

FROM FR. CHRIS ALIMAJI'S DESK

Reflections on the Third Scrutiny 2021: Jesus Christ the Resurrection and the Life

Once again, we are treating the Scrutinies to benefit parishes, CCE and Religious Education teachers, catechists, teenagers, young adults, and parents with catechumens and candidates in RCIA, to help them make their transition to full communion into the Church. The Sunday Mass readings for Scrutinies are only available liturgically in Year A hence they are alternatives in Year B and C. The usual Sunday readings for this Year B are for those without catechumens. On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, the Third and Final Scrutiny, I want to keep this reflection under three sub-headings, namely: (1) God Promises us Resurrection and Life; (2) Belief in Jesus who gives New Life; and (3) New Life in the Spirit. Our Scripture Readings are Ezek. 37:12-14; Rom. 8:8-11; and John 11:1-45; while with Psalm 130 we plead with God for mercy and the redemption of our lives.

God Promises us Resurrection and Life: The Prophet Ezekiel told the people of his time that God will open their graves and restore them to life. "O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and ...when I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may live. ..." (Ezek. 37:12-14). In doing so, the prophet foretold the resurrection of the dead. The Spirit of God, who is life, would be put in us and we shall breathe and live again. We are all adopted children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. It is a known fact that it is God who gives life. Read what happened in the Gospel. The Lord Jesus called forth Lazarus from the tomb and restored him to life. Recall the number of times the Lord Jesus raised the dead to life. What do those signs signify? One who is able to give back life to a dead person, can only be God himself, or God's instrument. God's promise in Ezekiel is being fulfilled in John's Gospel; and not only in the gospel, but to be realized in the lives of all believers because of our faith in Christ Jesus.

Belief in Jesus who gives New Life: As we contemplate on the raising of Lazarus from the dead, it is important to realize who were Mary, Martha and Lazarus in relation to the Lord Jesus. They were his friends with whom he ate and drank and visited their home in Bethany every so often. All four knew each other so well at the human level. Something remarkable happened in the responses of the two ladies in their dialogue with Jesus, which shows that they not only knew him in the flesh, they also believed that he is divine. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." (John 11:21-22). What a beautiful act of faith in Martha, also repeated by Mary in verse 32. This stand of theirs showed what they believed all along about Jesus, their family friend. The Lord's response, "Your brother will rise", (John 11:23), is also addressed to all of us, just as he addressed Martha today, regarding the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting. Yes, "Throughout the history of the world, God gives life." (2019 Pastoral Patterns, page 35). Therefore, since Jesus gives life, Jesus is God, the Second Person in the Blessed Trinity. God is Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We hear today from Martha and Mary, the Creed of our faith: "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." (John 11:27). It is very important for us not to miss the nuances in this episode of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, as well as in the past two weeks' scrutiny encounters. Take some time to discover what they are as you read the three Gospel narratives. They are among the hinges of our faith and practices. So many dialogues of great importance abound in the three narratives. To help you in your reflections, think of the interactions between Jesus and his disciples when they brought him the news that Lazarus was

ill. Why did Jesus choose to remain where he was for another two days before going back to Judea? There was no reason to hurry back. Jesus is in control of life and death. He had to build up the faith of his disciples with every incident, including the death of Lazarus, to prepare them for his passion and death.

New Life in the Spirit: “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ... You are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you.” (Rom. 8:8). To baptized candidates joining the Catholic Church from other denominations this season, catechumens for baptism, and all of us, we are no longer to remain in our old selves. We are being scrutinized in the three encounters this Lent. From this season of Lent, let us resolve to live in the Spirit, with the Spirit of God within us. This is a promise you can make to yourself. “The Spirit will enable you to listen with new ears, like the Samaritan woman at the well; see with new eyes, like the man born blind; and live with new life, like Lazarus. The Spirit will power your new life.” (2019 Pastoral Patterns, page 35). Notice that those who came to sympathize with Mary and Martha, and seeing what had happened, began to believe in Jesus. (cf. John 11:45). Like in the two previous Sunday Readings, conversion is the change of heart to believe in Jesus and become his disciple. Research on how the following lived the rest of their lives on account of Jesus among them: Lazarus, Martha, Mary, the man born blind, the Samaritan woman, Jairus’s daughter, all those Jesus healed, and their families and villagers, and the families of the Twelve Apostles. Those people became the first century Christians; some of whom became bishops, priests, nuns, Christian men and women, among whom were thrown into jail and martyred for the sake of the Kingdom of Christ Jesus. The three scrutiny encounters with Jesus are meant to strengthen the faith and belief of new comers to Christianity and reassure us who have believed for quite some time. How solid is your faith in Jesus?

In conclusion, just as Jesus called forth Lazarus from the tomb and restored him to life. In the same manner, the Lord will restore all of us to life because we believe in him. Notice that Jesus risked his own life by bringing life to his friend, Lazarus. Hence “the chief priests plotted to kill Lazarus too, because many of the Jews were turning away and believing in Jesus because him.” (John 12:10-11). On Calvary Jesus died an expiatory death on our behalf and was raised from the dead to justify us for life eternal. “If the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the One who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you.” (Rom. 8:11).