



EASTER

A Parish Guide to Celebrating the Season of Easter
Gerard McCormick msc

The fifty days from Easter Sunday to Pentecost are celebrated in joyful exultation as one feast day, or, better as one “great Sunday.”

General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar # 22

The church rejoices in the redemption of many, and is glad with spiritual exultation that the members of her household are at hand dressed in white. You have this in the Cantic of Canticles. Rejoicing, she invokes Christ, having prepared a banquet, which seems worthy of heavenly feasting. And so she says: “Let my beloved come into his garden and eat the fruits of his apple trees.” What are these apple trees? You were made dry wood in Adam, but now through the grace of Christ you flower as apple trees.

St Ambrose

Easter begins with a blaze of fire at the Easter Vigil and ends with the evocation of the fire of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Easter is an expansive season stretching from Easter Sunday to Pentecost, but too often the joy and exuberance of Easter Sunday quickly peters out. Sustaining the Easter grandeur for fifty days is challenging, but we must endeavour to achieve this if we are to appreciate fully the nature this “one great Sunday”. For just as Sunday stands in relation to the rest of the week as the day of the resurrection, so does the 50 days of Easter stand in relation to the rest of the year.

Easter Sunday is itself repeated for eight days – the Easter Octave – finishing on the following Sunday known as “Low Sunday”. In other words, Easter Sunday is expanded over the week to signify the awesome magnitude of the resurrection. The Ascension of the Lord is either celebrated forty days after Easter, that is, on Ascension Thursday, or on the Sunday before Pentecost (in Australia it is celebrated on Sunday).

Easter is above all a time for initiating new members into the community and for the entire community to renew its own baptismal vows. An effective and symbolic way of doing this is to make frequent use of the Sprinkling Rite throughout Eastertide. This is also the time for mystagogy – that is, a time of liturgical catechesis in which the mysteries or sacraments are expounded to the newly initiated as well as the rest of the community.

The readings – particularly the Acts of the Apostles – also remind us of the missionary thrust of Easter. As witnesses the resurrection we are commissioned and sent to proclaim the gospel.

Mood

After the restraint of Lent we are now dazzled by the glory of the resurrection. As in the words of the song “Easter glory fills the sky” we need to have a sense of this glory in our Easter celebrations. ‘Glory’ is the dominate tenor of Easter, for it touches upon the mystery of the resurrection. In one sense this glory is beyond our experience as we are yet not taken up fully into Christ’s glory. And yet – like Peter, James and John on Mount Tabor – we are given a glimpse of Christ’s glory through the awesome mysteries that we celebrate through Holy Week and into Easter.

Easter also resonates with “joy”. The joy with which the apostles encounter the Risen Christ is our joy as well. Underlying the joy is a sense of peace. The gift that Jesus bequeaths the apostles: “My peace I give you”. Easter is about the reassurance of Christ’s abiding presence.

Readings

The Easter Season is unique in that it departs from the usual Old Testament readings and substitutes the Acts of the Apostles for the First Reading. Week by week it follows the story of the early church and its rapid growth throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond.

Year A

The epistle readings are from the first letter of St Peter (with the exception of Easter Sunday, Ascension and Pentecost, when we have readings from St Paul’s epistles).

The gospel readings are primarily from John with the exception of Matthew on the feast of the Ascension and Luke on the Third Sunday of Easter (the Emmaus story). As well as the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples the remaining gospel accounts pick up the rich symbolism associated with Jesus: “I am the Gate”, “I am the way”, and the reassurance of the Lord’s continuing presence – “I will not leave you orphans”.

Year B

The epistle readings are from the first letter of St John (with the exception of Easter Sunday, Ascension and Pentecost, when we have readings from St Paul’s epistles).

The gospel readings are primarily from John with the exception of Mark on the feast of the Ascension and Luke on the Third Sunday of Easter. As well as the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples the remaining gospel accounts pick up the rich imagery of the Good Shepherd and the vine and branches, as well as the Lord’s commandment to love.

