

THE CHURCH AS A MISSIONARY SERVANT IN THE GODLESS WORLD

**Erich Przywara on the 'Holy Saturday'
Form of the Church**

Riyako Cecilia Hikota

HOLY SATURDAY, the liturgical term for the day on which the body of the Lord was in the tomb while his soul 'descended into hell', has often been neglected in the life of the Church, as it seems to be an empty, silent day between the cross and the resurrection. However, the empty silence of Holy Saturday is vital to connecting the grief of the cross with the joy of the resurrection, exactly because of its in-between place.

St Ignatius of Loyola was one of those who are aware of the significance of this Holy Saturday silence, even though the Gospels themselves do not mention it. On the Sixth and Seventh Days of the Third Week of the Spiritual Exercises, the exercitant is instructed to contemplate the burial of the Lord, that is, his body remaining in the tomb separated from the soul, as well as the desolation of Our Lady and of the disciples.¹ Since these contemplations fall at the end of the Third Week, we can say that they are, in a sense, the culmination of the meditations on the whole passion week, as well as a preparation for the Fourth Week, which is about the resurrection of the Lord.

As the Gospels are silent about Holy Saturday, it is also the day that requires our pious imagination the most: how desolate and sorrowful

¹ See Exx 208, 'At midnight, from the taking down from the cross to the burial in the sepulchre, exclusively; and in the morning, from the placing in the tomb [298] to the house where Our Lady went after the burial of her Son'; 'A contemplation of all the passion taken as a whole, during the exercise at midnight and in the morning. In place of the repetitions and the application of the senses, the exercitant should consider, throughout that whole day and as frequently as possible, how the most holy body of Christ our Lord was separated from his soul and remained apart from it, and where and how it was buried. Consider, too, Our Lady's loneliness along with her deep grief and fatigue; then, on the other hand, the fatigue of the disciples.'

was Our Lady as she went home after the burial of her beloved Son? And how did the disciples and the women feel? How did they spend the day between the crucifixion and the resurrection? St Ignatius invites us to imagine ourselves in the midst of the deep sorrow of the followers of the Lord. To put it differently, he invites us to imagine what the world would be like without Jesus, that is, how empty it would be. This exercise is necessary for us to appreciate truly the wonder and the joy of the resurrection.

In the twentieth century there were two major Roman Catholic theologians who wrote on the significance of the empty silence of Holy Saturday: Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988), who developed a highly sophisticated theology of Holy Saturday by exploring its Trinitarian, Christological and soteriological aspects; and Karl Rahner (1904–1984), who reflected philosophically on its meaning. It is probably no coincidence that both of them were Jesuits (even though Balthasar left the Society of Jesus later in his life). A much less well-known fact is that their mentor, the Polish-German Jesuit Erich Przywara (1889–1972) also paid special attention to Holy Saturday, especially in his commentary on the Spiritual Exercises, and regarded it as the pre-eminent ecclesiological symbol.² For example, in an unpublished manuscript of meditations on the Spiritual Exercises, we find him saying:

The sign of the resurrection will be: the empty grave! And therefore the real resurrection form of the Church also remains in the invisibility of God; and therefore it will be necessary for all the Church's worldly forms of the resurrection always to be humbled into the Third Week [of the Spiritual Exercises], for these forms are, fundamentally, a rebellion against the mystery of the cross Only there is the triumphal form of the Church at home. Throughout the history of the Church, there has been an impulse to embed invisibility in visibility within the Christian empire, and then the hand of God comes and restores *the true form of the Church, the form of Holy Saturday* This mystery keeps recurring. This holds good for the Church: humanity never learns from history and Christendom never learns from history either!³

² Martha Zechmeister examines the significance of the Holy Saturday motif in Przywara's theology, which can be located in the tradition of negative theology. See 'Karsamstag: Zu einer Theologie des Gott-vermissens', in *Vom Wagnis der Nichtidentität: Johann Baptist Metz zu Ehren*, edited by Johann Reikerstorfer (Münster: LIT, 1998), 50–78; *Gottes-Nacht: Erich Przywaras Weg negativer Theologie* (Münster: LIT, 1997).

³ Erich Przywara, *Exerzitien in Altenhohenau*, volume 2, 50. The manuscript was typed by Leo Zimny in 1936.

Here we can see that Przywara finds deeply ecclesiological significance in the image of Holy Saturday. In another place, he calls the Church on Holy Saturday ‘a widow in all her parts, desolate in this world! That means: in DEO! God between the mystery of the ascension into heaven and the Second Coming—not only the invisible but the departed God.’⁴ Przywara also repeats that Holy Saturday is ‘the feast of the Church’, that is, ‘the Day of the Church exactly in the form of the divested, plundered, exposed, impoverished and abandoned Church’.⁵

It is intriguing that Przywara uses these powerful words to describe the state of the Church on Holy Saturday, even though they are fragmentary images rather than systematic thoughts. In what sense can this ‘desolate’, ‘impoverished’ form of the Church as a ‘widow’ be the ‘true form of the Church’? And, more importantly, what implications does such a Holy Saturday motif have for our understanding of the role of the Church in the world today?

