

Memory and imagination

The Paschal Triduum teaching how to live and how to die

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Abstract. *Memory and imagination, complex activities of the brain, act as the cornerstone for ritual prayer. These brain functions undoubtedly ground us in hope and aid in our discovery of what it means to be fully human at a deep level. This paper explores the ritual of the Paschal Triduum, the Roman Catholic Church's highest expression of the mystery of faith. It interprets the three-day celebration as a ritual pilgrimage of memory and hope that reveals a cycle of deep human activity and religious imagination. Drawing insight particularly from the work of Gabriel Moran, the research maintains that the Triduum discloses a profound rhythm of life, namely, showing participants how to live and how to die. Contextually, the topic is set in a historical, theological, and liturgical frame of reference and analysis. However, the distinct approach of the research is that it views the Triduum from the perspective of a form and practice of religious educational activity.*

Augustine coined *Triduum*, the Latin word for three days, in about the year 354 to describe the annual three-day celebration of *Pascha* (Easter), the commemoration of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ (Aune 1997, 4). The highpoint of the liturgical year, the Paschal Triduum immerses the assembly in the gift and grace of the imagination that teaches a way of being in the world. Metaphorically, the Triduum takes us on a ritual pilgrimage of hope. Ritually, it speaks profoundly of identity, honesty, and rebirth on the moral and spiritual dimensions of life.

The paschal mystery, the dynamic of death and resurrection, is the point of departure for the Triduum. Reflective of the ancient tradition, the heart of the New Testament, paschal mystery defines and gives deeper meaning to Christian existence. When we speak of paschal mystery, death and resurrection are not separate moments (Chauvet 2001, 156-61). Resurrection gives meaning to death. God's self-disclosure begins here and reveals a way to live and a way to die. It may be difficult to wrap the rational mind around paschal mystery. However, reclaiming imaginative ways of knowing offers a new worldview. Paschal mystery, then, becomes not only the momentum for the Christian year; it is the center of just living, and authentic dying.

In view of the depth of insight found in and through the various symbols, stories, and rituals embodied in the Triduum, this paper explores a specific ritual aspect of each movement (Huck 1992, ix) of the Triduum that grasps the essence of the three-day feast. Specifically, it highlights

the *mandatum* or washing of the feet, the veneration of the cross, and baptism as the source and summit of the Triduum. As noted by David Hogue, “A central dimension of those ritual experiences is embodied in the experience of living, for a time, as though the world we imagine is really there” (Hogue 2009, 151). In turn, the paschal character of the Triduum, this essay postulates, religiously educates by reshaping the ordinary aspects of human life.

Religious education: Two operative faces

Gabriel Moran proposes, “Religious education has to do with the religious life of the human race and with bringing people within the influence of that life” (Moran 1989, 218). It is a valuable force for a creative and flourishing human development. Religious education, Moran notes, consists of two distinct sides or faces. The first side refers to religious education as teaching religion or academic study of religion in a classroom. The second face moves beyond the classroom and refers to teaching to be religious or formation in being religious in a particular way (218 -19). Teaching to be religious engages the whole person and allows one’s life to be influenced by religious practice. This fundamental distinction supports, strengthens, and cross-fertilizes teaching-learning activity in both its forms, namely, religion as an area of study and religion as a particular practice. In investigating how the Triduum educates, this paper is concerned with Moran’s second face, teaching to be religious in a particular way, namely, a Roman Catholic way.

Teaching to be Religious in a Roman Catholic Way: Catechesis

Education in and through ritual prayer is part of the process of catechesis. Catechesis links us to the past without being nostalgic, and, at the same time, maintains a continuity with the past, but is deeply rooted in authentic tradition. Moran (1989, 49) suggests: “One way to summarize this picture is to say that education is about ‘tradition,’ that it is about the transmission of what is most valuable from one generation to the next. . . . Education does not hand on the tradition; education *is* tradition, the process of handing on, and within the process the asking of critical questions about the past.” The Triduum, then, is traditioning at its source and summit.

Originally associated with the Catechumenate, a process consisting of several stages of preparation for baptism, catechesis occurred through proclamation and celebration (Sloyan 1983, 112). Similarly, today, religious rituals are the primary means of shaping and re-shaping a person in faith. Religious development that unfolds on pilgrimage through feasts and seasons of the liturgical year create a journey for re-appropriating deeper meaning in life and in death. “Within the total process of religious education” writes Moran, “there should be a place for passing on the past. Most of that work has to be done nonverbally through ritual . . .” (Moran1981, 52).

There is urgent need in our time to appreciate the need to ritualize both social and religious commitments (Hogue 2011, 258). The Paschal Triduum embodies in practice these social and religious commitments.

