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Entre Amigos - Commentary/Opinion

Holy Week: Diverse traditions, one faith in the Risen Lord

By Mar Muñoz-Visoso

This year the Holy Week falls quite late (Easter Sunday is April 24). As different from recent years, when it happened much earlier, this *Pascua florida* (“flowery” Easter) will honor its Spanish name by occurring right in the midst of the spring season, with its explosion of new life, color and light.

The Holy Week falls on different dates every year because its time is determined not by the Gregorian calendar we follow today but according to an astronomic event. At the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) it was decided that Easter Sunday should fall on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the Spring equinox (usually March 21). This means that Easter always falls between March 22 and April 25.

I like this late Easter celebrations because usually the weather is more benign and allows people to better enjoy the traditional Holy Week processions and live Stations of the Cross through the streets. With the growth of the Latino community in the United States these celebrations have become more common and less a curiosity, though at times they bump against a culture that still prefers to relegate everything religious to the private sphere.

Generally speaking, Latinos’ relationship with the divine is usually very incarnate and community oriented and, for that very reason, a lot more “cultural.” We like to see and even touch representations of the suffering of Christ because it reminds us that His suffering was, and is, real and for us. Every character in a passion play has a message or elements we can identify with or that makes us question ourselves. We see our daily sufferings reflected in the suffering Christ – and in the Mother who suffers with Him. We hope in the Risen Christ, whose power overcomes even death, and whose resurrection on Easter Sunday inspires joyful singing and celebrations, delicious food and family reunions.

Colorful as they are, our traditions are at risk of staying at the level of pure emotions or simple custom when they are not accompanied by proper and ongoing catechesis. If they don’t lead to real conversion and to the Resurrection, they do not serve their purpose. Without the Resurrection, the Passion of Christ makes no sense.

My first Holy Week in the United States helped me to place value in things I had always taken for granted. Nothing, not-a-thing, out there indicated that it was the most sacred time of the year. Stores did not close; there were no processions, no sound of drums; no foods and products typical of the season could be found behind store windows; very few mentions of the Holy Week could be seen in the media; and, what was most “shocking,”

people worked on Holy Thursday, even in church institutions! I remember thinking: “One wouldn’t know it is the Holy Week unless he or she comes to Church!” Also: “How many Catholics may be lost along the way in such a hostile environment!”

During the Good Friday service, I broke into tears. I felt a deafening silence. Perhaps the feelings of loneliness, of being away from my family and the parish community I was so involved with, emerged freely for the first time after I had left my home and my country. Holy Saturday was a true “desert” experience. And then, the Easter Vigil came as a big lesson and a great gift.

In a bilingual ceremony at a very Hispanic parish, the U.S. church introduced me to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Dozens of adult catechumens had prepared themselves, especially during Lent, to join the Catholic Church. Many received Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist for the first time on that day. And this was only one parish, not even the largest in the diocese! As far as I could remember, I had never seen an adult being baptized in my parish of origin, much less during the Easter Vigil.

In the Paschal symbolism of Spring, those new brothers and sisters in the faith were like flowery new branches announcing new life in the Church; adults who, in front of the assembly and with its support, were consciously and joyfully entering new life in Christ. The ceremony was long (ours are too with all the dramatizations and special devotions we like to add) but I enjoyed with admiration and enthusiasm this “procession” of the “risen ones” that was new to me.

I understood the Church here might be less dependent on, or preoccupied with, the external to evangelize, but certainly was doing a very effective job of proclaiming the Gospel and making disciples of all nations. The experience of that Holy Week certainly made me stronger. It motivated me to better know my faith, so that I could understand and better be able to explain my own traditions to others.

Happy rising with Christ!

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