

Landry: There's great power in the silence of Holy Saturday



Holy Saturday is the quietest day of the Liturgical year – the only day where the Church has no liturgy whatsoever.

For 363 days a year, Masses are celebrated, and on Good Friday, we have a liturgy (but it isn't Mass). On Holy Saturday, the Church offers us silence. In the midst of a Holy Week retreat many years ago, I embraced that silence, where I came across an Ancient Homily for Holy Saturday in the Liturgy of the Hours. This homily began to explain why things are so quiet on Holy Saturday:

“Today there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence, and stillness, a great silence because the King sleeps; the earth was in terror and was still, because God slept in the flesh and raised up those who were sleeping from the ages. God has died in the flesh, and the underworld has trembled.”

It brought up a question I'd never really considered: what is Jesus *doing* on Holy Saturday? Was he resting as he awaited the resurrection? We can guess what the others would have been doing. For the Apostles, it would have been a day of confusion. For the Sanhedrin, a triumph. Pilate and Herod were not likely to give him much more thought as they moved on to the next issue at hand. For those of us who know how the story ends, we can often look past Holy Saturday as simply the time that must pass to get to the resurrection. The ancient homilist, though, sees something extraordinary going on. Jesus has descended among the dead and has gone in search of our first parents. When He finds them, Jesus takes Adam by the hand and says:

“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light. I am your God, who for your sake became your son, who for you and your descendants now speak and command with authority those in prison: ‘come forth’, and those in darkness: ‘have light,’ and those who sleep: ‘rise.’ I command you: Awake, sleeper, I have not made you to be held a prisoner in the underworld.”

It’s an incredible moment to imagine. How would Adam have reacted? What of the crowd of faithful departed – many of the names we know from the Old Testament – who saw their faith rewarded? When you imagine that scene, it is no wonder the underworld is trembling, for all that is happening beneath the silence is striking them an incredible blow.

I think in many ways, Holy Saturday is a tremendous metaphor for the experience we live today. As we face the crisis brought on by the coronavirus, what we’re living is the most real ‘Holy Saturday’ experience any of us have ever known. Rev. Nathan Goebel, offered a tremendous insight on this experience, in a recent episode of the podcast *Catholic Stuff You Should Know*:

“I do actually think that it’s Holy Saturday ... Something is going on, but I can’t see it ... But below ... Christ is dominating. Whatever is happening with these souls that are going to him, whatever is happening in the hearts of persons on their sickbed, whatever is happening in nations where they’re saying ‘we want to have access back to the Sacraments or to a life of faith,’ or even in not just nations but personal hearts, that’s God reconciling the world to Himself.”

Each year, as we celebrate the Easter Triduum, we consider what is happening on Holy Thursday, as Jesus washes dirty feet and establishes the Eucharist. We reflect on the depth of His love for us as we hear the brutality of His execution. And we (rightly) celebrate the universe-altering fact of His resurrection from the dead.

But in the midst of it all, Holy Saturday passes us by. On a normal year, we might enjoy relief from the fasting and abstinence of Good Friday, get our Easter baskets blessed, and prepare ourselves for whatever Easter Sunday will bring. As we prepare to celebrate #holyweekathome this year, many of our usual Easter traditions are being changed, delayed, or omitted entirely. And it might leave us wondering what, exactly, God is up to. As the ancient homilist and Father Nathan point out – just because we can’t see it, doesn’t mean that He isn’t working.

The silence of Holy Saturday – and of this whole Holy Week celebrated at a distance – gives us the chance to contemplate just that.

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.” -1 Corinthians 2:9

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