

Homily from the Easter Vigil

April 4, 2026

Rightly, the public prayer of the Church, which we call Liturgy, is centered on and often identified with the Eucharist, which we are now celebrating. Public, that word has the sense of something notorious, that is, something done for all to see. For example, when we speak of a “public spectacle,” we mean something that we have all seen, something exposed to wide scrutiny, and, in this case, something that is less than virtuous. A public spectacle.

But, when our Catholic faith uses a word, you can bet there’s some Latin in it. When we speak of “public” prayer, we speak in the sense of the Latin word *publicus*, meaning “of the people, or belonging to the people at large.” But even this sense can be confusing. Instead, public prayer is not a private affair, but rather the official prayer of a particular people: the people of Christ. While one’s private prayer has a great deal of latitude, the Liturgy, the official prayer of the Church, is closely structured because it is not individual’s prayer, but the prayer of the Church, the prayer of Jesus Christ. I don’t think we get a more structured prayer than the one we’re in the middle of right now. Thus it has a special authority this Liturgy — confirmed and inspired by the Holy Spirit as a certain and authentic worship of God.

Besides the other sacraments which we’ll be celebrating this evening, there is the aptly named “Liturgy of the Hours.” While many pray this prayer of psalms and scripture, consecrated religious and ordained ministers have promised to pray this liturgy daily, at generally five to seven different times depending upon the religious promises made. We priests of dioceses get to pray the Liturgy of the Hours five times a day. This Holy Saturday morning, those who prayed the first of these hours, “The Office of Readings,” we’re treated with a reading from deep within our tradition, an anonymous homily from some time in the first four centuries of our faith. This “Ancient Homily on Holy Saturday,” is then prayed with the authority of the public prayer of the Church, is a mediation on the world in the interim between Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection on Easter, a time traditionally understood as “the descent to hell,” when the Lord, who desires that all be saved goes to claim those who had died before his death and resurrection. Now read and prayed some 1600 years, let’s hear part of this ancient homily:

“Something strange is happening — there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silent because the king is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God has died in the flesh and Hell trembles with fear. He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, he who is both God and the Son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing the Cross, the weapon that had won him the victory. At the sight of him Adam, the first man he had created, struck his breast in terror and cried out to everyone, ‘My Lord, my all. My Lord, be with you all Christ answered him: ‘And with your spirit.’ He took him by the hand and raised him up, saying: ‘Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.’”

The homily begins, “Something strange is happening.” In the silence of Holy Saturday, God’s saving of his people is well underway! Though we cannot see it clearly, God’s divine will is at work, with the Lord descending to the depths of perdition, to the depths of the loss into hopelessness of death, to claim his children for redemption and eternal life. As our Church has perpetually proclaimed: this is only the beginning of the saving! In his resurrection, the doors are opened wide for all — the dead, the living, and those yet to come to the fullness of eternal life. The same message sent in that ancient homily to the dead in hell: “Awake, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.”

Indeed, something strange is happening. This message is for us this evening as well. Something is happening — hidden, uncommon, out of the ordinary, yes, even strange. Those with us this evening who have been preparing for full initiation into our Church, and in parishes across our diocese, country, and the world, have heard the majestic calling of the Lord deep in their souls — “Awake, O sleeper, rise ... and Christ will give you light.”

The light of the Easter candle, shared with each, is a sign of this truth. Something is indeed happening — something extraordinary, profound, and eternal. You have heard Christ’s call to “awake in faith,” and you have responded with conviction, with joy, and with peace. Christ has come to claim you as his own, and you have responded in faith. When much of the world slumbers, you have been jolted to life by the love of God, and the present and future have a new intensity, a new light.

That same Ancient Homily ends this way: “The bridal chamber is adorned, the banquet is ready, the eternal dwelling places are prepared, the treasure houses of all good things lie open. The kingdom of heaven has been prepared for you from all eternity.”

God, our good God, has prepared this banquet for you, the supreme treasure in the kingdom of God, since before you were born. Let there be no doubt — something extraordinarily strange and new is underway. The salvation of the chosen of God and it is on display all around. Those to be fully initiated have been caught up in God’s love. So have we all!