

## **Recognizing Good Friday**

**By**

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Good Friday stands as one of the most solemn and reflective observances within the Christian liturgical calendar, marked by traditions that trace back two thousand years to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Observed on the Friday preceding Easter Sunday, it is a day of mourning, contemplation, and reverence, recognizing the suffering and death of Jesus as an act of sacrifice at the heart of Christian theology. For many Christian communities across the world, Good Friday is a day of fasting, prayer, and church services that often include Scripture readings, veneration of the cross, and reenactments of the Passion narrative. The day's meaning extends beyond religious devotion, influencing art, culture, and public life in regions where Christianity shaped historical customs and community rhythms. In the United States, various states and localities have at times treated Good Friday as a civic observance, with some government offices and institutions historically closing early or remaining closed entirely, acknowledging the day's widespread cultural and religious significance.

Although Good Friday is not widely observed today as an official state holiday in California, the state once recognized it in a limited but formal way. Under California Government Code §6700, Good Friday appeared among holidays designated for restricted observance, specifically identifying the hours from 12:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m. as a period of statewide recognition. During much of the mid-twentieth century, governors issued proclamations permitting state employees to be excused during those hours for reflection, worship, or quiet observance, giving Good Friday a unique status as a “half-day” solemnity rather than a full public holiday. Over time this statutory recognition became symbolic, and modern state practice no longer treats Good Friday as a paid holiday; California agencies, courts, and public offices remain open. Yet the original statute still reflects a moment when the state formally acknowledged the day's religious significance, and local traditions carry forward aspects of that heritage. Several California communities—particularly those with strong Catholic and Christian populations—continue to hold public services and devotional reenactments between noon and three, including outdoor Stations of the Cross in cities such as Los Angeles, San Jose, Gilroy, and parts of the Central Valley. Some school districts historically incorporated the partial-day observance into spring scheduling, occasionally closing early or aligning their academic calendar so that Good Friday fell within break periods. While these practices vary today, the long-standing inclusion of

Good Friday in state code underscores its earlier civic presence, and California's many churches, cultural groups, and communities continue to mark the day with traditions rooted in both faith and local history.

The history of Good Friday as a recognized civic observance in the United States reflects the country's evolving attitudes toward the relationship between religious tradition and public life. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many states with large Christian populations either informally or formally halted government business on Good Friday. Court systems in several states refused to convene on the day, and financial institutions often closed in recognition of longstanding community norms. In some regions, particularly the Midwest and Northeast, Good Friday closures were not mandated by statute but rather practiced as a matter of local custom, reflecting the deeply embedded Christian heritage within those communities. The observance was commonly treated as a half-day out of respect for the liturgical period from noon to three o'clock, which many Christians believe corresponds to the hours Jesus hung upon the cross. Even in states without official legal recognition, businesses, markets, and public institutions often operated on abbreviated schedules in acknowledgment of the sacred nature of the day for many residents.

California's relationship with Good Friday mirrors this wider national pattern, with early practices shaped both by Catholic mission history and community norms passed down through generations. During the Spanish and Mexican periods, Good Friday was treated as a major holy day within the missionary calendar, recognized through processions, Stations of the Cross, and region-wide pauses in commercial activity. After statehood, Catholic and Protestant communities alike continued to observe the day, and by the early twentieth century, many cities in the state held public gatherings, including large-scale Passion plays and community prayer assemblies. In areas such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Jose, Good Friday services often drew worshippers from diverse cultural backgrounds, reflecting the increasing plurality of the state's population. While California never universally mandated statewide closure, the statutory recognition of noon to three o'clock reflected an attempt to acknowledge the significance of the day without imposing a full public holiday on a religiously diverse society. This compromise preserved a link to tradition while allowing local governments, school districts, and communities to determine best to observe the day in ways reflective of their demographic and cultural landscape.

Throughout California, local observances have continued to evolve while retaining deep roots in community identity. Parishes in cities like San Jose, Santa Clara, and Los Angeles often hold processions that reenact the Passion narrative through dramatic

readings, music, and community participation. In the Santa Clara Valley, churches historically coordinated inter-parish services, especially among Catholic, Methodist, and Lutheran congregations, emphasizing reflection, communal prayer, and acts of service. Gilroy, with a strong Christian and Catholic presence, has long included Good Friday services within its Holy Week traditions, drawing families and multigenerational residents to evening vigils and midday Stations of the Cross. In many communities, Good Friday also became an opportunity to highlight charitable works, including food drives, clothing donations, and community outreach efforts aligned with the day's themes of sacrifice and compassion. Even as California has grown increasingly pluralistic, Good Friday remains a moment of collective pause for many households, churches, and cultural organizations across the state.

Although the legal and civic recognition of Good Friday has shifted over time, the continuing observance within churches, families, and communities highlights the enduring meaning of the day in American and Californian life. It serves as a reminder of the powerful intersection of faith, history, and cultural tradition, demonstrating how a religious observance can shape civic identity even in a society that maintains a clear separation between church and state. Whether observed through quiet reflection, communal worship, public reenactments, or private acts of prayer, Good Friday continues to hold a significant place in the moral and cultural landscape of communities across California and the nation.