

A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE THEOLOGY OF HOLY WEEK (PALM SUNDAY TO EASTER MONDAY)

INTRODUCTION

This work will critically reflect on the theology of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Easter Monday, exploring how the Church's liturgical celebrations invite believers into the saving mystery of Christ. Holy Week is not merely a historical commemoration but a lived participation in the Paschal Mystery, revealing the dynamics of human sin, divine love, and the transformative power of grace. Here, I will examine each day of Holy Week, highlighting key theological themes: Christ's paradoxical kingship on Palm Sunday, the tension of judgment and devotion from Holy Monday to Wednesday, the Eucharist and servant leadership on Holy Thursday, the redemptive meaning of the cross on Good Friday, the silence and hope of Holy Saturday, and the triumph and mission inaugurated by the Resurrection on Easter Sunday and continued on Easter Monday. By analyzing these events, this work aims to show how Holy Week shapes Christian understanding of discipleship, ethical living, and the ongoing presence of God's love in the world.

Palm Sunday: The Paradox of Kingship

Palm Sunday further reveals that Christ's kingship subverts expectations not only in its association with suffering but also in its mode of expression: He enters Jerusalem not on a warhorse but on a humble donkey, symbolizing peace rather than domination¹. The enthusiastic acclamations of the crowd "Hosanna" reflect a misunderstanding of His mission, as many anticipated a political liberator rather than a suffering servant. This tension exposes the fragility of human faith, which can quickly shift from praise to rejection, as seen later in the Passion narrative. Theologically, Palm Sunday invites a deeper reflection on the nature of true discipleship, which requires fidelity not only in moments of triumph but also in times of trial². It calls believers to examine their own expectations of Christ and to embrace a form of kingship

¹ Joachim Gnilka, *The Passion of Jesus: According to the Synoptic Gospels*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996, p.13.

² Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John: Text and Context*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015, p.522.

rooted in humility, obedience, and self-giving love, recognizing that participation in Christ's glory necessarily involves sharing in His cross

Holy Monday–Wednesday: Judgment, Anointing, and Betrayal

Holy Monday to Wednesday further deepen this theological tension by revealing how the presence of Christ provokes both conversion and resistance within the human heart³. The cleansing of the Temple is not merely an act of moral correction but a prophetic sign of God's demand for authentic worship, exposing the ways religious practice can be corrupted by self-interest and hypocrisy. In contrast, the anointing at Bethany embodies genuine devotion, as the woman's extravagant act of love anticipates Christ's burial and symbolizes total self-gift in response to divine grace⁴. Set against this is the figure of Judas, whose betrayal illustrates the tragic possibility of rejecting grace despite intimate proximity to Christ. Together, these events highlight the drama of human freedom: grace invites, but does not compel, and the human person must choose between fidelity and betrayal⁵. Thus, these days call believers to self-examination, urging them to purify their intentions, deepen their love for Christ, and remain vigilant against the subtle ways in which sin can distort both faith and action.

Holy Thursday: Eucharist and Servant Leadership

Holy Thursday thus reveals the inseparable unity between worship and life, showing that participation in the Eucharist demands a corresponding transformation in the believer's conduct⁶. In instituting the Eucharist, Christ not only offers His Body and Blood as spiritual nourishment but also establishes a perpetual memorial of His sacrificial love, inviting the Church to enter continually into this mystery of self-giving⁷. The washing of the disciples' feet further radicalizes this teaching by presenting a concrete model of humble service that overturns hierarchical and

³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, New York: Continuum, 2003, p.84.

⁴ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John: Text and Context*, p.523.

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave, vol. 1*, New York: Doubleday, 1994, p.430.

⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1330–1332, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993, Article 3, 2013, p.332.

⁷ *Dominicae Cenaе*, no. 3, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1980.

self-centered notions of authority⁸. Together, these actions form a coherent theological vision in which communion with Christ necessarily leads to imitation of His love in daily life. The Eucharist, therefore, is not merely a ritual act but a call to become what one receives Christ's body given for others while the example of foot-washing challenges believers to embody this sacrificial love in acts of service, reconciliation, and solidarity, especially toward the most vulnerable.

