

New and Renewed: Renewal of Baptismal Promises in the Easter Vigil

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ABSTRACT

The 1989 Prayer Book of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa introduced, for the first time, opportunities for renewal of baptismal promises, particularly at the Easter Vigil service. This article evaluates the innovation in the light of the Prayer Book's theology of baptism.

I grew up knowing that the mark of a “true” Anglican was someone who showed up at least at the Easter morning service. As the old South African *Book of Common Prayer* (the predecessor to the current *An Anglican Prayer Book 1989*) admonishes: it is the duty of every Communicant Anglican “to receive the Holy Sacrament frequently, and especially at all the Great Festivals of the Church of which Easter be one”.¹ I like to maintain the mark of a true Anglican, at least since 1989, are water-spattered pages 226/7 in one's prayer book. Those two pages set out the Litany of Redemption which is sung during the sprinkling of the congregation during the part of the Easter Vigil liturgy when baptismal vows are renewed. Of course I jest – but only partly so. To miss this (and by extension, the whole Easter Vigil) is to miss the central celebration of the Church's year, the pivot on which the Christian life is founded. It is, and has been since the early church, the central service of the liturgical year.

From the earliest days of Christianity, Easter was observed with a pre-dawn vigil (sometimes starting at sunset the night before and continuing throughout the night) including readings and prayers and culminating in the celebration of the Eucharist. From at least the third century onwards, provision was made for the baptism of new converts during the vigil liturgy. This is still the case today. In the Western church the liturgical reforms of the twentieth century also introduced an opportunity for renewal of baptismal vows to the vigil service – initially by the Roman Catholic Church in 1955 and followed by other denominations. So for example, in the current prayer book of the Anglican Province of Southern Africa (*An Anglican Prayer Book 1989* and hereafter referred to as the *APB 1989*), the Renewal of Baptismal Promises is included in the Easter Vigil liturgy.

1 *A Book of Common Prayer* (Johannesburg: ELD Trust, 1954), 251.

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