

May 24 & 25, 2014  
Sixth Sunday of Easter

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Syracuse, NY

You Can Step on a Flower – But You  
Can't Hold Back the Spring

My sisters and brothers, we come together on this springtime weekend as Disciples of Jesus Christ, Catholic Christians, celebrating – now for the sixth weekend in a row – Christ's resurrection: Easter! Hope! New Life! New Creation! Transformation! Rebirth! "Indeed, he has risen alleluia!" "*Indeed, he has risen alleluia!*"

But if I'm truly honest with myself, and with you..., this time of Alleluia, of Easter, of hope... has been interrupted; has been challenged; has been questioned; has not been without some doubt and fear, some angst and confusion as I reflect and struggle with some of the realities, some of the happenings, some of the headlines set before us during the last six weeks; which in honesty, have put a damper on my alleluias. A few examples:

Here at home, in the wealthiest and most advanced and – we like to think – most sophisticated country in the world, we are informed that some of our veterans, who went to our Veterans Hospitals expecting care that they most certainly deserve, died waiting months and even years for help that never came. Why? Because, it seems, some administrators – intelligent, well-trained and with impressive salaries – were adjusting the appointment books to make it look like a severe problem of veterans needing to wait for extended time for critical health care was solved – a desire to look good at the expense of the health and even the lives of the very people they were called to serve...

My sisters and brothers, how could such a thing happen? What motivates a person to do something so awful, so evil...? And, ours being a predominately Christian nation... the majority of them – probably baptized Christians, some number of them: Catholics.... How could "religious people" do such a thing?

Then, to go a step further: one reason why the Veterans Hospitals are being overwhelmed with patients is because of the thousands of our young men and women coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan – broken in body, mind and spirit... because the majority of us are still under the delusion that war, violence, killing and being killed is the best ..., the only way to protect ourselves and solve our conflicts; rather than facing the reality of history that shows us that violence only begets violence. NPR reported this past week, that every day in the U.S., 21 of our veterans take their own lives as a result of Post-Traumatic Stress... ...something for all of us to reflect on during this Memorial Day weekend.

Sort of puts a bit of a damper on Easter alleluias....

For another example: over the past few weeks of Easter, the world has been riveted on the fate of the 300-plus Nigerian school-girls kidnapped by a terrorist organization that has since claimed responsibility for blowing up a school among other atrocities. How can human beings do such things? Human beings who claim to follow Allah...? to follow the Quran which clearly teaches that one may only harm other in self-defense? the Quran that – with the same roots as our Scriptures – recognizes the dignity and preciousness of each person, created in God's image and likeness... ...sort of puts a little damper on our Easter alleluias.

Another example:

I think most of us have been touched in the past 14 months by Pope Francis and have become a bit more hopeful that some of the more negative and outdated aspects of the institutional church will be replaced by a more Christ-like and democratic way of being church.... But a couple of things coming out of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly called... The Inquisition!) in the last couple weeks, lead one to wonder. Last week, the Office once again blasted the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents over 80% of American religious sisters, for being “disobedient,” “uncooperative” and “supporting heresy” and a week later threatened to silence a Jesuit theologian whose distinguished career has advocated dialogue Asian religions.

Condescending, heavy-handed, patriarchal, fear-laden threats have no place in the Church today, the Church that Pope Francis is envisioning...

This has all put a bit of a damper on my Easter alleluias.

Finally, on the local level: I’m sure many of our hearts were saddened to hear the news or see in Thursday’s paper that a priest of our diocese has been charged by the District Attorney’s Office with possessing child pornography. I hesitated to bring this up... one can only imagine what is going on in the heart of this priest who must be struggling with demons within in his own heart... and we must pray for him. Yet the child pornography industry points out that people are capable of doing just about anything for money – even abusing innocent children...

I’m sure in our own lives these past six weeks of Easter, many of us have had personal experiences, problems, struggles that seem to make the Easter alleluias seem a bit distant and shallow....

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Do our Readings at today’s Liturgy shed any light on the disturbing events I have mentioned? or, more basically, on the reality of evil itself? Do the Readings give us Easter hope? I think they do!

Today’s Gospel continues Jesus’ farewell address to His Disciples: they are at the Last Supper: he has washed their feet. Jesus is on the verge of being *the victim* of the same evil that has touched our veterans, touched those young school-girls in Nigeria, touched those in our Church that are victims of the evil of patriarchy and elitism and clericalism and abuse of power; all the victims of the pornography industry and the demons with which we all struggle within our own our hearts and souls...

Within hours of this farewell address, Jesus himself will be arrested, beaten and murdered: a victim of capital punishment on the cross – crucifixion; a victim of the darkness, the evil of the powers and principalities of the world. But as we have been reflecting on the last six weeks: the story does not end on Good Friday – but with Easter!

