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Traditional palms for Palm Sunday and Easter are seen in Krakow, Poland. "The Felician Sisters originated in Poland, so many of our traditions come from our Polish roots," writes The Life panelist Sr. Maryann Agnes Mueller. (Dreamstime/Thomas Jurkowski)



by The Life Panelists

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March 28, 2022

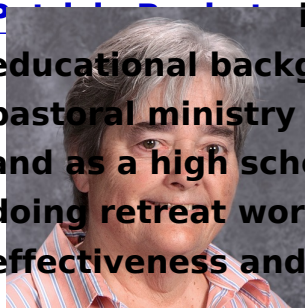
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Panelists were asked to draw on their own communities, cultures and customs and to share a selection of global insights around this question ahead of Easter, celebrated this year on April 17:

*Does your congregation or your culture have any special customs around Holy Week and Easter?*

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**[Patricia P. ...](#) is a Sister of Mercy from Rochester, New York. Her educational background is in history and political science, then theology, pastoral ministry and liturgy. She served as a high school campus minister and as a high school theology teacher. Currently, she is teaching theology, doing retreat work and liturgical planning, and working in mission effectiveness and the systemic dimensions of the work of justice.**



Many years ago, the mother of a ninth-grade student called me, and the minute I heard her voice, I knew Mom was upset. She was distressed that her daughter did not want to enter her parish confirmation preparation program. After a few conversations including Mom, daughter and the faith formation coordinator, they mutually decided to embrace a "readiness model." Translated: They would wait until ready.

Fast-forward to senior year. The formerly reluctant young lady came to my office and said, "I am ready now." Honestly, I had no idea what she meant, but soon, I realized she was ready for confirmation. "They want me to be part of the RCIA process, and I want you to be my sponsor."

Many years later, I recall the grace of her readiness, the grace her mother demonstrated, and the grace I experienced as her sponsor. What remains especially vivid is the Easter Vigil where she became a fully initiated member of the church.

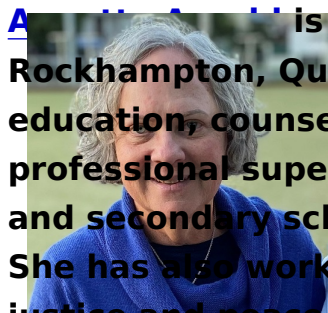
Holy Week and Easter invite accompaniment and sometimes adaptation. There is a rhythm from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, to the shared meal and foot-

washing, to the agony of the cross and the joy of light bursting forth from the tomb. The temptation for all of us is to gloss over the hard parts of the week. But just like the young woman mentioned, we — young or old — are called to accompany Jesus through the entirety of the week.

There is the joy of the rich Easter Vigil in the parish setting, where many of our sisters experience these sacred rituals. Within our motherhouse community, there is necessarily a spirit of adaptation, given physical limitations. Foot-washing has given way to hand-washing, and water is brought to the women without the mobility to come forward. Long processions are now brief-yet-holy movements around the chapel to the tabernacle. A cross to kiss is offered to sisters in their pews. The joy of the Resurrection still rings out during the Gloria, with small handbells shared by all gathered in the congregation.

What matters most is the rhythm of the liturgical year. What a gift to start with the Advent journey and to enter into ordinary time. Ashes mark the start of the Lenten days, followed by the palms and the passion. The light of the paschal candle bursts through the darkness, and we sing our [Exsultet](#) of praise. The Easter Vigil is a holy night, a night of joy, and a night of future promise. It is a renewed call to serve the risen Christ as we accompany God's people even in the "hard parts" of the suffering wrought by violence, prejudice, greed and the absence of welcome.

