

Christ lives in me

Homily by Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila, D.D.
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On this most solemn evening we celebrate a great truth of our faith – that Jesus Christ is truly risen. He is risen indeed and our hearts sing out the “alleluia” that sin and death are conquered, that what is restored to humanity is eternal – life itself. As we listen to salvation history, beginning with Genesis, moving through Exodus with Moses and the law, then through the prophets and the promise given, all is fulfilled in Jesus Christ -- in him and in him alone.

Also on this most solemn evening, we celebrate the sacraments of initiation in which some will be baptized, confirmed and receive first Eucharist and others will enter into full communion with the Church through a profession of faith, Confirmation and first Eucharist. We are reminded of the promise given to us by our God in the words of the prophet Ezekiel, “I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes” (Ezekiel 11:19-20).

My dearest sisters and brothers, these words from Ezekiel are fulfilled in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. In those first two sacraments of initiation, we receive a new heart and a new spirit, the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus.

Baptism is not just a cleansing or purification. Baptism is becoming a new creation in Jesus Christ. Baptism is entering into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and sharing in it. That is difficult for us to comprehend. And it is not just a difficulty of our modern times, with all of the distractions around us; it was also a difficulty in the early Church. We hear St. Paul in his letter to the Romans saying, “Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Romans 6:3). We were indeed buried with him, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead we too might live in newness of life. It is precisely that newness of life in Christ Jesus to which every baptized and confirmed person is called.

We are given a new heart, the “natural” heart from the words of the prophet Ezekiel. It is the heart of Christ that we are given. Everything that is good, everything that is true, everything that is beautiful is from Christ. It is from our God, and we are called to receive it, to place our faith in his promises, so that when I forgive I realize it is not simply my human forgiveness but the forgiveness of Christ with which I forgive. When I love, it is not just my love but the love of Christ. When I have reverence for the human body and for creation, it is the reverence of God that we heard in Genesis. When I am patient, it is the patience of Christ. When I am chaste, it is the chastity of Christ.

All of these gifts, graces, are bestowed upon us in our baptism and in our confirmation. These gifts are likely to remain dormant if we do not believe in them, if we do not desire them, if we do not hunger and long for them. As these gifts and graces are bestowed by God, he builds on our natural abilities and transforms our hearts. Our stance as believers is one of cooperation and receptivity to these graces and gifts. We have new hearts and they are Christ's! That is the wonder that happens in baptism and in confirmation. That is what Paul reminds us of this evening and what we celebrate – that we have died with Christ, we shall also live with him, and that life with him begins at the moment of our baptism.

We are living in Christ. St. Paul cries out in the second chapter of Galatians, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). My sisters and brothers, do you truly believe in your hearts that it is no longer you who live but it is Christ who lives in you, it is Christ who you become? That is the dignity of every Christian – that we truly become the beloved daughters and sons of God.

The greatest struggle for every one of us is to receive and believe in that dignity, to trust in the promises given to us by our God. That is the trust that Jesus hungers for us to taste in 2007. That is the trust, confidence and love that our God has so desired every human being to have from the moment of his or her creation. That is the invitation that is given to us in this Easter of 2007.

My dearest brothers and sisters, as we renew our baptismal promises tonight I pray that we will come to discover our true dignity as daughters and sons of the Father, who is also the Father of Jesus Christ. Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, “I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (John 20:17). He speaks those words to each one of us. “I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you... You shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (Ezekial 11:19-20).