

Faith Fact



The Color Symbolism of Lent and Easter

Color is an unspoken language that creates an immediate, emotional connection with the meaning of an event. Colors play an important part in the liturgical year of the Catholic Church for just that reason. There are many celebrations and observances in which color is used as part of the symbolism. However, the seasons of Lent and Easter are particularly rich in the use of color.

Lent

Purple (actually a shade of violet) is the traditional color associated with Lent, which is the 40-day period of time that comes after Ash Wednesday and ends on Easter Sunday. Purple is a color rich in symbolism. It is a deep, almost night-like color that focuses our attention on the fasting and repentance associated with the Lenten season. It is also a color of royalty, particularly the Roman emperors at the time of Christ. As an act of derision toward Our Lord, Pilate placed a purple robe on Jesus, whom he called “King of the Jews”. Turning this act of scorn on its end, however, the final Sunday of the liturgical year in November is the Solemnity of Christ the King, in which the true royalty of Christ is revealed. The fourth Sunday in Lent is called “Laetare Sunday”. “Laetare” is Latin for “rejoice”. It occurs after the midpoint of Lent and because of that the deep purple color of the vestments are lightened somewhat to “rose”. It is a time of celebration in that, though Lent is a time of sacrifice, the resurrection of the Lord following His death on the cross is getting closer.

Holy Week

Holy Week is the week leading up to Easter Sunday beginning with Palm Sunday. Throughout Holy Week, Christians follow the footsteps of Jesus beginning with His triumphant entrance into Jerusalem and ending with His death on Good Friday. Palm Sunday’s color is red and, even though this Mass commemorates Christ entering Jerusalem in triumph, this color foreshadows His death on the cross on Friday. Later in the week on Holy Thursday, white is the color of vestments and the altar because it is a time of joy as this liturgy relives the Last Supper, the foundation for today’s Mass and formation of the priesthood. Once Holy Thursday (also called Maundy Thursday) is completed, the mood changes and moves to a time of remembrance of Christ’s crucifixion, death, and His body being laid in the tomb. The color on Good Friday is red, symbolic of the blood Christ shed for our sins. Since Mass is not celebrated on Good Friday, altars are stripped bare to symbolize the emptiness of our lives in anticipation of the Risen Lord who is to come on Easter.

Easter

The celebration of Easter Vigil is one of the most important in the liturgical calendar. The bold reds of Good Friday give way to the brilliant whites of the Easter season. At the Vigil the first light is ignited, the creation story is retold and adults new to the Church are baptized, confirmed, and given Holy Communion for the first time. It is truly a joyful time symbolized by white. When Easter comes we have the Resurrection and God’s promise of salvation. Here too, the main color associated with this celebration is white. It symbolizes both the bright light of the moment of Resurrection and the purity of God’s love for His people. The colors of Lent and Easter in addition to those of Holy Week are significant to the celebrations and observances of these important liturgical events. They help believers better understand and become more fully immersed in the powerful mystery of being an Easter people.

Source: Catholic Financial Life (online)