

April 7, 2007

Easter Vigil

The Lord is Risen – He is Risen indeed! The Lord is Risen, He is Risen indeed! Tonight, we proclaim with all of our hearts that Jesus Christ is not dead – but Christ is alive! And because He lives – we shall live! This is the most important night of all nights, because it is the proclamation that we are going to live forever, because Christ lived forever! And you know, we sit there as priests and religious and vow to pray these readings every day, and the readings are phenomenal readings and they are there to remind us what is most important in the Church, and today the reading for Holy Saturday, is a phenomenal reading. Now, this is a homily given in the early Church, you know, ancient homily which means it comes from the first 300 years of the Church. And this is what it says – just to remind us of what is happening tonight – I am going to read you part of it because it is phenomenal! This is what the homily says – and it is Jesus and He is going into hell, if you will, the place of the dead and it is there that He is going, and He is meeting Adam and Eve and all of the people who have died before Him. And so, He goes up to Adam and He says “I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and all of your descendants, I now by my own authority, command all who are held in bondage to come forth! All who are in darkness to be enlightened – all who are sleeping to arise! I order you, o sleeper, to awake! I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell!” Listen to that! “I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell! Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead! Rise up, work of my own hands – you who were created in my image! Rise! Let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you. Together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.” Isn’t that phenomenal when you meditate on this ancient homily in the Church and how the Church wants us to go back and meditate on this? This is what is taught from the beginning – that because He lives – the reason that He was born – the reason that He died – “I am -Who am your God have become your Son and now I redeem you.” And so what has to happen with all of us tonight and like these people that are going to be baptized tonight, huh? What a glorious thing! There are three things that are going to have to happen. They are going to have to believe and you are going to have to believe. They are going to have to die and you are going to have to die – and then they are going to live, and you and I are going to live. But first it comes to the thing of belief. And you know so often when people sit there and say “what’s so big about Easter...” And you know, a lot of people, nobody here, of course, but a lot of people just go to church at Christmas and Easter. Did you know that? Can you imagine? Because at least they have a sense that what is happening is important. It is the most important thing. But what you and I have to do is more than just a ritual thing – “here, I’m showing up – that’s all I need...” we have to believe it – right? Remember Paul says “if you believe in your heart that Christ rose from the dead, what will happen? You shall be saved. So the first question I ask all of you tonight – not just these people who are going to be baptized – but all of you – do you believe it? Not just do you sit there and think “oh, that’s nice, I hope it...” Hope it is an altogether different thing – do you believe it? Do you know deep in your heart that the most important thing is that Christ is alive? He rose and so shall we! We will live

forever! That's what we believe! But we really have to believe it! Just let me tell you something here for a second! If you are just showing up to church just because you have nothing better to do, it's not enough! You can't just be a good person and think you are going to go to heaven – "I can be a good person..." Show me in the bible – show me in any religion where all you need to go to heaven is to be a good person - nowhere, it doesn't exist. What we believe more than anything else is you must believe it! And if you believe it – the only way you can prove that you believe it is by dying. Did you listen to that second reading today? Or no, the epistle today – did you listen to the epistle today? He says "we have died with Christ. You must consider yourselves dead to sin." And the real death that it comes to – the very first words out of Jesus Christ's publicly was what? Repent! Now again, people don't want to hear that. They want to listen to the Joel Olsteens of the world that sit there and tickle your ears and say "God loves ya just as you are...just loves, loves, loves – because He loves you! And you just try to be a good person – its all fine!" You and I have to believe it – and this belief has to cost you your life, or it is nothing! It means nothing if you say I believe it. Do you know what? Satan believes that Christ rose from the dead. Whoa...its not enough! This belief has to cost you your life. This belief tonight will cost at least five people their life. That's what baptism is, huh? And it used to be in the early church – if we had one of those type churches, but we don't. What happened is – the baptism font was at least five feet deep – huh – maybe even six, and there were steps down one side, and steps coming out of the other side. It was designed to look like a tomb – on purpose. So, what would happen is you would walk in – your old self – and you would go in there and then the minister would come, and you are all naked – that is why they had Deaconesses that would do the women – and as they would sit there – they would plunge you under the water – "in the name of the Father..." and they pull you up. And they would plunge you again – "in the name of the Father..." and pulled you up again. And then they plunged you a third time – "in the name of the Father..." and then they pulled you up again. And then you walked out the other side – never the same side that you came in – because you died. And then you walk out the other side and you are clothed in a white garment, to show that what has happened now is that you have left an old life. Your belief now has caused you to die, and now your belief is causing you to live forever with Christ. But there had to be a real letting go of an old life. And so for us – what God is calling us to is those of us who have already been baptized – the reason we go through Lent before Easter is so that we can die – 40 days of dying. 40 days of denying ourselves what we like. 40 days of denying what I want to do with my life – from what I like so that I can die with Jesus – so that I can live with Jesus. You can't live with Jesus unless you die with Him. So your belief must cost you your life. Do you know what happens? This is why it is the ultimate act of faith. "Would you die for me..." He says to you and me. And if you are not willing to die...and you know, again, I had used to have this kid when I worked for Fr. Peterson, who was a male prostitute – drug addict – had a \$500 a day habit – cocaine – this was 20 years ago. And so, here he is – he is 17 and he used to sell himself to men, women, everybody. And he would sit there and he said to me once, this was before I was ordained, and he says "Larry, I love Jesus so much, I would die for Him." And I said "so and so, God doesn't want you to die to Him explicitly, He wants you to stop having sex with everybody." "Oh, I couldn't do that..." You see? But a lot of us are like that. "Oh, yea I would die for Jesus! Oh, let me die for Jesus." Ok, what He wants you to do first to prove that you will