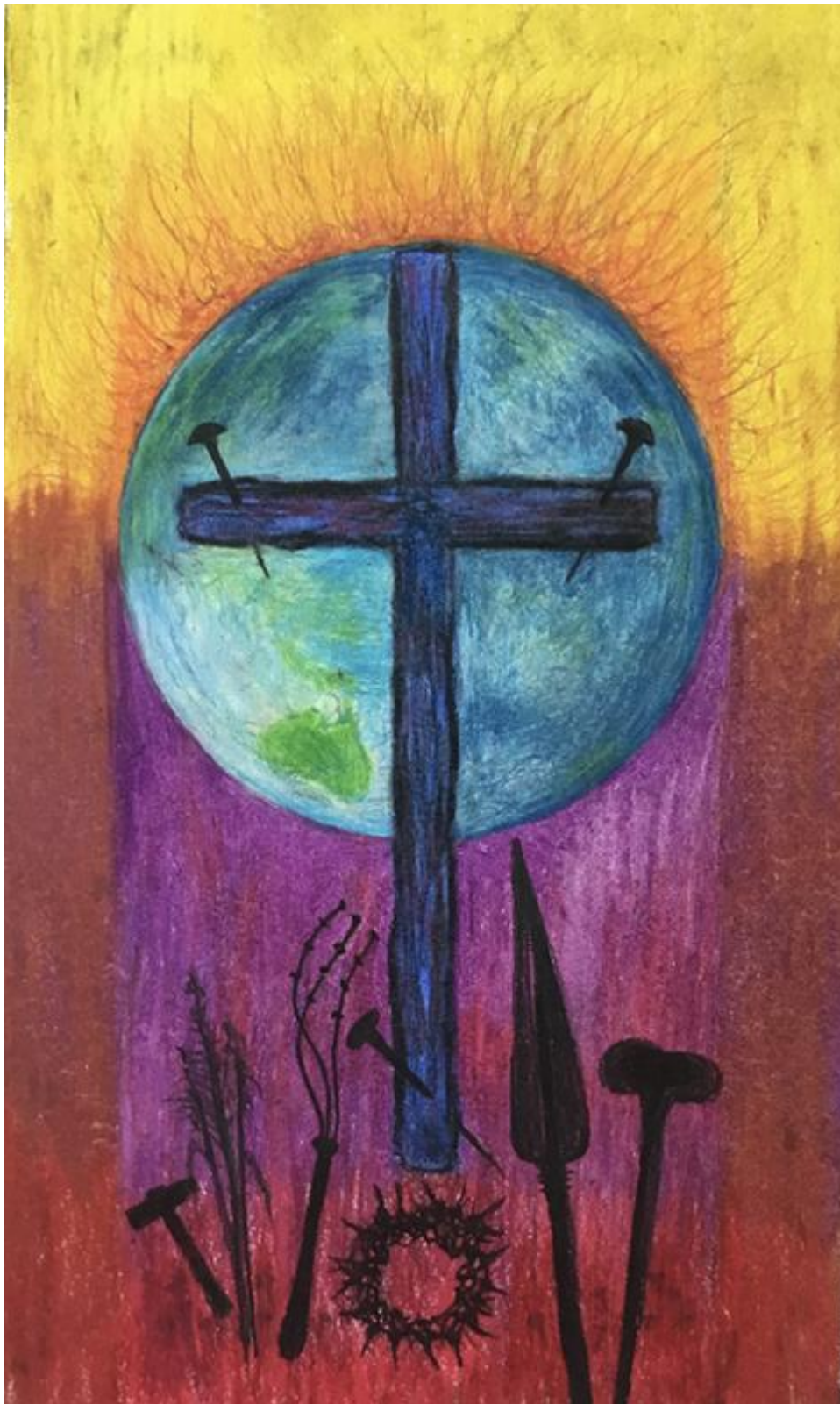
Are we ready? How are we called to adapt?



**Auntie Nell is a Sister of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart from Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia. She has an academic background in education, counseling, community development, mission studies, professional supervision and spiritual direction. She has taught in primary and secondary schools and conducted high school retreats and counseling. She has also worked as the executive office of the Brisbane Archdiocese's justice and peace commission and as the coordinator of the social action office of religious congregations. She has worked with First Nations women preparing to coordinate a safe house for victims of domestic violence and has served on her congregation's provincial and general councils and as a regional leader. She currently works in spiritual direction and professional supervision.**

Easter in Australia is often at the beginning of autumn. After the extreme summer weather events of fire, flood, cyclones, and high temperatures, people are ready for this four-day Easter holiday break. It is often a school holiday, as well. People endure congested motorways to head to the beach and the bush to swim, camp, hike, or go to horse-racing carnivals, music festivals and yacht racing.

