

Bishops' Guidelines on the Passover meal

The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales give this directive in the Guidelines for pastoral activity during Holy Week:

"In recent years the custom has grown in many parishes to arrange a demonstration Seder during Holy Week. This can have educational and spiritual value. It is wrong, however, to 'baptize' the Seder by interspersing it or concluding it with New Testament readings or Christian associations - or, worse, turn it into a Eucharist or a prologue to a Eucharist. Such mergings show a lack of respect for Judaism and a distortion of both Christian and Jewish traditions.

The primary reason why Christians may decide to hold a demonstration Seder should be to understand better the Jewish roots of our Eucharistic liturgy. Any sense of 'restaging' the Last Supper is inappropriate, historically inaccurate and should be avoided.

Demonstration Seders arranged in co-operation with local synagogues are strongly encouraged. Wherever possible, a Jew should be invited to lead the Seder and assist the Christians present to understand its ritual and meaning to the Jewish community ... In all events, Christians should take every care to ensure that the correct Jewish ritual is followed and that the Seder be respected in its full integrity. "

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CHRISTIANS AND THE PASSOVER SEDER MEAL

In recent years many Christian groups have organised a demonstration Seder meal, primarily to understand better the Last Supper of Jesus and the roots of the Christian Eucharist. As Cardinal Hume said, "[We] have become more profoundly conscious of the Jewish soil that nourished our Christian roots. We cannot hope to understand Jesus Christ and the significance of his life and teaching without knowledge of his people, their history and beliefs." The Passover is an ancient Jewish festival which is still celebrated enthusiastically by Jewish people. The purpose of this leaflet is to provide background information and guidelines to ensure that the distinctive Jewish character of the Seder is fully respected by Christians.

What is a Passover Seder?

The Hebrew term *Seder* means "order" and refers to the whole celebration, which can last for several hours, during which the Jewish people commemorate and re-live, as a family or a community, their liberation from Egypt: *We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and our Eternal God led us out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. If the Holy One, ever to be blessed, had not led our ancestors out of Egypt, we and our children and our children's children would have remained slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. "* (The Passover Haggadah)



The most important part of the Seder is the story of God's liberation of the Israelites from Egypt and this account is commonly called *Haggadah*, a term that means "the telling". This is based on the biblical commandment, "*Thou shalt tell thy son in that day saying, It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.*" (Ex. 13:8). The story is not simply a reading from the Bible but is interspersed with episodes from later Jewish tradition and contemporary struggles for freedom are included. According to the scholars the *Haggadah* as it is known today as a separate liturgical text was first drawn up around the ninth century of the common era, but the rites and prayers are much older, going back to the pre-Christian era.

Ritual food

Various ritual foods which symbolise the Exodus are eaten - *matzah* (unleavened bread), green and bitter herbs and *haroset* (a sweet mixture).

However, the authors of the New Testament agree in interpreting Jesus' death on the cross and his testament-memorial transmitted during the Last Supper: "Do this in memory of me" (Lk.22:19) in the context of Passover.

The role of children

Children play an important part and the ceremony is designed to hold their interest. The youngest child asks the questions that introduce the narrative. A game is played and lively songs round off the evening.

Jesus and the Passover Seder

The New Testament records that Jesus observed the Passover every year (cf. Lk.2:41 ff) and all the Gospels connect the Last Supper with the Passover festival. In New Testament times, the rite consisted of the offering of the lamb in the Temple of Jerusalem and the family (or group) eating it as a feast in "memory" of God's liberation of the people from oppression in Egypt. However, the Evangelists say nothing about the manner of celebrating the Passover. Their main purpose was to explain the new significance they believed Jesus had given to the rite and the early Eucharistic practice of the Church is reflected in the Gospel text. In any case the Last Supper was different

from the Passover Seder as it is celebrated today. From the historical point of view, we cannot definitely affirm from the New Testament that Jesus' Last Supper was a Passover meal. Some scholars would tend to see it rather as a farewell meal. However, the authors of the New Testament agree in interpreting Jesus' death on the cross and his testament-memorial transmitted during the Last Supper: "Do this in memory of me" (Lk.22:19) in the context of Passover.

