

## **Homily of Bishop John Barres**

### **Diocese of Rockville Centre**

#### **St. Agnes Cathedral**

**Wednesday, June 3, 2020**

At Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina, there is a unique baptismal font in the chapel. Before the Civil War there was a block of stone on what later became the Abbey property. It was called the “Slave Stone” because slaves being sold at auction were made to stand on that stone so that potential buyers could see them.

Imprinted in this stone was the emotional memory of the coarse cruelty of the slave traders and the anguish and trauma of slave families being separated and further stripped of their human dignity.

“The Slave Stone carried some of the emotional imprint of the stones of Calvary itself as do historical images from our nation’s history of lynchings, Jim Crow laws, film footage of fire hoses turned on African Americans engaged in peaceful civil rights protests and now, the recent horrific video we all saw depicting the tragic and senseless killing of George Floyd, a man who was in police custody on a Minneapolis street. On behalf of the faithful of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, I express my heartfelt prayers and condolences to the Floyd family.

Years later in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Benedictines purchased the land, discovered the history of the Slave Stone, and made an inspired connection between Catholic Sacramental Theology and Catholic Social Justice Teaching.

The Stone was turned and refashioned into a baptismal font. A plaque was placed on this baptismal font that is there to this day. It reads: “UPON THIS ROCK, MEN ONCE WERE SOLD INTO SLAVERY. NOW UPON THIS ROCK, THROUGH THE WATERS OF BAPTISM, MEN BECOME FREE CHILDREN OF GOD.”

The Benedictine Monks of Belmont Abbey, saw clearly both historically and prophetically the connection between Catholic Sacramental Theology and Catholic Social Justice Teaching.

In the words of St. Paul in his second letter to Timothy, they *stirred into flame* the gift of God and the love of God that defeats every dimension of racism, hatred, violence and every dimension of personal and societal blindness.

They saw the connection between the Theology of Baptism and the Church's insistence that all human beings are entitled by their very existence to Dignity and Freedom.

They saw clearly that slavery, racism and the commodification of humans in all its forms and in all its moments in World History are grave offenses against God and are rejected by the Sacramental Theology of Baptism as theological heresy.<sup>1</sup>

A slave rock transformed into a baptismal font is a powerful image that can help us to rediscover the relationship in our Catholic faith between repentance and conversion, and social change.

Each one of us today opens our hearts and lives to the Holy Spirit, the indwelling presence of the Holy Trinity within us and the power of the Body and Blood of Christ to transform us, heal us, inspire us so that we can be instruments of Spirit-driven social change that rejects hatred, violence and blindness and embraces the love and peace of Jesus Christ.

We pray for peace on the streets of our cities. We pray that peace, charity and justice may animate non-violent protests. We pray for our public servants, our police, our first responders and their families. We pray for the witness of our Church and the ecumenical and interfaith witness we have with our brothers and sisters of different faiths.

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<sup>1</sup> This section expands a section of Bishop Barres' September 21, 2017 Address at St. John's University entitled "The Relationship between Catholic Sacramental Theology and Catholic Social Justice Teaching." See the January 2018 edition of *The Long Island Catholic*.

On Friday, September 25, 2015, Pope Francis celebrated Mass in New York City at Madison Square Garden. In his homily, he reminded us of Christ's presence in every city around the world.

He said: "Knowing that Jesus still walks our streets, that he is part of the lives of his people, that he is involved with us in one vast history of salvation, fills us with hope...A hope which makes us see, even in the midst of smog, the presence of God as he continues to walk the streets of our city. Because God is in the city."

We pray at this Memorial Mass of the Ugandan Martyrs, St. Charles Lwanga and Companions, for peace on the streets of our cities and for justice. We pray for a powerful awareness, as our Holy Father says, of the presence of God as Jesus walks and carries His Cross through the wounded streets of our cities.

There are many wings of Pope Francis' "emergency field hospital."

I recently connected the "emergency field hospital" image to the heroism of our medical personnel at our Catholic Health Services hospitals and all our hospitals on Long Island at a special Mass on May 17th. During that Mass to honor them for their bravery and sacrifice, I thanked them and prayed for them during this difficult time. I said:

"Pope Francis once spoke of the Catholic Church as a combat field hospital and he said he preferred 'a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the street(s)' (EG 49) of the world.

What a perfect image for the way that Catholic Health Services serves all of Long Island and its dedication to the common good.

The glorified wounds of the Risen Christ have touched your wounds and in turn have helped you to touch the physical, spiritual and emotional wounds of the wide variety of patients and families you have served and will continue to serve."

The emergency combat field hospital has many wings.

This same image of the "emergency combat field hospital" is an image for us as Catholics and American citizens to go to the glorified wounds of the Risen Christ to

touch the wounds of racism and injustice in our own hearts so that we can be instruments of healing, peace, reconciliation and justice in the Church, on Long Island and throughout our nation and world.

Our love for the inspired Word of God and our reverence for the Body and Blood of Christ are a Light and a Lamp (Psalm 119) for our moment by moment dedication, commitment and prayerful vigilance.

Two years ago, on April 4, 2018, we commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and I shared a Pastoral Letter *The Dream and Our Deepest, Truest Selves* which has been reposted on our DRVC.org website.

Little did we know as we prayed and prepared that 50 year commemoration of Dr. King's death how relevant it would be two years later.

Allow me to share a brief section of it: "With the help of God, whose love he preached so fervently, Dr. King's sacrifice tipped the scales of human history and brought us closer to the fulfilment of a dream, one that recognizes the dignity of men and women of all races, one that recognizes that the sanctity of human life is the foundation of every human right, and one that recognizes the rich contributions and legacy of African Americans in our country."

May each one of us stir the flame of Christ's love and peace at every moment and in every situation in these painful and traumatic days.