Holy Saturday as Ecclesiological Symbol

For Przywara, Holy Saturday is first of all about the mystery of Christ, who even descended to hell for us sinners, so that we might be led out of the damnation that should have been our fate and into heaven. Przywara writes:

It is precisely this resurrection glory, taking place hidden in the womb of darkness itself, that is the light in which the extremity of this darkness first appears and shows itself: the inexorable consequence, happening to the God–man himself, of the ‘curse’ that he became for us (Galatians 3: 13): sin, death, hell (Romans 5: 12–21). This most extreme of extremities, hell, becomes manifest in the explicitly blessed soul: the blessed soul descended to hell. Since the darkness of God’s own godforsakenness (Matthew 27: 45–46) seems to be sealed in the darkness of death and hell, it is the blessed soul, that is, the soul living in the blessed vision of the unveiled God, that descended into hell, that is, to the place where the Godhead is hidden in the discontinuity of the loss of God.⁶

Here we can see some similarity with Balthasar’s interpretation of Christ’s descent into Hell. In the Holy Saturday mystery, what is called

⁴ Przywara, *Exerzitien in Altenhohenau*, volume 2, 34.

⁵ Przywara, *Exerzitien in Altenhohenau*, volume 2, 36.

⁶ Erich Przywara, *Deus semper maior: Theologie der Exerzitien* (Vienna: Herold, 1964), volume 2, 148.



The Descent of Christ into Limbo, by
Giovanni Bellini, c.1475–1480

the *admirabile commercium*, the ‘redeeming exchange’ between God and humanity, is clearly revealed.⁷ However, Przywara’s use of the Holy Saturday motif also has a deeply ecclesiological meaning in a more explicit sense than it does for Balthasar. We should also note the significant difference between them that Przywara is working with the Christ-Adam motif, which is an important part of the traditional interpretation of Christ’s descent into hell as the ‘Harrowing of Hell’, while Balthasar has clearly rejected this motif. Przywara writes:

Since in Christ’s descent into hell there appears most extremely ‘Adam in Christ’, all the curse of humanity concentrated into one curse, which ‘became Christ’ (Galatians 3:13) ... all humanity from Adam onwards is redeemed into one body of Christ: ‘Christ in Adam ... and Adam in Christ’ (Augustine, *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, 101.1.4). Precisely because the ‘Body of Christ’ in redeemed pre-Christian humanity from Adam onwards ... ascends in the ‘ascending Christ’ from the ‘lower parts ... so that he might fill all things’ (Ephesians 4:9–10), and precisely because the ‘Logos who became flesh’ (John 1:14) is revealed as ‘Head and Body of the one Christ’ (Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 9.12) in the one ‘body’ of ‘many members’ (1 Corinthians 12:12), then also the perfecting ‘beginning’ (Colossians 1:18) of the new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) takes place in Christ, as the ‘firstborn from the dead’⁸

For Przywara, in his descent into Hell, Christ as the New Adam unites humankind with himself in the body of the Church. This is why, as one commentator points out, ‘Przywara gives such a peculiar rationale for

⁷ Compare Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, translated by Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 360.

⁸ Przywara, *Deus semper maior*, volume 2, 178.

the universal significance of the Church: it emerges from the event that affects and enfolds all of the humanity involved in sin'.⁹

As to the image of the Holy Saturday Church—the 'desolate' Church as 'a widow'—Przywara finds it relevant for us today, as he sees a certain similarity between the absence and silence of the 'dead God' on Holy Saturday and the seeming absence and silence of God in our 'in-between' time, that is, the time between the ascension and the second coming of Christ. For Przywara, "the Godlessness of the world before the conception of the Lord" increases in "the Godlessness of the same world after his death and burial".¹⁰ He also speaks of,

... the God who seems to have come to this world once in order to leave it again, who seems to have handed over this world to a lost silence, as the silence before God's arrival was: for this world has experienced what God is, and now has to wait anew, having lost what had been found. And yet it is the silence belonging to a greater arrival.¹¹

These words seem particularly profound when we consider the time in which Przywara wrote them: looking back on the catastrophe of the two world wars. Przywara was confronted with the harsh reality of suffering in a world in which God seemed to be silent.¹² Nevertheless he had a hope that this silence implies 'a greater arrival'. In a sense, the silence seems ever greater than before, exactly because we have already experienced what God is through Jesus Christ.