In a country where about 15% of the population regularly attends a church, these activities are to be expected. It is interesting, though, that each night over the four-day Easter holiday, the major broadcasters show images of people going to church, always showing images of the pope at the Easter services and what is happening in the Holy Land!



A holy card used by Sr. Annette Arnold's community during Holy Week to meditate on the instruments of the Passion. Used with permission of the artist, Catherine Siciliano. (Courtesy of Annette Arnold)

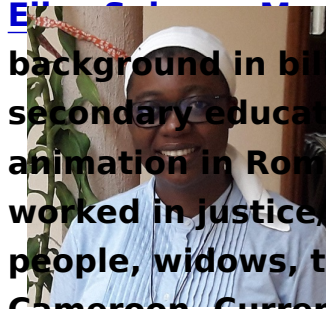
Given that many people have no interest in the religious side of Easter, I ponder why the media do this? I wonder how long we will hang on to this four-day Christian-named holiday and when we will claim holidays for the significant events of other faith traditions. The call of the sacred is obviously still strong — the call of God and mystery — drawing people out beyond the harsh first quarter of the year into the peace, quiet and coolness of the autumn outdoors, a time for being and refreshment.

As sisters, we certainly get out into nature and enjoy the break, but it is for us primarily a communal time, especially before Easter Sunday. During this sacred time, we have two particular congregational rituals: our communal forgiveness and reconciliation ritual on Holy Thursday and the invitation on Good Friday to choose an instrument of the Passion to reflect upon, in light of the suffering and oppression of today's world.

Holy Thursday provides the unique opportunity to seek forgiveness and pardon from each other and recommit to live as sisters, to be more fully Christ to each other. The ritual elements of Scripture, song, symbol, prayer and image enable a very real expression of sisterly love and forgiveness.

On Good Friday, we reflect on a contemporary image of the cross and the instruments of the Passion. This image is copied and cut into bookmarks highlighting an instrument of the Passion. We randomly choose one and reflect on our experience of that pain in our own life and in our world. We share our reflection and pray together. We come, then, ready to celebrate Resurrection, stirred again — in the words from General Chapter 2019, to be "women of Earth grounded in mission, engaging with neighbors and ministering with Christ in the cosmos."

**[Evelyn M. Maja](#) is a Sister of the Divine Will in Benin. With an academic background in bilingual letters, pastoral theology for religious, and secondary education, she also earned diplomas in formation and vocational animation in Rome. She has had a variety of pastoral experiences and worked in justice, peace ministry with Caritas, and with children and young people, widows, the sick, and young people in vocational discernment in Cameroon. Currently, she is serving as a parish catechist in the Porto Novo Diocese in Benin.**



"I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" ([John 10:10](#)). These words are full of significance for us Sisters of the Divine Will (Suore Divina Volontà). Our mission to defend life flows from our Christological spirituality, and celebrating Easter acquires its full significance when we are able to generate life. We contemplate the mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection not just as a past event, but as a yearly occasion to renew ourselves.

We begin preparing for Easter by entering the Lenten season, striving to experience the desert as a fertile ground to meet God and setting spiritual and charitable goals to improve our relationship with God and our brothers and sisters.

The culminating point, the Triduum, is celebrated with the Christian community, but bearing in mind that charity begins at home, on Holy Thursday, we have a special meal among ourselves. Recalling our fraternity and motivated by Jesus' words, "You also ought to wash the feet of one another" ([John 13:14](#)), we whisper to one another, "I care." Then we participate in Mass in the parish and adoration (continued by some in the community chapel).



