Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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by Sr. Jane Marie Bradish

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I have a confession to make ... Holy Week confuses me. There, I said it.

I grew up in a mixed-faith family. Mom was Catholic and Dad was Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran. Neither planned to convert, so they had to sign a document saying their children would be raised Catholic before they could be married. They did and we were.

We went to church with Mom, and Dad joined us for significant events — primarily the reception of sacraments and graduations, even for the grandchildren. Otherwise, he went to his church when we went to ours. On Easter, we all went to Dad's church because it had real trumpets and breakfast after the sunrise service; what more could a kid want?

When I was growing up, Holy Week wasn't "a thing" in our family, outside of Palm and Easter Sundays. We attended Catholic grade and high school and those experiences included age-appropriate prayer experiences, primarily around Holy Thursday and Easter. In college, I participated in a Tenebrae service. Held on Spy Wednesday, it can best be described as the "CliffsNotes" version of Holy Week. It wasn't until I entered my community that I experienced all the liturgies of Holy Week. To say there was a learning curve would be an understatement.

Palm Sunday makes sense to me, to a point. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, the heart of Judaism. It's the gathering of the greater faith community and Jesus is finally recognized for who he is. I reflect on my role in the universal church and I wonder how I live out my baptismal call.

And then, before I know it, we're into the Passion story. And while I understand the practical reasons, from a liturgical standpoint it's an odd combination for me.

Holy Thursday I do much better with. The sharing of a meal and the institution of a universal priesthood of service. These are familiar activities to even the youngest of humanity. The school where I minister has a free pasta meal for the staff that day. It allows us to gather and share in community. We even have a raffle of small (some would say silly) items that raises enough money for the event to be self-funded every year. It's a nice way to head into the holiday weekend — even those who skip every other optional staff activity choose to participate.

Good Friday is tough for me. The story of human cruelty, torture and capital punishment — in all its detail and gore — is so hard to hear. I was with both of my parents when they were diagnosed with rare and aggressive cancers, and again when they died a few short weeks later (albeit eight years apart). We retell some of those stories of those final days, and we will forever remember those journeys. But something about the Good Friday liturgy just doesn't sit right with me, maybe I simply don't understand. Or maybe it's too real, too raw in these times of continuous war, human trafficking, and the separation of families at U.S. borders.

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Holy Saturday is ritual overload for me. Fire and water and the telling of our Catholic story is rich. The welcoming of new members is also important. But my experience is the entire liturgy is rushed.

Yes, I understand many wouldn't attend if liturgy lasted longer than a couple hours. A priest friend always says something to the effect of — let us pray at a pace we can hear ourselves — an excellent reminder that time is needed or we "miss it." I've only attended one Holy Saturday liturgy that included everything, all the Scripture and rituals, and it went from sunset to sunrise — a marathon for sure — but there was time to let all the symbolism and ritual soak into my being.

Easter, an unexpected return to life, the ultimate celebration of new life ... I "get it." In this part of the world, Easter corresponds with the arrival of spring. Yes, it's been known to snow for Easter, but signs of spring abound in the greening trees and lawns and the sprouting of early flowers.

Resurrection cannot be explained. I struggle with the unexplainable, but Easter — the realization of hope, life, triumph, joy — I'm fine with it.

My college experience spoke of being a lifelong learner, a phrase I found both annoying and encouraging at the time. For me, Holy Week seems to be a lifelong learning experience, and that learning curve gets steeper some years and levels off other years.

My priest friend's words may be what's best for me as I enter into another Holy Week — pray at a pace where I can hear myself, where I can soak in what I need (and if I'm honest, what I really don't want).

I can't promise I'll be at every liturgy. I can't promise I'll be 100% attentive. I can't promise I'll "get it" this time. I can promise I'll be confused, at least some of the time. I can promise I'll try to pray at a pace where I can soak it all in. I'll see where it all takes me.

[Jane Marie Bradish is a member of the School Sisters of St. Francis based in Milwaukee. Her ministry has been in secondary education; currently, she teaches theology and is the academic programmer for a large, urban, multicultural high school.]