



THE ARCHDIOCESE *of* BIRMINGHAM

Office for Ethnic Chaplaincies and Eastern Catholic Churches
Co-ordinator: Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Semana Santa

Reflection for Holy Week

3 April 2026

Mgr Daniel McHugh

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”

- Isaiah 53 : 3

Good Friday

I had always been interested in going to Spain in the Semana Santa (Holy Week). When I finished my time as a Parish Priest, I had the opportunity to go to take part. I chose to go to Malaga with my sister, Geraldine, and I was not disappointed, though the weather could have been better! Semana Santa is the annual tribute to the Passion of Jesus; you can read about and view it in outline on Wikipedia. It is usually celebrated by Catholic religious brotherhoods and confraternities that form penitential processions on the streets of almost every city and town during Holy Week. A common feature



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is the general usage of the penitential robe by some of the participants in the processions; this garment consists of a tunic, a hood with a conical tip (capirote). The robes were widely used in the middle ages by penitents who would demonstrate their penitence while still masking their identity. The other common feature is that every brotherhood carries magnificent pasos or floats with sculptures that depict scenes from the Gospels related to the Passion of Our Lord and/or the Sorrows of Our Lady. The pasos are accompanied by marching bands performing “*marchos processionales*” a special type of composition devoted to the images and the confraternities. In Malaga 42 brotherhoods make 45 processions through the streets of Malaga showing realistic wooden sculptures depicting scenes from the Passion, or images of the Virgin Mary showing sorrow.

A striking feature of the images carried in the processions, and then kept in the Churches, is the influence of Spanish Baroque (1600 – 1700) a dramatic, artistic movement with a dedication to realism, dark contrasts and deep emotional intensity. Key artists were Diego Velázquez, who set the standard for portraiture, while others like Francisco de Zurbaran painted dramatic, mystical religious scenes. An article I have read says: “Unlike the more vibrant Italian or Flemish Baroque, the Spanish was generally more sombre and intense, reflecting the country’s profound religious faith and economic struggles.” It was that Faith so publicly on display that struck me in the processions of Holy Week. A highlight was being able to concelebrate the



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Last Supper Mass on Holy Thursday evening, where my year of Spanish years ago served me well (I was once in a community of Spanish Recollect Augustinians before joining the Diocese).

In Holy Week our commemoration of the Passion and Death of Our Lord and the Sorrows of Our Lady are much more muted than *Semana Santa* in Spain. However, the Passion and Death of Jesus that is central to the Liturgy on Good Friday afternoon, remain very moving especially the unveiling and veneration of the Cross. Fr Joseph Pollard of “Finding Fresh Light” asks: “What part do I play in this tragedy that is the passion and death of Jesus?” He goes on to say it’s true we were not there at that sad moment in history 2000 years ago, but Calvary goes on every day in some far away dictatorship or in drug-infested inner city families and in the family we are part of. He asks: “What part do I play in the drama? Am I Peter denying my Faith? Am I Pilate washing my hands? Am I one of the cowardly disciples who flee when it gets too rough?”

One of the places where I see Calvary re-enacted today is Nigeria. Just recently the Bishops from Nigeria went to give their periodic report called the ‘Ad Limina’ to the Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV. Vatican News described the visit coming at a particularly delicate moment for the Church in the African country, when Christian communities have been facing a serious situation of violence for years... In this context, the bishops have asked the



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faithful to accompany the Pilgrimage of the Bishops, so that meeting with the Holy See will contribute to strengthening the mission of the Church in Nigeria and the support Christian communities living among grave difficulties.” Aid to the Church in Need has frequently pointed to the suffering of Christians in Nigeria asking us to remember them in prayer and where possible with material support. Joseph Pollard concludes his reflection saying, “Sometimes I wonder if the reality of Calvary Past and the challenges of Calvary Present are softened, rather than sharpened, in us when we sing the touching lines of “Were you there when they crucified my Lord” and when we conduct the stylised liturgy of Good Friday?”

Let us meditate on the words from Isaiah 53 in the first reading:

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”