A sisters' community chapel in Chad, in the diocese of Lai. The altar is made of volcanic rock. (Courtesy of Elise Solange Maga)

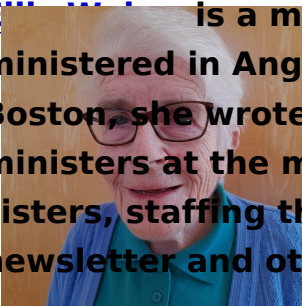
Every Friday of Lent, we experience the fertility of the desert with solitude days. This reaches its climax on Good Friday with the parish Stations of the Cross procession through the streets of our neighborhood. Practicing the spirituality inherited from our founder, Madre [Gaetana Sterni](#), who often embraced the cross as "spouse of the crucified," we celebrate our kinship with those carrying today's crosses (widows, orphans, sick, prisoners) through corporal works of mercy, sharing with them the fruits of our fasting from a meal every Friday of Lent.



On Holy Saturday, we go deeper into the mystery by spending it in recollection with the catechumens preparing for entrance into the waters of baptism. In the Easter Vigil Mass, we experience the passage from darkness to light, gathering outside the church around the huge fire. As it pierces the darkness, we strongly believe that the darkness in us is taken away as we receive the light of our risen Lord.

Like Mary Magdalene, we weep for the sufferings that dehumanize many around us but are renewed by Easter, when we can hear Christ calling us by name. As we recognize him, we are sent to shout "Alleluia, our Lord is risen!" If people can see the living God in us, Jesus will never be dead again. Through our personal commitment in defense of life, Easter is every day.

For my first Easter in West Africa, I'm eager to experience the famous celebration of "Galilee," a tradition in Benin in which the Monday after Easter is spent as a parish, singing, dancing and sharing.

 **Eileen W. O'Connell is a member of the Medical Missionaries of Mary in Ireland. She ministered in Angola as a nurse/midwife and in nursing education. In Boston, she wrote newsletters and appeals to benefactors. She currently ministers at the motherhouse in Drogheda, Ireland, working with elderly sisters, staffing the switchboard, and writing for the congregational newsletter and other newspapers.**

Holy Week and Easter are the pinnacle of the church's year. This was obvious to me in Angola, West Africa, where I worked for many years in a place called Chiulo, a remote and semi-desert area in the south of the country. We ran a busy general and maternity hospital, the only one for miles around, as well as a nurse training school. The hospital and the church were at the center of the local social life.

Beginning on Palm Sunday, Christ's triumphant arrival into Jerusalem was commemorated with a procession starting at the hospital and ending in the church, a distance of about 200 meters. The villagers, patients, sisters, and staff participated with enthusiasm in the singing and the waving of palms. No small branches timidly held tight — these were large fronds held high and waved with great energy!

During the week, the main emphasis was on the Passion play performed by the student nurses on Good Friday. There was great activity around rehearsals, making costumes and props, and it was performed to great acclaim by a "captive audience" after the liturgical celebrations.



A view of Chiulo, Angola (Wikimedia Commons/Medici con l'Africa Cuamm)

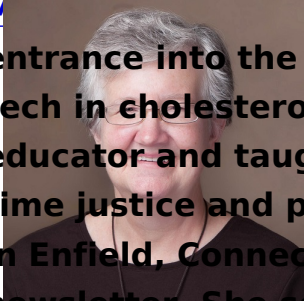
Preparing the paschal fire was also a big event. Here, Indigenous traditions held sway, with respect for the elements of fire, earth, air and water. Wood was gathered for the fire and a huge bonfire prepared near the entrance of the church.

On Holy Saturday, the ceremonies began at 11 p.m. Crowds of people had arrived all day on foot. The church was in darkness, and the large fire outside was lit with huge flames gradually gaining momentum and appearing to reach the sky. The celebrant began the liturgy beside the fire accompanied by his altar servers. One of these carried the new unlit Easter candle, which the celebrant solemnly lit from the new fire. He raised it on high and sang "Lumen Christi" ("Christ our light"), and as one, the people responded, "Deo gratias" ("Thanks be to God").

