

DESPITE THE DEVASTATION—VICTORY!

(Our Lord's sudden death on the cross left those who believed in him without hope.
On Easter Sunday life is restored and hope reborn.)

On this past Wednesday of Holy Week, I visited with a former parishioner from my early years at Saint Anthony's. He has been stricken with cancer and is not doing well. I had not seen him in a long time. He had been away from the sacraments for maybe twenty years but I anointed him and gave him Holy Communion. I believe my visit lifted his spirits a bit. I will visit him again.

Later that day as I was hearing confessions a penitent came and sat down. When I asked how long since the last confession, the response was unexpected. Forty-five years. Penitents who have been away from the sacraments for twenty years or forty-five years are referred to as "big fish" by priests. It is considered an honor to assist someone as they return to the faith in such circumstances. Priests always strive to be very helpful in such moments. The second person had a bad experience and it rocked him and he gave up on God. He turned his back on the Lord and walked away. Now he was returning and he was ready to say I'm sorry. That is still all it takes because of what Jesus did for us on the cross and in the grave.

Last Monday of Holy Week, on my 72nd birthday, the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris caught fire and the blaze raged for hours. It was devastating. I have been to that Cathedral and know its beauty and its history and its holiness and the magnificent church it took two hundred years to build. I prayed like so many others. I read a lot about the fire. I reflected a lot. It reminded me of our fire when our church burned down and how helpful many people were. There was some good news the next day. The entire structure had not been destroyed. And while the fire was a catastrophic blaze, there is hope for rebuilding.

These were all events of Holy Week. I thought it to be rather ironic that in this week called holy, because of the fire, literally millions of people all around the world were thinking about and talking about the crown of thorns which was salvaged from the interior of the Cathedral. Probably many more than would think of that crown in a normal Holy Week. I spoke to people who said that the fire really touched them and was actually drawing them back to the practice of the faith. It was the beauty and that something so beautiful was stricken. Much like the beautiful Christ was stricken on Good Friday. A beautiful person, a truly good person was attacked and destroyed. And the very act drew many people to him.

When the next day revealed that all had not been destroyed with the fire there was this picture of the cross boldly on display and still standing. The cross was undestroyed, still able to be seen, still able to proclaim silently to all the world that as long as the cross of Christ stands, there is always the hope of resurrection—healing, forgiveness, the triumph of beauty and love. To quote one blogger, Elizabeth Scalia, "There was the cross-upright, shimmering in the light, inviting us forward. It was a moment of spectacular grace, received with a selective sigh of relief. Because where the cross of Christ is, is hope and mercy and redemption offered amid our interior wreckage. Within the charred remains, the beauty had held." The stained glass of the rosettes. The statue of Our Lady of Paris where so many come to pray the rosary.

In recent year it has sometimes seemed like our church itself was being destroyed by the fires of evil. There has been so much confusion and loss of hope, And yet here we are on this Holy Saturday where there are literally tens of thousands of people, men and women like Christopher and Lindsay here before us, who are taking an important step in their spiritual journey by being baptized into the Catholic faith or making a renewed profession of faith. They will also be confirmed in their Catholic faith and then receive Our Lord sacramentally in the Eucharist.

I see our church as vulnerable but I see her in unexpected victory through Jesus Christ. God, in Christ, has taken on all of this so we do not have to. He alone can transform the destructive and bring new beauty and goodness, truth and harmony. That is what Easter means. The grave has been conquered. Death has been vanquished. Wherever the seeds of destruction are sown, there is a greater will and desire to recreate and make new and rebuild and restore the beauty. Betrayal, abandonment, isolation, destruction and death will all try to have their day and have their way. But Jesus Christ will have none of it. Let us put our faith in him the only one sent by God to take on our flesh and to rescue us from the grave. Let us be thankful for the gift that our Catholic faith is, especially in the midst of adversity. May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.