

“THE EARTH TREMBLED AND WAS STILL
WHEN GOD AROSE IN JUDGMENT.”

Easter Sunday, Offertory

COMMENTARY ON THE MOST SACRED FUNCTIONS OF HOLY WEEK

Holy week is the most fruitful and august time of the year in the celebration of the Church. During this Week the wicked, from every side, assaulted the Just One, Who was against their plans; they subjected Him to harsh trials of ill-treatment, immolating Him in the end on a Cross.

During this time the clouds vanished and the light appeared; the representations ended and the one represented was known: it became manifest who was the true Abel condemned to death, the true Job abandoned to the spite of his enemies; the Isaac guided by a paternal hand to Moriah in sacrifice; the Jonas swallowed by the sea monster and after three days returned, alive, to the shore; the fiery furnace which let the three youths out of its bosom untouched; and finally, the true ark which offers in the universal deluge the only escape for the human race.

This is the blessed time which separated the law of severity from the law of grace; which accomplished that of which the voices of the Prophets had sung hundreds of years before; which abolished the parochial Synagogue and gave birth to the Universal Church; which saw the institution of the most august of the Sacraments and the fulfillment of what is most sublime and most tender of those which the most providential God had established for human nature, miserably outraged by the sin of the first man.

It is no wonder, then, that the Catholic Church, in this precious time, uses more elaborate ceremony, deeper piety and veneration, and more numerous and salutary institutions and practices than in all the rest of the year. Holy Mother Church, in this Week, blesses and renews the Oil that must sanctify her temples and consecrate her Ministers; she cleans the Altars, on which she offers every day the Flesh of the Immaculate Lamb which nourishes and sanctifies her; she blesses and renews the water which must render her fruitful, and the fire which must enlighten her. This loving Mother did not hold back any care in preparing her children to celebrate worthily the Death and Resurrection of the Saviour and making them worthy of the immense fruits of this mystery.

The celebration of Holy Week is most ancient, so much so that we find it mentioned in the Apostolic Constitutions no later than the Third Century, and in the works of the Holy Fathers which flourished in the Fourth Century. We find it distinguished with pious names, according to the mysteries and ceremonies with which it was celebrated: among these we remember that of “Great Week,” as St. John Chrysostom calls it; “Greatest Week,” that is, the most august of all the weeks of the year; “Week of Indulgence,” for the reconciliation of sinners and the Baptism of the Catechumens which happened during the course of the week; “Week of toil and hardship,” for the austerities exercised by the faithful; “The Last Week,” because it puts an end to the penance of Lent; “Authentic Week,” or, “Week of the Lord,” for being the Week which belongs entirely to the Lord; and lastly, “Holy Week” par excellence, because of the sanctity of the mysteries and the sublimity of the sacred functions celebrated in it.

The ancient children of the Church endeavoured to distinguish this time

from the preceding weeks by the redoubling of their devotion, praying for the greater part of the day with the Clergy in church; by increasing their fast and rejecting profane activities, closing the law courts to the affairs of men.

The ceremonies celebrated by our Church in Holy Week are: the blessing and procession of palm branches on Sunday; the reconciliation of sinners; the singing of the prophecies in the last three days; the consecration of the Oils and the washing of feet on Thursday; the adoration of the Cross on Friday; the blessing of the candle and of the baptismal font on Saturday.

The *Blessing and Procession of Branches* is done in memory of the solemn entrance of Christ into Jerusalem, when the Jewish crowds – the Sunday before the Pasch – went to meet him outside the city gates with palm branches in their hands. For the branches of the palm, which is very rare in the West, the Latin Church substitutes olive branches, a plant most fitting to symbolise that peace and meekness which, on that particular occasion, shone through the Blessed Face of the Redeemer.

The *Reconciliation of Sinners* was public in ancient times, and was done by the Bishop or by a Priest delegated by him, during the morning officiating. The penitents would be outside, dressed in sackcloth and with heads covered with ashes, waiting to be invited into the vestibule of the church, with their foreheads to the ground. The Bishop, inside the church, would cry to them: Come! And having entered, they would recite the Penitential Psalms, or those which allude to repentance, after which the Bishop would pronounce over them the formula of absolution. This part of the Liturgy was closed by a proper Mass, called the “Mass of Reconciliation,” in which the absolved would be admitted to Communion. But this ceremony, for very wise reasons, is now abolished: no memory has remained but that which we read in the ancient books.

The *Consecration of the Oils* is reserved to the Bishop alone. The Oils to consecrate are the Chrism, used at Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination of Priests and Bishops, and at one time for the Coronation of Kings; the Oil of the Catechumens in the ceremonies used prior to a Solemn Baptism; and the Oil for the Sick, called commonly the Holy Oil for Extreme Unction.

