

## EASTER VIGIL

On behalf of our monastic community, I wish all of you a blessed Easter. There is no more joyful feast in the liturgical year, and to help continue the joy that marks our gathering here in our abbey church, for the first time since the pandemic struck a couple years ago we will offer some refreshments in our Fort Augustus Room after this service. We'll continue to do so after each Sunday Mass unless a possible spike in the number of cases in our area again forces us to refrain from that kind of hospitality. So much remains unclear.

What is very clear, however—so much so that it sounds trite to say it—is that our Catholic faith is very sacramental. I mean that not simply in the sense of the seven sacraments but in the broader sense that we Catholics have always seen tangible objects in the world around us as signs leading beyond themselves, pointing us toward the things of God. We began our vigil this night in the open air, mindful of the moon and stars far above us, reminders of the greatness of the Creator of this vast universe, so vast that even the most powerful telescope ever made and soon to be deployed, the successor to the already magnificent Hubble telescope, will not be able to reach back to the very beginning more than thirteen billion years ago. Then, literally down to earth, we gathered on a lawn full of vibrant spring grass and trees that are either already in bloom or soon will be. The Lord Jesus, whose resurrection we celebrate tonight, was well attuned to such realities. In his parables he often referred to seeds, or to flowers and plants such as lilies or mustard trees, or to birds, foxes, or other animals. Before us out there in the courtyard were pieces of wood ignited into a bright flame, and our blessing of “this new fire,” reminded us of God’s bestowing on all the faithful what the prayer called “the fire of his glory.” And now, here in the church, we have before the lectern a bowl of clear water, a symbol of the water with which each one of us was once baptized into new life.

All of this was captured in one of the most beautiful of all Christian prayers, the Canticum of the Creatures composed by St. Francis of Assisi. Here are a few of its lines, their order slightly transposed:

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,  
through whom You light the night, and he is beautiful and  
playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth,  
who sustains and governs us, producing varied fruits  
with colored flowers and herbs.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,  
So useful, humble, precious and pure.

In the rich readings and psalms we have heard or sung at this vigil, it is worth noting the numerous references to this latter creature, Sister Water. Our very first reading tonight was from the beginning of the book of Genesis, and its very first verse spoke of God's mighty wind sweeping over the primeval waters of our planet. Then, a few verses later, we heard of God's having the waters of the sea teem with fish and other swimming creatures.

The beautiful fifth reading, from the prophet Isaiah, began with the verse: "Thus says the Lord: All you who are thirsty, come to the water," and the psalm

that we sang as a response to that reading had as its antiphon the words “With joy, you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

After this homily we’ll bless the water here in the bowl before us with a prayer that includes these words: “Lord our God, ... graciously bless this water. For you created water to make the fields fruitful and to refresh and cleanse our bodies. You also made water the instrument of your mercy, for through water you freed your people from slavery and quenched their thirst in the desert.... Last of all, through water, which Christ made holy in the Jordan, you have renewed our corrupted nature in the bath of regeneration. Therefore, may this water be for us a memorial of the baptism we have received.”

All of this can also lead us to recall the words of Jesus recorded in the seventh chapter of John’s Gospel, where the evangelist recounts what Jesus spoke on the last and greatest day of the feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. John wrote: “Jesus stood up and exclaimed, ‘Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture says, Rivers of living water will flow from within him.’” That’s a marvelous promise: Living, life-giving water will flow within anyone who is a genuine disciple of Jesus. What more could one desire, for those words are really saying that such disciples share in the very life of the one who was raised from the dead on that first Easter Sunday? As St. Paul told the Corinthians, “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20).

But even as we relish the beauty of these texts and prayers, we ought also recall that many people throughout the world, people who are every bit as much children of God as we are—and who are therefore our brothers and sisters in Christ—are confronted with a serious shortage of clean, life-giving water almost every single day of their life. In his great encyclical *Laudato Si’* on care for our common home, Pope Francis rightly had a section about water. He there laments

that there is a terrible tendency today to privatize this precious resource, turning water into a commodity subject to the laws of the market. How wrong this is, as Pope Francis emphasized by putting his next sentence into italics: “Access to safe, drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights. Our world has a grave social debt toward the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity” (no. 30).

In response, one might be inclined to say, “Yes, that’s so sad, but there’s really nothing any of us can do about it.” Well, maybe not everyone in a totally direct way, but, as I may have mentioned once before, one of the most inspiring things I’ve ever heard in our school occurred a few years ago. I was asking some of my senior students where they planned to go to college and what they would major in. One young man said he wanted to study engineering at the nearby University of Maryland. Well, nothing surprising there. Lots of students want to go into the so-called STEM subjects these days—science, technology, engineering, mathematics—not only because they find such courses interesting but also because the demand for that kind of expertise pretty much guarantees a comfortable income and life-style. But this student went on to say that he wants to become an engineer in order to be able to go over to Africa and help villagers dig wells that will allow them to avoid having to walk several miles each day simply to get enough water for drinking and cooking. Maybe few or none of us could do exactly that, but this is certainly one way in which a charitable donation can make a big difference, a donation to a group like Water.org or Water Aid or H2O for Life. You can easily learn about such groups on the Internet and perhaps determine which one would most benefit from your contribution.

Lest anyone think I have strayed too far from the theme of Jesus' resurrection, let me conclude this homily with part of the prayer with which Pope Francis concluded his great encyclical, a part that refers specifically to the resurrection: "Son of God, Jesus, through you all things were made. You were formed in the womb of Mary, our Mother, you became part of this earth, and you gazed upon this world with human eyes. Today you are alive in every creature *in your risen glory*. ... O Lord, seize us with your power and light, help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of your Kingdom of justice, peace, love, and beauty. Praise be to you! Amen."