of these three days. Through the liturgies, you will hear the stories of the Catholic faith, you will experience profound rituals that give meaning to your faith, and you will give thanks to God.

If the Triduum is your retreat, then this book is your retreat leader! *The Great Three Days* is a book you can return to year after year to help you prepare for, reflect on, and participate in the liturgies of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday with greater understanding, appreciation, and depth. This book will help you truly discover why these days are considered the great three days.

THREE DAYS IN ONE

Perhaps when you picked up this book you hadn't even heard the word *Triduum*. And maybe now you're wondering how to pronounce it (it's TRI-DOO-UM, by the way)! *Triduum* literally means "three days." In fact, many people call the Triduum just that. It is three days but just one celebration. The three days of the Triduum are some of the most special days in the life of the Church, yet they are often the ones least understood. The word *Triduum* itself scares some people away, but the liturgies of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday are filled with beautiful actions and stories.

You may have heard the term *Holy Week* used to describe the time from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. This can be a confusing term because it makes people think that Lent ends on Palm Sunday. Lent actually continues until the time when the Holy Thursday liturgy begins. At that point, we enter into the Triduum. The three main liturgies are Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil (which is celebrated on Holy Saturday). Most parishes also have Easter Sunday Masses, and some even have an evening prayer service on Sunday to mark the end of the three days.

At the liturgies of the great three days, we do not attempt to re-enact the events of Christ's journey; instead, we remember them, like the way we remember a birthday or an anniversary. On our birthday, we don't try to historically re-enact or return to the time of our birth; instead, we look at our life in light of all that has happened since the day we were born.

A TIME FOR INITIATION

Each year at the Easter Vigil, we initiate new members into our Church through Baptism, Confirmation, or reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church (this last one is for those who have already been baptized Christian but wish to become Catholic). The journey to receive these sacraments is an important part of the Triduum experience for the whole community. You will need to know a little about this before entering the three days.

The process of being received into the Church is called the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Anyone who begins the process of formally discerning whether they want to become a part of the Church is called a catechumen (pronounced KAT-EH-CUE-MEN). During Lent, the catechumens who decide to continue the process toward Baptism and Confirmation become “the elect” at a special Mass. Those who have already been baptized in another Christian tradition but wish to be received into full communion with the Catholic Church are called candidates.

We support and encourage the elect and the candidates on their journey to initiation, and they help those of us who are already a part of the Church to reflect on our own journey of faith. Keep the elect and the candidates in your prayers throughout these great three days.

USING THIS BOOK

This book was created as a tool to help you prepare for, pray about, and reflect on these great three days. Use the book in a way that suits you best.

FOCUS AND PRAYER FOR EACH DAY

At the beginning of each chapter, you will find a brief introduction to the day called “This Day’s Focus.” These introductions will help you get focused as you prepare to pray and reflect. You will also find “A Prayer to Start the Day” at the beginning of each chapter. These prayers will help you center yourself in prayer as you continue the process provided for you in the book. You can use these prayers at the beginning of the day, but you might also pray them at other times throughout the day.

REFLECTION FOR REFLECTION

Each chapter provides questions for reflection to get you thinking about your past experiences and about what you might expect of the liturgies.

KNOW WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Each chapter continues with a “What You Need to Know” section that explains some of the key points of each liturgy, especially the elements that are unique to that particular day (for example, the foot washing on Holy Thursday). The specifics of celebrating these liturgies may differ somewhat from parish to parish, but the “What You Need to Know” sections give you a strong sense of what’s going on in the liturgies. More important, you will learn why we do certain things. Understanding some of the background will help you enter into these days more deeply.

SCRIPTURES THE SCRIPTURES

Especially important in each chapter is the opportunity you are given to reflect on the Scriptures of the various liturgies. The passages that are proclaimed at each liturgy are noted. You will want to have a Bible close by so you can refer to the readings and spend some time with them. Reading, journaling, discussing, and praying the Scriptures are some of the best ways you can prepare for liturgy.

Read as many of the Scriptures as you would like. You might select one reading from each day to spend your time on this year. Next year you might choose a different reading from each day. Whatever you decide, just remember that this is not homework! There is no quiz at the end of this book. Reflecting on the Scriptures is for you. It is a way to put you in touch with God and what God’s Word might be saying to you in your life. Think of reading the Scriptures as prayer, not as work!

LITURGY AFTER THE LITURGY

Each chapter provides you with the chance to spend some time reflecting on and praying about your experience of the liturgy. You will find journaling questions to help you explore how your prayer, ideas, or thoughts have developed or changed throughout the day. You will also find questions about the Scriptures to help you journey a little deeper into the readings. A prayer to end the day concludes each chapter.

SHARING THE JOURNEY

In addition to walking the Triduum journey with your parish family, you may also want to share some time outside of liturgy reflecting with a friend or a family member. Consider discussing some of the Scriptures and sharing experiences with someone who might be interested. Sharing the journey with someone close to you will help strengthen your relationship with that person and with God.

