**12 things you need to know about Holy Saturday**

*by Jimmy Akin* *Saturday, April 19, 2014 8:04 AM Comments*[*(1)*](http://www.ncregister.com/blog/12-things-you-need-to-know-about-holy-saturday1/#blogComments)



*On Holy Saturday the earth waits in stillness for the Resurrection of the Lord. Here are 12 things you need to know about it.*

Every time we say the creed, we note that Jesus "descended into hell."

Holy Saturday is the day that commemorates this event.

What happened on this day, and how do we celebrate it?

Here are 12 things you need to know.

**1. What happened on the first Holy Saturday?**

Here on earth, Jesus' disciples mourned his death and, since it was a sabbath day, they rested.

Luke notes that the women returned home "and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment" (Luke 23:56).

At the tomb, the guards that had been stationed there kept watch over the place to make sure that the disciples did not steal Jesus' body.

Meanwhile . . .

**2. What happened to Jesus while he was dead?**

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

633 Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, “hell” - Sheol in Hebrew or Hades in Greek - because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God.

Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the Redeemer: which does not mean that their lot is identical, as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into “Abraham's bosom”:

“It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Saviour in Abraham's bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell.”

Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him.

634 “The gospel was preached even to the dead.” The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment.

This is the last phase of Jesus' messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption.

**3. How do we commemorate this day?**

According to the main document governing the celebrations connected with Easter, [Paschales Solemnitatis](http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/CDWEASTR.HTM" \l "3" \t "_blank):

73. On Holy Saturday the Church is, as it were, at the Lord's tomb, meditating on his passion and death, and on his descent into hell, and awaiting his resurrection with prayer and fasting.

It is highly recommended that on this day the Office of Readings and Morning Prayer be celebrated with the participation of the people (cf. n. 40).

Where this cannot be done, there should be some celebration of the Word of God, or some act of devotion suited to the mystery celebrated this day.

74. The image of Christ crucified or lying in the tomb, or the descent into hell, which mystery Holy Saturday recalls, as also an image of the sorrowful Virgin Mary can be placed in the church for the veneration of the faithful.

Fasting is also encouraged, but not required, on this day.

**4. Are the sacraments celebrated?**

For the most part, no. Paschales Solemnitatis explains:

75. On this day the Church abstains strictly from the celebration of the sacrifice of the Mass.

Holy Communion may only be given in the form of Viaticum.

The celebration of marriages is forbidden, as also the celebration of other sacraments, except those of Penance and the Anointing of the Sick.

The prohibition on saying Mass applies to the part of the day before the Easter Vigil Mass (see below).

Baptism in danger of death is also permitted.

**5. What is the Easter Vigil?**

A vigil is the liturgical commemoration of a notable feast, held on the evening preceding the feast.

The term comes from the Latin word *vigilia*, which means "wakefulness," and which came to be used when the faithful stayed awake to pray and do devotional exercises in anticipation of the feast.

Easter Vigil is the vigil held on the evening before Easter.

According to Paschales Solemnitatis.

80. From the very outset the Church has celebrated that annual Pasch, which is the solemnity of solemnities, above all by means of a night vigil.

For the resurrection of Christ is the foundation of our faith and hope, and through Baptism and Confirmation we are inserted into the Paschal Mystery of Christ, dying, buried, and raised with him, and with him we shall also reign.

The full meaning of Vigil is a waiting for the coming of the Lord.

**6. When should Easter Vigil be celebrated?**

Paschales Solemnitatis explains:

 78. "The entire celebration of the Easter Vigil takes place at night. It should not begin before nightfall; it should end before daybreak on Sunday."

This rule is to be taken according to its strictest sense. Reprehensible are those abuses and practices which have crept into many places in violation of this ruling, whereby the Easter Vigil is celebrated at the time of day that it is customary to celebrate anticipated Sunday Masses.

Those reasons which have been advanced in some quarters for the anticipation of the Easter Vigil, such as lack of public order, are not put forward in connection with Christmas night, nor other gatherings of various kinds.

**7. What happens at the Easter Vigil?**

According to Paschales Solemnitatis:

81. The order for the Easter Vigil is arranged so that

* after the service of light and the Easter Proclamation (which is the first part of the Vigil),
* Holy Church meditates on the wonderful works which the Lord God wrought for his people from the earliest times (the second part or Liturgy of the Word),
* to the moment when, together with those new members reborn in Baptism (third part),
* she is called to the table prepared by the Lord for his Church—the commemoration of his death and resurrection—until he comes (fourth part).