For Przywara, both the Church on Holy Saturday and the Church in the 'in-between' time are characterized by the motif of 'remaining' (*übrigbleiben*) or 'being left behind' (*Übriggelassensein*). The Church is, so to speak, the 'remnant', which stays after the Lord's departure, guarding the tomb as a 'desolate widow'. Just as the consecrated bread left over from the communion is kept and guarded (something that is also associated with the image of the body of Christ left in the tomb on Holy Saturday), 'the blessed, the most intimate and the warmest has the form of being left behind!'¹³ Thus, for Przywara, being left behind in the

⁹ Eva-Maria Faber, *Kirche zwischen Identität und Differenz: die ekklesiologischen Entwürfe von Romano Guardini und Erich Przywara* (Würzburg: Echter, 1993), 150.

¹⁰ Przywara, *Deus semper maior*, volume 2, 118.

¹¹ Erich Przywara, *Was ist Gott? Summula* (Nuremberg: Glock und Lutz, 1953 [1947]), 26.

¹² In particular, Przywara explored this issue in his exchange with his contemporary, the author Reinhold Schneider. See Erich Przywara and Reinhold Schneider, *Briefwechsel: mit Gedenkworten von Theodor Heuss, Werner Bergengruen, Erich Przywara und einem Vortrag von Reinhold Schneider* (Zürich: Die Arche, 1963).

¹³ Przywara, *Exerzitien in Altenhohenau*, volume 2, 36.

seeming absence of Christ is a blessing, which enables us to be the closest to and most intimate with him.

Here we see a distinctive characteristic of Przywara's spirituality, which paradoxically sees the utmost form of unity with God exactly in God's absence and silence.¹⁴ Here we can also see that Przywara provides a unique interpretation of the seventh day of the Third Week of the Spiritual Exercises, when the exercitant is to contemplate both the body of Christ in the tomb and the desolation of Our Lady and the disciples: the body of Christ left in the tomb and the body of Christ (the Church) left by the grave are thus placed in parallel.

Further, the motif of 'being left behind' is connected to the notion of 'homelessness': Christ was without home on earth, and Christians and the Church are supposed to follow in his footsteps.¹⁵ Christians and the Church are *in* this world but not *of* this world. For Przywara, this other 'in-betweenness' of the Church or the Christian directly leads to the Christian mission. Therefore, we can see a connection between the Holy Saturday form and the missionary form of the Church. The Holy Saturday form of the Church is ultimately its missionary form as a 'slave of the world' as well as a 'slave of God'.¹⁶

The Missionary Form of the Church in a Godless World

Przywara's out-of-print booklet *Idee Europa* ('Idea of Europe') has recently attracted attention, after Pope Francis called it a 'splendid work'.¹⁷ Some scholars have already used it to illustrate the similarity between Przywara's vision of Europe and the Church, and that of Pope Francis.¹⁸ *Idee Europa* is also relevant for the Holy Saturday form of the Church.

In it Przywara emphasizes the importance of the old and new covenants, and of *admirabile commercium*. He explains how a covenant, in the original biblical language, entails participation in the spousal mystery between God and God's people. In the New Testament, the covenant is grounded in the death and resurrection of Christ. He has revealed himself to us as a servant, who, 'though he was in the form of God ... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave' (Philippians 2:6). Interestingly,

¹⁴ Przywara's spirituality is influenced by the Carmelite tradition of the dark night as well as by St Ignatius.

¹⁵ The significance of this notion is discussed by Faber, *Kirche zwischen Identität und Differenz*, 240–246.

¹⁶ Erich Przywara, *Katholische Krise* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1967), 82.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, address at the conferral of the Charlemagne Prize, 6 May 2016,

¹⁸ See John Betz, 'Pope Francis, Erich Przywara, and the Idea of Europe', *First Things* (5 December 2016), at <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/05/pope-francis-erich-przywara-and-the-idea-of-europe>.

in *Idee Europa*, the *admirabile commercium* is represented by the Maundy Thursday motif of washing feet; by washing the ‘filthy feet’ of the ‘filthy world’, Christ has shown the ultimate form of love and the basic intention of the covenant.¹⁹

According to Przywara, in the history of Europe as in the history of the Church, this new covenant has often been misunderstood as if it were just a new version of the old one: Christians have seen themselves as another type of ‘chosen people’. The ruling dynasties of Europe made this grave mistake:



Christ Washing the Disciples' Feet, by Giovanni Agostino da Lodi, 1500

They saw themselves exclusively as the glorious presence of the Divine Majesty on earth ... to the point that they could see in those ‘without Christ and without God’ nothing but an ‘enemy’ to be vanquished by ‘crusades’ or compelled to baptism.²⁰

