

By Bishop Joseph N. Latino

Holy Week begins this Sunday with the celebration of Palm Sunday. Around the world and across the Diocese of Jackson our Catholic faithful will bless palms and hear the passion narrative of St. Matthew's Gospel read. And so we commence the holiest of weeks in our church's tradition.

On Tuesday, April 19, at 5:45 pm in the Cathedral of Saint Peter the Apostle we will celebrate the Mass of Chrism, where with the presbyterate gathered around me, I will bless the oils of catechumens and the sick and consecrate the Sacred Chrism. These oils presented to parish representatives will be taken back to home parishes and used throughout the year to anoint the sick and baptize infants and adults. The clergy will renew their priestly commitment at this Mass as well.

At 6 pm on Wednesday, April 20, we will pray the Office of Tenebrae, an ancient part of the Liturgy of the Hours that reflects on the suffering of Jesus Christ while offering a glimmer of hope at the end in one remaining lighted candle. It is a very moving ceremony that features readings from the Lamentations of Jeremiah, psalms and hymns on the cross and crown of thorns. After each reading a candle on the altar is extinguished until one is left burning and offering hope. I invite everyone to the Cathedral to experience this unique tradition in our church.

The Sacred Triduum begins and Lent officially ends with the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Thursday, April 21. This Mass is filled with rituals and symbols revolving around the true meaning of the Eucharist – sacrifice and service. The Gospel reading is that of the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus. In the liturgy 12 feet will be washed by the pastor who in the image of Christ reflects the servant hood of being a follower of Jesus. At this liturgy a second ciborium of hosts is consecrated for distribution on Good Friday.

The final movement of the Holy Thursday liturgy is the transfer of the ciborium by procession to an area separate from the main altar perhaps even in another building. This area should be decorated with flowers to reflect the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus went to pray and was ultimately betrayed and also to foreshadow the garden tomb. The faithful are asked to pray with the Lord in the garden then leave in silence.

Good Friday, April 22, is one of my favorite liturgies of the church. It is once again an ancient ritual – one of the oldest in the church's centuries old liturgical tradition. The altar is bare, stripped of all ornamentation and the liturgy begins in silence. The starkness of the church is quite striking.

The passion narrative of St. John is read, and then the general intercessions are chanted or recited. Following these time honored prayers we venerate the cross. What a moving moment to be able to touch or kiss the cross and watch our fellow Catholics come forward and do the same knowing that so many of them have had trials and struggles in their lives throughout the past year.

Once the veneration is finished, the altar is set with a simple red cloth and corporal. The ciborium of hosts consecrated the evening before is brought to the altar for distribution to the faithful. The liturgy ends in silence and we are left to contemplate Christ on the cross.

Contrasting the starkness of Good Friday, the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday Masses lift us up from despair because we know the tomb is empty and the Lord has risen.

As we enter into Holy Week - this great week filled with intricate and deeply sacred liturgies - let us all focus on the journey of our Lord as he makes his way to Jerusalem, the upper room, the garden, the cross, the tomb and finally the Resurrection. Let us all open our hearts and minds to the passion of our Lord and the sacrifice he made for us all so that on Easter morning we can truly sing with joyful hearts – Jesus Christ is risen today!