



Guest Column: Remembrances of Easters past

By **Stephen Gambescia**, Times Guest Columnist

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Editor's Note: This column was received last week in preparation for the Easter holiday.

While Christmas is clearly the most popular (and fun) of the Christian Holy Days, staunch Catholics know Easter should be the most celebrated. Most non-Catholics get the Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday significance, but the other days during holy week are fuzzy.

I come from one of those "big Catholic families" - double digits. And we were a serious Catholic family. We all attended Catholic schools, so we were let out on Wednesday of Holy Week. And even though Holy Thursday did not have mandatory services, we practiced several of our own.

For example, we celebrated Christian Seder on Thursday of Holy Week. Living in a neighborhood with many Jewish families, we were familiar with Seder observances. This led us to wonder why we had to perform a Seder service. Wasn't that for the Jewish families? So while the other Catholic kids were out carousing the neighborhood, we were pondering why this night was different from all the other nights.

Given the Thursday evening activity, it was not easy to rise early on Friday morning. There is no Mass celebrated on Good Friday, although there may be readings and sermons by the pastor. Catholics traditionally stay inside between noon and 3 p.m. in remembrance of Jesus' pain and suffering on the cross.

Not only were we not allowed outside during this time, but our father would mimic the Holy Thursday “watch” in the churches. He designed a homegrown adoration, taking advantage of his prayerful children. He placed a kneeler in his large study replete with prayer books. As a physician, he was quite conscious of safety, so we were asked to focus on an electric candle. Each child had to sign up for a half-hour of prayer on the kneeler. All lights were out except for the flickering light of the candle. When the heavy, sliding pocket door of his study shut, it was judgment time.

For us, this half hour seemed like eternity, yet nobody dared to move from the kneeler. Later, we compared notes on how we survived. The most popular diversion was to consider what to do with our eyes, i.e. open/closed; one open and wondering; or starring at the flickering candle and contemplating our fate.

By Friday evening we had about 36 hours of sequester. Our father asked who wanted to go visit the churches, specifically the Eucharist still in repose from the Holy Thursday watch. The chance to get out was compelling, so we loaded the station wagon and gave our requests to our father on which churches to visit. However, he had other ideas. He knew where the most ornate churches were.

The evening was kind of neat. We parked the car in the church lot while our father explained that we must be solemn and quiet, especially since this was not our parish, and the congregations may not be used to a throng of children storming the altar, which is exactly what we did.

It became a race from the parking lot to the foot of the altar. A dozen kids ran up the aisles. It was not clear if saying the prayer before the Eucharist was part of the race. Regardless, local parishioners were impressed with a group of children being eager to pray; little did they know this was part of our furlough.

When we reassembled in the car, we asked which church was next. On the way to the next church we compared the one we left with others. By the end of the night, we each said which was the “best church” to visit for style, color, and overall presentation.

For kids, Easter can be both solemn and fun, even with the most orthodox parents!

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