THE EASTER MYSTERY

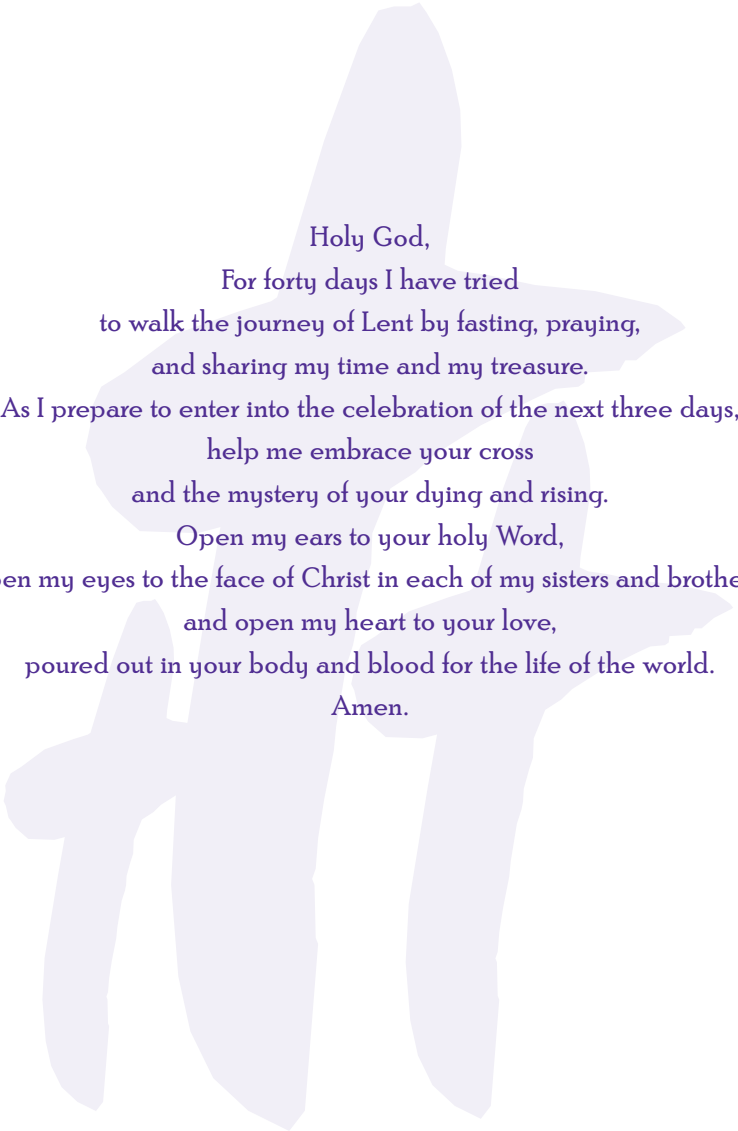
At the heart of these great three days is mystery. Do not try to understand everything! So much of this journey, like your whole life's journey, is about letting yourself be open to what God is trying to say to you through the rituals and stories. The wonderful thing is that your experience of these days will change from year to year. Again and again, you can come to this book to spark your thoughts and deepen your reflection on the great three days.

HOLY THURSDAY

FOCUS THIS DAY'S FOCUS

Love was the hallmark of Jesus's life. This call of love and service impels us to reach out to others. As you walk your journey each day, how do you pause on the way to wash your neighbors' feet? How do you look into the eyes of your brother and sister, parents and friends, and share God's love? Whom do you refuse to kneel before, knowing what they have done to you? Whom do you resist when they come before you to serve? We are invited to eat and drink at the table, to have our feet washed, to enter the heart of Christ, to be his beloved friends. We are told to do as Jesus did. We must wash one another's feet.

PRAYER
A PRAYER TO START THE DAY



Holy God,
For forty days I have tried
to walk the journey of Lent by fasting, praying,
and sharing my time and my treasure.
As I prepare to enter into the celebration of the next three days,
help me embrace your cross
and the mystery of your dying and rising.
Open my ears to your holy Word,
open my eyes to the face of Christ in each of my sisters and brothers,
and open my heart to your love,
poured out in your body and blood for the life of the world.
Amen.

REFLECTION FOR REFLECTION

Holy Thursday is filled with rich imagery including foot washing, chrism oils, the smell of incense burning, and bread and wine, just to name a few. Think about Holy Thursday liturgies you have celebrated throughout your life. Write down some of the images, smells, and sounds that come to mind.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

On Holy Thursday, we celebrate the beauty and mystery of the Last Supper. You'll recall that at the Last Supper, Jesus broke bread, shared wine with his disciples, and foretold of his own death. The sharing of that meal and Jesus's words "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24) are at the foundation of what we celebrate each week at Mass to this day. In fact, those words are the only instruction Jesus ever gave to his followers about how they should worship.

After sharing that sacred and symbolic meal, Jesus surprised his companions when he stood up and began to wash their feet. Though the breaking of bread and sharing of wine has become the central image of Christian worship, the washing of feet has become one of the central images of Christian life. In Jesus's time, slaves weren't even expected to wash their masters' feet. When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, he demonstrated an incredible act of humility and service to his friends and followers, for all time.