The *Washing of Feet* is not a function reserved only to the Clergy. It was enjoyed by Christ at the last supper when he gave the apostles the command to love one another, and of that love, He himself gave a great sign by washing their feet. This is why the washing is found in the liturgical books, identified with the name “Command.” The rite of the Consecration of the Oils and of the washing of feet seems to us to be derived from the practice of the Apostles themselves.

In the *Adoration of the Cross* the Church makes Christ Crucified Himself speak to His people, to tell them how much He suffered for them, with how many benefits He has filled them, and with how much ingratitude He has been repaid. In this day of sorrow, the Church puts on her lips these reproaches, for no other aim than to move her children to recognise in themselves the cause of the death of the Saviour, to humble themselves before Him and to wash away their own guilt in his Blood. In this day of universal salvation, in which Jesus Christ our Master prayed for all, even for his persecutors, the Church excludes no one from her prayers; and so the children separated from her bosom, the Jews, as also the Pagans, all have a share in her suffrage. The Church, however, abstains from offering the Sacrifice of the Altar, that is, from celebrating the Holy Mass, out of respect

for the bloody Sacrifice which the true Priest, Jesus Christ, offered to his Eternal Father on this day on the Cross.

The public *Blessing of the Paschal Candle* has been a rite of the Church for many centuries, along with its lighting in the Solemn Masses from Easter until the Ascension, as a symbol of the glorious Resurrection of Christ and of the light of the Gospel which was spread among all peoples. Past times attributed to it a symbol of the column of fire which guided the Israelites in the desert; and to see it lit during paschal time seems to indicate also the Passover which that people celebrated for so many years in their earthly pilgrimage. This blessing was composed by St. Ambrose, by decree of Zosimus, the Supreme Pontiff.

More ancient than the blessing of the candle is that of the Baptismal Font, since it is spoken of by the Fathers of the fourth, third and even second century. Having blessed and consecrated the font according to the rite in the Missal, the Bishop proceeds to solemnly baptize the infants. In the early days of the Church there was the practice of only conferring Baptism upon adults. They were first instructed about the mysteries of our holy Faith, and the time of this instruction, which lasted for at least three months, was called “catechumenate.” The Catechumens were then divided into two classes, the Novices and the Proficient, of which the latter were properly called the Competent or Illuminands: “Competent” because together they were asking for Baptism, “Illuminands” because of the light of grace they were about to receive in the Sacrament. On Palm Sunday they would present themselves in church asking if they might make the profession of faith; on Holy Thursday they would wash their heads which were covered with the ashes of Lent, and on Holy Saturday they would then be baptised. They would then receive and put on a white garment, a symbol of baptismal innocence. In memory of this, the Sunday within the Octave of Easter still carries the name of “Dominica in albis depositis” or Sunday of the removed white garments.

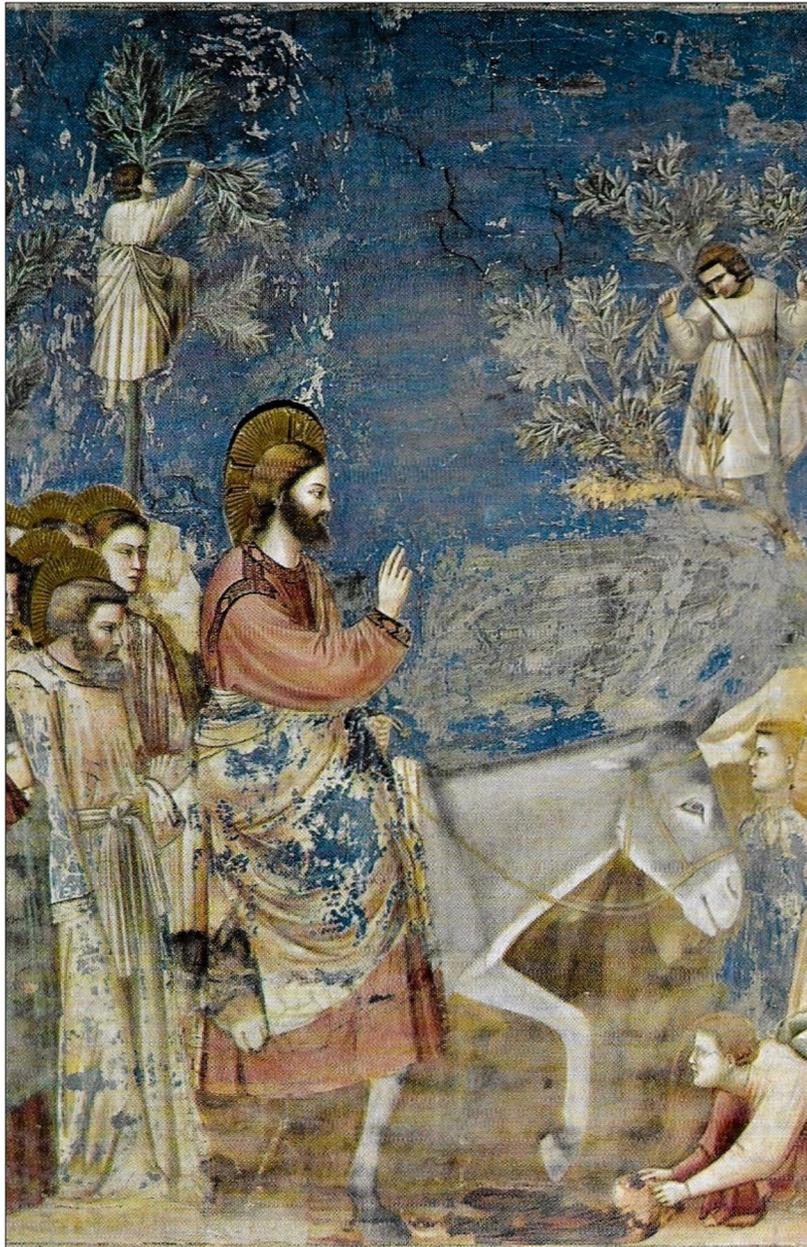
Some marvel at how during Holy Week in the Ambrosian Church the colour red is used, and in the Roman Church violet, while, to represent worthily the death of the Saviour, black would seem more fitting. But the Church did not want to confuse the death of men with the death of the God-Man. And in fact the same Church, which at one time ordered her Priests to recite daily the Office of the Dead for the whole of Lent, prohibited it during Holy Week, so that no one might believe the prayers for the departed to be meant for Christ. Only the Roman Rite uses black on Good Friday.

