

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
EASTER VIGIL
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, D.C.
APRIL 16, 2022

My dear friends in Christ, this evening we celebrate the greatest feast of victory in history. We celebrate the ultimate conquest of evil, the triumph of love, the reason for our hope, and the definitive statement that God does not leave us in darkness and fear. He is victorious over sin and death! He is alive! He is Risen!

To all present in this National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and to those who are spiritually united with us through the Eternal Word Television Network, especially those who are homebound or alone, may the peace of the Risen Lord be with you! As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's personal representative to the United States, I wish to express his spiritual closeness and his affection for you as precious members of the flock.

We began this sacred liturgy with the blessing of the Easter fire and the chanting of the *Exsultet*, which is marked by a striking, a jarring phrase: *O Happy Fault (O felix culpa)*. How can the words "happy" and "fault" be juxtaposed? To propose an answer, we must look at things from God's point of view, as best as we are able. Our Old Testament readings began with the creation story, and God saw all that He had made and declared it "good", and, with the creation of man and woman, He declared His creation "very good."

The sin of our first parents had dire consequences for all of humanity. How could it be called happy? After all, God's perfect plan of creation was now marred. It is as if someone had randomly thrown paint on a masterpiece. What would be a suitable remedy? Imagine you had a priceless vase from the Ming Dynasty, and someone dropped it. Perhaps, with the help of some experts it could be restored, but it will never be perfectly whole again. Again, imagine if you had a friend who told you something very important in confidence, and then you told someone else and it damaged the person's reputation. Could you ever undo the damage done? It seems impossible.

On the surface, the sin of Adam seemed to have done irreparable harm to humanity, yet God, the Divine Artist, undertook the task of finding a remedy for the sin to restore the beauty of His creation, but He did so in a way that took into account both our human nature and the nature of the fault, which was not so happy. The story of salvation history, which we heard in the Old Testament readings, speak to the drama of this restoration – a restoration which involved all the drama of a love story.

Although we did not hear the story of the Great Flood, with Noah, God began his plan of restoration, which continued in earnest with the Abraham, who God asked, in a seemingly incomprehensible way, to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Why would God ask this of him? He wanted to measure how far Abraham was ready to go in faith and in trust. Abraham believed, against, every hope or logic, that God would provide.

Abraham believed even when he did not understand perfectly, and this is part of the love story between God and humanity. Abraham loved God so much that he was willing to sacrifice his only son, and God blessed Abraham saying: *“Because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore.”* (Gen 22:16)

The love story between God and humanity continued during the Exodus from Egypt. God heard the cries of his own people who were sorely oppressed and we heard of his wonderful liberation of them through the strong hand of Moses and their crossing of the Red Sea. The canticle which followed their deliverance contains this verse: *My strength and my courage is the Lord, and He has been my savior. He is my God, I praise Him; the God of my father, I extol him.* (Ex 15:2)

God showed His love for His people, not only in delivering them, but in choosing them to be His own. He would be faithful to them and would work with them in bringing about his plan of salvation, even if their relationship, at times, would be strained. What we discover through the readings is that God is never far from His people; salvation history sheds light on our present situation: God is not far away. He acts so that we may be conscious of our evil and may ask Him to deliver us. The mystery of love is also the mystery of salvation. God intervenes in the life of those whom He loves, giving Himself, and leading them to victory and freedom.

The sin of Adam – that fault – prompted an act of love, an act of infinite mercy in the sending of our Redeemer, who was prophesied through Abraham to Moses to King David and to all the prophets. In history, this Redeemer would be born in the flesh of the Virgin Mary, would be crucified under Pontius Pilate, would die and be buried, and would rise again, a triumph which we again proclaim this holy night.

Despite the refusal of His love by so many, His love became an unstoppable force. Having passed through the infamy of the Cross and the coldness of the tomb, He descended among the dead to bring His love even there, and the love story found its happy ending on that joyous Easter morning. He appeared in His Risen and glorified Flesh and offered His disciples the gift of peace. This is why we can cry out, *“O Happy Fault!”* This fault demanded a masterful plan on the part of God.

Augustine’s great teacher, Saint Ambrose declared: *“The Lord knew that Adam would fall and then be redeemed by Christ... Happy ruin, which has such a beautiful reparation!”* (Commentary on Psalm 39, 20). Elsewhere Ambrose wrote, *“We who have sinned more have gained more, because your grace [of mercy, Lord] makes us more blessed than our absence of fault does”* (Commentary on Ps 37, 47). *O truly necessary sin of Adam, destroyed completely by the death of Christ! O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!*

Yes, God’s covenantal love appears throughout the history; there is an unbreakable bond between God and humanity. In the Risen Lord, our glorious Redeemer, the Father gives us the gift of His love and the gift of rising from our sins and the bonds of death to new life and further – to eternal life.

Yes, this is the night to proclaim to the whole world: He is Risen! He is truly Risen! Alleluia!