

**Resurrection of the Lord**  
**April 21, 2019**  
**Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass**  
**of**  
**St. Thomas More Catholic Parish**  
**celebrated at**  
**St. Joseph Catholic Church**  
**116 Theodore St.**  
**Scranton, PA 18508**  
**John 20:1-9**

On the tenth anniversary of our parish's first pilgrimage to Rome, a number of our parishioners returned to the Eternal City. We had a great tour guide, who took us into St. Peter's Basilica and spent a good amount of time with us underneath that church's massive dome. The four pillars that hold up the dome double as shrines for some of the most important relics in all of Christendom. One of the pillars holds the lance that was used to pierce the side of Christ as he hung dead upon the Cross, causing the fifth of our Lord's glorious wounds.

At first glance it seems ridiculous that the Church should possess one of the weapons that was used in our Lord's Passion. After all, the lance belongs not to the disciples of Jesus, but to the band of soldiers who literally killed Jesus, the ones who physically nailed him to the tree. But then we read the Book of Acts, from which we heard this morning, and the church's possession of the soldiers' lance no longer seems so implausible.

The context of St. Peter's speech in our first lesson is the conversion to the Catholic faith of Cornelius, the Roman centurion whom, with his household, St. Peter brought into the Church. This is the same speech in which the first Pope asserted, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). St. Peter here had to make a defense of this man's conversion, not only because he was a gentile and not a Jew, but because he was a Roman soldier, of the same nation and profession as the men who had killed Jesus. We can easily understand how the early Christians would have been shocked that the Church was now incorporating not just Gentiles but Romans, the Jews' oppressors, men loyal to the same procurator who had ordered Jesus' crucifixion.

So it is important to note how St. Peter ends the speech we heard this morning. Having begun by saying God shows no partiality, St. Peter ends by saying, "...everyone who believes in [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Without partiality God grants forgiveness, yes, even to those who killed the only begotten Son of God. How is this possible, that a fledgling group could so easily incorporate into their midst people whose fidelity was to the state that had killed the group's founder? Only if the group's disciples knew the Founder was not dead.

This is one of the great proofs that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead actually happened, that his apostles were not embittered by His death, but instead began shortly thereafter preaching that those who had conspired to kill Jesus should be forgiven. There were many groups at the time dedicated to fighting Roman rule, issuing incitements to violence, the Zealots being the most prominent. But the disciples of Jesus Christ did not join them. Who would have had more cause to hate the Romans for what that terrorist state had done to them? But rather

than call for retributive justice, which was the norm in the Middle East at the time—indeed, it is the norm in the Middle East even today—the disciples chose instead to preach forgiveness and began to convert the soldiers of the occupier Roman Army.

In other words, the Resurrection made this forgiveness possible. Yes, Christ's triumph over death means that God has forgiven our sins, and we no longer need fear death and eternal damnation. But when the Son of God forgave His killers even as he hanged upon the cross, and then reiterated that forgiveness in His conversation with the disciples after He rose from the dead, the only course of action those who had met Him could reasonably take is the one our Risen Lord had commanded: that we love one another even as He has loved us. By the time God commanded St. Peter to reconcile Cornelius to Holy Mother Church, the apostles had already long before forgiven those who had murdered our innocent Lord.

It is worth noting also that when the Jewish rebellion finally took place in 66 A.D., the insurrection against the Romans that had been fomenting for decades, the Christians wanted nothing to do with it. As the Zealots made Jerusalem their stronghold, the Christians fled to Pella, on the other side of the Jordan, thereby refusing to participate in the war and preserving themselves from the Roman reprisals that Jesus prophesied would come. The Church didn't refuse to fight the Romans because they were pro-Roman Empire; the Emperor Nero had only recently killed St. Peter and St. Paul. The Church refused to fight the Romans because they had forgiven them. The Jews fought because they had not. The power of forgiveness was such that within three hundred years the Roman Empire itself would declare Christianity its official religion. Those who know they will live with Jesus, our Risen Lord, are able to forgive and love even their persecutors. The result is that their persecutors are time and again incorporated into the Church. In most societies, this means the number of Christians increases and the number of persecutors decreases.

Which brings us back to the spear of St. Longinus, the name traditionally attributed to the soldier who pierced the side of our Lord. Since the Church has from her inception forgiven, converted, and then incorporated her persecutors, so much so that in three hundred fifty years she converted the Roman Empire, it isn't at all hard to believe that the spear we venerated in Rome fell into the hands of the Church by the conversion of the man who wielded it. Longinus might not have been his birth name, but he did stab Jesus in the chest, and after he became a Catholic, having repented of his complicity in Jesus' murder, he gave his weapon to the Church, that she might venerate this priceless relic until the day the Bridegroom returns to judge the living and the dead.

Whom will the resurrection of Jesus Christ enable us to forgive and possibly incorporate into the Body our persecutors who once tried to kill the Body? For the Catholics of Sri Lanka, who saw scores killed in bombings this morning at Easter Sunday Masses, the answer is yet to be determined. We don't yet know who played the role of the Roman soldiers in the latest attempt to kill Jesus Christ. We pray that when they find out our brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka will be as loving and forgiving as was St. Peter when Jesus told him to go to the house of Cornelius, the Roman centurion.

For many of us at Mass here today, there is no mystery. We know precisely whom we are called to forgive. We know exactly who our persecutors are, exactly who needs to be converted

and then incorporated into the Church whose Divine Founder shows no partiality and will forgive with a gladdened heart all those who repent and confess His Name. The reason the world scoffs at the idea that the Church possesses the Holy Lance is that the world can't imagine enemies becoming friends. This has not been hard for the Church to imagine since her inception. It is something we who confess the resurrection of Jesus Christ must believe is possible for us as well, that our enemies may one day be our friends, that because Jesus lives, forgiveness might yet make us brothers.