

5th Sunday of Easter B - Mass to Honor Benefactors Who Helped Restore the Stations of the Cross

Introduction

This Cathedral Basilica has stood the test of time. Beginning in 1806 its roots were planted deeply here in Mt. Vernon. Gradually its simple yet majestic design began to take shape until it was finally completed in 1821. Since then it has continuously served as a thriving Cathedral parish, as a symbol of religious freedom, and as a site rich in American Catholic history.

Nearly ten years ago the Basilica was restored by Cardinal Keeler to reflect more clearly the genius of its architect, Benjamin Latrobe. Following the earthquake of 2011, the Basilica was restored yet again, but this time with some steel in it, to ensure that this venerable structure would be sturdy for years to come.

Once that restoration was completed, Msgr. Valenzano pointed out that the Stations of the Cross - paintings that go back to the early history of this Basilica - remained unrestored. In this otherwise bright and beautiful house of worship, the Stations remained dark, drab, even dreary. So with the heart of a pastor Monsignor found donors who made it possible for these scenes from our Lord's passion and death to be restored. Now they are bright and colorful as the original artist intended them to be. And I would like publicly to express my deepest gratitude to the artists who restored these Stations and to the donors who made this restoration possible.

The Obscured Image of the Crucified

During this momentous week just past, I've been thinking and praying about the

restoration of the Stations of the Cross here in the Basilica. The thought came to me that over time these images of Jesus' saving love were covered over by years of dirt and grime. Some of it came from the old coal furnaces that used to heat our homes and businesses here in Baltimore. Some of it came from the soot of burning candles here in church, and some from the dust and dirt that gets stirred up on busy urban streets. As these paintings became increasingly obscured, no one did anything about it. Indeed our forebears may have concluded that the Stations always 'looked that way'... and, for a long while they were replaced by woodcuts until Cardinal Keeler rescued and rehung them, hoping for the day when these paintings could be restored to their original splendor.

As unrest spread through the City last Monday night, I thought about how the Stations had deteriorated over time. In many ways the dirt and grime that clung to them was a symbol of injustice and indifference toward various parts of our city that are chronically violent and crime-ridden, where jobs, good education, and good housing are in short supply, where families are in disarray, and hope seems to have vanished. Perhaps we thought it had always been that way. Perhaps we thought it best simply to leave those neighborhoods to themselves. In doing so we have all obscured the image of Christ who suffered and died for us.

Then I thought about the artistry of those who restored these Stations. With delicate precision they removed layer after layer that gradually accumulated on these images of Christ. The restorers did nothing rash or aggressive but patiently pruned away all that was covering up the image of that saving journey of Jesus which brought him to the hill of Calvary, out of love for us. Indeed they were like surgeons taking away the accretions of time while being careful not to cut into the substance of these portraits. Their goal was to bring out the original beauty with which they had been created.

The artistry of the restorers opened up for me a part of today's Gospel where Jesus

speaks of our heavenly Father as the Vinedresser. The care with which they removed the film covering the Stations of the Cross helps us see how carefully and lovingly God prunes our souls. The Father of mercy delicately prunes the branches so that they will be preserved, remain strongly connected to the Vine, i.e., to His Son, and so bear much fruit. So then I realized how our God and Father wants to prune our hearts - so as to remove from them everything that obscures in us the image of Christ who suffered with us and for us - for the sake of our redemption. With patience he seeks to peel away all traces of hatred, mistrust, and prejudice so that our connection to Christ might be strong, so that in our wounded community we might be bright and loving images of the Christ who loves us more than we could ever ask or imagine.

The Pruning of Paul

Yet, in wrestling with these comparisons, I wasn't satisfied. It all seemed a bit too abstract, too much of a flight of fancy ... that is, until I finally paid attention to St. Paul's experience in our first reading. As you recall, St. Paul no wallflower; in fact, he was a pretty brash figure. Before his conversion, he persecuted Christians - and he was good at it. After his conversion, that is, after he met Christ on the Road to Damascus, Paul was a thoroughgoing disciple of the Lord Jesus but he was also a strident and argumentative man. It seems he spent more time winning arguments than preaching the Gospel. The disciples of the Lord were still afraid of him and he made the Greek-speaking Jews so mad, they wanted to kill him.

For that reason, Barnabas was put in charge of Paul and he was sent back to his hometown of Tarsus for prayer and reflection. It's almost as if they sent Paul back to Tarsus for restoration. During that time, God pruned the heart of Paul. God carefully removed layers of anger and self-will. while preserving Paul's genius, energy, enthusiasm, and personality. The Father took care not to cut into the image of His Son, Jesus, implanted in Paul's soul by baptism. And Paul emerged from that

experience a changed man - still forceful - yet better able to present the image of Christ-crucified to people far and wide.

During these past days, we have heard many people speak out in ways that are eminently reasonable and constructive. We have heard people respectfully voice their concerns, even their anger, and we have heard those concerns expressed in a variety of styles. Yet things were also said in a brash, argumentative, and even incendiary ways; this got in the way of peaceful protest and constructive dialogue. When I saw this I was by turns uncomfortable and upset until I recognized that there have been times, in public and private, when I too have spoken in ways that are brash and argumentative... Not unlike St. Paul, I also stand in need of restoration.

Perhaps that's what we should all pray for this afternoon when these Stations, these images of Christ crucified, shed their light upon us. Let us pray that the Lord will work his restorative artistry upon our souls, pruning not just our outward behavior but even our inmost thoughts and attitudes... so that we might be formed in the image of the Word made flesh who took upon himself the sum total of our sins and vulnerability - the Son of Man who suffered with us and for us. When that image penetrates and shapes our hearts and shines brightly not only in our words but in our deeds, then we are fit partners to work with many in our community in building bridges of repentance, reconciliation, and trust.

Conclusion

Pruned, restored, and filled with life and light of Christ Jesus may our lives bear the good fruit of wisdom and charity for our families, our neighborhoods, our Church and our City. May God bless us and keep us always in his love.