

EASTER HOMILY 2019

The season of Lent begins on a Wednesday with what's left after a fire: ashes. Those ashes come from burning the palms used at the previous year's Palm Sunday. The palms of the crowd triumphantly acclaiming Jesus as He entered Jerusalem are reduced to ashes as quickly as those same adoring crowds changed their tune to shout "crucify Him!" a few days later on Good Friday.

Those ashes are the sign of fickleness. How changeable our minds and hearts are that praise the Lord one moment and then swiftly deny Him... like St. Peter did as he warmed himself by a fire as Jesus shivered in a jail! How often we eagerly come to the Lord in our moments of need but then forget Him or consider Him a burden when all is well as we enjoy the blessings He so freely bestows upon us.

Ashes become the sign of our repentance as we begin our annual pilgrimage to Easter. We repent of breaking God's commandments and placing pride, money, lust, and other false gods ahead of the one, true God. But how long does this repentance last? Forty days of Lent and then back to how we were before? Or sometimes we don't even last the forty days...

Fire itself is a fickle thing. We use it for light, for cooking, and for warmth. It enables us to see, to eat, and to be comfortable. On the other hand, it can hurt and destroy all that it touches.

This great Easter Vigil began with a fire. Jesus told the crowds: “I came to cast fire on the earth and would that it were already kindled!” (Lk. 12:49). He said this right after He commended His listeners to be like servants who keep their lamps burning waiting for the Master’s return. The lit candles we hold at this Mass are signs that we have received this sacred fire from the Lord who said “I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (Mt. 8:12).

Jesus also taught on the Sermon on the Mount that “you are the light of the world.” (Mt. 5:14). We are meant to bring the light of Jesus to those around us. This holy season of Easter concludes fifty days from now on Pentecost with tongues of flame descending from Heaven upon the apostles. We are commissioned to set the world on fire with love for Christ!

So, let’s ask the question... is the world on fire? You better believe it! Just not on fire with love for Christ. The world is certainly ablaze as man abandons truth, goodness, and beauty in favor of allowing his burning passions to guide him. This selfishness always ends in ashes.

This Holy Week began with a fire. Right after the triumph of Palm Sunday, the great Cathedral of Notre Dame was lit up by a fire seen round the world. It reminded me of something that the great English writer GK Chesterton wrote: “if the Middle Ages were a house half-built then the Enlightenment is a house on fire.”

It is always tempting to want to turn back the clock to an earlier and supposedly better time. The Age of Faith built Notre Dame and many such grand edifices across Europe. They were communal witnesses of faith and reminders that this life is a journey to our true home in Heaven. However, everything was not perfect back then (and we are certainly grateful for later innovations like indoor plumbing). We should not want to go back but rather push ahead building on the steady foundation that we have inherited from the Age of Faith.

The Age of Enlightenment is so-called as it saw the emergence of scientific rationalism as the governing principle of society. “Man, the measure of all things” was the rallying cry. But what is man if he is not understood to be made in the image and likeness of God? Man without relation to his Creator is merely another beast and usually a bully.

For all the scientific advances of the era, modern man's heart grows cooler and more distant from the love of God. Those who deplore the wars of religion forget that the atheistic leaders of the 20th century using the wonders of modern technology killed more people in a few decades than in all the previous centuries combined.

The Greek myth of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods to give it to humanity stands as a lesson for us today. Do we take the wonders of the intelligence and free will which God gave us and twist them to serve our own whims instead of God's Kingdom?

Our hearts are meant to burn with love for God and be a light for our neighbor. Does the fire within us come from the Holy Spirit or have we let other sources ignite us for destructive purposes? Is Faith in the Risen Lord Jesus the passion that drives us forward every day? Does the Light of His Truth guide each one of our actions?

The fire at Notre Dame can help us understand several important lessons. First, that just like the great cathedral we inherited, so the faith of those who came before us is a gift to inspire us. We thank God for the people in our own lives and all the saints of the past who show us the beauty of living as disciples of the Risen Lord. We stand on the shoulders of giants. We are called to do our part giving a witness of faith to the world going forward.

This is why we also need to recognize the frailty of a faith that is not ever new. The spiritual state of France today is more an heir of the bloodthirsty French Revolution than of the humble faith of Saint Louis and those who built Notre Dame. America, no less than France, enjoys the legacy of forefathers who were full of faith. That glorious history is not enough to ward off present dangers. All that is good in our society can go up in smoke in an instant—just as the right to life of the unborn or the universal definition of marriage disappeared with the stroke of a pen in the Supreme Court.

The fire also reminds us that the Church herself is subject to these dangers. The scandals we keep painfully experiencing are clear signs that the world has been influencing the followers of Jesus more than the followers of Jesus have been influencing the world! The Church needs renewal from top to bottom—not a single one of us should cast a stone until we make sure that we are without sin! How compromised is our witness to the world until we commit to keeping our own house clean!

I have to say that watching the burning roof of Notre Dame on Monday was fascinating as well as heart-breaking. There is a beauty to fire which attracts us. That's why we always have to tell kids—and altar servers—not to play with fire! It is fascinating but dangerous. Sin is like that too. Temptations only tempt us because they have a certain loveliness—but it is a false beauty, only the cheap splendor of fool's gold. We end up getting burned every time.

The most spectacular part of Monday's fire was certainly watching the spire of Notre Dame. "Spire" is the English word for it. The French word is "fleche" meaning arrow. It was an arrow pointing straight to Heaven! It lifted up the minds and hearts of all who saw it for generations.

Our lives are meant to be arrows as well. Our faith should guide our actions which then give witness to Christ to those around us. Do our lives look like arrows on fire with the Holy Spirit pointing to Heaven? Or do our lives look like relics of faith about to come crashing down in flames?

Jesus won us freedom from sin at a terrible cost. His Passion is the price of our new life of grace and the promise of eternal life. The joy of Easter is that His Love for us is so great that He was willing to pay that awful price. Is our love for Him great enough that we remain faithful rather than fickle?

Easter should not be reduced to a frivolous celebration about bunnies and chocolates. It is a serious time to reignite the Light of Christ within us! The Lord is Risen, Alleluia! He calls us to rise above the worldliness of our age and live in His Love on this pilgrimage to our true home in Heaven!