

Host your own family Seder meal

For Holy Week, bring Jewish roots of Mass to life



Vladimir Mauricio-Perez



We can't transmit the Christian faith to our children without transmitting the story of our Jewish Fathers. Teaching the next generation the importance of Judaism and its practices in our faith – and especially in the Mass – will help them better understand who Jesus was and what he did, and also appreciate our Jewish brothers and their traditions.

“We have to teach our children about our Jewish roots,” said Sister Magdalit Bolduc, liaison for Jewish-Catholic relations for the Archdiocese of Denver and member of the Community of the Beatitudes. “Some parishes host Seder meals during Holy Week... because [it is] the historical context of the Christian Passover.”

(To see how the Christian Passover [the Mass] has deep roots in the Passover meal, see the article [“From the Passover Seder to the Eucharist.”](#))

The Passover Seder is an ancient Jewish practice that recalls the deliverance of the chosen people from Egyptian slavery as told in the Book of Exodus. It's meant to make the same mystery present and pass it on to the next generation.



“So many Catholics are amazed when they discover this,” Sister Bolduc said. “Being able to witness the Seder as a family celebration and how it can be transmitted in such a fun way [is very enriching].”

The ritual is directed toward the children. “The evening needs to be prayerful, but also must keep the children’s attention and transmit them in an interactive way their story of salvation,” she said.

Sister Bolduc assures that hosting a home Seder is not disrespectful to “our elder brothers in the faith.” Rather, she says that immense work has been done in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue and relationship for the last 20 years and “both communities agree that it is time to overcome fears in order to establish a relationship of trust and respect.”

Sister Bolduc helped to explain some parts of the Seder meal to aid you in hosting your own Seder. This, of course, is not meant to be a home-made Eucharistic celebration.

Make recipes with symbolism

Having lamb for the meal would, of course, be the best way to bring to life this event. In addition – or if that is not possible – it’s better if the food on the table is symbolic. A good example would be to bake a cake or pie in the form of a lamb or a Biblical character. Parents can then ask their children why it was baked in that shape. Parents are also encouraged to include their children in the preparation of recipes – such as rolling the unleavened bread pieces – and incite them to ask questions.

Use the Seder plate to retell the story

The father of the house is responsible for explaining the meaning behind each of the food items on the table. They help retell and relive the Exodus story. This should be done in an engaging way and asking many questions. A short explanation of each item is included in the infographic at the end of the article.

Dress up and reenact

Some family traditions include wearing a tunic and head covering to immerse themselves more fully into the stories being told. More than that, children and parents can prepare skits retelling Bible stories or even use puppets to do so, while asking questions about the characters or guessing the story. For example, reenacting the story of Moses being found in the river would incorporate the whole family.

Such practices developed from a tradition of transmitting the faith orally to the successive generations. The involvement of parents “is important” and “can make a real difference in their children’s lives,” Sister Bolduc said.



Hide a piece of *matza*

This traditional practice is called the *afikomen*, which comes from the Greek word for “dessert.” The half-piece of the *matza* is typically hidden in the house by a parent during the Seder without the kids looking. After eating the meal, the children are sent to look for it. When they find it, each is given a prize, which is usually candy, money or a small gift. Then, everybody eats a piece. This practice was introduced in the Middle Ages by Jewish families to make the Seder more entertaining for children.

Sister Bolduc recalled that our last three popes have emphasized the importance of growing in relationship with our Jewish brothers. She especially recalled Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium*: “The Church... looks upon the people of the covenant and their faith as one of the sacred roots of her own identity... As Christians, we cannot consider Judaism as a foreign religion.”

What you need for a Seder Meal

- 1. Shank bone (*Z’roa*):** Symbol of the Passover sacrifice
- 2. An egg (*Beitzah*):** It must be hard boiled and smoked. The egg recalls the Passover peace offering called the *hagigah*. In addition, it’s a symbol of mourning recalling the destruction of the Temple.
- 3. Bitter herbs (*Maror*):** Horseradish and romaine lettuce may be eaten in fulfillment of the commandment to eat bitter herbs during the Seder. This symbolizes the bitterness and harshness of the slavery which the Hebrews endured in Egypt.
- 4. Haroset:** It’s a mixture of apple, nuts and wine (you can find this recipe online!) that is eaten with the *matza* (unleavened bread). It represents the bricks and mortar made by the Hebrew slaves to build the storehouses of Egypt.
- 5. Vegetable (*Karpas*) and salt water:** Parsley, celery or a boiled potato can be used. These vegetable is to be dipped into salt water, which represents tears, mirroring the pain felt by the Hebrew slaves in Egypt.
- 6. Three pieces of *matza*:** *Matza* is the unleavened bread of the meal. The first two loaves represent the fact that in the desert, the Israelites received two portions of manna on Friday so they could observe the Sabbath. The third *matza* is used to recall the haste with which their ancestors fled from Egypt.
- 7. Wine:** The Seder is ordered around the blessing of four cups. This may complicate things if you have never attended an actual Seder before, so it is recommended to have a glass of wine for symbolism. Each cup commemorates the four expressions of redemption promised by God in Exodus 6:6-7



From the Passover Seder to the Eucharist



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The Mass wasn't an invention of the apostles or something Jesus created out of nowhere. A long tradition says it was a transformation of a Jewish liturgy: The Passover meal, or Seder, as it later became known.

