

Homily for the Easter Vigil

20 April 2019

The One Thing Necessary

This night is the center of the Church's life, the climax of its annual circle of worship. For five of you, tonight is the beginning of your new life as fully initiated members of Christ's body, as you receive the Sacraments that join you to Christ and to us: Baptism, to put an end to your old way of life and give you a new beginning as a member of Christ's Risen Body; Confirmation, to give you as your animating Spirit that same Holy Spirit that drove Christ in His ministry and ultimately led Him to His death and resurrection; and the Holy Communion, to renew each week what you begin here tonight, your membership in Christ's Risen Body. Our attention will be focused on you fully in just a few moments; let me turn for a bit to the rest of us...

We are not at the beginning of our life in Christ: for years or decades we have tried to embrace God's Holy Spirit and to make the Risen Christ's mission in the world our own. Our weekly reception of the Sacrament of the Holy Communion is the marker of our being joined to Christ, "all of us Christ's Body, each of us a member of it," to adopt Saint Paul's phrase. Tonight should be, for us, a reminder of the great, if sometimes burdensome, trust that God has, for God's own mysterious reasons, seen fit to place in us; and it should be a time of rededication to the life of discipleship that we see begin tonight in the Elect.

For me, this will probably be the final time I will preach at an Easter Vigil; next year Fr. Joe Davanzo will, God willing, stand here and preside at the Initiation of new disciples. In no way do I want to attempt a summing-up of my ministry or even to draw the spotlight onto myself; but I would like to take this final Vigil to focus all of us on what I believe is the most important and most challenging commandment Christ gives us. If you – all of you, long-time believers and new initiates tonight – remember nothing else, I ask you to take this to heart and to make it part of your daily discipleship. I am convinced it is at the heart of the challenge to Christians in this twenty-first century United States.

I take Jesus' words from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Saint Luke [27, 35b-36]:

"But I say this to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly. ... Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

I say this because we live in a culture that is, at best, transactional – fair exchange, good for good, evil for evil; and at worst, a culture that is cutthroat and exploitative: whatever is best for me or for my cause that I can get away with. We have seen a tragic example of that at the highest level over the past few days. But even for all the good things in our culture – and there are many, as well as a tragic amount of evil and foolishness – there is one key thing that the culture cannot be expected to understand or to live by: We know, from God's action in Jesus, that the world at its depth is not transactional: that it is designed by God to be an exchange of gifts. At the Mass, we take what God has given to us – wheat from the field, wine from the

grape – and give it as a gift back to God at the altar; and then God in turn transforms it and gives it back to us as the Body and Blood of His Risen Son. In daily acts of charity and forgiveness we not only help one another but we make ourselves more ready to receive God's grace: In Jesus' words, "Give alms from what you have, and look: Everything will be clean for you." [Lk 11:41]

God has, in His providence, caused us to be born and called as disciples into a world of growing awareness of divisions among peoples: between rich and poor; between those with histories of conquest and those with memories of oppression; between societies of stunning overabundance and those of terrible want. Into a world with frightening possibilities for self-destruction, through weaponry and through the abuse of the natural world around us. Into a world of growing mistrust and polarization. If human civilization is to avoid increasing conflict and growing violence because of these divisions, justice will be necessary but not enough; a transactional culture cannot heal itself because it cannot move beyond memories of wrongdoing and offense. Generosity, toward rivals and even enemies, is the distinctive and irreplaceable gift that followers of Christ must bring if our world is to be set on a path to healing. The witness of Christians who forgive wrongs, who wish for and work for the best even for enemies, is what God asks us to offer to our troubled world. To be a disciple is to give unearned gifts to others, and to live in hope that gifts unearned will be given to us. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us...."

The Baptismal bath, the Gift of the Spirit, and the nourishment of the Eucharist commission us and give us strength so that we do not fail God's summons. Every week at Mass we are reminded of, and renewed for, that work. With that awareness I now invite those of you who have responded this year to God's call to approach the waters of rebirth.