PRESENTATION OF THE OILS

At the beginning of the Holy Thursday liturgy, three oils are carried in procession by representatives of the parish community. These oils are mixed with balsam, which perfumes the oil and signifies joy. The ritual use of oil to anoint people or things for religious purposes dates back to ancient times. The oil of the sick is used to anoint the sick for healing of mind, body, and soul throughout the year. The oil of catechumens is used at the Easter Vigil and throughout the year to anoint those preparing for Baptism, to strengthen them in their commitment to Christ. Finally, the holy chrism is used at the Easter Vigil and throughout the year to anoint those who are to be confirmed: bishops and priests at their ordinations, infants after Baptism, and new or renovated churches when they are dedicated.

The bishop consecrates the chrism for the whole diocese at a special liturgy called the Chrism Mass. The Chrism Mass is celebrated on the morning of Holy Thursday to give the celebration independence and to allow more people to attend.

Because the bishop is the only minister in the diocese who can consecrate chrism, the Chrism Mass highlights the bishop's ministry and our union with him. Although he will not baptize and confirm everyone in the parishes of the diocese, he will be symbolically present in the chrism that will be used in the sacraments.

SCRIPTURES
THE SCRIPTURES

In preparation for the Holy Thursday liturgy, take some time to read and reflect on the Scriptures. You may choose to read just the Gospel, some of the readings, or all four readings. When you have finished reading, take a brief moment to sit in silence. Then write down some of the key words, phrases, or images that stay with you. Then read the Scriptures again, with these questions in mind:

- † **What insights can you take from this reading?**
- † **What does this passage call you to pray for?**
- † **How are you being challenged to live out this passage?**

After you've had some time to read, journal, and pray over the Scriptures, consider reading the reflections that follow the listed passages. The reflections will help deepen your understanding of those passages.



FIRST READING: Exodus 12:1–8,11–14

In this passage from Exodus, we hear dramatic images of God's detailed instructions to Moses about how the Jews were to celebrate Passover. Passover is the commemoration of God's deliverance of Jewish slaves in ancient Egypt. It was around the time of Passover that Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples. In fact, the way Catholics celebrate the Eucharist to this day finds its roots deeply planted in the Jewish celebration of Passover.



PSALM: Psalm 116:12–13,15–16,17–18

This psalm is an overwhelming expression of thanksgiving for all the blessings of God. This thanksgiving is what we celebrate each time we share in the Eucharist (which literally means “thanksgiving”): thanksgiving for the sacrifice of the One who laid down his life for his friends.



SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 11:23–26

At the heart of this passage is Paul’s reminder to the Corinthians and to us: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). This is the great mystery of our faith we proclaim each time we celebrate Mass: the simple gifts of bread and wine we share are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Jesus’s words in this passage are the words of consecration, which are spoken by the priest and prayed by all during the Eucharistic prayer at Mass.

**GOSPEL: John 13:1–15**

In this Gospel account of the Last Supper, John focuses on what happened after the meal. In fact, John's Gospel is the only one that tells the story of the foot washing. Jesus took a towel and basin and did the job of the lowliest of servants. In Jesus's time, most teachers were waited on by their disciples. Some groups even purchased servants. In Jesus's band, the servant was the Master. He always had been, even though his disciples did not recognize it. That was unthinkable, unheard of, and almost impossible to accept. Peter balked at having Jesus perform such a menial task.

This action, of the Master serving his disciples in such a humble way, is a complete role reversal. By bowing down to wash the feet of his disciples, Jesus redefines his relationship with them. From that point on, the relationship changes from "followers" to "friends." This action is filled with a profoundly different way of viewing service. Jesus washed their feet because he wanted to impress upon the disciples that no task is too small and that no one is above someone else so much that he or she cannot be compassionate to another.

WASHING FEET

The foot washing in John's Gospel takes place at the point at which we would expect to find the Last Supper. It is as if John is saying that the Eucharist is about life, is about how we live, and means servanthood. So, living the example of Jesus after the homily, we wash one another's feet. This action is called the *Mandatum*, which is Latin for "commandment." By washing one another's feet, we are fulfilling Jesus's supreme commandment to love one another as he has loved us. As with all the actions during the Triduum, we are not dramatizing Jesus's washing the feet of his disciples; instead, we are participating in this humble action of service to rehearse and remember who we are called to be and what we are called to do as Christians in the world. Jesus very specifically tells us that not only should we serve others, but we should serve humbly and lovingly. In serving others, we are not only helping them but also humbling ourselves and admitting that we are not perfect.

Consider finding the time today to name a part of your life, a part of yourself, you want to surrender to the Lord to be embraced and loved. Like Peter, each of us needs to feel the resistance that might be inside us. We have to let Jesus wash our feet, let Jesus give himself to us, let him be our servant; in return, we will become servants for others. Consider these questions as you spend time in prayer or conversation today:

- † **Where in your life do you need to be more open to Jesus's kneeling before you?**

- † **Where are the places in your life where you need to stoop down and wash someone else's feet?**

- † **Think about an experience of witnessing humble service. How did it touch you? How were you challenged?**

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