Columns
Spirituality



Fr. Flavie Villanueva, a member of the Society of the Divine Word, kisses the feet of a homeless man after washing them Holy Thursday in Manila, Philippines, April 1, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Eloisa Lopez)



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Here we are, another Holy Week in the midst of pandemic — and it's not working for me. For me, Holy Week needs to be reimagined! Spiritual directors encourage people to insert themselves into Scripture stories as a way of praying. Many counseling and therapy approaches involve "rewriting" our personal stories, with the goal of improving our interactions and self-talk responses, as well as for personal healing. Professional coaches have you recall specific situations and brainstorm varied responses in an effort to be more effective. So, here I go.

Palm Sunday is Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. We know the story and all wave our palm branches as liturgy begins. Everything about the opening procession screams "look at me," which is so different from all other recorded stories about Jesus. Until Palm Sunday never once is Jesus calling attention to himself. Rather, he is drawing attention to God and teaching everyone how to live their best lives for the sake of others.

Maybe Palm Sunday can be a call for all of us to look at how we make entrances. We are all busy with very important ministries: education, social work, healing, arts, liturgy, prayer and presence … the list could go on. But how do we do those ministries? Do we parade in and make sure everyone knows we are there? Or do we arrive unassumingly and start to do what needs to be done? I suspect we all do some of both. I am in no way suggesting we let others take advantage of us; rather I'm suggesting we model Jesus' behavior. Assess the situation, and see how we can both help and empower those with whom we minister.

Holy Thursday — depending on your place of worship — focuses on the institution of the Eucharist or of the universal priesthood. Because of the ongoing pandemic, shared meals outside our households shouldn't happen right now, and shared virtual meals lack the intimacy so needed. Ordained priesthood gets a bad rap as it's part of an institution that is sometimes out of touch with current realities. Universal priesthood also gets a bad rap, largely because of vocabulary, but also because our baptismal call to universal priesthood is rarely mentioned.

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As consecrated religious, we're pretty good at serving others: That’s a large part of our understanding of ministry. It's also what I hear sisters struggle with as they

transition from "independence" to needing some or total care. Maybe we can shift the paradigm of Holy Thursday and look at how we let others serve us. Are we gracious and grateful, or do we "fight it," much like we hear Peter do when Jesus comes to wash his feet? Yes, it may be faster and more efficient to do for ourselves, but is that how we are called to live and model for the world?

Good Friday is the crucifixion of Jesus, a brutal story I find hard to listen to — let alone pray with. Even with the revisions in the liturgy, there still seems to be a lot of blaming. Of all the Holy Week services, this is the one I try to avoid. Remembering the death of loved ones is an important way to keep their memories alive, to keep them with us. Reliving the gory details and placing blame doesn't seem a very healthy way to live, though.

By no means am I suggesting that we ignore the fact that Jesus was arrested, tried, tortured and executed. I am suggesting we also include in our remembrances all the good he did while on Earth and work to follow his example. In our modern world there is more than enough corruption and violence than I can ever process. How can we follow Jesus' example to highlight and change practices and structures for the good of all, knowing that in the process we will likely be as misunderstood as Jesus was? And as horrific as it is to say, some of us may end up arrested, tried, tortured and murdered.

Holy Saturday is a fairly quiet day in Holy Week, until it's time for the vigil service. The vigil includes ritual and storytelling, so important to our Christian tradition. Fire and water and story after story, and welcoming new members through baptism, confirmation and the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, or RCIA. All of it is important and I'm sure I'm not alone when I say everything about the vigil service is *overload*. There is little time to soak in everything happening before moving on, a necessary pace if "the people in the pews" are going to attend.

My thought here is to choose *one* of the many Scripture readings and focus on that. Yes, our salvation story is important and needs to be remembered, but we also need to look forward as well as backward. By narrowing the focus, maybe we can also look forward and explore where we are called to bring the good news of Jesus in new ways, meeting the ever-evolving needs of the times in a very needy world, helping each other transition from death to life as Jesus did that Holy Saturday night. I for one can easily become overwhelmed almost to the point of paralysis if there is too much — too many needs or too much suffering or …

Easter brings the resurrection story. The story is again familiar and also hard to understand. Everyone was scared and confused, rightly so as they saw their friend and leader executed. The men hid while the women did what needed to be done in terms of final rituals for Jesus. The women came face to face with the unbelievable, the ultimate miracle of Jesus' resurrection. They believed and immediately started to spread the good news. The men (sorry, guys) took a bit longer to catch on and act.

Easter celebrates life. Sometimes life is misunderstood and thought of only in terms of "good stuff." Easter celebrates all life: the budding nature that happens around Easter time in the northern hemisphere, but also the resting nature as the southern hemisphere prepares to regenerate. Easter celebrates new possibilities, maybe after bitter disappointments or hardships.

As I reimagine Holy Week, I see Easter as a call to get up, dust myself off and keep trying to follow the example of Jesus.