

All Hands on Deck

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For seventeen years my husband served a vibrant but numerically small parish in Erie, Pennsylvania. When Holy Saturday came, it was "all hands on deck" to get everything ready for the Paschal service. Our parish children were a vital part of the team working, preparing, and anticipating the great night to come.

After the Holy Saturday Liturgy and a light snack, they helped decorate the church with fresh flowers and greens, having the special privilege of creating a garland for the royal doors. Once the decorating was finished and the church was bright and fragrant, they and their parents went home to rest, or took a turn keeping watch and reading at the tomb of Christ.

As late evening approached, families with children would begin arriving at church with Easter baskets to be blessed, and with sleeping bags to lay out on the second floor. Our church was a converted house, with the chapel on the first floor. Up a long, narrow flight of stairs was the large open area that served as our meeting room. Because the church had no pews, just a few chairs for those who might need them, the children who were staying for the whole service could go up and nap in their sleeping bags when they needed to, and then come back down. Our patient choir director didn't mind the "comings in and goings out" of those youngsters who were singing in the choir.

A few minutes before midnight, everyone waited in the hushed and darkened church for the priest to sing "Thy Resurrection, O Christ our Savior, the angels in heaven sing..." for the first time, very softly, then repeating it with increasing volume. At twelve o'clock the sanctuary doors opened, candles were lit from the priest's Paschal candle, and we assembled for the procession outside. Some of the children carried icons, others dozed in a parent's arms, but all felt the thrill of walking around the church in the bracing midnight air and hearing the bells peal as we sang together that Pascha had come. We returned to the now brightly-lit church with renewed energy and the joy of anticipation fulfilled, to begin the next part of the service.

Three-thirty in the morning found us upstairs, the sleeping bags piled in a corner, the tables laden with blessed Pascha foods. The children challenged each other to egg-cracking contests and eagerly consumed the chunks of kielbasa and slices of sweet bread offered from various baskets. They compared notes on who had stayed awake longest, and collected untold numbers of chocolate bunnies and marshmallow chicks from smiling grownups.

As Father Alexander Schmemmann has written, Pascha is the feast of the "day without evening" that prepares us for the Kingdom of God. A child who helps with the work of beautifying the church for the feast, who experiences worship at midnight and eating special foods at three in the morning, has an experiential understanding of what "day without evening" means. As the child matures, that understanding can deepen into certainty that the Kingdom truly awaits us. But it starts with simple things: a garland of flowers and leaves, a darkened church that suddenly blazes with light, a colored egg offered by someone who loves us and tells us with conviction, "Christ is Risen!"

by Valerie G. Zahirsky

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