



In many Catholic churches, something visually striking happens on the **First Sunday of Passiontide**: the images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints are covered with purple veils. This gesture, which may seem puzzling to some, carries deep theological and spiritual meaning. Where does this practice originate? What does it teach us today? In this article, we will explore the **origin, history, and current significance** of this tradition, dispelling misconceptions and rediscovering its spiritual richness.

1. Origin and Historical Development of the Practice

The custom of covering sacred images in the Catholic Church has **medieval roots** and is linked to the season of Lent, particularly the period of more intense preparation for the Passion of the Lord. In ancient times, the Roman liturgy had a practice called the “*Lenten veil*” (*velum quadragesimale*), a large cloth that was stretched across the sanctuary or in front of the main altar from the beginning of Lent, symbolizing the distance between God and the faithful due to sin.

By the 9th century, this practice evolved and became focused on **Passiontide**, the final two weeks of Lent. Instead of covering the altar, people began covering sacred images, leaving the church with a solemn atmosphere that prepared the faithful for the Paschal Triduum.

In the 16th century, **Pope Pius V** established in the **Roman Missal** the custom of covering images starting on the **Sunday of Passiontide** (the fifth Sunday of Lent), and these were to remain covered until the **Easter Vigil**. Although this practice was no longer obligatory after the liturgical reforms of the **Second Vatican Council**, it remains recommended and is still observed in many parishes and communities.

2. Why Are Images Covered? Theological and Spiritual Meaning

The **purple veil** covering the images on the First Sunday of Passiontide is not just a decorative element or a simple act of mourning. Its meaning is profound and multifaceted:



a) An Echo of the Gospel: The Hidden Christ

The most direct biblical foundation for this practice comes from the **Gospel of John**:

“Then they took up stones to cast at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.” (John 8:59)

This passage is proclaimed precisely on the **Sunday of Passiontide** and shows the moment when Jesus, after proclaiming His divinity, is rejected by the Pharisees and hides from the crowd that attempts to stone Him. This **hiding of Christ** inspires the liturgical gesture of covering His image: it is a **symbol of the withdrawal of His visible presence** in the days leading up to His Passion.

b) A Call to Interior Contemplation

The visual disappearance of sacred images invites us to turn our attention away from external forms and focus instead on the **invisible presence of Christ in the soul**. It is a call to deepen our **interior contemplation**, to detach ourselves from sensory experiences, and to spiritually prepare for the mystery of Redemption.

c) A Reflection of the Temple Veil

At the moment of Christ's death, the **veil of the Temple was torn in two** (cf. Matthew 27:51). This veil symbolized the separation between God and humanity. By covering sacred images before the Passion, the Church reminds us of **the distance that sin creates between us and God** and how only Christ's Cross can tear this veil, allowing us to enter His presence.

d) An Act of Humility and Penance

In her wisdom, the Church teaches us to **humble ourselves with Christ** during this time of sorrow. By visually stripping away sacred images, the liturgy invites us to a kind of **spiritual fasting**, where we **temporarily renounce visible beauty to prepare for the glory of the Resurrection**.



3. Misinterpretations and Common Objections

Over time, some people have misunderstood this tradition, attributing meanings to it that do not align with the Church's teachings. Some frequent objections include:

a) "It's a Superstitious and Outdated Practice"

Some believe that covering images is an antiquated custom with no relevance in the modern Church. However, the reality is that **its meaning is deeply biblical and theological**. Far from being a superstitious act, it is a sign of the Church's spiritual pedagogy, helping us to enter more deeply into the Paschal mystery.

b) "It's a Denial of Devotion to the Saints and the Virgin Mary"

Some argue that covering images is a form of "abandonment" of the Virgin Mary and the saints. But the truth is that this practice **does not deny their intercession or closeness**. On the contrary, it reminds us that their glory is tied to Christ's victory and that their splendor will be revealed again at Easter.

c) "It's Optional, So It's Not Important"

Although no longer obligatory, it remains **highly recommended by the Church**. Many communities have rediscovered its spiritual richness and have reintroduced it with great reverence. It is not a matter of obligation but rather an **opportunity to deepen our understanding of the Passion**.

4. Relevance and Application Today

In a world where images and immediacy dominate our daily lives, the practice of covering sacred images teaches us a **profoundly relevant lesson**: it invites us to rediscover the value of silence, emptiness, and waiting.

We live in a society that fears absence, mystery, and sacrifice. But Lent and Holy Week teach us that sometimes **God seems to hide so that we may seek Him more intensely**.



The veil covering the images serves as a reminder that faith is not always based on what we can see and touch. It challenges us to exercise **trust and hope**, knowing that God's glory will be revealed in His time.

Conclusion: An Invitation to Reflection

Covering images on the **First Sunday of Passiontide** is not merely an external ritual but rather a **powerful visual catechesis** that helps us prepare to live more deeply the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ.

It is a time to silence the noise of the world and enter the intimacy of the mystery of Redemption. A moment to remember that **Christ hid Himself out of love**, only to reveal Himself gloriously at Easter.

May this practice help us to **look beyond the visible** and encounter the living Christ, who, even when He seems hidden, never ceases to be present in our lives.