

The Holiest Days in Christendom

The Triduum

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When one asks the random man or woman on the street, "What is the holiest day for Christians?", the two days most frequently mentioned are Easter and Christmas. While these are indeed important, Easter being the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord and Christmas being the Feast of the Incarnation, our deeper tradition rests in other, much more significant days in the Christian year. Specifically, the Triduum, or "Great Three Days" of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Vigil of Easter, combine to represent the holiest of days for Christians.

Most of us are very familiar with at least two of these three days. Maundy Thursday, the day on which our Savior gathered with his disciples for a final meal and at which he not only showed himself as servant of the servants through the washing of feet, but also instituted the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, as the "meal of the baptized" and foretaste of the feast to come. It is also the night on which he was betrayed by Judas Iscariot and handed over to Pilate for trial, conviction, and sentencing. Good Friday, of course, is the day on which our Lord was nailed to the Cross and died, once and for all times for the forgiveness of all our sins and the sins of the world, and then buried and descended into the place of the dead (or hell, if you will) to confront and defeat sin, death, and the devil so that we might all be assured that death will have no power over us.

The Vigil of Easter is an event in the Church which served as the primary day in the early Church for baptisms and reception of new people into the Christian faith. As the name suggests, this was a night in which the church stood vigil-on watch-for the coming of the new day and the resurrection of our Lord. In the early days, the Vigil ran deep into the night, and the first Eucharist of the Easter season was celebrated early in the morning-often at sunrise.

For much of the 20th century, the Vigil of Easter was often overlooked, and the Easter Sunrise Service took its place. It wasn't until the liturgical renewal movement in the 1970s that the Vigil began to be celebrated in churches. The Vigil is marked in different ways, but it is becoming increasingly popular. Truth be told, the time to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord is at the Vigil, rather than on Sunday morning, long after the tomb was found empty.

The Triduum, or Great Three Days, is really one very long "day" of worship. It begins with the Maundy Thursday (and no benediction), continues through the Good Friday liturgy (again, no benediction), and concludes with the Saturday evening/night Vigil, traditionally a two to three-hour service opened with the lighting of the New Fire (often a large bonfire), Old Testament readings, psalms, prayers, canticles, baptism, and then the

first Eucharist of Easter. In some churches, there is a breakfast or "brunch" to break the fast of the Triduum following the Vigil.

What does all this have to do with our common work as Templars? Quite a bit, actually.

In my travels, I have become distressed with the number of Good Friday observances being held, complete with fancy dinners. Good Friday is the most solemn day in Christendom and is historically marked by a fast and not a feast. This is a time when we should be gathered in prayer in our several churches reflecting on the sacrificial act of Jesus on the Cross and the gift of grace which God has bestowed upon us. If we as Templars would like to commemorate our Savior's death on the Cross, perhaps we would be wiser to do so in the context of a "Holy Week Observance" earlier in Holy Week, inviting the public to join with us, perhaps in the context of a "stations of the cross" devotional? A well-designed asylum offers us a wonderful opportunity to provide Christian witness while quietly disproving the notion of Freemasonry being "anti-church" or "anti-Christian."

Let me suggest, however, that a better place for Templars to gather during The Triduum is in their home church, or, should a group wish to attend together, the ideal time would be for the Vigil, participating in the service of anticipation. In some areas, where the Vigil might not be commonly celebrated, Templars might opt to gather at one church and offer assistance as readers and worship assistants for the Vigil (and many a pastor would appreciate the help, given that a "full Vigil" has eleven readings from the Old Testament, and that's BEFORE the baptism and Eucharist). There are a host of opportunities for us to mark these holy days without impinging on the proper role of our churches by conducting events of our own.

Do not misunderstand me. Events such as our Easter Sunrise Service in Washington, DC, and other similar gatherings across the Grand Encampment are right and proper, especially when we use the opportunity to open our worship to the community as an outreach and Christian witness.

But as for the Great Three Days, our place as Christian Knights is in the fellowship of our home congregations, and not at a Masonic gathering. In doing this, we also help to educate our non-Masonic friends that Freemasons, and Knights Templar especially, are not working against the church and her teachings, but support her with heart, mind, and soul.

Update: July 11, 2014

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