

Easter Vigil: Awaiting the Climax of the *Eucatastrophe*

Paul E. Michelson

“Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”
Psalm 30:5b

In the Western tradition, Holy Saturday (Easter Vigil) is an ambiguous and poignant day, an empty space poised between the tragic and apparently calamitous events of Good Friday and the crucifixion and the triumph of truth and goodness in the bright dawn of Easter Sunday. The first disciples could only mourn and despair. They did not know that the *eucatastrophe* of Holy Week was soon to reach fulfillment. We know better...or do we? For the majority of us Holy Saturday is the most neglected day in Holy Week. For many of us it is just another weekend shopping day, devoted to consumerism rather than soul-searching and repentance.

In the West, Christmas is the most popular holiday of the year, likely because it has been so thoroughly and convincingly commercialized. For Eastern Christians, Easter is far more significant as we found out during several Easter seasons spent in Romania. Eastern Orthodox Churches celebrate the final day of Lent—Great and Holy Saturday or the Blessed Sabbath—which culminates late in the evening with the Vespereal Liturgy of Saint Basil. Living as we were in a communist country, it was striking and deeply moving to see overflowing Orthodox churches keeping a vigil for the coming resurrection of Christ. What were they celebrating? According to Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann, Holy Saturday deliberately connects with the Genesis Creation. In Christ, God completes creation by restoring believers to communion with Himself. “All things are again as they should be. His mission is consummated. On the Blessed Sabbath He rests from all His works.”

J. R. R. Tolkien coined the term “*eucatastrophe*” specifically to describe a story in which seeming disaster turns cataclysmically to the good in a way that “pierces you with a

joy that brings tears.” According to the Catholic Tolkien, the Easter story—a story all the greater because it actually happened— was “the greatest *eucaastrophe* possible...where Joy and Sorrow are at one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in Love.” The Gospel account of the life of Christ was a *eucaastrophe*, because out of the apparent calamity of the crucifixion, hoping against hope, came the good news of the resurrection. This is very much like the sentiment expressed by Protopresbyter Schmemmann: at Easter “sorrow is not replaced by joy; it is transformed into joy. This distinction indicates that it is precisely within death that Christ continues to effect triumph.”

Shortly before midnight of the Romanian Orthodox Easter, all lights in the sanctuary are extinguished except for the Eternal Flame at the altar. Then precisely at midnight, the priest cries out “Christ is Risen,” and candles (symbolizing the Light of the Resurrection) are lit at the altar and passed from person to person in the church and to the thronged spaces outside the building as the church bells break the silence. After the assembled gathering, led by the priest, marches around the church three times, hundreds of flickering candles disperse as the multitude heads home to end the Lenten fast, to share in the traditional Easter meal of lamb (representing the Paschal Lamb), braided *cozonac* sweet bread (symbolizing the bread of the Eucharist), and red Easter eggs (as a figuration of new life through the blood and resurrection of Christ).

It is good that the pilgrimage of Lent has taken us to Holy Saturday where we now await the climax of the Great *Eucaastrophe*. Amidst the trials and despairs of our immediate past and the confusions of our uncertain present, we have been sustained by faith, hope, and love. It's Saturday...but Sunday is coming. This Easter let us celebrate the *Eucaastrophe*: “Christ is Risen!” “He is Risen indeed!”

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