

HOLY WEDNESDAY¹

The Wednesday of Holy Week is known as Spy Wednesday, Good Wednesday (Western Churches), and Holy and Great Wednesday (in the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches).

This is a day of remembrance of the betrayal by Judas, seen by followers of the canonical gospels as a clandestine spy among the disciples. New Testament accounts of Holy Week tell that after Palm Sunday, the Sanhedrin gathered and plotted to kill Jesus before the feast of Pesach (Passover). On the Wednesday before his death, Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the Leper. As he sat at the supper table with his disciples, a woman named Mary anointed Jesus' head and feet with a costly oil of spikenard. The disciples were indignant, asking why the oil was not instead sold and the money given to the poor. But Judas Iscariot wanted to keep the money for himself. Then Judas went to the Sanhedrin and offered to deliver Jesus to them in exchange for money. From this moment on, Judas sought an opportunity to betray Jesus.

In reference to Judas Iscariot's intent to betray Jesus, formed on Holy Wednesday, the day is sometimes called “Spy Wednesday”. The word spy, as used in the term, means “ambush, ambuscade, snare”. Additionally, among the disciples, Judas clandestinely was a spy and Wednesday was the day he chose to betray Christ.

Liturgy within the Catholic Church:

Today, the term “Tenebrae” or “Darkness” refers to a Holy Week service usually held on Spy Wednesday that involves the gradual extinguishing of candles on a Tenebrae hearse, readings related to the Passion of Jesus, and the strepitus (loud noise).

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Tenebrae liturgy of matins and lauds of Maundy Thursday (Holy Thursday) used to be celebrated in the afternoon or evening of Good Wednesday. The name comes from the Latin word tenebrae, meaning darkness. In this service, all the candles on a special candelabra and on the altar were gradually extinguished except for one. This was then hidden, and the church was left in complete darkness. Next, after recitation of Psalms 50-51 and a special prayer, a loud noise (in Latin strepitus) was made, which was originally a signal for the ministers to depart but was later interpreted as symbolizing the confusion and terror that accompanied the death of Jesus, including the earthquake that, according to the Gospel of Matthew 27:51, followed. A similar celebration of matins and lauds of Good Friday and Holy Saturday used to be held towards the close of each of the preceding days. This custom is still retained by those Catholic Churches which celebrate the pre-1955 Holy Week Reforms.

In the older form of the Mass known as the Tridentine Mass the readings for Holy Wednesday are taken from Isaiah 62:11; 63:1-7 and the Gospel according to St. Luke 22:1-71; 23:1-53. In the 1955 Holy Week Reform, the first 38 verses of the 22nd chapter of St. Luke were removed. Those 38 verses are retained in the Roman Catholic Churches which celebrate the pre-1955 Holy Week.

¹ Excerpt from the *OMS – Les Chevaliers du Verbe – Lectionary* by Sâr Cœur de la Croix.



Holy Wednesday procession in Villarreal, Spain.

Byzantine Rite

In the Byzantine Rite, the theme of Holy and Great Wednesday is the commemoration of the sinful woman who anointed Jesus before his crucifixion and burial; a second theme is the agreement to betray Jesus made by Judas Iscariot.

The day begins with the celebration of the Presanctified Liturgy on Tuesday afternoon. Later that evening (in parish practice) or early the following morning, the matins follows the special Holy Week format known as the Bridegroom Service. Towards the end of matins, the Hymn of Kassiani is sung. The hymn, (written in the 9th century by Kassia) tells of the woman who washed Christ's feet in the house of Simon the Leper (Luke 7:36–50). Much of the hymn is written from the perspective of the sinful woman:

Service of the Sacrament of Holy Unction.

“O Lord, the woman who had fallen into many sins, sensing Your Divinity, takes upon herself the duty of a myrrh-bearer. With lamentations she brings you myrrh in anticipation of your entombment. "Woe to me!" she cries, "for me night has become a frenzy of licentiousness, a dark and moonless love of sin. Receive the fountain of my tears, O You who gather into clouds

the waters of the sea. Incline unto me, unto the sighings of my heart, O You who bowed the heavens by your ineffable condescension. I will wash your immaculate feet with kisses and dry them again with the tresses of my hair; those very feet at whose sound Eve hid herself in fear when she heard You walking in Paradise in the twilight of the day. As for the multitude of my sins and the depths of Your judgments, who can search them out, O Savior of souls, my Savior? Do not disdain me Your handmaiden, O You who are boundless in mercy.”

The Byzantine musical composition expresses the poetry so strongly that it often leaves many people in a state of prayerful tears. The Hymn can last upwards of 25 minutes and is liturgically and musically a highpoint of the entire year.

In Greece (and some other places the custom has spread to) all members of the church receive Holy Unction on Wednesday evening.

It is on account of the agreement made by Judas to betray Jesus on this day that Orthodox Christians fast on Wednesdays (as well as Fridays) throughout the year.



Service of the Sacrament of Holy Unction (Anointing of the Sick), during Great and Holy Wednesday. The Holy Oil (Chrism) is blessed by the Holy Spirit and is used for anointing the faithful for the healing of infirmities of the soul and body. In the Greek Orthodox Church, all members of the church receive Holy Unction on Holy Wednesday evening.