“While there’s debate about this point, there’s been a long tradition that [this was the case],” said Dr. Mark Giszczak Biblical scholar and professor at the Augustine Institute in Denver. “An attentive Jew would hear a lot of references to the Passover [at Mass].”

How did Jesus bring this about? With the help of Dr. Giszczak and Dr. Brant Pitre’s book, [*Jesus and the Jewish roots of the Eucharist*](#), we try to illustrate the basic aspects of this tradition by describing the Passover meal, how Jesus kept it and how he transformed it during the Last Supper.



THE PASSOVER MEAL

It's important to highlight some of the main characteristics outlined by God for his people in Exodus 12, where he commanded them to have a meal before freeing them from the land of Egypt. Some practices that were popular at the time of Jesus are also considered.

Sacrifice a lamb and spread its blood

The lamb had to be free of defects and had to be killed in such a way as to not break any of its bones. At the time of Jesus, the lambs had to be sacrificed at the Jerusalem Temple because sacrifice became a right reserved to the Levite priests. Thus, the Passover had to be celebrated in Jerusalem.

In Exodus 12, the Israelites had to spread its blood on the wooden lintels of the door, so when God passed through Egypt taking the lives of the first-born sons, he would “pass over” their house.

Eat the lamb with unleavened bread

The Israelites had to eat the flesh of the sacrifice, whose blood was spread to saved them from the death of their first-born child. Having unleavened bread was a sign of the haste with which they left Egypt – they had no time to let it rise.

Keep this day of remembrance forever

God commanded the Israelites to remember this day generation after generation. It was seen not only as a remembrance but also a sharing in the very mystery of the Passover. The father of the family would explain to his children the story and the symbolism behind the bread and other foods.

Passover of the Messiah

At the time of Jesus, a new theory had developed among many Jews, believing that the Messiah would deliver them on the night of the Passover and bring about a new covenant and new exodus, as God had delivered their ancestors from the land of Egypt.

The four cups

The Jewish Seder meal is divided into the blessing of four cups. Scholars aren't exactly sure if this practice was already established at the time of Jesus, but there are reasons to believe so. This structure also called for the reading of the Hebrew Scriptures and closing hymns.

WHAT JESUS KEPT

Matthew, Mark and Luke say that the Last Supper was a Passover meal: “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you,” (Lk 22: 14-15). They also say that it was done in the evening and in Jerusalem, as was required. The Gospels also include an explanation of the meaning of the bread by Jesus and the conclusion with a hymn.

Theory of the four cups

Luke mentions that Jesus had more than one cup: “A cup” and then “the cup after supper” (Lk 22:14-20). Dr. Pitre explains that, although more speculative, there are reasons to think that a form of the four-cup tradition was already present, especially because it helps explain other allusions to a “fourth cup” by Jesus. Based on clues from the Gospel narrative, the cups mentioned must have been the second and third out of the four.

The first cup was for an introduction of the meal; the second was tied to the explanation of the bread and food symbols; the third was drunk at the end of the supper; and the fourth was the closing cup after the final hymn.

WHAT JESUS CHANGED

Jesus shifts the focus from the remembrance of the old covenant to the “New Covenant” to be brought about by the Messiah at the Last Supper: “This chalice which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20). He establishes the new Passover in the following way.

The Passover lamb

The Passover liturgy revolved around the body and blood of the lamb. Jesus now focuses on his own body and blood, placing himself as the sacrificial lamb. He takes the bread and explains it in a new light: “This is my body.”

He then takes the wine and says, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:27-28). Dr. Pitre says that a Jew would have understood Jesus saying, “I am the new Passover lamb... This is the Passover of the Messiah, and I am the new sacrifice.”

The missing cup

Instead of drinking what would’ve been the fourth cup of the Passover, Jesus says he will not drink wine again until he drinks it in the kingdom. In its place, after singing the final hymn, he goes straight to the Mount of Olives with his disciples (Mt 26:27-30). Dr. Pitre assures that this would’ve puzzled the apostles because it meant leaving the Passover meal unfinished.



Jesus' fourth cup

The fourth cup is his sacrifice. In Gethsemane he prays to the Father three times about the cup of his death he must drink... "Let this cup pass from me" (Mt 26:36-46).

It is not until he is about to die on the cross that he asks for the last cup, saying, "I thirst." After he drinks from the sponge full of wine, he exclaims, "It is finished." Dr. Pitre states that it was then that he finished the Last Supper – on the cross right before he died. Jesus interwove his own sacrifice into the Passover mystery, as the sacrificial lamb, to bring about the Passover of the Messiah for the salvation all.

THE MASS

This New Passover is the Eucharistic celebration, the Mass. "He instituted a new Passover liturgy that was tied to his death," Dr. Pitre says. We eat the flesh of the new Passover lamb, Jesus himself, and drink his blood. It's the new covenant that brings about a new exodus, not from Egyptian slavery, but from the slavery of sin, and takes us to the Promised Land.

