Lent & Easter at Gethsemani in Thomas Merton's Day

Br. Paul Quenon OCSO

Lent

In 1956 Pope Pius XII completed a reform of the Lenten and Easter liturgy. This proved to be a foreshadowing of what was to come with Vatican II, which occasion marks the greater distinction between the old and new liturgy. One of the most conspicuous items of the old liturgy was the Lenten curtain. The Lenten curtain at Gethsemani was made of heavy purple felt and hung perhaps twenty feet high and thirty feet across the face of the sanctuary. I never saw the curtain since that practice of separating the sanctuary from the community during Lententide had been discontinued by 1958 when I entered the monastery. However, the mechanism for raising it, positioned high on the two pillars on either side of the sanctuary, were still in place. That was unsightly and was eventually removed.

We never covered statues with purple cloth, since we had no statues to cover. No statures or images in church has been the traditional Cistercian norm, although there was an exception for Our Lady. Gethsemani, however, had stained glass windows with figures of saints. The primary one, behind the high altar, was Mary in heaven with Cistercian saints hovering under her cloak. It was slowly illuminated from behind during the singing of the Salve Regina at the end of Compline and slowly faded out during the Angelus following.

For Ash Wednesday with Mass and the smearing of the ashes, we went bare footed. A cross of ashes were smeared across the top of our bowed, shaved heads. But in the renovated church is a pebble floor—a rough surface of smooth pebbles embedded in concrete. They are only about an eighth of an inch high and I never minded the change, but some senior monks with tender feet found it hard to walk. As one old priest explained: 'You might fall off the stones!' So we now wear shoes.

One distinctive architectural feature we had was the 'Jube box'. Readings for Vigils in choir were from those elevated Jube boxes. There

were two, one on each side of the choir — at the 'Abbot's end' — where the Abbot choir stall was located. One had to climb a dozen steps to a platform with railings around and a lectern from which the Latin reading could be heard. With the adoption of English and the use of microphones the 'Jube box' was no longer necessary. Its name was based on words the reader would sing and bow, asking for a blessing from the Abbot: 'Jube, Domine, benedicere' [Deign, O Lord, to bless]. With the church renovation of 1967 the 'Jube box' disappeared.

On Holy Thursday morning, there was a special washing of the feet in the cloister hallway. This was for a selection of poor men from the neighborhood (men only). They were seated along the cloister and opposite each stood a monk or novice who would upon the signal wash the feet of the man's feet. Once washed, you kissed the foot and you passed some money into his hand. I only did that once, and I bowed and made as if to kiss his foot, but I didn't actually press my lips to his foot. It seemed unsanitary. The monastery had an offering to the poor every Wednesday morning — a regular food distribution at the gatehouse, with a line-up of cars to the end of the front avenue.

Foot washing was a weekly practice of the community on Saturday evening. There were four washers who went around to all the several dozen Choir Monks while antiphons were sung by all. These four were the incoming and outgoing servants for meals in the refectory for that week.

On Holy Thursday afternoon there was washing of the feet by the Abbot and Superiors for the whole community, including Lay Brothers. It was not in the church, but in the Chapter Room. After the washing the narrative of the Last Supper was read from St. John's Gospel. When it came to an end with Jesus' words, 'Let us rise and go forth', we did just that and left the Chapter to the Church for Mass.

These days, the foot-washing is in church during afternoon Mass after the Gospel, and a token number of retreatants are included. The Abbot and Superiors do the washing with the help of a server. St. John's long 'Priestly Prayer' is read at the end of communion while we are seated. Finally, we rise and in procession singing, take the Blessed Sacrament elsewhere to the Reservation Chapel, where it is kept until communion time on Good Friday.

From then on the use of the organ is discontinued and no sound of bells is heard. The altar is stripped and the tabernacle lies open and empty with an air of desolation. A seven candle Menorah is placed in the middle of the choir for the Tenebrae at Vigils on Friday and Saturday. No

other light appears during the service. Psalms and readings are by the Menorah light, and after each one a candle is snuffed out. After the final reading, which was sung, the last candle is extinguished, and the church is left in darkness. The monks remain kneeling at their stalls for a couple of minutes. Merton expressed this darkness as the community being bound into one.

This service is a dramatic difference from the former Latin liturgy, which was sung with the lights on, with sung antiphons and psalm tones. There was no Menorah and it was not strictly speaking a Tenebrae service. Also, this Tenebrae service, now like all other Vigil services since adoption of the English liturgy, had only six psalms. The six have displaced the twelve psalms which were typical of the Latin liturgy — something that Fr. Louis and others complained about as being too lengthy. As a result, more time is made available for Lectio Divina.

On Good Friday morning a special service for the Choir Monks was held — a long recitation by alternating choirs of the entire 150 psalms. The Lay Brothers were not included. It took about three hours, and one was left feeling buzzed at the end. This corresponded to the three hours Jesus spent on the cross. Nowadays, we spend one hour with selected psalms read by individuals in turn, with intervening prayers. Attendance is optional, but most attend, including some guests.

