

Easter Prayer and Reflection

Jesus, we know that after you died on the cross, your body was placed in the tomb. But on Sunday morning, when some of the women who had followed you went to the tomb, your body was gone. Two figures in bright clothing said to them, "Why are you looking among the dead for one who is alive? He is not here. He has risen." Excited and full of joy, the women ran to tell the disciples and Mary (Luke 24:1-9).

If we had been there, Jesus, we would have shouted for joy. We would have run with the women and called out the good news: "Jesus is alive; he's risen. Come to the grave and see." We would have hugged Mary and gone with her to the empty tomb. There, with her, we would have prayed our thanks.

(All recite the following with upraised hands and arms):

We praise you, God, for raising Jesus from the dead.
We thank you for the great gift of his life and ours.
Help us to believe in the resurrection and to keep on following Jesus all of our lives.
Amen. Alleluia.

When a Catholic steps into the church, he or she dips his or her fingers into a holy water font at the door and blesses himself or herself. This gesture not only has its origins in the ancient practice of purification before prayer, but it serves as a reminder of one's baptism. In making the sign of the cross, a Catholic ought to also renew one's baptismal commitment in his or her heart.

Some churches have preserved the ancient custom of remembering the poor and less fortunate, by providing a **poor box** at the entrance. It is in keeping with the custom of the early Christians who "shared all things in common." (Acts 2:44)

The **nave** of the church, where the congregants gather for worship, ordinarily is equipped with pews and kneelers which are arranged either in rows or in a circle around the altar. In large cathedrals or basilicas, the nave may be bare and have room for standing. Today some churches also use movable furniture to accommodate different sizes of congregations.

Church decor varies. It may be decorated in striking bold colors, subdued pastels, or plain plaster. Paneling, murals, frescoes, marble columns, mosaics, or wooden beams are a few of the many options for interior church designs.

No matter what the decor, the church is pervaded by an air of reverence and quiet, which is conducive to prayer. This is partly due to the lighting effects. Since the Middle Ages, multicolored **stained-glass windows** have been used in churches to add to the devotion. The exquisite artistry of Bible scenes and saints etched in glass provided meaningful visual aids for the commoners who were illiterate. The stained-glass windows were often called the "Bible of the Poor." Modern churches still use stained glass, but often they are designed with contemporary liturgical symbols.

The fourteen **stations of the cross**, which portray the Passion and death of Jesus, adorn the walls or back of the church. These stations usually are plaques, statues, or simple crosses. Early Christians

Nave *Main body of a church building*

Poor Box *Collection box at church entrance for alms for the less fortunate*

Stained-glass Windows *Colorful windows often found in churches; many tell biblical stories or depict saints, others are symbolic*

Stations of the Cross *A series of meditations on the sufferings, death, and burial of Christ*

traced the steps of Christ in Jerusalem during his Passion. After the Moslems conquered the Holy Land, the pilgrimages temporarily ceased, and "stations" were placed in churches as a pious devotion. In 1731, the general features of the stations became uniform and special blessings and indulgences were attached to meditating on Christ's Passion. In order to complete the Paschal Mystery theology, some parishes have unofficially added a fifteenth station, resurrection.

Statues of saints or angels may be on a pedestal, in a niche, or on a side altar. Vatican II placed emphasis on liturgy and the sacraments, and so devotions to the saints take a secondary position in a Catholic's faith life. That is why there are fewer statues in modern churches or even a lack of them. However, statues of Mary, St. Joseph, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and St. Anthony retain their popularity.

Vigil lights, glass vials containing candles or, in line with modern technology, small electric lights triggered when a coin is put into the slot, may burn before the statues or in a separate stand. A candle is lit to pray for a special intention or for the soul of a loved one. Catholics believe prayers can assist the dead who are in **purgatory** to atone for their sins. A candle, too, symbolizes a constant presence. One's prayers continue through the light left burning when we cannot be present.

To an outsider, the most foreboding and curious feature of a Catholic church is the **confessional**. This darkened alcove where one "goes to confession" has often been a stumbling block for prospective converts. The shift in theology of Vatican II aimed to make the confessional less ominous, although private confession of sin still is a vital aspect of Catholic belief and practice.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation today is meant to be a healing experience of the compassionate Christ, and so one no longer needs to confess in the darkness of the confessional. One can opt for a face-to-face confession in which the person who confesses faces the priest

Confessional *Darkened alcove in a church for confession with a screen between the priest and penitent*

Purgatory *Place or condition of temporal suffering and punishment for those who have died in the state of grace, but with some attachment to sin*

Statues *Three-dimensional representations of Jesus, Mary, the saints, or angels; often found in churches, but away from the main altar*