

# **50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Homily at Prayer Service)**

**Most Reverend John O. Barres**

**St. Agnes Cathedral, Diocese of Rockville Centre**

**April 4, 2018**

At Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina, there is a unique baptismal font in the chapel. Before the Civil War there was a block of stone on what later became the Abbey property. It was called the “Slave Stone” because slaves being sold at auction were made to stand on that stone so that potential buyers could see them.

Imprinted in the Slave Stone was the emotional memory of the coarse cruelty of the slavery and the anguish and trauma of slave families being separated and further stripped of their human dignity. The Slave Stone carried some of the emotional imprint of the stones of Calvary itself.

Years later the Benedictines purchased the land, discovered the history of the Slave Stone, and made an inspired connection between Catholic Sacramental Theology and Catholic Social Justice Teaching.

The Stone was turned and refashioned into a baptismal font. A plaque was placed on this baptismal font that is there to this day. It reads: “UPON THIS ROCK, MEN ONCE WERE SOLD INTO SLAVERY. NOW UPON THIS ROCK, THROUGH THE WATERS OF BAPTISM, MEN BECOME FREE CHILDREN OF GOD.”

The monks of Belmont Abbey, saw clearly both historically and prophetically the connection between Catholic Sacramental Theology and Catholic Social Justice Teaching.

They saw the connection between the Theology of Baptism and the Church’s insistence that all human beings are entitled by their very existence to Dignity and Freedom. They saw clearly that slavery, racism and the commodification of

humans in all its forms and in all its moments in World History are grave offenses against God and are rejected by the Sacramental Theology of Baptism as theological heresy.<sup>1</sup>

In December 2000, William Cardinal Keeler of the Archdiocese of Baltimore said: “We gather this evening mindful of an evil, a spiritual malady that has gnawed at the moral fiber of our nation, our community and our church from the early days of colonial America. The early history tells us of the slave trade. Like other sad pages whose message causes pain, these have been torn from the history books most people study, but the scars, the consequences remain. The illness festers. Today we call it by the name of racism.”<sup>2</sup>

In his Address to the Joint Session of the United States Congress on September 24, 2015, Pope Francis recognized the pivotal role of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in addressing the scourge of racism: “Here too I think of the march with Martin Luther King led from Selma to Montgomery fifty years ago as part of the campaign to fulfill his ‘dream’ of full civil and political rights for African Americans. That dream continues to inspire us all. I am happy that America continues to be, for many, a land of ‘dreams’. Dreams which lead to action, to participation, to commitment. Dreams which awaken what is deepest and truest in the life of a people.”

As the Catholic Church on Long Island, we awaken to “what is deepest and truest” in ourselves in the signs and symbols of the Easter Octave Catholic liturgy and sacramental theology, and the power of the Risen Christ working at every moment in history.

Memories of the Easter Vigil Fire, the Paschal Candle, the Gospel Resurrection Appearances, the Light that streams from the glorified wounds of the Risen Christ – these all speak to us of our Catholic baptismal responsibility to stand up against all expressions of racism and to be instruments of the Divine Mercy who actively cultivate racial harmony and the spirit of beatitudinal peace in the World.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Bishop John Barres’ Founder’s Week Keynote Address at St. John’s University delivered on September 21, 2017 entitled “The Relationship between Catholic Sacramental Theology and Catholic Social Justice Teaching: The Sacrament of Penance in Service of Welcoming the Stranger” in the January 2018 edition of *The Long Island Catholic*.

<sup>2</sup> William Cardinal Keeler as quoted in Most Reverend William E. Lori’s *The Enduring Power of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Principles of Nonviolence: A Pastoral Reflection*. February 2018, 13.

Tonight, as we commemorate Dr. King's paschal mystery death, his commitment to a dream inspired by the Beatitudes, he asks us to touch the wounds of racism in this country with the glorified wounds of the Risen Christ.

Last Saturday night at the Easter Vigil here at St. Agnes Cathedral, we rejoiced in the chanting of the Easter Proclamation, the *Exsultet*, which connects our emotional faith memory with that of our ancestors in the faith.

We hear in the *Exsultet* these words: "Rejoice, let Mother Church also rejoice arrayed with the lightning of his glory, let this holy building shake with joy, filled with the mighty voices of the peoples."

"Let this holy building shake with joy....Let this holy building shake with joy."

Let this holy building of St. Agnes Cathedral in this Easter Octave shake with joy in such a way that the tremors are felt in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the recently restored Tomb of Christ.

Let this holy building of St. Agnes Cathedral in this Easter Octave shake with joy in such a way that the tremors are felt in St. Peter's Basilica and St. Peter's Square in Rome.

Let this holy building of St. Agnes Cathedral in this Easter Octave shake with every parish in every part of the world and let every Catholic parish on our beautiful Island shake with the joy of their Mother Church.

And let this holy building of St. Agnes Cathedral shake tonight with the living dream of Dr. Martin Luther King as we commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of his assassination in Memphis. Let it shake with the Risen Christ and with every sincere heart on Long Island that wants to rediscover Dr. King's dream in our own time.

Let the Word of God, the real Eucharistic presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle, our prayer, our praise, our witness, our living memories of Dr. King and his sacrifice reach deeply into the historical wounds of this country.

Let the power of the Risen Christ reach into every moment in every place in this country in which someone was treated unjustly -- whether it was on a bus or in a restaurant during the Jim Crow era, whether it was a lynching or the bombing or

burning of a Church or whether it was a subtler but still devastating expression of racism.

Nor can our witness against racism be separated from our steadfast belief in the sanctity of human life at every stage of life.

As we remember tonight Dr. King's leadership role in the Civil Rights movement of this country, he would not want us to forget the Civil Rights of the Unborn and the Dream that we share with so many in American Society that the 1973 Supreme Court Decision *Roe vs. Wade* will one day be overturned and overcome.

During the Easter Vigil last Saturday night, we chanted the Litany of Saints in which we asked the intercession of the great saints of every century to intercede for us.

They, in turn, beckon to us to be faithful to that "deepest and truest" dimension in ourselves, our baptismal call to holiness and mission.

The Saints of the Centuries want a rich new harvest of Catholic Saints on Long Island -- Saints who understand that *dramatic missionary growth* grounded in the spirit of the Beatitudes is the most effective way for us to live Dr. King's dream in our time.

And it is through *dramatic missionary growth* that we will help promote the justice for which Dr. King gave his life.