

“Awake, O Sleeper”



L'Ascension (Detail) by Gustave Doré

“Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.” Here are the words of Jesus Christ taken from an ancient homily, back in the very beginnings of the Church, given to Christians on Holy Saturday morning as they observed the Sacred Triduum. According to this tradition, on Holy Saturday Our Lord descended into Sheol, the abode of the dead where all the righteous of the Old Testament awaited their redemption. Because of the sin of our first parents, the gates of Heaven were closed to all. When they experienced death, they were sent to Sheol (think of a waiting room at the doctor’s or dentist’s office). Adam and Eve were there, so was Abraham, King David, the Prophet Elijah, and St. John the Baptist. But now the debt of sin had been paid by Christ’s death on the Cross, so Our Lord spoke these words to Adam and Eve, took them by the hand, and led the triumphal procession into Heaven. They were now new creatures, redeemed by Christ’s Blood.

During the Easter season, the Church traditionally reflects on the Sacraments of Initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist, for that was the time when many were received into the Church. We can take this opportunity to reflect on our own Baptism and its implications. We were baptized, yes, but what does that mean in our lives? The lives of the early Christians living in the Roman Empire can be a great example to us. True, they had to live their baptism with the threat of persecution always looming over their heads, but the similarity between then and now is otherwise remarkably the same. To be a baptized disciple of Jesus Christ and to LIVE that baptism means that you will have to pay a price. So what did baptism in the Church’s first three centuries mean?

In ancient Rome, to become a follower of Jesus was a radical decision. It could mean incurring disapproval or outright rejection from friends and family. It could entail close fellowship with people one would have previ-

ously shunned: the wealthy with slaves, the devout with the formerly decadent, Jewish nationalists with Roman soldiers. For the educated it could mean enduring the ridicule of former colleagues for the absurdity of following a carpenter from a backwater village who had suffered the most ignominious form of capital punishment. And, for many, their Christian faith would result in imprisonment, torture and death in the brutality of the Roman arena.

Read the above slowly to yourself. Am I willing to endure the modern day version of the above because of my baptism? The Roman arena part may be missing from most of the Western world but it's a reality in many parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. So what characterized the living out of Christian baptism back then?

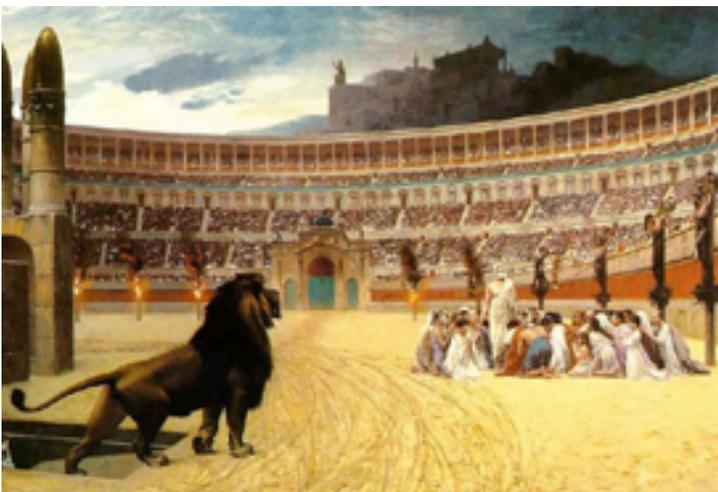
First, these Christians saw the Gospel into which they had been baptized as the TRUTH, not as one "spirituality" among many other "valid spiritualities;" And they insisted on it. There is a Romantic view of the primitive Church which claims that the early Christians lived in a state of "charismatic democracy", innocent of dogmatic differences, and treating dogma as "an authoritarian and paternalistic way of dealing with people that lays down the law and pretends to have all the answers." In reality, the Church fixed the canon of the New Testament with the four authentic Gospels and the teachings of the Apostles, and turned its back on the pleas of the intelligentsia to keep itself abreast of evolving second-century thought. Instead of "dialogue" there was evangelization: "Go out and make disciples of ALL nations. BAPTIZING them in the name of the

Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age (Matt 28:19-20, emphasis added). As baptized Christians, these were their marching orders. Because of their baptism, they knew that they were radically joined to the person of Christ and He would give them the graces necessary to be faithful. Anyone who rejected any one of these teachings was considered outside the Church.

Why were these Christians so strict about dogma? Because they saw it as God's Revelation and not the product of "concrete lived experience." This helped them to endure the persecutions that would follow. Together with their doctrinal immobilism, another mark of the early Christians was their resistance to the moral ethos of their time. Ancient Rome was pretty loose as far as morals went. Divorce was easy to obtain, contraception and infanticide were common. Many forms of contraception existed, as did the practice of leaving "unwanted" babies out in the countryside, exposed to the elements and to wild beasts. Christians would often take these babies and care for them, remembering Christ's injunction, "as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me." (Matt 25:40). Fornication and homosexuality and all the elements of today's "Sexual Revolution" were also in place back then.

Remember also that the Christians were a distinct minority; common sense would dictate that they "lay low" and not make a fuss about these things: "Let's go along to get along." Instead, they knew that they were locked in mortal combat with what was of the Devil. They did not parley with it, they did not create committees to seek "common ground" with the pagan religions of Rome and the Mystery cults of the East, they did not see "some elements of the truth in them," but, rather, the falsehood of the Evil One. They considered it as poison and the "Way of Death" to a baptized Christian. In the Didache, which dates from around 90 A.D. (a work every Christian should read), a "Way of Life" and a "Way of Death" is spelled out, and what the Christian was supposed to choose made very clear. For them two plus two equaled four, not five. They insisted on it.

In receiving the Sacrament of Baptism, every candi-



The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer by Jean-Léon Gérôme

date for baptism declared his renunciation of the world. His repudiation, that is, of contemporary paganism and its self-pleasing standards. A Christian who fell from the strict morality to which he pledged himself/herself by his/her baptism could be reconciled after strict penance, often performed publicly. Indeed, our Sacrament of Penance today is quite tame compared to it at that time.

If anything, these early Christians did that which our “modern” culture abhors and which so exasperates the “pastoral approach” crowd today: they **STOOD STILL**. These Christians did not move a step to meet the pagan, Roman world halfway, and so in the fullness of time, found the world moving to them. This is how these early Christians lived out their baptism, how they

adhered to the teaching laid down in the first days of their faith. “Religion clean and undefiled is ... to keep oneself unspotted from this world” (Jas 1:27), and “Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them ... redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Eph 5:11,16). Remember also that many could have saved their lives by putting that pinch of incense in before the idol. They could have done it “under protest” or “strongly disagreeing” with it. Some did. Most did not and died martyrs. As Tertullian wrote, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” That conquered Rome. May we live out our baptism in this spirit. Our Lord is calling out to us: “Awake, O Sleeper.” ❖