

The Triduum: setting the agenda for the whole year

A wise pastor used to say that the Triduum sets the agenda for the rest of the year. As we move into the three days that are the summit of our liturgical year, what can we take from the Triduum that will guide us for the rest of the year? We can divide its inspiration into three parts: a liturgical agenda, a pastoral agenda, and a spiritual agenda. These, of course, are not isolated from each other, but are bound together by one overarching reality: the paschal mystery of the Lord's self-surrender even to death, his rising, his ascension to the heart of God, and his sharing of his Spirit with the universe.

The liturgical agenda. We fuss over the Triduum because there are so many little details that occur but once a year, and we want to make sure that we're ready for them. Hopefully this concern arises not from rubricism, but instead from a deep-seated conviction that ritual and symbol matter. The rites speak. They can do their work, if only we would let them, and prepare them in such a way that they can speak. The intensive preparation that the Triduum demands is a model for the careful preparation that the ritual and symbols of every celebration demand, no matter how often we celebrate them.

Taking time is important. Ritual gestures such as footwashing cannot be rushed, lest their intimacy and power be drained away. A vigil is exactly that—a

vigil, a prolonged time of waiting and watching. The North American instinct to rush, rush, hurry, hurry, get things done in the least time possible is inimical to good liturgy. For a [counter?]-cultural model, we need to look to the slow food movement to help us re-learn the importance of taking time to do our rituals. It's hardly surprising that some people complain of a lack of reverence in our liturgies when we sometimes put speed at the top of our list of liturgical criteria. How many times do we hear a liturgy judged by a comment such "Well, that only took fifty-five minutes. Great job."

Related to this is the capital importance of the word of God. At the Easter Vigil, we proclaim nine readings. Sometimes the focus of planning seems to be, "How many can we drop?" instead of "How can we help people hear God speaking?" Don't expect that people will suddenly learn to listen to the scriptures at the vigil if silence and reflection have been absent from our celebrations the rest of the year, and if "hurry up and get it over" is our

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dominant approach. Our year-round approach to the word as an event in which God speaks to us, and to the ministry of the lector, through whose voice God speaks to us, will be revealed by how we vigil with the scriptures.

The pastoral agenda. Baptismal spirituality lies at the heart of everything we are and do. The making of new Christians and the renewal of our own baptismal promises at the Vigil make clear the source of our Christian identity: we are joined to Christ Jesus, our risen Lord, in the waters of baptism; as members of his body we share in his Trinitarian life. Each Sunday, we renew our baptismal commitment as we share at the Lord's table, receiving his body and blood, and becoming more fully his ecclesial body. Baptism is never a past event; rather it is the daily stream from which our living arises. Anointed as God's holy, priestly, prophetic, royal people, we can spend a lifetime plumbing the depths of this mystery and its very practical implications for our daily living and the Church's mission. The initiatory event of baptism-confirmation-Eucharist shapes us permanently as a paschal people.

Service is central. The footwashing on Holy Thursday night is not just a ritual gesture for Holy Thursday. Rather, combined with the Sacramentary's invitation to bring food for the poor along with our gifts for the sacrifice, this gesture leaves us no room to avoid the fact that our ritual gestures must become real gestures. They are not reserved to the church building, but are the foundation on which our Christian life is built. The paschal mystery, Jesus' self-surrendering love, is written in our lives today. Baptismal spirituality and service form the foundations of our pastoral planning.

The spiritual agenda. We know that people can turn to all kinds of sources for spirituality today. But the Triduum

invites us to three specifics in terms of our spirituality. First, self-surrender. Lose your life and your will regain it is hardly a culturally popular approach to finding meaning in life, but we believe that it is the way; we discovered that in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Second, in weakness is strength. Again, that's hardly an icon of our culture. But the glorying in the cross in which we engage points to this paradox that is at the heart of Christian life. The cross of Christ reveals that "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1.25). Third, joy and profound hope that Christ's light is real, and that shining through the baptized, it can illumine even the darkest corners of our lives, and the lives of sisters and brothers. That light is entrusted to us. Because of that, as we walk through the year, we will not simply remember the light of Christ, the new fire that we kindled and shared at the Vigil as a dramatic liturgical moment, but experience it as the call to each of us and all of us in our baptism: to bear and be the light of Christ to all people.

The agenda is the Church's, the challenge is ours. May the Spirit of the risen Christ continue to give us the courage, strength and persistence to let these aspects of the Vigil guide us deeply into paschal living and ministering all year.



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