

EASTER VIGIL 2022

Homily of Bishop John Barres

St. Agnes Cathedral

April 16, 2021

At the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, Fr. Alessandro da Luz said: "We cannot reflect on the mysteries of the Eucharist, the priesthood, or the commandment of fraternal charity without reference to the Cross of Christ. The **Eucharist** cannot be reduced to a communal meal or we miss the point. The **priesthood** cannot be divorced from sacrifice...**Fraternal charity** cannot be divorced from self-gift...Our Lord did not come into this world to be a good man and wise teacher, but to save us by his death on the Cross. If we do not acknowledge (and embrace) his Cross, we cannot understand his teaching."

At the Celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday, our Cathedral rector Fr. Michael Duffy said: "Our Blessed Lord suffered an awful, painful, humiliating death. And yet we still hold the Cross high. This awful symbol of death and suffering has been turned into a symbol of life. Jesus Christ has given himself freely upon the altar of the Cross so that we might live."

Tonight at this Easter Vigil Liturgy 2022¹, we celebrate the moving Resurrection symbolism of the freshly lit Easter Vigil fire. It is fresh fire that purifies our lives, opens us to the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit and drives us on mission.

It is a fresh fire that we share person to person until the whole Church is lit and it symbolizes the fire of the Catholic faith that missionary disciples have providentially shared with our catechumens.

We celebrate the preparation of the paschal candle which is a constant symbol of the Resurrection and the Paschal Mystery in our sanctuaries. As I inserted five grains of

¹ For a theological, liturgical, spiritual and historical analysis of the Easter Vigil, see Bishop Barres' Holy Week 2020 Pastoral Letter *The Great Week: A Pilgrimage with the Lord in Holy Week*, 14-18.

incense into the candle in the form of a Cross, I said this prayer: “By his holy and glorious wounds, may Christ the Lord guard us and protect us.”

The holy and glorious wounds of the Risen Christ touch our spiritual, emotional and physical wounds so that we can be the Risen Christ’s instruments in helping to heal the wounds of the world. The holy and glorious wounds of the Risen Christ touch the wounds of those suffering in Ukraine, in Poland and in Russia.

Tonight we celebrate the beautiful connection between the Good Friday chant as the the Cross is raised three times “Behold the wood of the Cross, on which hung the salvation of the world” with the Easter Vigil chant as the Paschal candle is raised three times “The Light of Christ. Thanks be to God.” These parallel chants remind us to have great faith in the Paschal Mystery pattern that the Holy Spirit etches in us in the flowing water of the Sacrament of Baptism.

Tonight we rejoice in the chanting of the Easter Proclamation, the *Exsultet*, which connects our emotional faith memory with that of our ancestors in the faith. We hear in the *Exsultet* “Rejoice, let Mother Church also rejoice arrayed with the lightning of his glory, let this holy building shake with joy, filled with the mighty voices of the peoples.”

Together we marvel at the rich panorama of Easter Vigil readings that trace the arc of Salvation History and illustrate the power of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI once said that the lives of our Catholic Saints are a beautiful light that streams from the biblical passages that they studied, prayed, contemplated, and heard proclaimed at our liturgies and lived heroically.

Every saint was formed and forged in the biblical passages of the Easter Vigil we heard tonight. Every saint was forged in the Resurrection Appearances and Narratives that we will celebrate in the Easter Octave and throughout the Easter season.

During our Baptismal Liturgy, we will chant together a Litany of the Saints in which we will ask the great saints of the centuries to intercede for our catechumens who are to be baptized and to intercede for each of us and the mission of the Church at this unique moment of history.

Each one of us remembers tonight during this Litany that as we call on the Saints to help us that they in turn call on us to join them on the path of heroic holiness and mission.

Tonight, in the Blessing of Baptismal Water, we will hear these words: “O God, whose Son, baptized by John in the waters of the Jordan was anointed with the Holy Spirit, and, as he hung upon the Cross, gave forth water from his side along with blood, and after his Resurrection, commanded his disciples: ‘Go forth, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,’ look now, we pray, upon the face of your Church and graciously unseal for her the fountain of Baptism.”

The rich symbolism of the baptismal garment and the presentation of a lighted candle, the renewal of baptismal promises and the laying on of hands in the Sacrament of Confirmation with an emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit – wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord – all of the interlinking dimensions of the signs and symbols of the the Easter Vigil Liturgy along with our eating and drinking of the Body and Blood of Christ emphasize our call together to be missionary disciples.

Dear Catechumens, as you receive the Sacraments of Initiation tonight – Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist -- you are making a bold and radical decision about every moment of the rest of your lives.

The logic of every moment of your preparation for the Easter Vigil and the experience of support you have received from your sponsors, our RCIA team and the parishioners of St. Agnes Cathedral is a radical fidelity.

Make no mistake tonight. You are making a radical commitment tonight to be completely faithful to the Body and Blood of Christ and to the Sunday Mass.

You are making a commitment to be a missionary disciple in your family, in your parish, in your community, and in the World.

We rejoice with you tonight at this Easter Vigil and we pledge our support as you embrace the Light of the Risen Christ and the Light of his presence in the mission of the Catholic Church on earth.

