

**Homily for Holy Saturday Mass of the Easter Vigil
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

April 16, 2022

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Reverend Fathers, Deacons, and Consecrated Religious; beloved Elect entering into the Paschal mystery through Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist; and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Every year for the past thirty years or so, I have been taking a Winter vacation to Florida with three or four fellow priests. It is a very low-key vacation: rest, relaxation, reading, running, swimming, cooking dinner, and watching a movie. One of those Winter vacations turned out to be a special feature film fest: we watched all six episodes of the Star Wars films, one on each night of the week.

If you are familiar with these films, you know that the first Star Wars movie that came out in 1977 was actually the fourth episode in the story. It was followed by episodes five and six. Some years later, the first three episodes were made into what they called “prequels.” Before going on this vacation, I had over the years seen all six episodes, but I saw them in the

order that they came out, so more than two decades intervened between seeing Star Wars IV in 1977 and Star Wars I in 1999, making it difficult to recall all the details and make the connections between the movies.

On our vacation, we decided to watch all six movies, not in the order in which they were made and released, but in order of the story line, from episodes one through six. When seen in this way, the main focus and the continuity of the story line become clear, so much so that I would give an overall name to the six-part story as, "The Fall and Redemption and Anakin Skywalker." Let me explain.

Episode one starts out with young Anakin Skywalker as a young boy with exceptional gifts and talents, such that the Jedi Knights speculate as whether young Anakin might be the Chosen One foretold by prophecy to bring balance to the Force, although they have their doubts. Jedi Master Yoda senses great fear in the boy, and tells him, "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." These fears are realized in episodes two and three which chronicle Anakin Skywalker's descent to the Dark Side in which he eventually takes on the persona of Darth Vader. In the process, however, Anakin Skywalker fathers a set of twins, named Luke and Leia. Their mother dies in giving

birth, and the twins are separated and sent far away from their father, who sinks deeper and deeper into the evil of the Dark Side, ruthlessly killing countless numbers of innocent people without remorse.

The final episode culminates in an encounter between Darth Vader, his son Luke, and the evil Emperor. The Emperor goads Luke to kill Darth Vader and take his place; Luke then realizes he is perilously close to suffering his father's fate, casts his lightsaber aside, and proclaims his allegiance to the Jedi. Luke refuses to give up on his father and tries to coax him back from the Dark Side, saying, "I see the good in you." This enrages the Emperor, who attacks Luke with Force lightning. Unable to bear the sight of his son's suffering any longer, Vader grasps the Emperor and casts him down a reactor shaft to his death, but is mortally wounded by the Emperor's lightning attack. The redeemed Anakin Skywalker asks Luke to remove his mask, and tells his son before dying that there is good in him after all, finally at peace. All told, the Star Wars saga is a very Catholic story!

My friends, we are here tonight because God sees good in us. As we listened to the story of creation as recounted in the first reading that we heard tonight from the book of Genesis, we heard how God paused after

the various stages of creation and reflected on what He had created. Each time the narrator says, "God saw how good it was." When He finished His work of creation, we are told, "God looked at everything He had made, and He found it very good."

We know, of course, that the Book of Genesis will later tell of the sin of Adam and Eve and how God punished them for their disobedience to His command, yet this does not change the basic view that God has for His creation. Our Catholic view of human nature flows from this. We do not see people as inherently evil, because God did not create us to be inherently evil. Our nature is inherently good because that is how God made us. But He also gave us a free will, to choose between good and evil, right and wrong. So Catholic theology sees human beings as good, but fallen; not evil, but sinful, and the fall of people into sin calls for redemption.

Since Thursday night we have been celebrating the Passover of the Lord. Jesus passed over from this world to the Father by dying on the cross. His body was buried, but on the third day He rose from the dead. He has changed the course of history. We who are doomed to die can die with Him and rise with Him. We start the process at our baptism. We live our

lives dying daily to self and living a life of sacrifice—being “dead to sin and alive for God in Christ Jesus.” We hope one day to die in the Lord and live forever in heaven.

Our Easter Vigil began in darkness but soon celebrated the triumph of the light, the light God created on the first day and which now shines through the risen Christ. In his light we read in Exodus of God leading Israel out of the prison of slavery. Israel’s journey through the Red Sea is a symbol of the Passover of Jesus from death to life, and our deliverance from slavery to sin into freedom in grace through the waters of baptism.

Our passage tonight from the Gospel of Saint Luke (24:1-12) tells how Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women had come with Jesus from Galilee. After His death, when they went to the tomb, they found the stone rolled away, but did not find the body of Jesus. We are told that two men in dazzling clothes said to them, “He is not here. He has been raised. Remember what he said to you while you were still in Galilee: that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day.” Then the women remember, that is, they comprehend that Jesus’ prediction has been completely fulfilled. They proceed to tell the apostles and all the others: Jesus is alive!

In a few minutes, we are about to witness the sacramental death and resurrection of a young person named Lydia Barnett, who heard God's call and enrolled in the RCIA—the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. She has been praying and discerning, and we have been praying with her and for her. The waters of baptism are a sign that she will have died to sin by the power of God's grace as well as a sign that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and make her a child of God. Then she will be anointed with the sacred chrism, the holy oil that signifies the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and will receive her First Holy Communion to complete her initiation into the Church. This is a great blessing for Lydia in her young life!

Think for a moment about some of the greatest blessings that you have received in life. Although we may first think of God as giving us health, family, and prosperity, the greatest blessing is our spiritual adoption as sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ. The various Scripture passages we heard tonight remind us of a history in which God continually blesses us—and yet the newness of life that began with our Baptism is the best blessing of all!

Paul invites us to recall the most important moment in our lives, the day we were baptized: "Are you unaware that we who were baptized in

Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him through Baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by glory of the Father, we, too, might live in newness of life" (Rom 6:3-4.)

On this holiest of nights, we gather with the entire Church, and pray for those who are about to be baptized throughout our diocese. We stand apart from the world and enter the quiet of Christ's presence to reaffirm publicly our belief, our faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the hope that this mystery brings of new life for ourselves and for the whole world!

May God give us this grace. Amen.