

Vigil at the Altar of Repose at Home

For Maundy Thursday
April 9, 2020



Altar of Repose from St. Martin's Episcopal Church

What is an altar of Repose?

After the Agape Meal and Foot Washing, the main altar of a parish is typically stripped, and an altar other than the main altar of the parish is set up with the consecrated bread and wine from the Maundy Thursday Eucharist and saved or reserved for communion on Good Friday.

The altar of repose may be in a chapel or a room away from the church. It is usually decorated with candles and flowers. Members of the congregation may participate in a watch or vigil at the Altar of Repose from the conclusion of the Maundy Thursday service until the beginning of the Good Friday service. At some churches, people sign up for their hours of vigil, from 7 pm until 7 am on the morning of Good Friday. For us at home this year, during the hours of watch, we may contemplate and meditate on an image such as this one, or set up our own, using any table or surface and place icons or a cross, rosary, palm cross, flowers, or any other symbols of Jesus to meditate on. You may also choose to light candles or incense at your altar, too.

History and Significance

The tradition of keeping vigil through the night on Maundy Thursday comes from the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus goes off to pray and asks his disciples to pray with him as he agonizes about his coming Passion and death, but they fall asleep. Jesus is exasperated, and, when he finds them

sleeping asks Peter, "Couldn't you keep watch with me for one hour?" (*Matthew 26:40*)

The Altar of Repose is intended to encourage the congregation to spend some time in prayer and adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Just as the three disciples were invited to watch and pray for an hour, so, too, Jesus invites all of us His disciples to watch and pray (*Matthew 26:36-45*).

This vigil commemorates that night when the disciples were unable to heed His request. Will we watch and pray not to be put to the test? This is a most holy and solemn night, and it needs to be treated with all the dignity that we can muster.

While sitting at your altar of repose, you may choose to meditate on *Matthew 26:36-45*. Read it several times, and ponder what sticks out to you; what did you notice that maybe you hadn't noticed before?

It is also common during the hour of sitting vigil to do an examen or reflection on your own life. Examen is not judgment; they are a way to see where our growth edges are, and to repent of those things which we ought not to have done.

On the morning of Good Friday, Jesus is arrested and taken before Pilate. On this day, Pilate is able to release one prisoner, but rather than releasing Jesus, the crowd becomes riled up shouting for Pilate to crucify Jesus. He is stripped of his clothing and dressed in a purple robe, and a crown of thorns. He is beaten and forced to carry his own cross. He is nailed to the cross, and at noon, he breathes his last.

This is why we meditate and spend the night in vigil knowing it is his last night. Try to imagine you are the disciples sitting up with him, and not knowing he will rise again, and see what that feels like. It is a way to prepare ourselves for Good Friday. Traditionally, the Sacrament that's left on the Altar of Repose is

used for the Good Friday liturgy as no new hosts are consecrated on this day because we live on Good Friday as if Jesus is dead through our liturgies. One way we do this is through using only reserved hosts for communion.

A Daily Examen

(from Prayerfully Reviewing Your Day: Daily Examen)

Part of the rich tradition of the Church is recognizing the need to reflect on the day's activities—to remember God's invitation and our response or lack of response. Saint Ignatius of Loyola developed a simple method by which you can review each day in a way that will help you grow in self-understanding and free you to follow God's will. This practice is often called the Daily Examen. Many people choose to practice this prayerful review of their day before going to bed at night by following the five steps below.

Stillness: Recalling God's Presence

Relax in God's presence in your favorite prayer place and posture. Be aware of how God shows his love for you in all his gifts to you. Be thankful as you think of God the Father's love, the love of his Son Jesus, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Ask the Holy Spirit to come into your heart and to help you to look honestly at your actions this day and how you have responded in different situations. With the Spirit's inspiration, you can recognize what draws you close to God as well as what pulls you away from God.

Gratitude: Expressing Thankfulness

Review your day and give thanks to God for his gifts. Try not to choose what to be thankful for but rather to see what springs to mind as you reflect. Think of the concrete details of your day—the aroma of coffee brewing, a smile from a co-worker, or a beautiful rainbow. Recall the gifts that God has given you that you can share with others—your ability to help in a crisis, your sense of humor, or your patience with children. Pause and express your gratitude to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Reflection: Looking Back on Your Day

Again review the events of the day and notice how you acted in the many situations in which you found yourself. Recall your feelings and motives to see whether you considered all of the possibilities and freely followed God's will. Ask yourself when you were conscious of God's presence. Think about opportunities you had to grow in faith, hope, and charity. When we think about why we did or did not take advantage of these opportunities, we can become aware of how we might change our actions in the future. Be grateful for the occasions when you freely chose a course to help others. Perhaps you let a shopper with a small order go ahead of you in line or did not join in a conversation critical of a co-worker. These are examples of responding freely as God wants us to. When we reflect on the times we did or didn't act with God's grace, we can be more sensitive to developing habits of positive responses.

Sorrow: Asking for Forgiveness

After you have asked for the Holy Spirit's guidance in recalling and reflecting on the actions of your day, spend time talking with God or Jesus. Express sorrow for the times you failed to follow his direction and ask him to be with you the next time you encounter a similar situation. Give thanks to God for the grace that enabled you to follow his will freely. Feel the sorrow and gratitude in your heart as you converse with God.

Hopefulness: Resolving to Grow

Ask God to help you as you look forward to a new day tomorrow. Resolve to cooperate and trust in the loving guidance of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Conclude the day's prayerful review with the Lord's Prayer.

By prayerfully reviewing your day, you will experience the difference it can make in the way you live. If you make a habit of practicing the Daily Examen, you will grow closer to God in your thoughts and deeds and will be free to choose to follow Him.