For the Latin Good Friday singing of St. John's passion, the three who sung the Passion first prostrated full length on the floor. Meanwhile, we all left the choir and spread out on the empty floor in front of the sanctuary. This was to make room for community prostration at the point in the narrative when it came to the death of Jesus — everyone prostrated full length on the floor for a minute in silence. Now that open space is occupied by chairs and we kneel for a moment.

There were a few incidents of disappointment for Fr. Louis (Merton) with the new English liturgy, and one was at the first English rendition of St. John's Gospel on Good Friday. Previously it had been sung in Latin by three voices. On the first English Good Friday it was merely recited by three voices with a translation now discontinued. I was standing behind Fr. Louis at the time and about four minutes into the reading he'd had enough, made a profound bow and walked out of church. By the following year Fr. Chrysognous had composed a musical rendition which we have continued to use since then. It has enduring appeal.

One peculiar item particular to the Triduum is *the clapper*. Bells of no kind are rung from the time of Mass on Holy Thursday until the Gloria of the Easter Vigil Mass. So to notify the community of times for the Divine

Office we used a wooden clapper, which could be carried around the hallways. The old clapper, which was crafted here, was a wooden box with a crank. Inside the box were a row of wooden flanges which flapped when the crank was turned. It almost sounded like a machine gun!

The smaller, new one, also crafted in our carpenter shop, is a eight-inch paddle on a perpendicular handle, held for swinging. Attached to the paddle is a hinged wooden swing hammer which hit the ends of the paddle when the brother swung his arm. It was not so loud, just a discreet clack-clack. Most of the community wears watches now and depend less on hearing the clapper. In the old days wrist watches were not allowed, not even for the bellringer, who used a leather cased pocket watch.

Easter

It took several years to work out all the liturgical kinks for the new Easter celebration. One major change was the location of the Paschal fire. Previous to our church renovation, which was completed in 1967, the Pascal fire for the Easter Vigil was located outside the front door. Afterwards, the fire was re-located behind the church beyond the cemetery. I remember the one in 1968 when the flames sent up a lot of sparks that blew towards the cemetery. That somehow seemed ominous, and later that year we had three deaths, including Fr. Louis'. After the candles were lit, one held by each individual, we headed toward the church along the curved walkway skirting the graves. The procession that time got stalled and there was a prolonged wait because someone forgot to turn out all the lights in church which is meant to be dark on entry. I was behind Fr. Louis, who got impatient and restless, and he turned and looked over the railing. That also seemed auspicious, like he was thinking of jumping the wall. By December, in a sense, he had — and returned to be buried in our cemetery — but I entertained no idea of anything so drastic as that at the time.

One of the most interesting changes in the English Paschal fire rite was something that was a purely local thing — the Canticle of the Fire. We arrived at the unlit fire and held a ceremony for the lighting of the fire. The wood was ignited by striking iron on flint rock. One stood in darkness and heard the tick-tick of the hammer on flint stone until sparks caught on a pallet of wood shavings. These were blown into flame and then set to firre the heap of logs, carefully constructed criss-cross. Meanwhile, a canticle was sung by the cantor celebrating the fire. It used many symbols — the rock in the desert of the exodus, Christ the rock struck, etc. The canticle was written by Br. Chrysostom whose baritone

voice carried well in a large crowd. He was the one who devised this 'para -liturgical rite' and the Canticle. The community loved it — standing in the darkness, hearing the hammer, watching the growth of flame and the growing light, followed by the blessing of the large Pascal candle and its lighting from the wood fire.

With the revision of the rite under Pope Benedict XVI, the fire must be lit already when the community arrives. And once again our ceremony takes place outside the front door of the church where it is accessible to the guests.

Masses of Lent and Easter are concelebrated, of course, as they are daily since Vatican II. Previously there was a single celebrant, the Abbot, with Deacon and Sub-deacon for Easter Mass and Solemnities. Now, with concelebrations, many priests are involved, at that time numbering twenty-five or thirty. Masses began with an entrance procession, which on Solemnities would process around the high curved wall behind the sanctuary, while a hymn was sung. Visually stunning. Now, with the visiting crowd on the ground floor, the priests enter at the back of the church and process down the middle to the altar.

Through the Easter season a large, golden banner is suspended behind the sanctuary between two pillars. It was sewn by the late Lavrans Neilson who produced many banners and icons during his decades in the monastery. The Easter banner was about 25' by 10'. It portrayed Christ the Word with scripture held in one arm. The figure emerges from a blue and black oculus of oblong shape, as indicating the Word emerging from the dark womb of the Father. It immediately won the approval of the community and is still used annually.