The Eucharist and the Passover Seder

The New Testament situates the origin of the Christian Eucharist, which is the memorial of the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the context of Passover. However, the Eucharistic practice of the Church is also intimately linked with the Jewish prayer of blessing said on many occasions in daily life, especially before and after meals. Mark (14:22-23) clearly refers to the blessings over bread and wine: "He took bread and blessed and broke it ...then Jesus took a cup and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them." The same Hebrew term *b'rach* means both to bless and give thanks.

The grace after meals is said to be of biblical origin. It consists of four blessings which thank God for food, for the land, for redemption from Egypt and for the covenant and revelation of the Torah. It is preceded by a summons to pray and a dialogue between the host and participants. At special meals, like the Passover and the Sabbath, a cup of wine is drunk after the Grace.

Can Christians celebrate the Seder?

Since it is a constitutive rite of Judaism, the Passover can only be celebrated by Jews. But Christians can benefit by understanding and appreciating this celebration. The ideal way is to be invited to a Passover Seder as a guest of Jewish friends in their home. Thus one would be truly a "guest" of the Jewish tradition and faith to which the Church is "linked in its very identity" (Pope John Paul II)

When Christians re-enact the Passover Seder it is not a celebration of the rite but a reflection and a learning experience to deepen understanding, in respect and gratitude. When this is done it is advisable to invite a rabbi or an observant Jew who is conversant with the tradition. A preparatory meeting to explain the rite can be very helpful.



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND AND WALES

Committee for Catholic Jewish Relations

Passover (Seder) Guidelines for Parishes

In recent years the custom has grown in many parishes to hold a Passover Seder event as part of the preparation for Easter. The Committee for Catholic- Jewish Relations has become concerned about this trend as the Seder is essentially a Jewish ritual. The word 'seder' means 'order' and refers to the service at home which includes both ritual and a meal. The following guidelines are therefore offered to help those organising such an event so that it will be sensitive to our relations with the Jewish community, respectful to Jewish observance and consistent with the teaching of the Church.

It is recognised that there is great value in experiencing a demonstration Seder. Priests, teachers and catechists also hope that such an event will help people understand the Jewish context of the Eucharistic Liturgy. There is a danger, however, that both the Jewish Seder and the Christian Eucharist will be misunderstood unless great care is taken with the preparation of the event.

1. The Jewish Passover (Seder) is not just something that belongs to the distant past which has been replaced by the Eucharist, but is a major feature of Jewish observance today. In fact the Seder and the Eucharist are two entirely distinct and independent developments since the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE (AD). Although the Eucharist partly developed from the context of a Passover according to the synoptic gospels, the present day Seder is not a replica of the Last Supper.

2. The rite of the Seder should not be altered by adding Christian prayers or New Testament readings. Neither should it be turned into a Eucharist. Such mergings show a lack of respect for both Christian and Jewish traditions.

3. If a Seder is being planned, parishes should, if possible, ask a rabbi or an observant Jew to conduct it. A preparatory talk from someone conversant with the Jewish tradition can be very helpful.

4. On the other hand, if an authentic Jewish ritual is not being used, or if a parish meal is being held to mark the ending of the season of Lent or the beginning of the Easter Triduum on Holy Thursday, the meal should be called by another name e.g. an Agape, which means 'love feast'. It is inadvisable to hold a Seder during Holy Week, particularly on Holy Thursday.

The Committee for Catholic-Jewish Relations draws attention to the Committee's pamphlet Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations (CTS, 1994) where there is a fuller treatment of the topic, and to the leaflet Christians and the Passover Meal. That, together with an outline of the Seder, available in 'The Passover. Last Supper and the Eucharist' are published by the Christian-Jewish Resources and Library at the Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter 34 Chepstow Villas. London W11 2QZ, tel. 020 77273597

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