

Holy Week at home

The Vatican Decree of 25 March on Holy Week in time of Covid-19 says: “The faithful should be informed of the beginning times of the celebrations so that they can prayerfully unite themselves in their homes.” Yes, I’m sure we will do that; but we can do more.

Simply to watch the Holy Week ceremonies on line or on television can engage people, but it could also be somewhat passive. What suggestions can we make which will encourage those at home to be the “domestic church”? The fact that gathering for the ceremonies is suspended does not mean that the church is suspended. We are the church, whether gathered in the “church-holder” which we call our church buildings, or at home, or anywhere we find ourselves.

Although we would very much like to gather, what people may do at home is not a second-best. We all share in the priesthood of Christ from our Baptism.

Here are some suggestions we could offer people, and they can choose what or when or how they will mark this Holy Week at home. These suggestions are just starters – I hope many others will add their ideas.

Each day we can get the up-to-date Irish news on Covid-19 from <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c36c85-covid-19-coronavirus/>. Just click on Latest Updates.

Liturgical Press in Minnesota have a 15-page booklet, Holy Week at Home. Go to <https://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2020/03/30/prayers-and-resources-coronavirus-pandemic/>, and click on “Holy Week at Home”, the fourth item in the list. It’s a free download.

The Scripture readings for each day can be found at <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/readings/>; and, of course, from the link on the ACP Home Page. You can reflect each day on one or more of these readings, keeping in mind that Jesus Christ is really with us in his living word – he is the Word Incarnate. To reflect on scripture with one or more others can add extra richness.

There have been many similar times in the life of the church over the past 2000 years: plagues and pestilence. John Clyn, a Franciscan Friar in Kilkenny, wrote of the Black Death in his Annals of Ireland; he died during that plague in 1349.

What follow are simply suggestions. Each person can design their own celebration. They can be done either in conjunction with ceremonies on line or on television, or independently. If a number of people are in the household, adapt what you do for what seems best. Especially consider any children.

Palm Sunday at home:

The “palms” mostly used in Ireland on Palm Sunday are, of course, not from a palm tree, but from trees growing locally. This is what Christians around the world do.

We can mark the day by choosing a piece from a tree in your own garden if you have one, or perhaps a neighbour would supply it for those who don't have anything available – for example, those without a garden, or those in apartments, etc. Choose a piece of whatever size you like. A suggestion is that your “palm” could be put on your front door after your home celebration, just like some people like to put a Christmas wreath on their door. The palm could be left just as a straight branch, or it could be bent around in a circle. If more than one person is in the household, each could have a palm.

On Palm Sunday, 5 April, you could tune in to a Palm Sunday celebration in your own parish if it is broadcast on the internet on their website, or to some other parish, or to a broadcast Mass on radio or television. Have your chosen palm ready, and some Holy Water if you have some at home.

Just as we gather before Mass, at home take just a minute or two in silence if possible before beginning in order to call to mind that the Lord is with us wherever we are, and to remember his loving presence.

Listen to the reading of the Word of God from the Bible, remembering that Jesus Christ is with us when the Word is proclaimed. Hold your palm in

your hand, remembering it is a sign of our welcome to Jesus not just into Jerusalem 2000 years ago, but into our world and our parish today, where his presence and life and healing are needed just as much.

As the palm is blessed in the celebration you are following, let the prayer of blessing be your prayer also, and answer “Amen.” If you have Holy Water with you, sprinkle some on the palm. Remember that even if you are alone at home, or with some others, you are always united with the followers of Jesus all around the world. The followers of Jesus are called to be his living presence in our world and our parish. Remember especially those who are sick with Covid-19, and those whose work every day is to take care of those who are sick. Remember too those who have died, and their families and friends. Remember the many people who serve us each day, making the things we need each day available to us; give thanks for their work. Keep the palm with you as you take part from home in the celebration on-line or on radio or television.

At the Sign of Peace, remember the people in your life. If some of them are with you, offer them an appropriate sign of peace (preferably without physical contact), each saying to the other: “The peace of Christ be with you always.” In your heart, offer that sign to those not with you, including to any person with whom you are not at peace at this time.

Even though people cannot gather and come forward to receive Communion as we usually do on Sunday, keep in mind at the Communion time of the Mass that Jesus promised to be with us all days to the end of time. He is with us at home just as truly – we are members of his living body. He is with us in the people around us, and in the Living Word proclaimed.

If you share a meal with others afterwards, remember that sharing a meal with others in cultures all around the world is a sign of being united, and strengthens that unity. If you have a candle, you might light it today, Palm Sunday, and each day of this week, at your main meal, and take a moment to remember those who are sick, those who care for the sick, those who have died and their families and friends. Whether alone or with others, you can formulate your own “Prayer of the Faithful.”

If you can, keep a larger candle to use at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night.

Give thanks by saying “Grace” before or after the meal – either a prayer you know by heart, or in your own words. Every time we share food, it can be a reminder and a sign of what we do our Communion at Mass.

Sharing in the Eucharist is also our Communion with Jesus and with one another. St Paul wrote: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a fellowship in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a fellowship in the body of Christ? As there is one bread, so we, though many, are one body, for we all share in the one bread.” (First Letter to the Corinthians, Ch.10, verses 16-17)

After you take part in this celebration in your own home, if you wish you can put the Palm you chose on your front door; and when you wish, put it wherever you might normally put the palm you bring home from your parish church.

