

In the Heartland

Dying and rising The Paschal Mystery

The Visitation Sisters in Minneapolis are fond of telling about a prison inmate who had committed a horrendous crime which incurred a life sentence without parole. He, as a result, had been ostracized and basically all had rejected him – family and friends. He was even an outcast among his fellow inmates. Self loathing and despair constituted his frame of mind.

The Visitation Sisters, who were located reasonably close to where this individual was incarcerated in Iowa, began visiting him. At first he was impenetrable. He existed for the most part in a catatonic state. But the Sisters persisted.

One day the prisoner responded with a faint smile and made contact with his eyes. It was months before he thawed in order to converse even minimally. The nuns were faithful and enormously patient. At first, short spurts of conversation occurred and eventually signs of humanity and longer conversations ensued.

The Sisters, in time, told this man about Jesus. This story had never registered with him before. He listened intently and as the story unfolded, he locked in on the Passion and Crucifixion. Through the power of the Spirit he began to realize that there was a message of love embedded in the dying of Jesus. And that love was for him. Contemplating this reality, the prisoner personally embraced this message. His despair and hopelessness began to recede.

Eventually, the inmate realized that there was someone who loved him, someone who cared deeply for him – someone who cared so deeply that he was willing to give his life for him. These realizations gave way to transforming moments, tears flowed, hardness of heart was unlocked as he connected with Jesus.

A particular talent which the prisoner had was that of wood carving. Inspired by newly found faith in the Christ, he carved a crucifix. In his work, he was able to capture the mystery of Christ's death. In the very dying of Jesus new life was coming forth. It was new life such as he experienced when he accepted salvation from God. His artistic insight captured the paschal mystery: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." *John 12:24*

The prisoner gave the crucifix to the Visitation Sisters in genuine gratitude for introducing to him the story of salvation – a story which released him from the depths of despair to liberating hope. The Sisters treasured the crucifix. It was the parting gift to a group of Sisters who left an established monastery to open a new house in a crime-ridden,

dangerous neighborhood in the inner city of Minneapolis. There the sisters in living the paschal mystery by dying to themselves to give life to others introduce hope to a neighborhood darkened with the shadows of crime and infested with narcotics and other debilitating drugs.

The crucifix was also the inspiration to the sculptor Robert Nicpon of Saint Paul. He fashioned an image of the dying Jesus who in that very moment was also emitting life. Dying and Rising. The Paschal Mystery. This corpus was placed on the platform where the altar is situated at Saint Ambrose of Woodbury Church in Woodbury, Minnesota. It invited all engaged in the sacrifice of Jesus, the sacrifice of the Mass, to become one with Him in dying and rising thus making present the paschal mystery of the Lord Jesus. The gift of the prisoner, his artistic insight, expressed in a crucifix continues to foster inspiration.

As we enter Holy week and especially as we celebrate the Triduum, the three days when we engage the paschal mystery – we focus intently on that reality – in slow motion – which has changed everything, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

It is my special prayer and earnest wish for all in the Diocese of Des Moines that you take the opportunity to slow down and engage yourselves in these precious days which commemorate the transforming action of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Hopefully we too might become more and more united with Jesus in dying and rising and joining in that process with him in generating new life.

A blessed and very happy Easter to all in our diocesan community.

Alleluia!