**8. What happens during the service of light?**

According to Paschales Solemnitatis:

82. . . . In so far as possible, a suitable place should be prepared outside the church for the blessing of the new fire, whose flames should be such that they genuinely dispel the darkness and light up the night.

The paschal candle should be prepared, which for effective symbolism must be made of wax, never be artificial, be renewed each year, be only one in number, and be of sufficiently large size so that it may evoke the truth that Christ is the light of the world. It is blessed with the signs and words prescribed in the Missal or by the Conference of Bishops.

83. The procession, by which the people enter the church, should be led by the light of the paschal candle alone. Just as the children of Israel were guided at night by a pillar of fire, so similarly, Christians follow the risen Christ. There is no reason why to each response "Thanks be to God" there should not be added some acclamation in honor of Christ.

The light from the paschal candle should be gradually passed to the candles which it is fitting that all present should hold in their hands, the electric lighting being switched off.

**9. What happens during the Easter Proclamation?**

According to Paschales Solemnitatis:

 84. The deacon makes the Easter Proclamation which tells, by means of a great poetic text, the whole Easter mystery placed in the context of the economy of salvation.

In case of necessity, where there is no deacon, and the celebrating priest is unable to sing it, a cantor may do so.

The Bishops' Conferences may adapt this proclamation by inserting into it acclamations from the people.

**10. What happens during the Scripture readings?**

According to Paschales Solemnitatis:

85. The readings from Sacred Scripture constitute the second part of the Vigil. They give an account of the outstanding deeds of the history of salvation, which the faithful are helped to meditate calmly upon by the singing of the responsorial psalm, by a silent pause and by the celebrant's prayer.

The restored Order for the Vigil has seven readings from the Old Testament chosen from the Law and the Prophets, which are in use everywhere according to the most ancient tradition of East and West, and two readings from the New Testament, namely from the Apostle and from the Gospel.

Thus the Church, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets" explains Christ's Paschal Mystery.

Consequently wherever this is possible, all the readings should be read so that the character of the Easter Vigil, which demands that it be somewhat prolonged, be respected at all costs.

Where, however, pastoral conditions require that the number of readings be reduced, there should be at least three readings from the Old Testament, taken from the Law and the Prophets; the reading from Exodus chapter 14 with its canticle must never be omitted.

87. After the readings from the Old Testament, the hymn "Gloria in excelsis" is sung, the bells are rung in accordance with local custom, the collect is recited, and the celebration moves on to the readings from the New Testament. An exhortation from the Apostle on Baptism as an insertion into Christ's Paschal Mystery is read.

Then all stand and the priest intones the "Alleluia" three times, each time raising the pitch. The people repeat it after him.

If it is necessary, the psalmist or cantor may sing the "Alleluia," which the people then take up as an acclamation to be interspersed between the verses of Psalm 117, so often cited by the Apostles in their Easter preaching.

Finally, the resurrection of the Lord is proclaimed from the Gospel as the high point of the whole Liturgy of the Word.

After the Gospel a homily is to be given, no matter how brief.

**11. What happens during the baptismal liturgy?**

According to Paschales Solemnitatis:

88. The third part of the Vigil is the baptismal liturgy. Christ's passover and ours is now celebrated.

This is given full expression in those churches which have a baptismal font, and more so when the Christian initiation of adults is held, or at least the Baptism of infants.

Even if there are no candidates for Baptism, the blessing of baptismal water should still take place in parish churches. If this blessing does not take place at the baptismal font, but in the sanctuary, baptismal water should be carried afterwards to the baptistry there to be kept throughout the whole of paschal time.

Where there are neither candidates for Baptism nor any need to bless the font, Baptism should be commemorated by the blessing of water destined for sprinkling upon the people.

89. Next follows the renewal of baptismal promises, introduced by some words on the part of the celebrating priest.

The faithful reply to the questions put to them, standing and holding lighted candles in their hands. They are then sprinkled with water: in this way the gestures and words remind them of the Baptism they have received.

The celebrating priest sprinkles the people by passing through the main part of the church while all sing the antiphon "Vidi aquam" or another suitable song of a baptismal character.

**12. What happens during the Eucharistic liturgy?**

According to Paschales Solemnitatis:

90. The celebration of the Eucharist forms the fourth part of the Vigil and marks its high point, for it is in the fullest sense the Easter Sacrament, that is to say, the commemoration of the Sacrifice of the Cross and the presence of the risen Christ, the completion of Christian initiation, and the foretaste of the eternal pasch.

92. It is fitting that in the Communion of the Easter Vigil full expression be given to the symbolism of the Eucharist, namely by consuming the Eucharist under the species of both bread and wine. The local Ordinaries will consider the appropriateness of such a concession and its ramifications.

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