

Homily for Holy Thursday
1 April 2021
Cathedral of Saint Raymond Nonnatus

Dear Bishop Hicks, my brother deacons, my friends who form this Cathedral parish community; dear brothers and sisters from the Diocese of Joliet and beyond who have tuned in to pray with us, good evening and thank you for letting me preach to you on this holy and important night.

As a lot of you know, last May I finished a Master's Degree in Catholic Studies from the University of St. Thomas. Catholic Studies asks the question, "What is the impact and influence of the incarnation of Jesus on human thought and culture? What does God becoming a human mean for humanity, in all of its expressions?" I'm so grateful to have had the chance to study over those two years, and to explore the Catholic tradition in all of its facets - philosophy, theology, art, science, education, the humanities, and, my favorite, literature.

I never thought I would have an excuse to read the great literary classics of our tradition in a critical and structured way. During one semester, I was able to take a class entirely devoted to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. For those unfamiliar with this masterpiece of Christian writing, its author, Dante Alighieri, presents an autobiographical and analysis of his own life and times through the lens of his own spiritual awakening; he is led through hell, through purgatory, and ultimately reveals a vision of Paradise, of heaven. Dante began writing in 1308 and finished in 1320, and this long-form is considered to be the most famous piece of Italian literature ever written. The *Divine Comedy*, by the way, is where we get the famous conception of the nine circles of hell.

Dante begins the first book, *Inferno*, with an incredible line: "In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost." Dante wrote in his journal that he experienced this moment of awakening on Holy Thursday in the year 1300, the 35th year of his life. Until that night, Dante freely admits that he had lost the way to salvation and had begun to descend into a life of sin, and that he was falling into a "low place" and feared that if he did not begin to change he would be relegated forever to the place "where the sun is silent."

Eventually, Dante is rescued by the Roman poet Virgil, who teaches him that in order to achieve the freedom he so desires, he must empty himself and make the decision to move forward on the path set before him...to continue with courage, moving through the "dark

wood”, and as he travels downward through each circle of hell, Dante learns that in those whom he encounters, he himself will be forced to reckon with his own sin.

After descending through the circles of the inferno (and after writing literally hundreds of pages), Dante arrives in the pit at the very center of hell. Contrary to popular images, Dante describes the very pit of hell not as a fiery furnace but as a frozen lake. Stuck in the center of the lake, frozen in one place forever, is the devil himself. He sees that the devil has six massive wings, since before he and the other rebellious angels fell, Lucifer belonged to the angelic order of the Seraphim. He flaps his wings with great vigor, trying to escape, but the more he flaps, the more he spreads the cold air around and solidifies his place in the ice. The devil now has three heads, which for Dante represented a disgusting and a reprehensible perversion of the Trinity. The devil is impotent, ignorant, and full of hatred; God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving. In each of the beast’s three mouths is found one of the three greatest traitors in history: Brutus and Cassius, who betrayed Julius Caesar, and, of course, Judas Iscariot.

Dante hates what he sees, and what it does to him: he writes that everything is shrouded in a mist, and that it is almost completely dark. “How then I became frozen and feeble, do not ask, reader, for I do not write it, and all speech would be insufficient. I did not die and I did not remain alive: think now for yourself, if you have wit at all, what I became, deprived of both.” (34.22-27)

Dante and Virgil approach Lucifer and, taking a deep breath, plunge themselves through the hole in the ice, expecting to find themselves descending...but instead they notice they are actually ascending! Everything in hell was actually upside down, and now having passed through it, Dante regains full consciousness and begins to ascend up Mount Purgatory toward heaven.

Why are you listening to a book report tonight?

Because Dante is teaching us every lesson that will move us through this night. Tonight, the Church invites us to reckon with our own lives, to take ourselves seriously and look in the mirror, allowing ourselves to be confronted with the reality of sin, with the reality of its consequences, and with the reality of redemption...but to see, maybe for the first time, not only what this redemption cost, but also what sort of redeemer we are dealing with in the first place.

Sin literally upsets the world.

Creation is designed to move toward God; he is our origin, and he is our end. St. Augustine wrote that we have been made for God, and that our hearts are restless until we rest in him. Augustine used the Latin word “AD”, instead of “PRO”, meaning that we are not made for God in the sense that he wants us to serve him as employees or that God somehow needed us in order to be complete.

