

The Gift of His Presence

If the tulips in your yard are not yet blooming, they surely are in full color in your local grocery store. Our church altars are beautiful with fresh linens and spring flowers decorated for Easter and for joyful Baptism, First Eucharist and Confirmation celebrations—life feels light and airy.

The newness of spring and the joy of Easter is one reality. Simultaneous shootings on our city's south side, the subway death of a mentally ill man, the mall shooting and death of eight shoppers, and the violence in Ukraine, the Sudan, and other parts of the world is another reality. How can we live with such contradictions?

In the first reading for this Sixth Sunday of Easter, we learn that in Samaria and Jerusalem the church is growing. With its growth, there is “great joy.” (Acts 8:8) Wherever the apostles travel, they are empowered to offer the crowds the miraculous cures of the Risen Lord, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and, with the laying on of hands, reception of the Holy Spirit.

The reading from 1 Peter urges early Christians and us to “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.” (3:15) and always to know the presence of Christ who “Put to death in the flesh...was brought to life in the Spirit.” (3:18) Over and against the violence, discord, and pain of the world of 2023, reigns the Risen Christ and the power of his Advocate, the Spirit of Truth.

In the light of Jesus' physical departure, over 2000 years ago, what does it mean today to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, to “sanctify” him in our hearts, to be animated with his Spirit, and to effectively confront evil? The Gospel of John for this Sunday reminds us that we have not “lost” Jesus. In fact, Jesus will not leave us orphans. (John 14:18)

Those who hear the proclamations of Easter, who believe in Jesus Christ, who love him, and keep his commandments, will experience a new era, not of absence, but of gifts. Father J. Moloney, SBD, in his *Gospel of John*, (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1998) states Jesus' physical absence is overcome by his gift of his *living* presence which continues in and through the Holy Spirit and in the worshipping community especially through the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation (page 403).

All the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the graces of the sacramental life of the Church are possible for disciples who love Jesus and who, in loving him, are loved by his Father. Followers of Jesus have the power to recognize the evils of our world today and to confront them according to their personal gifts and opportunities. In reflecting on today's scriptures, can we accept Jesus' gift of a loving Advocate and commit to making a difference today in a world so in need of the presence of Jesus Christ?

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