

February 25, 2007

## Sunday of Orthodoxy

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Presbyterian theologian Alan Lewis liked to describe Holy Saturday as a "boundary." His use of this literary metaphor (invented by Karl Jaspers and made popular by Paul Tillich) meant that Holy Saturday served as a sort of dividing line between the Lord's suffering and death on Good Friday and His triumphant Resurrection on Easter Sunday, thereby shaping the entire sacred "Three Days," or *Triduum*. One function of a boundary, obviously, is to *define* something, in the etymological sense of conferring a *finis*, a "limit" that gives it form.

A real boundary, moreover, confers shape on two things, namely, those realities on either side of it. Like the god Janus, a boundary must cast its regard in both directions. A border unites two entities even in the act of segregating them. Ironically, they are disjoined by what joins them. They are put apart by what they share. What distinguishes them is what they have in common. I suggest that Alan Lewis was right in this respect. The image of the boundary really is a useful way of looking at Holy Saturday, and I believe that the theological insight of Holy Church respects the unique place of this day in her traditional liturgical customs.

Going beyond Lewis, however, let me further suggest that in Holy Saturday—the middle of the sacred *Triduum*—we recognize in Good Friday and Easter Sunday, somewhat as in the Lord's two natures, twin realities placed "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." Holy Saturday 'hypostatically' holds together, as it were, the two extremes of the *Triduum*.

To grasp what I mean here, it may be useful to recall that when the events of those days originally took place, the Apostles and Myrrh-bearers did not know that Holy Saturday was the central day in the sacred *Triduum*. They had no concept of the matter. For them it was simply the day after the tragic climax. They did not realize what was to come on the next day, as we see in their incredulous response when it did come. For Peter and Mary Magdalene, therefore, Holy Saturday was not a recognized *interval* (or "valley in between"). It was not the prelude of a victory, but only the aftermath of a catastrophe.

Holy Saturday thus conveys the sense that Good Friday was not "confused or changed" by Easter Sunday. The other two days of the

*Triduum* were not mingled, so to speak, so that each lost its own identity. The gall of the earlier day was neither less bitter nor its stripes less severe. The great calamity of the Cross was not mitigated in the tiniest degree. This is Good Friday's union with Holy Saturday.

At the same time, nonetheless, regarded from the perspective of the triumphant Third Day, Holy Saturday is Good Friday's link to the Resurrection, and this link was "without division, without separation." That is to say, only in Easter is revealed the full significance of the Cross. When Christ rises from the dead, bestowing life on those in the tombs, the Church knows that He tramples down death by death.

In addition, Holy Saturday is also the most mysterious day of the *Triduum*, in the sense that Sacred Scripture says less about it. Whereas we know in some detail what the first Christians witnessed on Good Friday and what they subsequently learned on Easter Sunday, we are told about Holy Saturday almost nothing except that "they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment" (Luke 23:56).

And just where was our Lord during the Church's time of rest? A rather full answer to this question is given in the liturgical prayer, I suppose, which describes Him as "in the tomb with the body, in Hades with the soul, in Paradise with the thief, and on the throne with the Father and the Holy Spirit." Now this was surely more than the original Christians knew. They had seen, of course, that His body was in the tomb, and they knew that His soul was in Hades, but they were not yet familiar with the whole story even about this second point.

Certain disturbing developments, you see, had already begun in Hades, and the place would never again be what once it was. It was already the site of an invasion. Death was even now in the process of being trampled down by a death. A Champion had appeared on the scene and was making a royal havoc of the neighborhood. The ancient gates, those everlasting doors, had been lifted from their hinges, the iron bars were rent asunder, and the King of glory had entered in. The reign of death was over.

What came to pass in Hades that day was later described by Dante, who claimed to have received the information from Virgil. More likely, we suspect, Dante learned about it in the *Exultet* sung by the deacon on the evening of Holy Saturday: *Haec nox est, in qua destructis vinculis mortis Christus ab inferis victor ascendit*—"This is the night in which Christ comes up victorious from Hell, having destroyed the chains of death."

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