No, AD is the Latin word which means “toward.” So, in our core, we possess a fundamental orientation toward God. This is why our hearts are restless until they rest in him. The heart recognizes the one who designed it, the one who sets it free, the one to whom it has been longing to return from the earliest moments; **the heart knows infallibly what corresponds to its longing.**

What is the longing of the heart? What is the deepest desire of the Christian heart? St. Paul says it so beautifully in his letter to the Philippians: “I count everything as loss, in order that I may **gain Christ and be found in him.**” Think of that beautiful line in John’s gospel: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” (Jn. 12:21)

Living, as we already do, in the new age initiated by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, **we have been freed for this kind of fulfillment.** And yet, as Pope Francis has written so often, each of us suffers from a kind of “spiritual Alzheimer’s,” a certain **amnesia of the heart.**

We aren’t the first of God’s people to experience this reality. In the Book of Exodus, God commands that the Israelites celebrate the Passover at the same time every year. We heard in the first reading that God told Moses, “This month shall stand at the head of your calendar; you shall reckon it the first month of the year.” This month, the month in which I will set you free from slavery to Pharaoh and set you on a new journey to a new homeland, in which I will dwell among you, this month will now be for you the beginning of time. You will keep these events of Passover as a memorial feast, a perpetual institution; You will celebrate them always, for all time; for these are not events which remain in the past; this saving moment, this liberating action will be carried out throughout all time for all of my people who remain in my covenant.

The promise of liberation and of a homeland, of a new covenant, and of God’s perpetual presence to his people...this is some of the most beautiful language found anywhere in the scriptures. It rightly moves us, and inspires us, and comforts us.

And yet, tonight, we are like Dante. Awaking, on Holy Thursday, in the midst of tumult on every side. We are awaking to the fact that despite this beautiful promise we often give

ourselves over to the disorientation of sin; we wake in the dark wood to the painful reality that our fallen nature sometimes leaves us hurling headlong, downward toward death.

The Israelites were more than willing to be taken out of Egypt, but allowing Egypt to be taken out of them was a different matter entirely; a different matter that would become their downfall...and ours as well.

We must recognize that the Exodus from Egypt is to be kept as a perpetual memorial because, as I have said, the Exodus from Egypt is a type, a foreshadowing, **of our, of my liberation - I can say with confidence that *I have been set free***...and yet, in so many ways, I still yearn to return to Egypt.

This is the painful reality with which we all must contend tonight: sin exists in my life... sin upsets and distorts reality...sin keeps me bound to a “low place” (as Dante said)...**sin leads me away from God into emptiness.**

But there is a joyful reality which draws our attention tonight, also. As we come to face to face with this emptiness, we are greeted by something, by someone strange.

“So...he rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and dry them with the towel around his waist.” (Jn 13)

What is going on here?

“Good-natured helpfulness, perhaps, readiness to serve...But the moment described here is far too huge for any such slight motive. There are people who instinctively seek the lowest possible place, inner uncertainty or a feeling of inferiority drives them to perform the most menial services in order to attain a certain inner truth. It is self-understood that Jesus’ nature knows none of these... ‘You call me Master and Lord, and you say well, for so I am.’ He has acted in the full, pure consciousness of his authority.” (Guardini, *The Lord*, 422)

What is Jesus doing?

Recall something else that Paul wrote to the Philippians:

“Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not consider being equal to God a thing to be clung to, but **emptied** himself, taking the nature of a slave and being made like unto us.” (Phil. 2:6-7)

Jesus became a human, to live our life, so that he might “penetrate to depths we can never measure” (424) - that is, to die our death. By dying our death, he enters more fully into our emptiness than we ourselves ever could, and by so doing he fills our emptiness with the one thing we had been looking for all along: the fulness of his own presence, of his own life.

Sin upsets the balance of the world, and creates an unconquerable void. “Our salvation was not something God could bring about with a detached and effortless gesture; he felt its full weight.” (425) **God literally emptied himself**, embracing the nothingness of our world of sin, the same nothingness that caused Dante in Lucifer to be “alive and not alive” at the same time. “To abandon himself to the void, to destruction...this is Christ’s sacrifice.” (425)

This is the meaning of the washing of the feet. The performance of the most menial task, reserved in ancient times for the lowest of slaves, is the fullest and most beautiful explanation Jesus ever offered regarding what he was about to accomplish on the Cross.

In that moment, after the supper in which he instituted the new covenant, in the context of that perpetual memorial which we celebrate on this altar every day, Jesus stooped down into the emptiness; he embraced the humanity and frailty of his disciples; and he did so, not as some corporate consultant, distant executive, or disinterested third-party. **He entered into their lowliness as their friend.**

“Every Christian one day reaches the point where they too must be ready to accompany their Master into destruction and oblivion: into that which the world considers folly, that which for his own understanding is incomprehensible, for his own feeling intolerable. Whatever it is to be: suffering, dishonor, the loss of loved ones or the shattering of a [lifetime’s accomplishments], this is the decisive test of our Christianity. Will we shrink back before the ultimate depths, or will we be able to go all the way and thus win our share of the life of Christ? What is it we fear in Christianity if not precisely this demand?” (426)

This is the invitation of Holy Thursday. It is the invitation that Dante heard when, on this very night, 721 years ago he was woken up by the Spirit of Jesus and led from the darkness of sin into the brilliance of life.

This is the invitation: to face our own reality, to take it seriously, to ponder it in silence, and to move forward into whatever we find; confident that Jesus, by his death and resurrection, has already been there and has paved our way.

In Jesus, death is conquered and sin is forgiven; and all emptiness, all imbalance, all disorientation is set upright and is filled.

“When he had washed their feet, and put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, **‘Do you realize what I have done for you?’**”