

Easter Vigil – April 11, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:00pm – COVID-19 Pandemic – 1,250 words

Apart from God, there is only darkness. In fact, the first words of our Lord recorded in sacred scripture are, “Let there be light”. Light was God’s first gift to his creation. The sun brightly illumines the day, and the moon and the stars at night assure us that we are never left totally in darkness. But then the Lord shared the power of light with us, also, giving man a capacity he gave to no other creature: namely, that of being able to make from created things our own light and control when and where it shines. So the Exsultet – the glorious hymn that began this liturgy – prayed, “On this, your night of grace, O holy Father, accept this candle, a solemn offering, the work of bees and of your servants’ hands, an evening sacrifice of praise...”

This Easter Candle is a created light, offered as an evening sacrifice of praise to God. If we attentively study the scriptures we see that believers have always prayed in the evening to give thanks for the light.¹ But they have also seen created light – whether the sun, the moon, the stars, a candle, or our latest LED bulbs – as a symbol of that uncreated light that ever shines and can never be overcome: our Lord Jesus Christ. This candle represents him, the light unvanquished. Yes, we have certainly tried to overcome him: the Roman soldiers did their worst; oppressive regimes throughout history have stopped at nothing to try to eliminate him and his Church; and let us not forget our own sins, by which we have also often united with the darkness.

But perhaps our capacity to make our own light has also deceived. See how so many in our world today live as if God did not exist! They take his creation for granted. They take pride in their own abilities, failing to see that those talents and capacities are God’s gift. Yes, many believe that they are living in the light, when we must say, instead, that they are really only basking in its shadow – for the creature is never as great as the Creator. And this is the challenge for each one of us, who are believers: never to become so self-sufficient, so independent, that we end up mistaking the creature for its Creator. We thank God for his gifts and we use them with joy – but the gifts, as well as every other part of our lives, must be wholly ordered to him.

Our present crisis – an immense calamity provoked by a tiny virus – has reminded us that not only must we depend entirely upon God, but that perhaps we had lost sight of that truth. Pride is our historic and constant companion and foe. Reflecting on these realities, a Dominican priest, Father Thomas Joseph White, put it very well, writing this past week. He said:

Christians ought to treat this pandemic as an opportunity to learn more about God. What does it mean that God has permitted (or willed) temporary conditions in which our elite lifestyle of international travel is grounded, our consumption is cut to a minimum, our days are occupied with basic responsibilities toward our families and immediate communities, our resources and economic hopes are reduced, and we are made more dependent upon one another? What does it mean that our nation-states suddenly seem less potent and our armies are infected by an invisible contagion they cannot eradicate, and that the most technologically advanced countries face the humility of their limits?

Our powerful economies are suddenly enfeebled, and our future more uncertain. Priests and bishops are confronted with a new obligation to seek interiority over activism as their sacramental ministry is rendered less potent, and laypeople have to find God outside the sacraments in their own interior lives, discovering new ways to be grateful for what they

¹ Skyler Neberman published a fine article on the “evening sacrifice of praise” in 2016: “The Evening Sacrifice: A Historical Case for the Office of Vespers as Sacrifice”, <http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2016/04/the-office-of-vespers-as-sacrifice.html>.

have, rather than disdainful in the face of what they lack. We might think none of this tells us anything about ourselves, or about God's compassion and justice. But if we simply seek to pass through all this in hasty expectation of a return to normal, perhaps we are missing the fundamental point of the exercise.²

How much had we believers, also, been basking in the shadow rather than the source until now? How far had we, too, fallen into a lull? Light is ordinarily what awakens us from slumber: God is shining his light now! Indeed, we must not view this pandemic with bitterness or scorn: our good God is trying to wake us up. Perhaps our own vision had become darkened by our comfort, our ease, our privilege. But this Easter, we have the painful experience of separation. We can appreciate more fully how the disciples felt as Christ lay in the tomb – and they thought he was gone forever. Yet by faith, we also perceive the true light that beckons through this darkness. Indeed, this great candle, for which we praise God, reminds us of it.

Dear Catechumens: we are so glad that you are with us here this evening. Circumstances prevent us from having all your RCIA companions here also – they will be baptized or otherwise received into the Church soon enough, privately, in order to comply with prudent directives. Thus, they will soon join you, who are about to have the light of Christ poured into your souls. You came to see that light outside you; you have welcomed it through an initial act of faith; and soon, it will pervade your deepest depths and will change you forever. Your task going forward will be to live always as children of the light, keeping the flame of faith alive and burning brightly in your hearts. You will become light bearers, living Easter candles, on this holy night!

But that is what all of us, who are baptized, are. No sinister plan that either human beings or the devil could dream up was or will ever be capable of overcoming God. Christ has won the battle in a most definitive way. The end of the story has been written, and so it will be done. If we remain in the light, we will be part of the triumphal procession; if, God forbid, we allow our light to be extinguished, we will most certainly be trampled underfoot. The COVID-19 pandemic is a gift to help us all re-focus and re-commit. See how good our God is, that he still comes to us today! Had we been more faithful, he would not have had recourse to such a strong remedy. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, “Whom the Lord loves, he disciplines” – he treats us as sons!³

Therefore, during this evening sacrifice of praise, we, beloved sons and daughters of God through baptism into Christ, will renew our baptismal commitment. Those watching from home should certainly join in also! We will reject Satan, all his works, and all his empty show. We will profess our faith in God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; in his Church; and in his promises about the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection, and eternal life with him. Let us ask him for the grace to more fully die to sin with Christ and rise with him to new life – living each day in his holy light, never again taking it for granted. What a difficult, but wonderful time the Lord has called us to live in! Thank you, Jesus, for your great mercy. Thank you, Lord, for choosing us!

² Fr. Thomas Joseph White, O.P., “Epidemic Danger and Catholic Sacraments”, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/04/epidemic-danger-and-catholic-sacraments>.

³ Hebrews 12:6-7.