Recently, a second banner is hung on Good Shepherd Sunday — the fourth Sunday of Easter — until the end of the Easter season. It is an image of the young Good Shepherd, also by Br. Lavrans, originally a black and white woodcut, but then projected and imprinted on a banner.

Easter day breakfast is sweet rolls or cakes from our kitchen, and for the main meal fish, pasta, and wine or soft drinks. In the old days neither fish nor wine was allowed. Wine may have been common in France, but not in America. Perhaps in the early decades of the 20th century, when we produced apple cider, it was served at Easter. Whether it was fermented by March or April one can only guess.

Vatican II Changes on the Altar

We always had used the thin, white communion wafer, but for the principal celebrant there was an enlarged host—about 5" diameter for

the sake of visibility. That was broken in pieces for the priests' communion. The small, standard sized wafer was used for the community.

fter Vatican II there was a desire to make the bread look more like bread. So in our bakery Br. Rene devised a larger host, about ½" thick that was deeply scored so as to be broken into enough pieces for the community. It was dark and substantial and tasted like, well, a dens e bread. We used that for many years, but the first time it was used almost killed the whole experiment. Evidently the bakers did not sample the bread, so when the time came for communion the celebrant, his two assistants at the altar, and the row of concelebrants behind began chewing the bread. They chewed and chewed until it was becoming an embarrassment. It was so dense they could hardly swallow it down.
That was quickly corrected for the next day, and the new host continued in use for long years. Now we have resumed the thin wafer, made by our Cistercian nuns who make it as a livelihood.

Once the practice of communion under both forms—bread and wine—was allowed, there was need for chalices big enough for our community of 150 or more monks. A carpenter in the neighboring Marion County carved two beautiful dark wooden chalices that stood about 10" high and about 5" wide. They bellied down from the rim in a smooth curve and were positioned on a stem. A true work of art and craft. Plenty of wine for all. Once the number of monks shrank.

Another chalice was crafted by our own silversmith, Br. Richard, which was silver, with black wooden handles and black, vertical, wood strips mounted around the surface. This one was reserved for the concelebrants. Another single chalice was pretty interesting. It came from Marivald in Germany and was made from bomb metal. Made by a monk who had been a pilot in the Luftwaffe, and was given to our former Abbot Fr. Timothy Kelly for his ordination

Conclusion

Merton loved Latin and continued to use the Latin breviary when alone at the hermitage. At times he would sing the Kyrie or the Gloria and the appropriate Proper. I never heard him complain about the English liturgy as a whole. However, after the early change to English we had to draw from existing English hymns, many from the Anglican tradition. For Merton , it seemed like a step backwards. He came from that background. Eventually, new hymns were written by Fr. Chrysognous Waddell, which Fr. Louis considered among the best. Fr. Chrysognous, trained at Curtis in

Philadelphia, also wrote new psalm tones, antiphons, and responsorial psalms for the Office and for Mass. A complete musical liturgy. I remember the first Vespers performed in English when Fr. Chrysognous looked apprehensively across from the choir organ at Fr. Louis to register his reaction, but I detected no disappointment in his face if any was there.

The style of antiphons Fr. Chrysognous wrote was in continuity with the Gregorian chant, but simpler. Like Gregorian, they were modal tones; rhythms were not regular but freestyle, beats determined by words and accents. Words are primary and normative in plain chant. The notation was also in square shaped notes on the four-line staff. An accomplished jazz musician friend of mine, Dick Sisto, said he was happy to see that our music kept integrity.

With the shift to English, the magnificent choir volumes of the Latin were removed. They were large enough for three monks to see at the same time: about 30" high, 18" wide and 5" thick. The cover was leather with brass trimming around the edges and a brass Sacred Heart in the middle. They were held shut with two brass clasps, and when all together closed and clasped them at the end the church resounded like a battle of rifles.

Books replacing them were printed in our print shop and put in a thick notebook snap binder. Supposedly that was temporary—temporary remained until 2008, when the Abbot, Fr. Elias who is a bookbinder, began producing lovely hard-bound copies. They are hand sewn so the book lays flat on the desk, with embossed titles, and colorful marbled paper inside the cover.

Today, our services are more accessible, and less demanding. The emphasis is on prayer, rather than ritual. Unfortunately, the body is less engaged with no more full prostrations and kneeling at the choir desk, but with an ageing community that became less do-able anyhow. Even getting down on the knees for the foot-washing is a challenge to some. There is no more distinction between Choir Monks and Lay Brothers. All come to the English services and share the prayer together.

Br. Paul Quenon o.c.s.o. has been a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in America since 1958. With many others, he benefited from the teaching of Thomas Merton as their Novice Master. He has published many poetry collections, as well as his memoirs and journals. He is also a photographer who keeps a record of life at Gethsemani, a act which he sees as a form of meditation. In June 2026 will appear a new book of his poetry, *Where Time Its Silence Keeps.*