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The Fifth Sunday of Lent (A)<sup>1</sup>

As Jesus said to Martha so he says to each of us: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this" (John 11:25-26)?

When a person comes to the Church seeking Baptism, the question is asked of them, "What do you ask of God's Church?" "Faith," they answer. The priest then asks, "What does faith offer you?" "Eternal life."<sup>2</sup>

This is what Baptism is all about. It is the gift of faith - which necessarily entails the Church and the Sacraments - that gives eternal life. But do we really want this life?

We know that many people today reject the fullness of the faith of Jesus Christ. How many of our relatives and friends - who once filled these pews - have abandoned the Church?

This is a cause of great concern and of deep pain. Why have they left?

Perhaps many people reject the faith today simply because they do not find the prospect of eternal life attractive. What they desire is not eternal life at all, but this present life... To continue living forever - endlessly - appears more like a curse than a gift. Death, admittedly, one would wish to postpone for as long as possible. But to

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<sup>1</sup> This homily largely based on Pope Benedict XVI's *Spe salvi*, 10-12.

<sup>2</sup> *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 51.

live always, without end – this, all things considered, can only be monotonous and ultimately unbearable.

Eternal life, then, for many, seems something very much like a fairy tale, an impossible reality. But is this what we mean when we speak of eternal life?

As he preached his homily at the funeral of his brother, Saint Ambrose of Milan addressed this very topic. He said,

Death was not part of nature; it became part of nature. God did not decree death from the beginning; he prescribed it as a remedy. Human life, because of sin ... began to experience the burden of wretchedness in unremitting labor and unbearable sorrow. There had to be a limit to its evils; death had to restore what life had forfeited. Without the assistance of grace, immortality is more of a burden than a blessing.

Thanks be to God, the life that Jesus offers us is very different from this life, and for this reason Saint Ambrose could also say, "Death is, then, no cause for mourning, for it is the cause of mankind's salvation."<sup>3</sup>

We know that at times we wish death would come and at other times we keep it as far away as possible.

Obviously there is a contradiction in our attitude, which points to an inner contradiction in our very existence. On the one hand, we do not want to die; above all, those who love us do not want us to die. Yet on the other hand, neither do we want to continue living indefinitely.

What is it, then, that we really want?

We say that we want to live, but what does this mean? What is this life that we want? What we really mean is that we want

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the happy life, the blessed life. In our prayer we ask for nothing more than happiness.

We do not really know what this means, what happiness is. Simply try to describe it. But we do know that this life is not it; our hearts yearn for something far greater.

In some way we want life itself, true life, untouched even by death; yet at the same time we do not know the thing towards which we feel driven. We cannot stop reaching out for it, and yet we know that all we can experience or accomplish is not what we yearn for. This unknown "thing" is the true "hope" which drives us, and at the same time the fact that it is unknown is the cause of all forms of despair...

What then is the eternal life that Jesus promises? This is the question before us today.

We speak of "eternal life" in reference to this happiness to which we are drawn but cannot fully be known now. Eternal often sounds as though something interminable,

and this frightens us; "life" makes us think of the life that we know and love and do not want to lose, even though very often it brings more toil than satisfaction, so that while on the one hand we desire it, on the other hand we do not want it.

All of this can lead to a false sense of the eternal life that is ours in Jesus Christ.

The eternal life which is the resurrection of the body is difficult - if not possible - to describe. Eternal life is not a mere ticking off of endless days, but is

something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction... It would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time - the before and after - no longer exists. We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a

moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy. This is how Jesus expresses it in Saint John's Gospel: "I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (16:22).

This joy can still be ours these remaining days of Lent if we "trust in his word" and "wait for the LORD" (Psalm 130:5-6).

The Holy Father has urged us to use these days of Lent "for a fast of words and images. We need a little silence," he reminds us, "we need room where we are not constantly bombarded by images... [We should] create spaces of silence even without images in order to reopen our hearts to the true image and the true word," Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

How often do we stifle the voice of God with our cell phones, iPods, computers, televisions, radios and any form of "background noise"? We drown out the voice of God and never give him a chance to speak and so we do not understand his life.

If we wait silently for the Lord each day we will come to know that "with the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption" (Psalm 130:7). The Lord will lead us to confess our sins and he will say, "Untie him and let him go" (John 11:44). We will experience peace and life.

Let us allow the Lord to speak to us, that we might know him and be known by him. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting with the parish priests and the clergy of the Diocese of Rome, 7 February 2008.