

THE TRADITION OF PALM CROSSES

The date palm is one of the most ancient cultivated trees and is mentioned in a variety of religious texts, including in the Old Testament. In the Jewish tradition, the palm branch is a symbol of triumph. Jews would wave palms in the air as part of certain festivals or as a sign of joy.

For Christians, Palm Sunday commemorates Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, when people publicly proclaimed him a "king" and laid down palm branches in his path as he rode on a donkey.

The modern palm crosses are a variation of the Roman Catholic tradition of handing out palm fronds to parishioners on Palm Sunday. Greek Orthodox Churches also follow the practice, as do some Episcopal churches. The practice is popular in countries where there are large populations of these faiths. In some areas of the world very elaborate palm crosses are made and sold to raise funds for various church activities.

The blessed palms are often taken home by parishioners as signs of the holy in their lives and to symbolize warding off evil. People will keep them in their homes, sometimes one in each room, and many will take them to the cemetery to place on graves.

They are properly disposed of by either burning them or tossing them in the garden. This applies to all the blessed palms used on Palm Sunday and not just those made into crosses. In some churches, parishioners are asked to bring in their palms from the previous year to burn and use as the ashes in Ash Wednesday services.

The making of palm crosses is not any kind of requirement or obligation of one's faith, or even an important part of it. Christians may not get any closer to heaven by folding the palm reeds given out in the church on Palm Sunday, but many will create for themselves a symbol they can display to remind them of God.

Some are critical of the practice of folding palm crosses for use in the procession, that it makes no sense to wave a cross at Jesus while shouting "Hosanna" (which means "God saves" in Hebrew).

But there is justification for the palm in the shape of the cross. As we hold the palm crosses, they can represent both the cheers and jeers of the crowds, and that we share in the hard road that leads to His victory.

It is also true that after the entry into Jerusalem, the liturgy turns clearly toward the passion. This is why the priest wears red, to show the blood of the passion, which looms ominously ahead. The palm crosses help us to know what is to come while living in the moment of the celebration.