

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (YEAR B)

LAETARE SUNDAY

March 14, 2021

2 Chronicles 36:14–16, 19–23 • Ephesians 2:4–10 • John 3:14–21

I.

There's a large crucifix that hangs in my office.

It was given to me as a going-away present from a former parish.

The crucifix was sculpted out of bronze by a Belgian artist named Sylvain Norga between 1915 and 1925.

The Belgian origin of the crucifix is interesting because in the history of the Richmond Diocese, a number of our priests were trained at the American College in Louvain, Belgium.

Some native Belgians served as priests in the diocese, including Augustine van de Vyver, who was bishop of Richmond between 1889 and 1911.

It was Bp. Van de Vyver who built the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart (1906).

The corpus or body of Christ on that crucifix has always captivated me.

Its posture is not so common:
Jesus is perfectly erect on the cross.

There are no nails in his hands or feet.

He wears a crown of thorns,
but his face shows no sign of suffering.

This is the portrait of Jesus' crucifixion in the Gospel of John.

It's not that the Evangelist John denies the horrible suffering of the crucifixion.

Rather, the Evangelist emphasizes the crucifixion as Jesus' victory over sin.

Looking ahead, that is the meaning of the Good Friday liturgy,
when the Church meditates on the Cross as the instrument of victory.

II.

That depiction of the crucified Jesus,
on my bronze crucifix and in the Gospel of John,
is a beacon.

In today's Gospel,
Jesus speaks of his crucifixion as a "lifting up":

"Just as Moses **lifted up** the serpent in the desert,
so must the Son of Man be **lifted up**,
so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

In the cases of Moses,
God sent poisonous serpents to bite the Israelites
in punishment for their disobedience while journeying to the promised land.

But in response to Moses' plea,
the Lord instructed him to mount a bronze figure of a serpent on a pole,
the sight of which would heal the Israelites.

Similarly, it is the "sight" of Jesus' crucifixion—
"sight" meaning belief—
that brings about the forgiveness of sins:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

This belief that brings eternal life is not just an intellectual assent to a proposition;
it is the commitment of the whole person to God.

This commitment accepts the gift of God in Christ,
and it is expressed in the gratitude of a holy life lived in service to others.

Jesus' "lifting up" on the Cross calls for a decision be made,
whether or not to accept this gift from God.

“Whoever believes in him will not be condemned,
 but whoever does not believe has already been condemned,
 because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

Jesus’ complete gift of himself on the Cross reveals the meaning of our lives—
 to live like him, and to love like him.

“And this is the verdict,
 that the light came into the world...
 Everyone who does wicked things hates the light
 and does not come toward the light,
 so that his works might not be exposed.
 But whoever lives the truth comes to the light,
 so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.”

Perhaps for many people,
 being a Catholic is just one aspect of their lives, among many others.

But there can be a turning point for each of us
 when we realize that being a Catholic is the purpose of our lives,
 and that it shapes everything we do.

This purpose of life brings joy,
 along the lines of the liturgy for this Fourth Sunday of Lent,
 which is traditionally known as *Laetare* Sunday.

Laetare is the Latin word for “rejoice.”

The name of the Mass comes from the Entrance Antiphon:

“Rejoice [*Laetare*], Jerusalem, and all who love her.
 Be joyful, all who were in mourning.”

As a sign of joy,
 rose-colored vestments may be worn today,
 flowers may adorn the altar,
 and instrumental music may be played.

These joyful signs provide a respite from the rigors of Lent.

These signs also point to a truth about life:

Only God can bring us to ultimate fulfillment,
and the way to that fulfillment is through Jesus' cross and resurrection.

This week,
I've been thinking about two signs that point to the centrality of faith in our lives.

They come from opposite sides of the parish's demographic spectrum.

Last Saturday morning,
the children of the parish received the Sacrament of Penance for the first time,
in preparation for their First Holy Communion in May.

The Sacrament of Penance renews the dying and rising of Christ,
and applies it to our lives for the forgiveness of sins.

There, in the confessional,
these children look upon Jesus being "lifted up,"
and they receive healing.

Their joy after receiving the sacrament,
and the support of their families,
indicates the importance of the Sacrament of Penance in all of our lives.

Then, last Saturday evening, and again today,
various adults in the parish underwent a scrutiny
in preparation for their baptism at Easter.

By means of this rite,
those adults express sorrow for their sins,
they receive healing,
and they renew their intention to be forgiven through Baptism,
which will immerse them into Jesus' death and resurrection.

Their joy, as they move closer to Baptism, is also very clear.

Both groups provide a compelling witness of faith—
an encounter with God that gives meaning,
and a relationship with God that brings joy.