

## GOOD FRIDAY, Apr. 19, 2019, Year C

- As soon as I heard the news on Monday, like everyone else I went to the internet. The live video of the flames rising up from the roof of Notre Dame in Paris was deeply disturbing. Like so many others, *I felt an immediate grief. How touching that we would feel a sense of our being wounded when hearing about and seeing the wounding of a great and beautiful building. And it is no accident that we should have felt this way.*
- For like so many other medieval cathedrals, *Notre Dame de Paris is so much more than a building. It is first an offering of great love for our Lord and his physical, earthly mother.<sup>1</sup> It is also an embodiment of faith, a tangible expression of the Body of Christ.* This is particularly evident in the way that its floor plan is shaped in homage to his crucified Body. The cathedral therefore represents an 'incarnation' of what the book of Revelation calls the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.<sup>2</sup> For he is the One through whom all things were made, and the One through whom all things will come to their End... whether their End be their termination, or their fulfillment and completion.<sup>3</sup>
- Believers through the centuries who worship the Incarnate Lord have something in common. It is both true of his followers at the time of his crucifixion, two thousand years ago, and of us today in this liturgy. *As believers, we are never ambivalent about harm brought to the Lord's Body, and to living symbols of his Body – both harm to the structures in which we worship, and harm to the living temples formed by us, his embodied members.*
- For the Lord, for his followers, and for all members of his Body, *death is always a gateway to new life.* And, for the cathedral of Notre Dame, *death* to one phase in the life of this magnificent building will surely become a gateway to a *new life ~ both for it, and for her people.*

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- It is precisely *with this awareness*, I believe, that Peter Koenig has painted, and offered for *our spiritual edification*, his glorious image of Jesus as a Second Moses.<sup>4</sup> *Peter Koenig's vision is that of the original builders of Notre Dame*, the same mystical vision permeating John's Gospel and John's understanding of Jesus' Incarnation, life, death and resurrection. We will reflect on Koenig's fine painting today, and explore it further on Sunday morning.
- Here, we should notice this: *The body that the Son of God embraced, and with which he became one, has become the Body we have embraced, and with which we have become one.* The Body of *his* transformation has become the Body of *our own* transformation. His death was a critical 'hinge point' in *his and our process of transformation*. And so, this liturgy that is ostensibly focused on the *death* of Jesus, is also profoundly about the *renewed lives* of others.
- In this respect, we must be clear about a simple truth. We remember Jesus' death *not because of* our sense of the *loss* of his presence. *From the Gospels, we do know how the disciples felt deprived by his death.* But whereas they *did not have* the benefit of hindsight, we do. *But we also have Jesus-shaped foresight.* In plain terms, *he prepared us not only for his death; he prepared us for our new life in him, new life that would come through his death.*
- Looking at Koenig's *Jesus as a Second Moses*, we *at first* observe several motifs, at least one which may direct our thoughts toward Easter. Notice the *pastel colors* at the top and bottom. These probably remind us of the colors we find on *Easter cards and eggs, and other springtime decorations.* *Yet, we should stop and remember how these are the colors of the rainbow. And what in Scripture did a rainbow first represent?* In the mythic imagery of Genesis, it came after a *forty day deluge* that brought massive *death* and

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*destruction*. According to the story, most of what was then *'life on earth'* was destroyed and lost, both people, animals as well as plants. **Noah and his family, and all the animals on the ark, traveled through the waters of death into a new covenant life with God.** But that death, however extensive, however *gruesome* and *abhorrent*, was not final; *it would never be the last word*. **God's Word is a word of promise, of covenant.** Where we aim for good but tend for bad, **God always** aims for and achieves **good**.

- This may prepare us to acknowledge **how our own status** is depicted in Koenig's painting. For we are represented by those shown standing in the purple shadows, behind the *'Christ as Moses'* figure. **We are people who live and walk in darkness until we meet the true light. This is the Light that comes into the world to enlighten everyone.**<sup>5</sup> We were trapped by death and darkness *until* we were freed by his death. And we were grafted into his death, and then his resurrection, through Baptism.
- A prominent theme in Koenig's painting is one we find in Eastern Orthodox icons. It is often called *'the harrowing of hell.'* In more familiar language, we refer *–in the Apostles' Creed–* to how *"he descended to the dead."* In both western religious paintings of the crucifixion, we find the idea depicted by **a skull placed at the foot of the cross**. Adam and Eve, and all who came after suffering the consequences of our primordial Fall from Grace, are **freed from sin and death by his sinless death**. And, in Christian belief, after his death and burial, **he descended to be among the departed in order to free them** ~ to free them so that they could rise with him to a new life of Grace.
- Through his *death*, we have come into the fullness of **Life**. Through his descent into *darkness*, we have been lifted up into the true **Light**. And through his *sinless self-offering*, we have been freed from **the power of sin**. As a result, we can now experience both his peace, as well as his joy.

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- At the beginning of Lent, we reminded ourselves of a practical truth. **Our journey toward knowing the fire of the Holy Spirit more truly begins with physical ashes.**<sup>6</sup> A sign of death and destruction like ashes or the Holy Cross can help us see new life beyond it. May we, *like our brothers and sisters in Paris*, always remember this.



Peter Koenig, Jesus as a Second Moses

*'Through the waters of death into a new covenant life with God.'*

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The readings appointed for this day are:

- Isaiah 52:13–53:12
- Psalm 22
- Hebrews 10:16-25; or 4:14-16; 5:7-9
- [John 18:1–19:42](#) (the Passion Gospel, which is traditionally read in parts)

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, like its sister cathedral Notre Dame de Chartres and so many other cathedrals, is dedicated to the honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

<sup>2</sup> See Revelation 1:8; 21:6; and 22:13.

<sup>3</sup> See Colossians 1:15-20. For a fuller exploration of some of these ideas, see Philip Ball's book, *Universe of Stone: A Biography of Chartres Cathedral*, as well as M.D. Chenu's book, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*.

<sup>4</sup> "Double entendre" is implied here in my use of the variant of the word 'edifice,' *building* upon Paul's employment of the metaphor of being 'built up' in Christ.

<sup>5</sup> See John 1:9 in context.

<sup>6</sup> In the liturgy on the day we call 'Ash Wednesday.'