

Understanding Holy Thursday



**Saint Francis of Assisi
Roman Catholic
Church**

Kitchener, Ontario

HOLY THURSDAY:

This service begins at 8:00 pm. As the first words of this celebration (“Mass of the Lord’s Supper”) are spoken the Season of Lent is brought to an end, and the holiest of all days in the Catholic Church begin – the Easter Triduum (the three days of Easter). During the celebration of Holy Thursday five things of great importance to our community of faith unfold: the reception of the holy oils; the ritual of mandatum; the celebration of Eucharist; adoration of Eucharist; and our caring response of service to the poor through a collection of food.

The Reception of Holy Oils reminds us of the church’s important threefold mission of forgiveness, healing and new life. These oils have been consecrated and blessed by our Bishop during the “Chrism Mass” celebrated on the Monday of Holy Week at the Cathedral Basilica in Hamilton. On Holy Thursday we receive the “**Oil of Catechumens**” which will be used to anoint adults preparing for baptism; we receive the “**Oil of Chrism**” used to anoint the newly baptized, those who are confirmed, bishops and priests at their ordination, and altars and churches when dedicated; we receive the “**Oil of the Sick**” used to anoint those who seek God’s healing of body, mind and/or spirit.

The ritual of Mandatum (washing of the feet) takes place on this night. This action is not a re-dramatization of the gospel, but rather is a parable – a parable that requires no words of explanation, nor words spoken during the action. The parable of mandatum simply speaks for itself. It stands as a symbolic reminder that we are all called to share in the mission of the Church, we are called to live and proclaim the gospel, and we are called to service in Christ. The service this ritual action calls us to,

is the humble service of others. Also, and just as important, it calls us to be served – to be free enough to permit others to serve us in Christ.

The **Celebration of Eucharist** (“Mass of the Lord's Supper”) is celebrated. We recall not solely the event we know as the “Last Supper”, but also recall the words of Jesus to his Apostles when he commanded them to do this in his memory. (The Church teaches that Christ “instituted” Eucharist on this night). Each time we celebrate Eucharist we are reminded of the great sacrifice Christ made on our behalf, a sacrifice that implores us to offer prayers of thanks. As well, the Church invites us on this night to “taste fully” the sacrifice of Christ, thus why we receive both the Body and Blood of Christ.

Our Holy Thursday celebration of Eucharist ends in a rather unique fashion. All consecrated Eucharist is removed from the main body of the church and the tabernacle is left open and the vigil candle extinguished; all non-essential furniture is removed; liturgical decorations are removed; any items that are not necessary or needed for Good Friday are removed from the church; people are instructed to vacate the main body of the church; and the church is cast in darkness and somber silence until Holy Saturday. The emptiness of the church stands as a vivid reminder to us of the emptiness the Apostles and followers of Jesus experienced at his death – Jesus has not yet risen. (While we know the news of the Resurrection, the followers of Jesus did not yet know this great news – we are invited to be one with the followers of Christ and imagine we too have not yet heard the news of the resurrection). We immerse ourselves in the pain of his death, and the feelings of emptiness death brings, until the joyful news is proclaimed at Easter Vigil that Christ is not dead but is alive and risen from the dead.

The consecrated Eucharist removed from the main body of the church is processed to a place of adoration downstairs in the Assisi Room. The **Adoration of Eucharist**, the fourth dynamic of our Holy Thursday celebration, now takes place – people who wish are invited to spend some moments of quiet prayer before the Eucharist in order to spiritually reflect upon this great gift Christ has left us. This time of silent adoration will continue until 9:50 pm when those gathered will pray night prayer together. Following night prayer the Eucharist is removed without ritual and placed in a secure, private, place until it is placed back in the tabernacle at Easter Vigil. Until Vigil the main body of the church is empty of the Eucharist presence of Christ.

The final dynamic of Holy Thursday is the **Food Collection**. People are invited to share in the care of those who find themselves in need of food – this is our caring response to Jesus' command to enter into service of others. Our parish Saint Vincent de Paul Society, ministering on behalf of the entire parish community, will distribute the food collection to those in need. This gift of food flows from our understanding of Eucharist, the food of everlasting life, for just as we need the spiritual food from heaven, we also require food to nourish our earthly bodies. Everyone is invited to bring some food with them to the Holy Thursday celebration, which they will take with them to their pew. During the time of the preparation of the gifts people will be invited to bring their food donation to the front of the church and place it around the altar – a visible sign and reminder to us that Eucharist calls us to care for those in need.