

TITLE: “The Righteous Witnesses of Christ”

Today is the first Sunday after Easter, and the Octave of Easter, but it's also known historically as *Quasimodo* Sunday. It received this title because in the Latin church, a verse from St. Peter's first epistle would have been read or sung to introduce the Mass of the day. That verse begins with the words “quasi modo geniti infantes.” In English these words of St. Peter say, “So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants [*quasi modo...infantes*], long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” I think we're all familiar with the story of another Quasimodo, whose story is told in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Birth defects had given Quasimodo a rather monstrous appearance that horrified the Parisians who dwelt near the Cathedral where he lived. He was given his name because he was abandoned in the Cathedral on Quasimodo Sunday. Hugo's story is one of the great examples of the Romanticism of the 19th century.

Quasimodo falls in love with Esmeralda, a young girl who was kind to him, even though he was involved in a plot to kidnap her along with the evil Archdeacon of the Cathedral. It was her gift of water while he was suffering in the stocks that opened his eyes to her beauty and kindness. In the story we learn that Esmeralda's true name is Agnes, which is the Latin word for “Lamb.” The symbolism is striking. The young girl, whose name is “the lamb”, converts the beast of a man, the deformed

and rugged Quasimodo, by a simple gift of water. Later he will save her life when she is threatened again by the evil Archdeacon, but they will both meet a tragic end at the conclusion of the story. As one author notes, because of the simplicity and purity of his love, Quasimodo has today become synonymous with “a courageous heart beneath a grotesque exterior.” “Quasi modo...infantes”, a love as innocent and pure as a child’s.

The theme of putting of appearances and putting on what is true and good is fitting for this Sunday, which was also known in the ancient church by another Latin title, “Dominica in albis depositis,” which means “the Sunday when the white garments are taken off.” The white garment refers to the garment that the catechumen were given after their baptism on Easter Sunday, and they were required to wear it for all of Easter week. This Sunday would be only the second time that they were to receive Holy Communion and the first time doing so without their baptismal garment. Those who wore these garments had converted to the Christian Faith prior to Lent. They had fasted and prayed for 40 days in preparation for putting on Christ in their baptism. Having put on the baptismal garment during Easter week, now appearing on Quasimodo Sunday for the first time in plain clothes, Christ’s message to them would be very clear, namely, “you were foreign children when you became Christians, and you were admonished like servants to put off your old self with its passions and desires, but now you’ve come through the fiery trial. You have

been brought into the household of faith, adopted as God's own children in your baptism, and now the day has come for you to take off the robe of the neophyte. When you take off the baptismal robe, do not remove the power and promise of your baptism. But, put on your battle armor, and daily fulfill your baptismal vow to fight manfully under the banner of Christ. Now you are to live a new life as a witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Our lesson this morning from St. John's first epistle tells us that to put on Christ is to put on more than an outward garment, but it is to become a witness of the resurrected life, demonstrating that in Christ we who were once dead in trespasses and sins are now made alive, by the power of his resurrection.

St. John refers to three ways that we become witnesses of the resurrection: the Spirit, the water, and the blood. Though John uses cryptic language here, what he means by these three witnesses harkens back to the Old Testament requirement that God gave to Moses, that any time there's a dispute over the truth, the matter must be settled by two or three witnesses. Christ tells His disciples to keep this commandment of the law in St. Matthew, chapter 18, and St. Paul tells us to use it as well, saying that any accusation against a priest must be confirmed by two or three witnesses. So, this is not only a rule for the Israelites of long ago, but it's also for us.

And yet, when it comes to our divine calling it does no good to have a merely human witness. St. John answers that God Himself bore witness that Jesus Christ is

both the Son of God and the Lord. He begins by referring to Christ's birth. He says, "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." In this verse we hear of a birth that is also a victory that overcomes the world. This is a new birth, not merely the bursting forth of a child from the womb, but the resurrection of the dead, the bursting open of the tomb, and the power of eternal life that looses the bonds of death and hell forever. That's what Christ did, but that's also what faith does. Christ came, not only by water, that is by being born in human flesh, being baptized by water in the Jordan, but also by blood, that is, by a righteous death. So, "Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" And, "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar, because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life; and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life."

It does no good to have a merely human witness. As the psalm says, "I said in my haste, all men are liars." St. John says "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God, which he hath testified of his son." God testified on His Son's behalf on three occasions, which St. John describes by the terms water, blood, and Spirit. Each of these three words refers to a type of baptism that Christ underwent. The water was His baptism in the river

Jordan, at which time the Father bore witness of His Son, saying, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” Christ permitted himself to be baptized by John the Baptist, so that, as He says, “[he] might fulfill all righteousness.” That He might “fulfill all righteousness,” because through His baptism of water, He was making a way for all humanity to not only witness His divine Sonship, but to participate in it, to bear witness of its truth, hearing the same declaration of the Father in our baptism, “This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.” So, the water is the first witness.

