

The Promises of Ordinary Times (Column 32: April 20, 2020)

By Lucia A. Silecchia

For so many obvious reasons, this Easter season is different from any I have known before. Yet, in one hopeful way, it is the same: Easter is and remains a season of great promise. In spite of gloom, signs of the renewing promise of spring lie just outside the window. This season of the Church year is subdued and yet exuberantly filled with the celebration of Christ's promises fulfilled in the Resurrection He foretold – and what those promises mean for our own eternities. Indeed, in these stormy times, it is those promises alone that may seem to be our only signs of peace and strength.

Promises have been on my mind lately since the quiet sacredness of the Easter Vigil. In what seems like a lifetime ago, on Ash Wednesday, the Gospel reading included an instruction from Christ on prayer. He said, “[W]hen you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.” Through events I did not foresee at the time, that was exactly where I found myself on the great Vigil of Easter. I was not in the joyful, expectant company of my parish family, or my friends, or my whole family, but in the “inner room” of home.

Watching this great Easter celebration unfold on broadcast television did not seem quite right. So, as I have throughout this unusual season, I turned to the Facebook page of my hometown parish to watch the Vigil Mass livestreamed and pray at a distance while I could still see familiar faces, hear familiar voices speak and sing, and look at the familiar sanctuary where I hope to be again sometime soon. I was especially eager to celebrate, long distance, with my hometown parish, because it is in Queens, New York – a county which has suffered so much during this pandemic, and where my heart has turned so often during these difficult weeks.

The Vigil Mass was beautiful, as always. But, for the very first time, there was one part of the Mass that struck my heart in a new way: the renewal of Baptismal promises that came halfway through Mass, at the very heart of the liturgy.

The words of my own Baptismal promises were spoken by my parents and godparents on a July day that I do not remember. The words of my godchildren's Baptisms are better remembered, but still obscured a bit by the joyous excitement of those days. The words of Baptismal promises made at other Easter vigils in other years certainly had my sober attention. Yet, there is something about responding with a community that both strengthens the promises made but also makes it easier to respond rotely because the questions, “*Do you renounce ...*” and “*Do you believe...*” are directed to us all in unison.

However, this Easter vigil was different. There was no crowd and no company with whom I could make those promises. Instead, for the first time since my own,

unremembered Baptism itself, I heard these questions, quietly, addressed to me alone in that “inner room.” The questions of renouncing what was evil and believing in what was good were posed directly to me. “Do *you* reject ... “and “Do *you* believe” had a new emphasis on “you.”

My mind wanders, sympathetically, to the plight of St. Peter when he was asked who Christ was. He answered quickly while he reported what others were saying about the identity of Christ. But, then, when he was asked, “Who do *you* say that I am?” the question took a deeply personal, intimate tone.

And so it was for me on the great Vigil of Easter this year. The “you” in the Baptismal promises did not start questions that I could answer relying on the responses of those who surrounded me. It was, instead, the start of more personal, intimate questions that, on that night, felt addressed to me alone.

I hope that it will be alongside others that I renew these promises at the great Easter Vigil of 2021. For now, I am grateful for these questions asked in the quiet of home, and pray for the grace to live out these promises through ordinary times.

May God bless you and yours with good health and comfort in the days ahead.

Lucia A. Silecchia is a Professor of Law at the Catholic University of America. "On Ordinary Times" is a biweekly column reflecting on the ways to find the sacred in the simple. Email her at silecchia@cua.edu.