Year C

The epistle readings are taken from the Book of Revelation (with the exception of Easter Sunday, Ascension and Pentecost, when we have readings from St Paul’s epistles).

The gospel readings are primarily from John with the exception of Luke on the feast of the Ascension. Easter Sunday through to the Third Sunday of Easter narrates the various post-resurrection appearances including the beautiful account of Jesus' appearance on the shores of Lake Tiberius (Third Sunday). The other gospel passages throughout the Easter season concern Jesus' teaching to the disciples as a way of preparing them for when he will depart; teachings that include the new commandment and the promise of the Holy Spirit to enlighten them.

Music

Musicians need to sustain the focus of Easter throughout the season. The Alleluia is the victory shout of the resurrection. Try to find strong, joyful settings of this acclamation. It is also a good idea to use a strong, energetic Mass setting for Eastertide.

The psalm for Easter Sunday (Ps. 118) and its refrain "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad." can also serve as a common (seasonal) psalm for the early part of the Easter season. Psalm 66, with its refrain "Let all the earth cry out to God with joy", works well as a common psalm for the later part of the season.

On Easter Sunday and again on Pentecost the sequence is sung before the gospel. These are beautiful ancient texts that need to be meditated upon as well as sung.

Consider including "Regina Caeli/ O Queen of Heaven" into the Easter repertoire. It is sung in place of "Salve Regina/Hail Holy Queen" as the hymn praising Mary during Eastertide.

There is a vast repertoire of songs suitable for Easter ranging from plainchant to contemporary song. In hymnody collections there are many fine examples of Easter hymns and carols. "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today" and "Now the Green Blade Rises" are favourites loved and shared by many Christian denominations. And one should not overlook the contribution by Australian authors and composers: "By Your Kingly Power, O Risen Lord" is one of the fine tunes and hymn texts by Richard Connolly and James McAuley.

Environment

Apart from the colour red at Pentecost, the colour of Easter is white. Cream and gold are also appropriate. Flower arrangements are a wonderful way to maintain the Easter joy throughout the season. They need, therefore, to be fuller and more lively in contrast to Ordinary Time. The paschal candle has a prominent place next to the ambo. This can also be adorned with flowers and greenery.

Sanctoral cycle

With the exception of the Easter Octave the commemoration of the saints continues throughout Eastertide. On the feast days of the martyrs red vestments are worn. This is a powerful reminder that the word martyr means ‘witness’ – a witness to Christ’s resurrection in which the victorious martyrs now share.

Our Lady Help of Christians falls on May 24. In Australia it is ranked as a solemnity as it is the National Patronal Feast.

Other Celebrations

The Sacraments of Initiation

Those who have journeyed with the RCIA have now been fully initiated into the Church at the Easter Vigil. Their journey continues throughout this period of mystagogy. While there are no set rites for this period, it would nevertheless be helpful for the parish to acknowledge and affirm their baptismal status as full members of the community during one of the Masses during the Easter season and perhaps provide a morning tea after Mass in their honour and as a way for the community to get to know them better.

Baptism of infants could take place on Easter Sunday, especially during Mass, and at other Sunday Masses of Eastertide. Likewise the sacrament of Confirmation is well suited for the Easter season, particularly close to Pentecost.

Liturgy of the Hours

It is a good idea to celebrate Vespers (Evening Prayer) on Easter Sunday as a fitting closure to the Triduum. If a parish has a tradition of praying in common the Liturgy of the Hours then the Easter season provides many wonderful hymns The “Te Deum” is sung/recited during the Easter Octave.

Book of Blessings

It is recommended that homes are blessed during Easter. It is also suggested that the family use a special blessing for the main meal on Easter Sunday.

Divine Mercy Sunday

The Second Sunday of Easter has been designated Divine Mercy Sunday. Care should be taken not to call this the Feast of Divine Mercy because the feast day that we celebrate is Easter. Divine Mercy is a widespread and popular devotion that was endorsed and encouraged under the pontificate of John Paul II. However, it remains a devotion and as such should complement rather than detract from the liturgy.