In his March 26, 2005 Easter Vigil homily, Pope Benedict XVI said: “The liturgy of the holy night of Easter – after the blessing of the paschal candle – begins with a procession behind the light and towards the light. This procession symbolically sums up the entire catechumenal and penitential journey of Lent, but also calls to mind Israel’s long journey through the desert towards the Promised Land, and lastly, it symbolizes the journey of humanity, which in the night of history was seeking light, seeking paradise, seeking true life, reconciliation between the peoples, between heaven and earth, universal peace. Thus the procession involved the whole of history, as the words of the blessing of the paschal candle proclaim: ‘Christ yesterday and today. The beginning and the end...All time belongs to him. To him be glory and power through every age forever...’”

In these days of international crisis, war, death and the heart-breaking plight of war refugees, we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ at this Easter Vigil.

In these days, we think deeply about the arc of history and the connection of events and ideas in history.

A few weeks ago, on the Solemnity of the Annunciation, Pope Francis and the universal Church prayed for the consecration of Ukraine, Russia and the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

The Holy Father prayed these words in his *Act of Consecration*: “O Mary, Mother of God and our Mother...you never cease to guide us to Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Yet we have strayed from that path of peace. We have forgotten the lesson learned from the tragedies of the last century, the sacrifice of the millions who fell in two world wars.”

In praying these words, the Holy Father reminds us of what the philosopher George Santayana (1863-1952) once said: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

As we look at the horrendous evil that is occurring in Ukraine today, we see before our own eyes how evil repeats itself in history and how humanity so often seems not to learn from the lessons of history and thus is condemned to repeat it.

The consequences of original sin play out each day, each decade and each century in history. And always the poor, the defenseless and the destitute bear much of the brunt of the resulting savagery.

In this *Year of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, we think of one of St. Ignatius' 19th Century Jesuit priest-poet sons from England, Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) who reflected on the nature and connection of historical events in his poem *God's Grandeur*. He writes in that poem:

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.”

There is something about the line in this poem – “Generations have trod, have trod, have trod” – that captures with the poet's gift the consequences of original sin and the constant temptations against hope that humanity experiences.

And, without the Cross, history does so often seem hopeless. The Culture of Death so often seems to reign. Not only does it reign in the mass graves near Kyiv – so reminiscent of the mass graves of Jews next to Kyiv at Babi Yar in 1941 – but it reigns in our cities and even in many of our hospitals where unborn babies are euphemistically called the “products of conception” and killed because they are deemed inconvenient. And the Culture of Death and the Dictatorship of Relativism not only eliminate the weak and the helpless, but create a sense of despair that affects us all.

Humanity experiences this ache of a seemingly constant and meaningless despair as it repeats the tragic mistakes of eras and epochs gone by.

“Generations have trod, have trod, have trod...”

“Generations have trod, have trod, have trod” through the deadly trenches of World War I and through the starvation genocide in Ukraine in the early 1930’s to the death camps and execution pits of World War II and every 20th and 21st century human tragedy.

So many of those tragedies were founded upon philosophies and ideas that rejected the idea that humans have a higher purpose and treat with contempt the spiritual nature of humanity.

And yet, it remains the case that a light shines in this vast field of darkness. As Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins states, “the world is charged with the grandeur of God.” How can that be? How can the poet say “Generations have trod, have trod, have trod...” and say at the same time and in the same poem that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God” as we see horrific images of war, devastation and inhuman massacres in Ukraine?

The answer to this question is simple and yet deep. We can say this because the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the “fulcrum”² of salvation and world history. Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life and his Resurrection brings hope to the world.

Pope Benedict XVI states: “The resurrection of Jesus is an eruption of light. Death is conquered, the tomb is thrown open. The Risen One himself is Light, the Light of the world. With the resurrection, the Lord’s day enters the nights of history. Beginning with the resurrection, God’s light spreads throughout the world and throughout history.”³

That is what we celebrate at this Easter Vigil.

New Testament biblical scholar N.T. Wright says that the confusion of humanity in history is present on Easter Sunday.

He writes: “The Easter stories are full of people getting the wrong end of the stick. Mary thinks Jesus’ body has been stolen. Peter, sees the linen wrappings and can’t work out what it’s all about. The disciples didn’t understand the Scriptures. The

² Pope St. John Paul II’s 1998 Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, 2.

³ Pope Benedict’s *Easter Vigil Homily*, April 11, 2009

angels question Mary, and she still doesn't know what's going on. Then she thinks Jesus is the gardener. Then, it seems, she reaches out to cling to him, and he tells her she mustn't. You could hardly get more misunderstandings into a couple of paragraphs if you tried.

The point is, of course, that Easter has burst into our world – the world of space, time, and matter, real history and real people and real life – but our minds and imaginations are too small to contain it. So, we do our best to put the sea into the bottle and fit the explosive fact of the Resurrection into the possibilities we already know about.”⁴

We pray that at this Easter Vigil 2022 the Risen Lord may open our eyes, hearts, minds and imaginations to his Easter power and to his Easter grace.

May the eruption of Christ's Light from the Empty Tomb enlighten and illumine the world's darkness. May the Risen Christ lead us to heroic and courageous holiness so that we can be instruments of His Peace to change the world.

⁴ 2008 Easter Sermon of N.T. Wright available on line.