

HOLY WEEK

The week immediately preceding the feast of the Resurrection (see FEASTS, MAJOR), a period rich in reminiscences of the ultimate stage of salvation. Following the celebration of the Divine Liturgy on Palm Sunday, the faithful worshipers reenact, step by step, the last scenes of the life of Christ, with observances gradually rising in solemnity to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

To enter more fully into the [proper](#) spirit of suffering and self-mortification, the early Christians endured strict practices in keeping the paschal fast (see FASTING). Some abstained completely from eating or drinking throughout the whole six days; others observed an uninterrupted fast for two, three, or four days, according to their individual power of physical endurance. The *Constitutions of the Holy Fathers*, however, recommended a simple diet of bread, salt, and herbs: “Do ye therefore fast on the days of the Passover, beginning from the second day of the week until the preparation and the [Sabbath](#) six days, making use of only bread and salt and herbs, and water for your drink” (*Constitutions* 5.18 and 19, 1951, p. 447).

In the early days of the church, it was customary to read both the Old and the New Testaments in their entirety during the course of the Holy Week prayers. This practice continued until the time of Pope GABRIEL II (1131-1145), also known as Ibn Turayk, who, with the help of a number of ecclesiastical and biblical scholars, rearranged the readings in a more systematic form. The new lectionary, called *qatamarus*, consisted of a selection of relevant Old Testament prophecies, Psalms, and corresponding passages from the New Testament, arranged in the light of the events that took place during the last week of the life of [Jesus](#) Christ on earth. A few generations later, this compilation underwent a meticulous recasting at the hands of Butrus, bishop of BAHNASAH, for the purpose of making the readings of individual days more evenly distributed over the various CANONICAL HOURS.

Into these lections were incorporated homilies and [sermons](#) from the early fathers, together with a commentary or exposition on the events of each particular day. The prayers also included a nighttime and a daytime litany, each composed of about twenty-four supplications read by a priest with the congregation responding each time, "Lord, have mercy."

Worship during Holy Week, with the exception of Maundy Thursday, is characterized by the following distinctive features:

1. It is a period of deep mourning in commemoration of the suffering of Christ. As soon as the church has celebrated Jesus' triumphant entry into [Jerusalem](#) on PALM SUNDAY, the presbyters and deacons remove their colorful vestments, and all pillars and lecterns are decked with black ribbons. [Henceforth](#) all prayers, readings, and chants are delivered in a mournful, subdued tone called *idribi* (see MUSIC: Description of the Corpus and Present Musical Practice).
2. The sanctuary (*haykal*) curtains are drawn, and worship is performed in the main body of the church. The symbolic significance of this practice is threefold. It refers to Christ's crucifixion at Golgotha outside Jerusalem. "So [Jesus](#) also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp, bearing abuse for him" (Heb. 13:12-13). Just as in Old Testament ritual the sin offerings, the blood of which was brought within the veil to make expiation in the sanctuary, were taken outside the camp and destroyed, so Christ suffered outside the gate and fulfilled the original ritual outside Jerusalem.

Also according to the Old Testament, a man suffering from [leprosy](#) had to stay outside his tent for seven days before he was pronounced ritually clean (Lev. 14:8, 9). Likewise, Holy Week is a means of self-purification after which fallen man becomes worthy of being accepted into the presence of God.

3. Memorial services for the dead are not allowed to be celebrated during Holy Week. A collective office for the deceased is therefore

conducted, in advance, at the end of the Liturgy of Palm Sunday for the souls of those who might depart this life during this week. All solemnities of worship can thus be directed toward one objective only, the passion of our Savior.

4. The Psalms of the canonical hours are replaced by the paschal doxology. As each hour includes twelve Psalms, this doxology is chanted twelve times antiphonally, each time followed with the Lord's Prayer said inaudibly. The words of the doxology are taken from the concluding verse of the Lord's Prayer, and from Revelation 5:12-13: "Thine is the power, the glory, the blessing, and the majesty forever, Amen; [Emmanuel](#) our God and our King. Thine is the power, the glory, the blessing and the majesty forever, Amen; my Lord [Jesus](#) Christ. Thine is the power, the glory, the blessing and the majesty forever, Amen. Our Father who art in Heaven, etc."

To the above words is added the following section as from the eleventh hour of Tuesday: "O my Lord [Jesus](#) Christ, my Good Savior." A further section is added to this, beginning on the first hour of Friday eve, until the last hour of that day: "The Lord is my strength, my praise, and has become my salvation."

5. On Maundy Thursday, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated in the sanctuary, and holy communion is administered as usual, following the service of foot-washing (LAQQAN) after the ninth hour of the day.
6. The entire Gospel of Saint Matthew is read on Tuesday, [Saint Mark](#) on Wednesday, Saint Luke on Thursday, Saint John on the eve of Resurrection Sunday. On Holy Saturday after the sixth hour, the entire book of Revelation is read, and, following the ninth hour, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated.

At the conclusion of the twelfth hour of Good Friday, the congregation repeats "KYRIE ELEISON" a hundred times toward the east, west, north, and south, and ends with twelve times toward the east. Then the deacons and [clergy](#) go in a procession around the altar three times, and three times around the church, followed by one more time around the altar.

Finally, the crucifix icon is wrapped in white linen, and placed on the altar, covered with the cross, rose petals, and spices. The chalice and paten veil (see EUCHARISTIC VEILS) is spread over them, and two candelabras are placed one at the head and the other at the feet, representing the two [angels](#) who stood inside Christ's sepulcher. Then the priests, in turn, start reading the entire book of Psalms. At Psalm 3:5, "I lie down and sleep," the sanctuary curtain is drawn, and the reading is resumed.

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