die for Him is to die to that sin that you keep clinging to every day. Die to that, and then He will give you a new life. “Well, uh, I don’t want to die to that...” Then you can’t live. You see? It has to cost you everything to love Jesus. Why? Because it cost Jesus everything to love you. Tonight, all of you who are here – not just these candidates – are you willing to die for Jesus? If not, what are you doing here? Why are you here for this three hour long Mass? Why are you here? “Well, I had to come, someone I know is getting baptized, so I had to do it, you know, I don’t particularly like it.” Well, what a waste of three hours, huh? Or, you can sit here tonight with the rest of us and say “yes Lord, I believe that you are not dead – that you are alive! And I am willing, Jesus, for the rest of my life to die to myself so that I can live forever.” You know, when I do these Parish Missions, the very first day I get out there and I try to get people to come to the Mission. And people sit there and say I make them feel guilty. Me? And what I do is I will sit there and talk about when I was at Prep. And when they were State Champions and I will say “gentleman, what are you going to do?” Be State Champions, Father!” And I go “whoa...what are you going to do to prove to me that you are going to be State Champions, gentleman?” Do you know what they did and they still do to this day? They practice 4 hours a day – can you imagine? Four hours a miserable day – throwing a football, kicking a soccer ball, swimmers used to get up at 4 AM to get to that pool! And they did it – just to win a State Championship! Now if I ask the same question – “gentlemen, what are you going to do to be State Champions...” and they had said to me “well, we are going to go to practice when we feel like it, when it is not a nice day and we have nothing better to do, for 45 minutes to an hour, depending on who the coach is, and we are going to have good thoughts about the game...” I’d say “wrong answer, gentlemen, you are never going to be a State Champion!” Now, the same people – the same kids – I’d sit there and say “gentlemen, do you want to go to heaven – do you want to live forever?!?” “Yes, Father!” “Whoa! What are you doing to prove to me that you want to live forever?” Do you know what they’d say to me? “Well, we go to church when we feel like it, depending on who the priest is and I try to be a good person.” “Sorry, wrong answer gentlemen!” Do you think that God is Barney? I love you, you love me... Do you think really think that God is Barney? And God says “you know what, to win a State Championship, to make money, to be healthy...to win a State Championship, you have to work four hours a day; to make money 40, 80, or 60 hours a week; to be healthy, you are going to have to work out every day to get those ripples in your stomach. But to go to heaven, the greatest of all goals and gifts – uh, don’t get mad at me, but could you try to go to church on Sunday and could you try to be a good person?” Do you think God is a fool? I’m here to tell you – God isn’t a fool. He believes in what He believes so much that He died for us. This faith that we take for granted oh so often, cost Jesus Christ His life, and the only way for us to enter into life with Him is to die. So, will you die tonight? Will you walk out of this place all together different than when you walked in? I will give everybody here a chance to renew your commitment or to commit your life to Jesus Christ forever tonight. You – everyone here – can walk out as new as these newly baptized people. If in a bit, you kneel down with me and leave your old life go – let Christ come in – make an act of faith – believe in Him and let Him come live in you. If you and I do this tonight – just as Christ lives forever – we will live forever. But it is all up to us. It is our decision. Got it? Get it? Gonna do it? You better! May each of you know His love today and forever. Amen.