Processing into the darkened church, this was repeated twice more, with people lighting their own candles from the Easter candle. When they reached the sanctuary, the lights of the church came on, the celebrant sang the Exsultet, a psalm of praise to the Lord. The atmosphere was jubilant, and it was time to celebrate. Christ has risen from the dead!

A number of adult catechumens would be baptized later, adding to the wonder of the occasion.

At the end, the people began to go home, singing and chatting and taking a lighted branch from the fire to light their way through the coming year.



**Mary Ann Mueller** is a Felician Sister of North America. Before her entrance into the congregation, she worked as a dietician and research tech in cholesterol metabolism. Later, she worked as a certified diabetes educator and taught science in high school. Now, she serves as the full-time justice and peace coordinator for the Felician Sisters of North America in Enfield, Connecticut, and edits the congregational justice and peace newsletter. She serves on several boards; among them is U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking, for whom she publishes the Stop Trafficking Newsletter.

The [Felician Sisters](#) (Congregation of the Sisters of St. Felix of Cantalice) originated in Poland, so many of our traditions come from our Polish roots.

In Palm Sunday (*Niedziela Palmowa*) processions, we carry plants distinctive to the area, like willow branches, dried flowers and herbs in Poland, and palm branches and crosses in other countries where we serve.

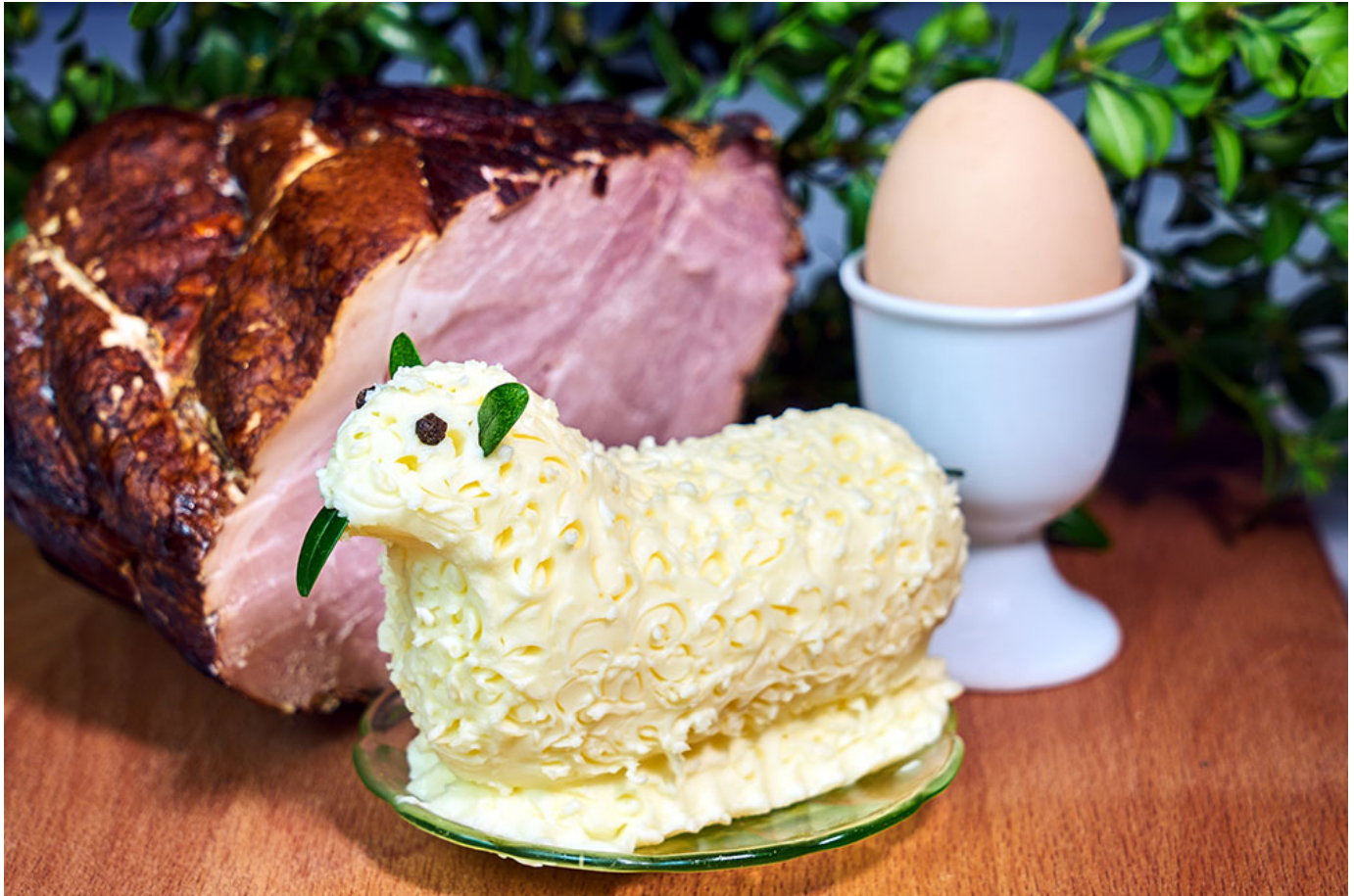
For Maundy Thursday, we have the *agape* meal, commemorating the Last Supper. Before the reenactment became part of the Mass, we used to have the washing of the feet in the dining room before the meal. Following the Mass, most communities stay for the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. In Poland, adorers use the *ciemnica*, the "Dark Room." There is a *ciemnica* in every Catholic parish in Poland. People congregate throughout the night and the next day to adore Jesus, praying and sometimes singing hymns aloud.