Knowing the circumstances in which we celebrate while unable to gather together, perhaps it will mean so much more this year, and help us to look forward to being able to gather together again in our parishes in the coming weeks and months and years.

If there are children with you, you can talk to them about this Palm Sunday in a way appropriate to their age. As people welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem so long ago, we also welcome him today into our lives and into our parish.

This is the start of our Holy Week, with the Three Great Days, the “Triduum”, beginning with the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper on the evening of Holy Thursday, the Passion of the Lord on Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday of the Resurrection of the Lord.

We do not yet know whether it will be wise to begin returning to normal on Easter Sunday. As we wait to see developments in the Covid-19 crisis, we look also to how we can take part in those days by marking them in our homes in ways which will help us to experience in a new way the new life Jesus brings us by his life, death and resurrection.

Maybe you would have a suitable place in your home to set up a “**Sacred Space**” for Holy Week, like perhaps you used to set up a May altar. You could take a little time each day at this space. Have a crucifix, and a Bible if you have one, or a copy of the readings for the day which you can download from the websites given above. Light your candle here to start with a pause for reflection.

I’ve given most space to Palm Sunday, just to try to set the kind of scene for how you may like to mark the other days of Holy Week, for which there are just brief notes. Add you own ideas.

Holy Week: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday:

These are the quieter days of Holy Week.

You may take part in Mass on line. The readings are available as above.

If you are one of the many at home, perhaps you can plan some time each day just to be quiet, in whatever manner seems right to you. Eat more simply than usual, in preparation of Easter, however we may be able to celebrate it.

Light the candle at your main meal, as on Palm Sunday, remembering those who are sick, those who care for the sick, those who have died and their families and friends.

The “Triduum” – the Three Great Days: Thursday evening to Sunday evening.

Holy Thursday at home:

The Gospel for the day is John 13:1-15. Reflection on your own, or with others at home, or on line via Skype, FaceTime, Zoom, WhatsApp, etc.

Remembering the Last Supper, you may like some lamb for your main meal if this is possible: see first reading, Exodus 12:1-8,11-14. There is a tradition that the youngest child in a household asks, “What is the meaning of this

night, and why do we do this?" An adult relies as best she or he can. It's not an examination!

"Gethsemane" time at your Sacred Space. Perhaps read the prayer of Jesus in John Chapter 17.

Good Friday at home:

This, and Ash Wednesday, are our two days of Fast and Abstinence, a way in which we mark our solidarity with all Christians around the world.

Prepare your Sacred Space with a Cross.

If you choose to do the Stations of the Cross, select your own time. There are no fixed prayers. Use your own if you wish, or use some from the many available. You could do all 14 "traditional" Stations (although there are different traditions), or you could select those which mean most to you. Remember those around the world who are suffering, whether from Covid-19 or some other reason.

The Good Friday ceremony is often at 3pm; check whether your parish has it on line.

Reading of Passion is from the Gospel according to John. The full reading consists of John Chapters 18 and 19. Whether you are alone or with others in the household, to speak all or part of it aloud, without hurrying, may be a worthwhile experience.

You could follow this with "Veneration of the Cross" as you would be used to at the Good Friday ceremony in your parish church. If you are with others, it is advisable that each use a separate cross – for example, on a rosary.

On this day especially, we have longer "Solemn Intercessions." Include those suffering from the pandemic.

Easter Vigil at home:

This is the beginning of Easter, beginning in darkness and welcoming the light of Christ, risen from the dead.

Check time of the ceremony, either in your own parish or elsewhere.

Prepare an Easter Candle, perhaps decorated a little. You may have a candle from your Baptism or the Baptism of one of your family.

Solemn lighting of candle at home: The Light of Christ

Liturgy of the Word (choose readings)

Renewal of Baptism. Bring out your Baptism certificate(s) and remember those named on it. Remember those due to be baptised this Easter, and whose Baptism may have to be postponed. Reflect on what your Baptism means, and pray that the Spirit you received at Baptism will be renewed particularly for this unusual experience of Easter.

It would be suitable to share some food (simple or otherwise) following the celebration of this Easter Vigil.

Easter Sunday at Home:

How will you mark Easter Sunday morning this most unusual year?

If, as seems likely at this stage, we will not have returned to “normal” and have not met our neighbours for a while, is there a way to exchange an Easter Greeting? Is there something that could be arranged, regardless of the weather on the day?

There may be some who have seen nobody. There have been scenes on television of people in apartments greeting and singing from their balconies. In a suburban area, perhaps it could be arranged by phone or email that people in a local area would come to their doors or gates at a specified time for ten or fifteen minutes to greet one another while keeping safe distance? Dress in your Sunday best! What might be possible in a rural area?

Would it be possible to play the well-known Hallelujah Chorus from The Messiah by George Frederic Handel, or some other uplifting piece?

Perhaps the experience of this strange Lent and Easter Season can spark a new spirit among Christians of every church. Yes, we are strange ourselves, but we really do have something, someone, to celebrate.

In Greece, a traditional Easter greeting in place of “Good Morning”, etc, is: Christos Anesti! – Christ is Risen!

The reply is: Alithos Anesti! - "Truly He is Risen!"

Search on line for sung versions of the Greek Orthodox Easter Hymn “Christos Anesti.”

Christos anesti ek nekron,
thanato thanaton patisas,
ke tis en tis mnimasin,
zoin charisamenos!

Christ is risen from the dead,
Trampling down death by death,
And to those in the tombs
He has given life!