Przywara also criticizes both the medieval Catholic Church and the Reformation, each of which has also created another form of exclusivity in a different way. Finally, Przywara criticizes ‘Christian humanism’ as well, which, in his view, also grew into a new version of the old covenant, that is, ‘the new Old Covenant of “human perfection”’, which is just another form of elite.²¹

In fact, Przywara is critical of any form of ‘Christian elite’ who just ‘escape into the region of some “sacred separateness”’, whether it be “God’s State”, or “Holy Empire”, or “community of the Chosen” ... or “Christian society” or “Christian party”’. Instead, following the example of Christ, Christians must wash the ‘filthy feet’ of a ‘filthy world’.²² For

¹⁹ Erich Przywara, *Idee Europa* (Nuremberg: Glock und Lutz, 1956), 36.

²⁰ Przywara, *Idee Europa*, 34, translated in Betz, ‘Pope Francis, Erich Przywara, and the Idea of Europe’.

²¹ Przywara, *Idee Europa*, 35.

²² Przywara, *Idee Europa*, 36.

Przywara, only Christianity like this is ‘the one true Christianity’, the ‘Christianity of the “redeeming exchange”’. Przywara concludes *Idee Europa* with the following passage:

Therefore, a true and new ‘Christian Europe’ as ‘Christian Occident’ can only exist so long as, with Christ as the ‘friend and table companion of sinners’ (Matthew 11: 19), we Christians truly ‘befriend sinners’ and ‘sit at the table of sinners’—this being the only way for us to be like Christ, who did not ‘quench’ his enemies (Isaiah 42: 3; Matthew 12: 20), but ‘takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1: 29).²³

Eventually, as Eva-Maria Faber points out, we can see ‘how little Przywara regrets the collapse of “Christian Europe”’.²⁴ This is understandable for, if we follow his logic, the Church becomes closer to its true form precisely when it is exposed to a godless world. This point is also connected to his idea of the Holy Saturday form of the Church. It is clearer now that for Przywara the Church has often fallen into the error of ‘the new Old Covenant’, of creating just another form of exclusivity. This is ‘the triumphal form of the Church’ or the Church ‘at home’—the Church that does not go out into the profane world. Then the hand of God, which restores the true form of the Church, the ‘divested, plundered, exposed, impoverished and abandoned’, ‘desolate’ form of Holy Saturday as a ‘widow’, which is ultimately the form of the Church as a missionary servant. This form of the Church is Christologically grounded in the *admirabile commercium*, which is characterized by the radical service that Christ even descended into hell for us so that we might be saved from damnation.

The Holy Saturday Church

What implications does such a Holy Saturday motif provide for our understanding of the role of the Church in our world today? One important consequence might be to change our view of the so-called ‘crisis’ faced by the Church in the more and more secularised profane world. Such a Holy Saturday form of the Church, considered as a missionary servant to the godless world, shows us that crisis could actually be an opportunity for the Church to be closer to its ‘true form’. Recently more and more devout Catholics have tended to take a somewhat defensive, inward-looking

²³ Przywara, *Idee Europa*, 36.

²⁴ Faber, *Kirche zwischen Identität und Differenz*, 246 note 414.

stance against the outside world, looking desperately for ways to uphold the fading authority of the Church in this world, and so falling into the error of 'the new Old Covenant'. Przywara suggests that what we need is rather the courage to go out into the godless world and remain there as a 'divested, plundered, exposed, impoverished and abandoned Church'.

His radicalism recalls that of Pope Francis, who has emphasized that the Church must go out to the margins of the world in order to serve the poor and the suffering. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, the Pope writes:

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures ... More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: 'Give them something to eat' (Mark 6: 37). (n.49)

Despite the Pope's vision, the Church and the people of God still seem to be going in the opposite direction and, according to Przywara, we have often done so in the past. Przywara's image of the Holy Saturday form of the Church, along with its form of a servant to the ungodly world, may help us to remember what the true Church should be.

The Christian mission is a result of the encounter with the resurrected Christ, so an unbalanced emphasis on Holy Saturday which could simply undermine the joy of the good news should be carefully avoided. However, Przywara's radical reflection on the 'impoverished' form of the Church at the 'zero-point' of Holy Saturday may help us Christians to become and remain a humble, Christ-like Church that really serves the poor and the suffering in this more and more secularised world.

Riyako Cecilia Hikota is currently conducting research on Erich Przywara at the Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. She received a PhD in systematic theology from the University of Edinburgh. Her thesis was published in 2018 as *And Still We Wait: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of Holy Saturday and Christian Discipleship*. Her main research interests are in the *ressourcement* theologians in twentieth-century Catholic theology.