

WHY DO CATHOLICS COVER CRUCIFIXES AND STATUES DURING HOLY WEEK?

Veils over sacred images keep our minds on the promise of Easter. It seems strange that during the most sacred time of year Catholics cover everything that is beautiful in their churches, even the crucifix. Shouldn't we be looking at the painful scene at Calvary while we listen to the Passion narrative on Palm Sunday?

While it may appear counterintuitive to veil statues and images during the final weeks of Lent, the Catholic Church recommends this practice to heighten our senses and build within us a longing for Easter Sunday. It is a tradition that should not only be carried out in our local parish, but can also be a fruitful activity for the "domestic church" to practice. The rubrics can guide us. In the Roman Missal we find the instruction, "In many Dioceses, the practice of covering crosses and images throughout the church from [the fifth] Sunday [of Lent] may be observed. Crosses remain covered until the end of the Celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday, but images remain covered until the beginning of the Easter Vigil."

This is the current practice of the Church, but veiling from the Fifth Sunday of Lent onward is miniscule compared to what was once practiced. For example, in Germany there was a tradition to veil the altar from view throughout all of Lent.

Families are also encouraged to imitate this practice and veil prominent religious images in their homes. It helps us to participate in the liturgical season, especially if we are prevented from going to Mass during the week. Otherwise we only see the veiled images in church once or twice before Easter and it has a minor effect on us. It is also a beautiful tradition to pass down to our children, who will be intrigued by it and it will make this time of year truly special for them. We go through great lengths to decorate our homes for Easter, so why not prepare for the great feast by using veils?

But why go through such lengths to cover up images that are designed to raise our hearts and minds toward heaven? First of all, we use veils to alert us of the special time that we are in.

When we walk into church and notice everything is covered, we immediately know that something is different. These last two weeks of Lent are meant to be a time of immediate preparation for the Sacred Triduum and these veils are a forceful reminder to get ready.

Secondly, the veils focus our attention on the words being said at Mass. When we listen to the Passion narrative, our senses are allowed to focus on the striking words from the Gospel and truly enter into the scene.

Third, the Church uses veils to produce a heightened sense of anticipation for Easter Sunday. This is further actualized when you attend daily Mass and see the veils each day. You don't want them to be there because they are hiding some very beautiful images.

And therein lies the whole point: the veils are not meant to be there forever.

The images need to be unveiled; it is unnatural for them to be covered. The unveiling before the Easter Vigil is a great reminder of our own life on earth. We live in a "veiled" world, in exile from our true home. It is only through our own death that the veil is lifted and we are finally able to see.