The Paschal Triduum: Teaching how to live and how to die

Shared memory is celebrated in the context of the liturgical year and brought to heightened experience in the Triduum. The three-day ritual, when Jesus gives himself to the work, tells the whole Christian story and nourishes the community of believers uniquely. The story of life and death told from generation to generation is tangible, open-ended, and experiential. The telling of stories strengthens and brings people to a deeper understanding of who they are as members of the community of believers. Stories of old become new through continuous telling and retelling. Kieran Scott (2005, 85) writes, “This retelling of a people’s story keeps memories and hopes alive. It maintains religion as a chain of memory.” Hearing the story again and again aids in the re-appropriation for faithful living. Such ritual memory portrays the fullness of hope that finds light in darkness. It communicates what we believe, and expresses and shapes the life of the baptized in an all-absorbing way. It fashions the community in discipline and tradition.

The celebration of the Triduum awakens the imagination. It unveils what seems hidden or obscure. It discloses meaning if we dare to leave the comfort zone of the rational and enter into the seemingly eclipsed, waiting arms of God’s embrace. Succinctly, the Triduum educates with an end in view (Moran 1989, 49), namely, to know Christ - to experience the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ in relation to the life, death, and resurrection of the world.

Marcel Metzger (1997) notes, “Jewish institutions are the womb of Christian institutions.” The history and the development of this three-day feast, celebrating death and resurrection as one event, provides a glimpse of the hope-filled patterns that sustained our Jewish ancestors - people of the covenant who retained a religious identity through the struggle toward Exodus. Christian hope developed from this Jewish faith rooted in the God who is active and present in all of life. This living history is remembered and appropriated today in and through hope-filled rituals of death and resurrection.

The patterns of hope celebrated in the Triduum are embedded in the experience of ordinary people of another time (Baldovin 1989, 67-68). In our time, the church calls the human person to that same enduring hope, namely, hope spelled out through the cycle of death and resurrection. This hope is experienced and made real through a three-day pilgrimage that teaches, in a specific way, how to live and how to die. We turn now to explore this three-day celebration of memory and hope.

Holy Thursday ~ The Washing of the Feet

The Mass of the Lord's Supper celebrated on Holy Thursday evening is entrance into the Triduum. There is great depth to this night, the first movement into Triduum. On this night, John's account of the Last Supper includes a foot washing during the meal, not the institution of the Eucharist. This is most significant in teaching how to live. In this symbolic action of love and reconciliation Jesus performs the work of a slave, a humble task with a greater message. His action here is the culmination of the way he lived. On the night before he died, Jesus displayed table companionship in a most profound way. Table companionship was Jesus' way of announcing the reign of God. Sharing meals with the outcasts and marginalized, Jesus was sharing his life with them, and, in turn, announcing that God shares life with all. On this night, the genuine meaning of meal sharing is revealed. Jesus' command, "do this in memory of me," is explicit. The proclamation of the Gospel and the symbolic action that follows, namely, the washing of the feet, captures the essence of what it means to celebrate and live as a eucharistic people.

Traditionally referred to as the *mandatum* (commandment), the washing of the feet, takes place after the proclamation of the Gospel and homily. Notice, the washing of the feet is not a dramatization of the Gospel, it serves almost as a keynote of the Triduum, a proclamation in itself (Huck 1992, 38). Washing feet spells out, in ritual language, the interdependence of all that is human and non-human. It spells out the love that is at the heart of justice. Washing feet and having one's feet washed is an authentic expression of what it means to live in right relationship. It asks: how are we Christ for others? How can we live in truth for the life of others? It serves as an invitation to move beyond all cultural limitations and recognize the proclamation of God's love in the world. This washing is a deep proclamation of love rooted in humble service.

The celebration of the first movement of the Triduum implicitly reminds the gathered community that Eucharist is rooted in loving service. The church enacts such reconciliation and healing in an effort to wash the wounds of racism, egotism, individualism, and sexism. The once-a-year washing of feet has profound implications for mature living. It is a pure sign of human liberation. It acts as a reminder that participation in a faith community means participation in love and service to all that is human and non-human. Washing feet, then, stirs social consciousness and responsibility to care for the bodily needs of others. It is essentially grounded in the public ministry of Jesus.

Good Friday ~ The veneration of the cross

On Good Friday the church steps into another movement of the Triduum and contemplates the cross, the place of God's penetrating love. Fasting, prayer, and patient waiting continue as the church enters a difficult, yet necessary, look at suffering and death. Contemplating the cross of

Christ is to see that God abides in and among all that is humiliating and painful. The tragedy of the cross shows that God dies with us and redeems all pain and suffering. Paradoxically, it is in the brokenness of Jesus where we find wisdom. It is through the lens of Jesus' passion and death that the church venerates the cross.

