

The Pascal Mystery and Moral Leadership

Throughout our Easter, springtime season these last seven weeks, we have been reflecting – from a number of different perspectives – the core message of Easter for Christians of the 21st Century and every Century: While believing that 2000 years ago, Christ rose from the dead – proving that he is God; we are called right here and now to experience the Resurrection of Jesus within us and among us. We experience the Resurrection of Jesus when we love one another: the risen life is a life of love.

But to enter into this dynamic, transformative movement of the Risen Christ, we must face the reality of suffering and death on many levels. The Risen Life is not easy; it is also a dying life. The presence of the Resurrection in our lives means the presence of the Cross:

“Unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and die it remains a grain of wheat, but if it dies, it produces as much fruit...”

We don't rise with Christ, unless we also first die with Christ. We all know this..., but what does it really mean?

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Sisters and brothers, this Paschal-Easter Mystery of dying and rising is experienced on many levels in our lives and work:

1. The suffering and dying of those affected by the Covid-19 virus – now over 90,000 in the US alone – can't help but move all of us to reflect on the reality of death. But as Christians, we don't believe in death without resurrection! Our Good Fridays are always followed by Easter!
2. The Paschal-Easter Mystery is experienced by *all of creation*... as we observe all around us in the rebirth of spring from the long cold 'death' of winter.
3. In our personal lives we know that there is no transformation and change without death to the old way. We die from our mother's womb to be born into the world; we die from our toddler stage to go out into the world of kindergarten; we die to the world of our birth-family to go out into the wider world to begin anew.

4. Sin is *sin* because it brings about suffering and death to our self and to others. We cannot bring about change, ...transformation in our lives until we let go of all that binds us, chains us and enslave us. For example, we must die to the Good Friday of addiction in order to be reborn into the Easter life of recovery;

and the list goes on....

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Peter, in our 2nd Scripture Reading today, addresses another form of suffering and even death that is crucial to being a disciple of Jesus; one that is so often overlooked, rationalized or downright denied:

Peter writes:

“Beloved, rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ so when his glory is revealed, you may rejoice exultantly...”

What kind of suffering is Peter referring to? The next line gives the answer:

“If you are insulted for the name of Christ – blessed are you, for the spirit of glory and God rests upon you!”

He goes on to say:

“Whoever is made to suffer as a Christian should not be ashamed, but glorify God because of the name.”

The Beatitudes:

“Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely, because of me! Rejoice and be glad for your reward in heaven will be great.”

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice; for theirs is the realm of God!”

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Sisters and brothers, what does Peter’s message say to us as Catholics and as Americans during this very difficult time in our nation and world?

Pope Francis puts it well in his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), when he points out what it means to be a faith-filled citizen in any nation: getting involved in the political process:

“An authentic faith involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. We love this magnificent planet, on which God put us, and we love the human family which dwells here – with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses.... If the just ordering of society and the state is the central responsibility of politics, the church cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.”

We are the Church..., it is our responsibility to critique the culture rather than be assimilated by it.

That means, sisters and brothers, that as disciples of Jesus if we are to be authentic, it means rolling-up-our-sleeves and getting involved in the political reality of the moment – speaking out for truth, speaking out for justice, speaking out for the right of the most vulnerable. Challenging in every way possible the demeaning prejudice; the destructive extremist xenophobia and sexism; the ignorance, narcissism, and moral emptiness coming from the current Administration, that seems more concerned about getting reelected than being concerned and compassionate about the suffering dying and most vulnerable in the pandemic.

Unfortunately, by and large, at this time, the voice of our Catholic religious leaders – including our Catholic Bishops and pastors have been pretty weak at best. Why? Perhaps when we confront our leaders there is a cost... ? Yet, even worse than this silence, how shocking, and I would say how scandalous, it was when Cardinal Dolan on the April 25th phone call with President Trump *and* in a homily at St. Patrick’s Cathedral *and* an appearance of “Fox and Friends,” told the President that was “a great gentleman, whom Catholics need more than ever, ... working so hard to see that we can safely return to church as soon as possible;” without mentioning a word about the President’s inadequate leadership during this pandemic crisis; his racist, sexist, xenophobic rants; his demonization of immigrants; his over 18,000 false or misleading claims since he was elected and the list goes on... .

One could say that that our Catholic bishops made an error when they veered away from the Vatican II vision of ‘respect for life’ as a seamless garment that includes life from the very beginning through its natural end, to embracing single issue positions and the politics that support them. Our current situation brings to mind once again events during the Nixon Administration and bloody Vietnam War, when our Catholic bishops were on the verge of releasing a strong antiwar statement which, then President Nixon, requested they delay, with the promise that he would recommend funding for Catholic education. The Bishops delayed their statement, the bloodshed continued and funding for Catholic education didn’t appear.

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Sisters and brothers, during this coming week, I would invite us to reflect a bit of the cost of discipleship. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer would say: “Are we willing to suffer for the sake of Jesus, are we willing to be rejected and misunderstood and even scorned for standing up for what is right?” We have prophets and martyr’s – past and present – who are examples of those who put their lives on the line to make the world a little more like what God intended.

I’m proud of my friend and fellow priest, Father Tim Taugher, Pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Binghamton, (who many folks may remember from Our Lady of Solace – which was his first assignment) who sent a powerful letter to Cardinal Dolan, with a copy to our Bishop. In part it stated:

“Leaders I hold in high regard and with moral character are men and women who speak up with moral clarity in speaking truth to power. ‘The Church’ cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. It seems like you and the bishops in April remained on the sidelines and failed to speak truth to power.”

Brothers and sisters, in the closing remarks of his address to our Congress in 2015, Pope Francis said “a nation is great when it defends liberty as Abraham Lincoln did, when it seeks equality as Martin Luther King did, and when it stands for justice for the oppressed as Dorothy Day did.”

Let us pray that our nation moves toward such greatness in this election year. Let us pray that we faith-filled disciples are willing to risk suffering and rejection in leading the way.

Amen.