The blood is the second witness. The blood is the true baptism of Christ, in which He put off not just the dirtiness of the body but the body itself by dying on the cross for the sins of the world. And for a declaration and a testimony to the righteousness of Christ, the Father did not need to speak any words. Indeed, there was silence in heaven as the Son of God died a sinner’s death. When the silence was broken three days later – or 30 minutes as St. John records in his Revelation – the Father raised up the Son from the dead. And when the silence in heaven was broken, John says, “And I saw another sign in heaven...I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire: and them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God. 3 And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God

Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints. 4 Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest.” When Cain murdered his brother Abel, God said to Cain, “the blood of your brother Abel cries out to me from the ground.” The saints gained the victory over the beast by their righteous death. The witnesses of the saints’ blood does not go unnoticed by the God who made humanity in His own image. If the blood of Abel cried out to God for justice, then how much more does the blood of the Son of God and his saints cry out for eternal justice?

The blood bears witness to Christ’s righteousness, and the resurrection is God’s answer to the cry for justice. Indeed, as St. Paul says, “he was raised to life for our justification” and those of us who are baptized have “put on Christ” and His righteousness, his victory, his life, and we receive his verdict when the Father declares us to be “righteous” on account of his blood. We were “Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.” By faith are we justified in the presence of God. Our justification is that declaration of God, that despite the fact that our baptism does not completely wash away our sinful nature, though we receive Christ and the record of our sins is washed away, we are still tempted to turn away from our Lord and savior. But despite all of that, as often as we put our faith in the power

of God to raise up life from the dead, he remembers our baptism and he renews his vows to us, declares us righteous by the blood of Christ that washes us white as snow, and makes us witnesses to these things in the world.

How is it that, by baptism and blood we become witnesses to the resurrection of Christ? How does the sprinkling of a child in a baptismal font in Lexington, or Richmond, or New York have any connection to Christ's death 2,000 years ago? The answer is in the third witness, the Holy Spirit. In our Gospel lesson Christ breathed out the Holy Spirit on His disciples. The Spirit bears witness to the divinity of Christ and to the sons of God. The fact is, if the only witness we had was the witness of water and blood, it wouldn't be enough. What is the washing of the body with water without the live-changing gift of the Holy Spirit? Indeed, Christ tells us in the book of Revelation that if our lives are not changed by our confession of faith, our worship, our participation in the sacraments, then we have become like lukewarm water. And, as lukewarm water is spewed out of the mouth, so the Father will cast us out of his kingdom.

The witness of water and blood, in Baptism and Holy Communion would be meaningless if it were not for the promise of God attached to those means with the seal of the Holy Spirit, who puts his seal on us like the seal of the promissory note of heaven, stamped with the emblem of God himself, which is the sign of the cross. By the power of the Spirit, we become cross bearers. The same Holy Spirit who was

with Christ in the grave, is the same Holy Spirit that Christ breathes out on his Church, so that he might now dwell in us, and we in him. Now each time we receive those visible promises of God in the Sacrament, the Holy Spirit himself bears witness with our spirits, that we are indeed the children of God. So now “Like newborn infants [quasi modo...infantes],” God is commanding you, “long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” This is the first resurrection.

What does it mean to long for pure spiritual milk, to taste and know that the Lord is good, to put on the garment of innocence? What does it all mean but to love God in sincerity and truth from the depth of your being, with your spirit bearing witness with God’s Spirit? God is asking all of us today to put on these witnesses and wear them and love them, to wear a garment of identity that is not ours, but to put on Christ’s righteousness and to live a life worthy of the resurrection. If a soldier or a policeman put on his uniform to merely pretend, he would not be prepared for the battle, and he would likely be killed. So should we put on the full armor of Christ, the full protection offered to us by his resurrected life. As St. John says, “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him ... For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.”

As St. Augustine says in his sermon for this Sunday, “Your own hope of resurrection, though not yet realized, is sure and certain, because you have received the sacrament or sign of this reality, and have been given the pledge of the Spirit.” When you feel yourself convicted because of your sin, and when you know that you desire to hear God’s absolution, know then that it is the Holy Spirit bearing witness within you that you are a child of God. The Spirit and the sign go together, the word and the Sacrament. When Christ breathed out the Spirit on the disciples, he gave them the power to forgive sins on earth. The power to forgive sins is extended to sinful men. That means, when you confess your sins to the Church and you hear the absolution, you are not to listen to the voice of man, but to the voice of the Spirit of God, whom Christ has breathed out upon his Church. When the priest invokes the Holy Spirit so that he might come down upon the “creatures” of bread and wine, so that they might be to us the body and blood of Jesus Christ, we are not to look at the outward forms alone, but to what the Spirit says that they are.

As Christians we are called to put off the old way of thinking and put on a new spiritual way of thinking. This means, we are to put on the Holy Spirit of Christ in all of our thoughts, words, and actions. We begin to do this when we look beyond the outward forms of things and look inward to what is eternal, and abiding, and true. Though the outward forms look simple (bread and wine), though the voice of the minister sounds like common speech (when says “I absolve you from sin”), and

though the love of your Christian brother sometimes appears ugly on the outside (when their concern for you causes them to disagree with you or even rebuke you), look not to the outward appearance, but look with the eyes of the Spirit, and know that, in the Church, you have come to something greater than a merely earthly society, something more powerful than the witness of man, but “you have come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, 23 To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.” Now, beloved, let us put on Christ and his righteousness, and come to Holy Communion with faith in our hearts, listening to God’s voice bearing witness inwardly that we are indeed his very own children, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.