The veneration of the cross is the climax of the Good Friday ritual in much the same way the *mandatum* is of Holy Thursday (Huck 79). Like the *mandatum*, the veneration of the cross has rich implications. Veneration of the cross not only takes the assembly to the vulnerable places of their own lives, it is a movement toward social awareness for the crucified in the world. The dynamic wooden symbol gathers the agonies of the world and offers a way to experience God's love even in the darkest hell. The agonies of the world are embodied in the victims of terror attacks and women and girls around the globe who are subject to sex trafficking and mass rape; people with HIV and AIDS are treated as the lepers of our day; undocumented immigrants live through unsettled fear and attack; homeless children suffer the burden of instability, while efforts are made to keep them in schools. In addition, the earth suffers the devastation of climate change. These are the crucified people and places of Good Friday. As disciples, we must "be there," with compassion when our brothers and sisters are crucified.

The cross is a unique, radical symbol of God's love. The central symbol of Christianity, the cross reveals that God is not immune to suffering. The challenge is to connect the cross of Christ with death (physical, moral, spiritual). The once-a-year ritual of veneration provides deep consideration for a way of being in the world. However, like all ritual, the veneration cannot be grasped at once (Danneels 2003, 20). The poetry of the church (Huck 1992, 81), then, is revealed gradually and is only understood through the religious imagination. The veneration of the cross evokes gospel responsibility that fosters a sense of genuine surrender and dispossession.

The Easter Vigil: Recovering a baptismal spirituality

The Easter Vigil is the playground for liturgy. Capturing the essence of what it means to be re-created in the Lord, the vigil embodies the "play" of imagination. In other words, we lose ourselves and allow our consciousness to be shaped in new ways (Cote 105). Rooted in the early church's Passover (Adams 1990, 58), the vigil is the night that banishes the darkness of sin and death. Spelled out through sacramental initiation, on this night, the church gives birth, and, in so doing, reminds those already born in Christ of the great gift of God's parental love. Furthermore, the Easter Vigil, the yearly Passover, has rich implications for living and dying.

The distinct meaning of Christian life is found in Paul's letter to the Romans. He writes, "Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3-11). This is the

linchpin of the entire vigil. It speaks of sharing in Christ's life through baptism (Adams 1981, 81). With the restored rites of initiation holding a prominent place in the Easter Vigil, this proclamation is extremely important for the elect and the baptized. It gives substance to the commitment to discipleship born and renewed on this night.

Baptism of the elect, the climactic movement of the Triduum, gives heightened meaning to the rituals that came before and for the time that follows. Washed in the waters of new birth, neophytes are new hope for the world, while at the same time they offer the already baptized renewed vision. For too long, the meaning of baptism was reduced to a washing away of original sin. Furthermore, original sin is best understood as the human condition into which all are born (Kavanagh 1978, 89-90). Baptism, then, offers life in Christ, a way to foster right relationship. Recovery of a baptismal spirituality, as a vocation to be lived, recognizes the baptized as God's light in a darkened world. In this way, the baptized are called to respond to the needs of those who hunger and thirst for justice, in all its forms. Entrance into the waters of baptism is entrance into communion with God and one another. In and through the water, commitment to justice flows into the hearts of the newly baptized and those renewed in the promise of God's covenant.

Undeniably, ritual use of water provokes deep meaning. The waters of baptism signify the beginning of Easter life and connect the human person with the cosmic dimension of life. From the same water that baptized the elect, the assembly is bathed as they renew their baptismal promises. To be baptized is to die – to enter Christ's tomb. At the same time, it is immersion into life-giving water.

At the Easter Vigil, the washing associated with baptism, is closely related to the washing of feet on Holy Thursday. Having put on Christ, baptism is a radical call to wash wounds inflicted by, for example, racism, sexism, violence, and consumerism. In and through the movement to the font, the Easter Vigil commissions the community for mission in the world.

Conclusion

The Triduum remembers the past and awakens the religious imagination for a hope-filled future. Lessons learned from footwashing, cross veneration, and baptism point toward the urgent needs of our time. The Triduum is a statement to the world of a commitment to be compassionate toward the needs of others. It recognizes, in a profound way, the critical and ongoing need to fashion a just world.

Careful integration and appropriation of ritual, symbol, and story nourishes and fashions a people in a particular religious heritage. The Triduum sustains memory and educates toward a way of life rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Scott (2005, 82) affirms: "No religious tradition can survive without reconnecting the chain of memory. Education has to do with the maintenance of

community through the generations – its preservation and improvement. This maintenance or conservation must assure enough continuity of vision and values to sustain the self-identity of the community.” The Triduum sustains this vision profoundly.

Religious education in and through ritual prayer reclaims an intuitive, affective, imaginative way of knowing. The depth of meaning, discovered within the highlighted movements of the Triduum, generates wonder and imagination. The Triduum nourishes our ability to go beyond our five senses and see something beautiful in the ordinary. It awakens the dormant “posture of the soul” and calls us to life and renewal (Cote, 10).

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