Good Friday: The Theology of the Cross

Good Friday, therefore, confronts believers with the depth of both human sin and divine mercy, revealing that the cross is not simply an instrument of suffering but the place where reconciliation between God and humanity is accomplished⁹. In the crucified Christ, God enters fully into the reality of human pain, abandonment, and injustice, transforming these experiences from within rather than eliminating them externally. As Jürgen Moltmann emphasizes, the cross discloses a suffering God who is in solidarity with all who endure oppression, thereby offering hope not in spite of suffering but through it¹⁰. At the same time, the cross must be understood as a decisive victory: it exposes the power of sin, unmasks the illusion of worldly authority, and inaugurates the defeat of death through self-giving love¹¹. Thus, Good Friday calls Christians not to passively accept suffering, but to recognize in the cross both a call to resist injustice and a promise that suffering, when united with Christ, can become a means of transformation and redemption.

Holy Saturday: Silence and Waiting

Holy Saturday deepens this mystery by presenting a liminal space between death and resurrection, where all visible signs of hope seem suspended and God appears silent¹². Theologically, it invites reflection on the "hiddenness" of God, emphasizing that divine action is

⁸ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 270, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013, p.175.

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1974, p.88.

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, p.89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990, p.233.

not always immediately perceptible but often unfolds in ways that transcend human understanding. Christ's descent into the realm of the dead signifies not defeat but the extension of salvation even into the depths of human existence, affirming that no dimension of life or death is beyond God's reach¹³. For believers, this day becomes an invitation to trust amid uncertainty, especially in moments of spiritual dryness, loss, or apparent abandonment. It teaches that faith is not only sustained by visible consolation but also purified through waiting, as the silence of Holy Saturday prepares the ground for the transformative joy of the Resurrection.

Easter Sunday: Resurrection and New Creation

Easter Sunday, therefore, unveils the full meaning of Christ's mission by revealing that divine love is stronger than death and that suffering is not the final word in human existence¹⁴. The resurrection is not merely a miraculous event but the inauguration of a new order of reality in which sin, death, and despair are definitively overcome. It affirms that God's justice is restorative rather than punitive, vindicating Christ's obedience and revealing the ultimate triumph of truth over falsehood. For believers, this transforms hope from a distant expectation into a present and active force, empowering them to live in the light of new life even amid ongoing struggles¹⁵. The resurrection thus becomes the foundation of Christian faith and mission, calling the faithful to witness to renewal, embody joy, and participate in God's ongoing work of making all things new.

Easter Monday: Mission and Continuity

Easter Monday continues the celebration of the resurrection by focusing on its practical and communal implications for the life of the Church¹⁶. The post-resurrection appearances of Christ, as recorded in the Gospels, stress that the risen Lord is not a distant figure but an active presence calling the disciples into mission and service. This day reinforces the transformative power of the Paschal Mystery, showing that resurrection is not only a historical event but a living

¹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, p.234.

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003, p.512.

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p.513.

¹⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Resurrection: Faith or Fact?* Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004, p.143.

reality that shapes the believer's ethical choices, relationships, and engagement with the world¹⁷. By emphasizing witness, community, and the ongoing experience of Christ's presence, Easter Monday invites Christians to embody the hope, joy, and renewal inaugurated at Easter Sunday, thereby extending the liturgical celebration into a daily commitment to live out the resurrection in acts of love,

Conclusively, Holy Week presents a dynamic and transformative theology, weaving together paradoxes of suffering and glory, death and life, and divine initiative and human response. From Palm Sunday's paradoxical kingship and the tension of judgment and devotion during Holy Monday to Wednesday, to Holy Thursday's call to Eucharistic participation and servant leadership, Good Friday's revelation of the cross as reconciliation, Holy Saturday's invitation to trust in God's hiddenness, and Easter Sunday and Monday's triumph of resurrection and ongoing mission, each day reveals a dimension of the Paschal Mystery that shapes Christian discipleship.

By engaging with these events, believers are challenged to move beyond superficial faith and embrace humility, fidelity, repentance, ethical action, and service. Holy Week not only commemorates salvation history but actively forms Christians in the daily practice of love, mercy, justice, and reconciliation. In this way, the journey from Palm Sunday to Easter Monday integrates reflection, participation, and mission, showing that the Paschal Mystery is both a historical reality and a living guide for ethical and spiritual life.

¹⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Resurrection: Faith or Fact*, p.144.