

FROM THE ASHES OF THE CHURCH BURNING: NEW LIFE

Twenty-two years ago, Christmas Eve the church of Saint Anthony of Padua here in Ambler caught fire and burned early in the morning. I was awakened by a pounding of the Old Rectory front door. I came down the steps and saw flashing red lights. I thought there had been an accident and that someone was asking to use the Rectory phone to make a call. This was way before cell phones. Instead, it was a fire fighter asking if I was the pastor. Assuring him I was, pajamas notwithstanding, he said bluntly: "Your church is on fire." That is the fastest I ever got dressed as an adult.

I was stunned and in shock. I could see the flames shooting through the roof. There were three alarms issued that day. And in all nine different fire companies came to our rescue. It was a frigid cold day just like today but there was no wind. That fact is what saved our school from catching fire too because they were only ten feet apart. With wind and embers and old buildings we would have lost everything. We were blessed even in our loss.

It was so cold that the water from the hoses used to douse the flames fell to the earth and also immediately froze. This turned everything into a sheet of ice. Quickly there was rock salt and it was sprinkled everywhere. The firefighters were so cool under pressure. I remember one man carrying out the tabernacle, this very tabernacle, with the Blessed Sacrament inside, and he called out to me "I got the tabernacle, Monsignor!" They got the baptistry we still use. And the crucifix. And the stations of the cross. And they broke through the stained-glass windows not through the painted portion but through the colored glass portion. Colored glass can more easily be restored. They were magnificent. I was still in shock.

Parishioners started to show up for Mass and others had heard the news report that the Church was on fire. That news literally went around the world that day. We got reports from people in Europe, in India, in Australia and all across our own country. Churches burning on Christmas Eve is a story that will be picked up and reported. As the firefighters brought things out of the burning church they were carried into our school and what I did not realize was that parishioners were taking these items to their homes and cleaning them. We had asked for and received permission from the Wissahickon School Board to use their high school for Masses that night. Permission was given and we used that facility for three and a half years. While the firefighters were extinguishing the blaze, our faithful people were cleaning things and transporting them over to the High School and setting up in the auditorium for Christmas Mass.

Different pastors sent liturgical vessels, chalices and ciboria, cruets and wine, vestments and albs, and purificators. Everything we needed to celebrate Mass. They all stopped what they were doing in preparation for Christmas and lent us a helping hand. We had two Masses that Christmas Eve night. Three the next day. The smell of smoke could still be sniffed but it did not seem to matter. It is easy to think that we did all this but the truth is, the Lord, the Child in the Manger, the One for whom we do all that we do, was responsible for all the good that came tumbling out of us that Christmas so many years ago. It was Jesus whom we love who inspired us to greatness. God is good. So good. And merciful. So merciful. We all experienced a death that day and we all experienced the richness of God's mercy that day.

I read a Christmas homily by Father Paul Scalia recently and it struck me. Allow me to share part of it with you now.

*Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver. By becoming incarnate of the Virgin Mary, the Son of God proportions himself to our “mode” so that we can receive him. In his mercy, he doesn’t demand that we become capable of him but makes himself capable of being received by us. True mercy always has this quality of being fitted, tailor-made for those in need, neither too high for them to reach nor too hard for them to accept.*

*So, God comes to us in a manner we can receive. The infinite becomes finite, the eternal enters time, and the Creator of all is born of the Virgin and laid in the manger. We can receive him because he has become accessible to all of us, and to every kind of us, from the lowly shepherds to the learned Magi. We can receive mercy more easily because – without losing any of its power – it has been scaled to our size.*

*And not only to our size. God’s mercy is also fitted to our wounded human nature. He is born poor to meet us – we who have squandered our gifts and lost our inheritance. He is born homeless for us, who live in this world as exiles. He is born exposed to the elements and even to his enemies to encounter us, who are so weak and in danger. He is born alienated from his own people – who “received him not,” (Jn 1:11) – to be one with us, who are alienated from God and from one another.*

*He unites himself to us in these sorrows because mercy does not stand far off and look patronizingly on the suffering. The Lord of mercy draws near, unites himself with us, and becomes one with us in our misery. The poverty of his birth already points to Jesus as the man of sorrows, the one united with humanity’s every kind of suffering – mental, emotional, physical, spiritual.*

*But the simplicity and ease with which we can now approach God doesn’t mean that his mercy is indulgent and permissive. On the contrary, like all newborn children, he calls out and asks something from us. The infant Christ cries out to us, asking that we receive him and respond. Yet even this inconvenience is proportioned to our needs, for it keeps us from the vice of taking his mercy for granted.*

That is why the Lord comes to us as a child. On our terms. This is how we each enter the world. He comes in a way we can accept. He comes as a little one. Why? Because there is still a little one in each of us. A little one who is afraid of the harsh, selfish, brutal and sometimes traumatic world in which we live and find ourselves. God’s little one makes himself available to the little one in each of us in just the right way. Not overpowering or overwhelming, nor confusing. But simply and approachable. He comes to do for us what we need but cannot accomplish. He comes to rescue us and save us. And that is what we celebrate today. And why we celebrate today. Merry Christmas

