

HOMILY EASTER 2012

One of the most precious endowments of the Catholic Church is the sacred liturgy. And one of the most climactic rituals in the entire liturgical year is the Liturgy of Light which begins the Easter Vigil and inaugurates the whole Paschal season. Most Catholics know how it unfolds: a huge fire burning in front of the church, the lighting of the Easter candle, the lighting of the little candles, the movement of the procession into the church, and finally the illumination of the entire building and the chanting of the Exsultet.

The symbolism of all this merits careful attention. First there is the Easter fire, a symbol of the divine. In the Old Testament at critical moments in salvation history, God appears cloaked in flame. There is the revelation to Moses of the enigmatic divine name "I am who am" from the burning bush; later God descends in smoke and flame upon Mt. Sinai to give the law to Israel and adopt them as his chosen people. God is in fact like a consuming fire: he generates heat and light which warm and illumine all things. Yet like a raging conflagration, God is also unapproachable. Those who dare to violate his space, as it were, risk injury and even destruction. Mortals must keep a safe distance from the all holy deity lest they be destroyed.

Second there is the Easter candle which is lit with flame drawn from the Easter fire. St. John has told us that the Lord Jesus, the only Son of God, was the divine light which came into the world that he might be the Light of the world. He was sent to scatter the shadows of a world darkened by sin, to show our fallen race the path that leads to eternal life. In the person of Jesus, the divinity has restrained itself within the confines of a human nature. In this way, God becomes visible, palpable, and approachable. Likewise the Easter candle carries the flame in safe proportions so that it can be held, handled, and approached. It is a beautiful symbol of Christ, the divine Word made flesh, the light which dispels our darkness, the Lord of history to whom all ages belong, the crucified savior whose wounds effect our redemption.

Finally, there are the little tapers which are lit, the first ones from the Easter candle, then from one another. Once all have been lit, the whole assembly moves forward in procession into the church, the house of God. In similar fashion, there was a first generation of disciples which saw, heard, and believed in Jesus of Nazareth; they drew their faith directly from him. Then they brought his joyful message of salvation to others. And so the gospel began to spread throughout the world and continues to do so today. We are among those whose faith came from others-- parents, spouses, friends; we represent the latest in a long series of generations dating back to the apostles and other first disciples. We 21st century Catholics follow the path illuminated by our forebears in faith, as they followed their predecessors, with the whole great throng of us guided by Christ our light on the way to our heavenly Father's home.

The signs and sounds of the Liturgy of Light are all so very beautiful, so pregnant with meaning, that words do not do justice to it. The ritual must be experienced to be appreciated. The words of the Easter gospel do grant us a key insight into this whole process of enlightenment in Christ;

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most importantly, the accounts of the Resurrection indicate the essential duties and crucial challenges inherent in being a believer. In Mark's selection for the Vigil Mass, we are told that the first witnesses to the resurrection were completely surprised to find the tomb empty and hear the glad news that Jesus had risen. If we read the "rest of the story" in Mark Chapter 16 we find that these women do not first share the happy report with the other disciples like they were told to do, but are so frightened that they run and hide and tell nothing to anybody. In John's account which is read on Easter morning, the disciples are again portrayed as astonished by the empty tomb; again, a reading of the larger context indicates struggles w/ doubt and disbelief. In fact, the themes of fear and doubt run throughout all the Resurrection Narratives, contending with feelings of amazement and joy: the disciples struggle to accept the Easter message that Jesus has truly risen, even when he appears before them in the flesh, and even then they are unsure what this new state of affairs means for them.

One implication I would draw from all this is that keeping the flame of faith alive in your heart requires dwelling in the safe confines of the Church Christ founded. Now I address myself esp. to those here who may have been absent from Church for a while. If you stand outside the church after your candle gets lit during the Liturgy of Light, there's a fair chance the wind is going to snuff it out, esp. atop what locals here call Catholic Church Hill where the winds can blow mighty hard. Likewise, in this day and age, the social and cultural windstorms that try to extinguish the flame of religious faith come hard, fast, and frequent. Our divine Lord knew that storms would come, so he established his Church as a safe haven and supports her constantly with the power of the Holy Spirit. The church is a shelter where the flame can be kept burning: it's a school of the gospel where questions find answers, a hospital of grace where sins are forgiven, and a family of faith where the witness of other disciples strengthens one's own belief.

A second implication I would draw is that faith is meant to be shared, just like we share the flame of our candles at the Easter Vigil. Once your taper gets lit, you turn and light your neighbor's. The reason we have the gospels and the church, is that the first generation of disciples shared their faith with others, just as the Lord commanded them. Some of those early disciples committed the record to writing so that those to come afterward would have a trustworthy account of just who this Jesus is who stands at the center of our community. So those believers who came before us did their part to pass on the faith to us. Now, brothers and sisters, now it's our turn. And don't just look to Father to do the task of evangelization, because spreading the faith is everybody's job, because each of you encounters a wide circle of people who may have no other connection with the Catholic religion besides your solitary witness. We live in a world where many have fallen away from religious practice, where increasing numbers have never even heard of the gospel, so the need for public testimony by all Christ's faithful is more urgent than ever. Let's pray that the graces of this holy Paschal liturgy will strengthen the flame of faith in our hearts, that we may grow into a brilliant beacon which draws others to Jesus Christ.