

The Great Vigil of Easter
April 11, 2009
Romans 6

The church is dark, and everyone has gathered in silence. A single voice chants ancient words of praise and wonder as, one by one, candles are lit. The story is told of humankind's fall from the splendor of light and grace intended by God; so, also, is the story of the even more splendid salvation of humankind, glorious with the light and grace of God's forgiveness. The gathered assembly responds to each chapter of redemption's story with psalms and prayers and spiritual songs.

A group waits nervously by a pool of water in an alcove near the main sanctuary. Most are adults; there are several children and babes in arms. For some time they have attended worship, and have been dismissed before the communal meal is served; they are outsiders still, and needed to be instructed in the moves and graces, the stories and doctrines, of the family into which their heavenly Father is even now finalizing adoption proceedings. They have been drawn by the Holy Spirit to confess Jesus Christ as Savior, Lord, God and Brother; now, on this night of nights, this "night truly blessed," they are to be baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus; filled with the Spirit who first beckoned them; and made children of the One whom Jesus now bids them call Abba, dearest Father.

First, though, they must die: die to their old loyalties to Isis or Athena, Mithras or Abraxas, Astarte or Wotan or Lir or Shiva or Apollo or whatever dead-end deity they had worshipped as god. They must die to the world, with all of its seductive splendors and plausible delusions. They must die to their bondage to the father of lies, the great deceiver, whom Jesus named the Evil One and from whom He commanded His followers to pray for deliverance. They must die to self: to that incurved gaze that puts ego at the center of reflection and action, word and worship. They are stripped naked; this is radical detachment is from world, powers, principalities, and self.

Finally, they must die not simply *to* these things; they must die *with Someone: with Jesus*. They must die in him; bound intimately to him in a death-spiral that takes them, with Jesus, into a watery grave. And then, clinging to Him alone, hoping on Him alone, they are raised up, dripping wet and gasping for breath, clothed in white robes that reflect their Savior's resurrection life, His righteousness and His purity. Their heads are anointed with fragrant oil as hands are laid upon them and the Holy Spirit is prayed into their very heart. They are led, like astonished children, into the blazing light of the gathered assembly, as newborn brothers and sisters in Christ, fledgling heirs of His Kingdom of light and love, having died to all in Him, now made eternally alive in Him.

And then they are greeted with the kiss of peace, the mark of Resurrection life in the peaceful communion of the Holy Trinity; they pray, with their sisters and brothers, the table-grace of the Lamb's high feast: *Our Father, who art in heaven...give us this day our daily bread....* And they are led to the table prepared for them in the presence of their enemies: sin, death and the devil, defeated and beating a bitter retreat; they taste and see the goodness of their Lord in a first Communion of milk and honey, for they are such newborn babes, dearly ransomed, dearly redeemed, and dearly beloved.

Such is the history of Holy Baptism at this great and solemn Vigil of Easter, for a millennium and a half in the Western Church at least. And although tonight we have not stripped the baptismal candidates naked or fed them milk and honey; and although they are doused with water from a Rubbermaid tub, not immersed in a baptismal pool, little else has changed. They have entered into the great drama of salvation; they, with us; and with the great congregation of the redeemed across the whole Earth, in all times and places; and with the angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, have joined in the mighty chorus which proclaims, *O Ruler of the Universe, Lord God, great are the deeds that you have done, surpassing human understanding. Your ways are ways of righteousness and truth, O King of all the nations, O King of all the ages. Who can fail to do you homage, Lord, and sing the*

praises of your name? For you alone are the Holy One. All nations will draw near and bow down before you, because your just and holy works have been revealed.

The great Father of the Eastern Church, St. Gregory Nazianzen, said this to the newly baptized; I can do no better than to speak his words to our new brothers and sisters in Christ - and to this whole gathered assembly. "Today let us do honor to Christ's baptism and celebrate this feast in holiness. Be cleansed entirely and continue to be cleansed. Nothing gives such pleasure to God as the conversion and salvation of men, for whom his every word and every revelation exist. He wants you to become a living force for all mankind, lights shining in the world. You are to be radiant lights as you stand beside Christ, the great light, bathed in the glory of him who is the light of heaven. You are to enjoy more and more the pure and dazzling light of the Trinity, as now you have received - though not in its fullness - a ray of its splendor, proceeding from the one God, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen."