

A family tradition for Holy Thursday

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Today is Holy Thursday, a remarkable day in the memories of our big Catholic family.

Holy Thursday did not have mandatory services, but we had one. Living in a neighborhood with many Catholic and Jewish families, we celebrated Christian seder in our home.

Passover is an important Jewish feast that commemorates the Israelites' redemption and liberation from Egypt. For Catholics, Holy Thursday is the time to recall the Last Supper, and some Catholics, my family included, memorialize their Judeo-Christian roots by observing a type of seder service on Holy Thursday night.

This was no easy task for my mother, with Easter dinner just a few days away. The foods served at a seder — matzo, maror (bitter herbs), charoset (a mixture of apples, nuts, and cinnamon), roasted egg, parsley, wine, and lamb — must be prepared just right, and many dishes are needed, which keeps teenagers busy with cleanup. Special prayer books were set on the table and we read, and read, and read some more.

The tradition in a seder had the youngest son read the question: “Why is this night different from all the other nights?” One of the older boys mumbled: “I can tell you. All of my friends are out tonight, and we are in here doing the stuff that the Jewish families do. I thought we were Catholics.” Which led my father to double the readings, kosher or not.

There was some comic relief, as it was not clear who would get real wine and who would get grape juice. Our father was not as acutely aware of everyone's age as our mother, and the older kids wreaked havoc by switching receptacles around. The

biggest concern was someone getting giddy during a reading; mess up, and we risked more readings.

By the end of Christian seder, it was well into the evening and there was much to clean up. My mother was exhausted, so the older ones could not abandon her, though the older boys would claim they had to get ready for the Thursday night “watch” at church. After Mass on Holy Thursday, the Eucharist is taken to a side altar of repose. Traditionally, the men of the parish stood watch in solemn prayer, symbolizing the apostles who were supposed to keep watch while Jesus prayed before he was taken captive. The apostles slept instead, prompting Jesus to ask, “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?”

The next morning, our friends would ask where we had been Thursday night. Having heard the answer, a kid once replied, “Wow, you guys are, like, really Catholic!” Who would think we’d be considered “really Catholic” by mimicking what Jewish families do during the holiest week of the year?

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