Some ask themselves why, Jesus being risen on Sunday, the Church at one time celebrated his resurrection on Saturday, therefore much before it actually happened. What was the reason for changing the time of this Liturgy? The clemency of the Church, which anticipated the Mass and the First Vespers to the Saturday, wanted to provide for the needs of her children and anticipate for them both the joy of Communion with the Risen Christ and the comfort of the evening meal, which otherwise they would have had to delay until after midnight.

PALM SUNDAY

Dominica in Palmis

Our Holy Week begins with the ancient liturgy of Palm Sunday, wherein we join the Hebrew children and cry out "Hosanna!" to our Lord and King, in anticipation of the victory He will attain on Easter Sunday.

Giotto, *Entry into Jerusalem* (c. 14th Century)

“BEHOLD, THY KING COMETH TO THEE, MEEK,
AND SITTING UPON AN ASS.”

Palm Sunday, Holy Gospel

PALM SUNDAY

The Blessing of Branches

Having finished Terce, the aspersion of blessed water is done, as usual. The Priest then, in violet cope, with attendant ministers also vested in violet, proceeds to the blessing of branches of palm, olive, or other trees, placed in the centre before the Altar, or on the Epistle side. The choir sings the Antiphon:

Hosanna filio David: benedictus, qui venit in nómine Dómini. O Rex Israël: Hosanna in excelsis.

Hosanna to the Son of David: blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord. O King of Israel: Hosanna in the highest.

COMMENTARY

The crowds variously cried out “Hosanna”, saying “Hosanna in excelsis” and “Hosanna Filio David”. Grammatically, the crowd was saying: “We give these branches to the Son of David.” It is as if, in our days, when a person of importance enters in a city, the people might shout, “Long Live!” It seems that from Christ on, this joyful form of welcome with branches has never been repeated, as it was reserved exclusively for feast days and for God alone.

The Priest, standing at the Epistle side, without turning towards the people, says, with hands joined, in the tone of the ferial Oratio:

✠ Dominus Vobiscum.

✠ Et cum spiritu tuo.

Orémus.

Oratio

Deus, quem diligere et amare iustitia est, ineffabilis gratiae tuae in nobis dona multiplica: et qui fecisti nos in morte Filii tui sperare quae credimus; fac nos eodem resurgente pervenire quo tendimus: Qui tecum vivit et regnat.

✠ Amen.

✠ The Lord be with you.

✠ And with thy spirit.

Let us pray.

Prayer

O God, whom to love with heart and mind is righteousness, multiply in us the gifts of Thy transcendent grace; and since by Thy Son's death Thou hast given us hope of those things in which we believe, grant us by His resurrection to reach our journey's end: Who liveth and reigneth with Thee.

✠ Amen.

The Subdeacon goes to sing the following Lesson at the usual place in the Epistle tone, and after, he kisses the hand of the Priest.

LECTIO LIBRI EXODI

Exodi 15:27; 16:1-7

In diébus illis: Venérunt filii Israël in Elim, ubi erant duodecim fontes aquarum et septua-

READING FROM THE BOOK OF EXODUS

Exodus 15:27; 16:1-7

In those days: the children of Israel came into Elim, where there were twelve fountains of water, and sev-