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Our Stations of the Cross processions in the United States usually highlight a social justice issue, such as abortion, the death penalty or war, followed by Good Friday services.

In Poland, the adoration of the cross is special: Crowds line up to venerate the *Święte Drzewo Życia* (Holy Tree of Life). Afterward, we go again to the *ciemnica* for adoration throughout the night. Some will visit a parish representation of Jesus' tomb to mourn and pray. The tombs are decorated differently, with "focus places" like white flowers or a veil.

On Holy Saturday, sisters in Poland prepare a festive Easter basket with lace napkins, sprigs of boxwood, painted hard-boiled eggs (*pisanki*), a piece of meat, salt and pepper, bread, and other dishes. Throughout the world, we preserve the Polish tradition of creating a butter lamb (*baranek wielkanocny*) that is prominent in the display. (What better way to use up cream they gave up for Lent than churning it into a way to celebrate the resurrected Jesus?) On my first Easter in community, I remember how proudly the sisters taught me how to make the *baranek wielkanocny* !



The traditional butter lamb (*baranek wielkanocny*) from the Easter table of the Felician Sisters (Courtesy of Maryann Agnes Mueller)

In Poland, the paschal vigil only begins after dawn, so some parishes start the Easter celebration at sunset and many people go to church that night.

The traditional *święconka* (blessing of food) is an enduring and beloved Polish custom. The food is blessed either at church or by a priest or sister in the convent dining room and enjoyed as part of the Easter Morning meal. The blessing includes prayers for the hungry and for those whose labor provides us with food.

Then, we share wedges of a blessed hard-boiled egg from the Easter basket and wish each other happy Easter. Other dishes include different meats, pâté (*pasztet*), eggs, horseradish relish, bread, sweet yeast cake (*babka*), and of course, Polish cheesecake (*sernik*).

On my first Easter Monday in community, I was astonished when our kitchen staff, all born in Poland, merrily tossed water on us as we entered the convent dining room. *Śmigus-Dyngus* is a tradition dating to the 14th century that is associated with the March equinox and the coming of spring. The playful tradition continues in Polish communities throughout the world. So wear a raincoat or an umbrella for *Śmigus-Dyngus*!

This story appears in the **The Life** feature series. [View the full series.](#)