Easter ultimately overcomes Good Friday!

Life ultimately overcomes death!

Love ultimately overcomes hatred!

Goodness ultimately overcomes evil!

Resurrection overcomes crucifixion!

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In today's Gospel, Jesus is telling His frightened Disciples and is telling us: "Be not afraid! Do not give up... I will not leave you orphans... I'm sending you the Spirit! The Spirit that will dwell in you and among you and will protect you....! The Spirit that will enable you to become the person, the people, the world, that God intends... IF you keep God's commandments." "IF..." The big "IF" is a condition that implies that we are called to struggle against all the forces of evil and darkness and ego that work against us... that can ultimately destroy us.... And God's commandments? What are these "commands"?

Essentially, sisters and brothers, these are all Commandments of Love:

- to serve each other;
- to be compassionate;
- to live in communion with one another;
- not to judge, but to forgive;
- to love our enemies;
- to live the Beatitudes;
- to wash one another's feet....

...this is the recipe to cleanse our hearts from evil and open them to become agents of peace and of change in our world.

The Commandment of Jesus is that we love one another as He loves us. This is His Way - The Way to God – the way to healing...; the way to restoration...; the way to peace.

Sisters and brothers, we – and the whole human community – are called to leave behind all the selfish attitudes of the world, to no longer put all our energies in the pursuit of power, wealth, honor and superficial relationships. It implies: struggles, moments of grief... purifications. Our inner "home" – our heart, our soul – has to be emptied – cleansed of all the mess and dirt, freed from all forms of selfishness – in order to become the dwelling place of God. This takes time: a whole life-time...

"IF..." if... we keep God's Word and Commandments: we as individuals and we as Church become the place where the Holy Spirit makes her home; we become the dwelling place of God! As Paul said to Disciples in Corinth: "*Do you not know that your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit?!*"

Brothers and sisters, in the midst of the darkness and evil of the world, in the midst of the struggle with their own darkness - their own demons; it is The Holy Spirit that God gave those frightened disciples; it is the Holy Spirit that God gives us: The Spirit who strengthens us, comforts us, guides us and inspires us! It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to interpret the signs of the times in ways very different from ways of the world.

It is the Holy Spirit who works within us for the transformation of our hearts; the "transformation of our hearts" foretold by Ezekiel, the prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures:

*"I will sprinkle water upon you and you shall be cleansed from uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you... A new heart I will give you and a new Spirit I will put within you. I will remove from your body a heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh... I will put my Spirit within you!"*

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So my sisters and brothers, as we move towards the conclusion of our Easter Season, as we approach Pentecost, we are once again – as Easter people – invited to live in a deeper way, the life of the Spirit, conforming our lives after the model of Jesus: the model love. Living in the Spirit: with clear consciences, with gentleness and reverence. The love that comes to us through The Spirit will overflow into the lives of others. We will be agents of God’s love in the world. Through our commitment to righteous living, we will cast-out the unclean-spirits that inhabit our world:

- the Spirits of greed and selfishness;
- the Spirits of deceit and manipulation;
- the Spirits of hatred and violence;
- the Spirits of disinterest and distance.

Those Spirits that create the Veterans scandal, the Vatican scandals, the Nigerian scandal, and pornography scandal, the scandalous demons in our hearts that enslave us.

Sisters and brothers, together with all people of goodwill – little by little, the realm of God will abound – on earth as it is in heaven!

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My brothers and sisters, as we well know, life at times can be hard, and the struggle in our world, in our Church and in our hearts can, as I indicated in the beginning of my Homily, sometimes be overwhelming.... but I conclude we some thoughts that – over the last weeks of Easter - give me hope:

Last weekend, 14 of our young parishioners were Confirmed in the Holy Spirit! In preparation, we had them read the book I Am Malala, the story of the twelve year old girl from Pakistan who was shot in the head by the Taliban simply for going to school. Miraculously, she survived and now, as a teenager, is a global advocate for the human rights of young girls and women. A few months ago she had a meeting with President Obama, the First Lady and their daughters in the White House. Though not reported much in the U.S. press – but covered globally – during that meeting, in great humility she looked the President in the eye and said: “Mr. President, you must stop the use of lethal drones in our country. You are killing innocent women and children and turning our country against America.”

Now there’s the courage of the Holy Spirit!

Finally sisters and brothers, a saying that helps me when things seem hopeless (said originally by someone famous who right now I can’t remember):

“You can step on a flower, but you can’t hold back the spring!”

“You can step on a flower, but you can’t hold back the spring!”!

Amen!

Please remain standing as – reflecting on Ezekiel’s prophecy and Christ’s assurance of the coming of the Holy Spirit – we renew our Baptismal & Confirmation Vows and experience the Rite of Sprinkling.