

## Good Friday

Cathedral of Saint Paul  
April 2, 2010, 3:00 p.m.

by The Most Reverend John C. Nienstedt

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I remember the day well. I was pastor of St. Patrick's Parish in Union Lake, Michigan, and had just finished hearing confessions about noon on a bright, Saturday morning in springtime.

As I exited the Reconciliation Room, our student secretary approached. Huron Valley Hospital had called with an emergency. I immediately headed across the parking lot and got into my car.

When I arrived at the hospital, I became quite upset to learn that the patient in question had been brought into the emergency room at 3:00 a.m. that morning. The call to the rectory was made some nine hours after his admission.

Apparently, the young man in question had been out late at a party the night before, drinking quite heavily. Despite the protests of his friends, he got behind the wheel of his car and headed home. Within minutes, he crashed into the back of a gravel truck. The impact of the crash had smashed the steering wheel against his sternum so forcefully that a main artery had been severed. It was still intact when he arrived at the hospital, but when they later tried to move him, the artery severed completely and death followed within minutes.

Now, I found myself being ushered into a small closed room with the body of the dead young man. The victim had been a 20-something young man, handsome fellow with a full head of jet-black hair.

I said a few prayers over his body and then touched his forehead with the sign of the cross.

I was startled to feel how cold and clammy his skin felt on my fingertips. I drew my hand away almost on impulse.

The nurse then entered to say the family was on their way. A half hour later, the deceased's mother and sister arrived and joined me.

Both women burst into tears upon seeing their son and brother. The mother began kissing her son's face and running her hands through his hair. The sister placed her cheek next to his. Both sobbed, bemoaning a life so tragically and needlessly ended.

I stood there mesmerized by the fact that these women could so lovingly caress this same body that I had found so cold and clammy a few moments before.

But, you see: they knew and loved that young man. And knowing and loving him allowed them to overlook the external signs of death and to caress even so tenderly the mortal remains of their son and brother.

That same expression of tender love can also be seen so close at hand in Michelangelo's sculpture of the Pietá, a word meaning pity, compassion or mercy. Immortalized for all the world to see, the Florentine artist captures that moment when the virgin mother received back into her arms him whom she knew to be the Light of the World.

My friends, today's liturgy focuses our attention on the Cross of Christ. But not the Cross of a dead corpse, but rather the Cross of our living Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The words of the prophet, Isaiah, speak to his condition: "Many are amazed at him – so marred was . . . his appearance beyond that of mortals – so shall he startle many nations."

The author of Hebrews tells us:

"Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

When we come forth to worship and venerate the Cross this afternoon – we do not come to kiss a cold and impersonal dead body, but rather, like those two women at the hospital, we come to venerate One whom we have known and loved through these forty days of Lent. We come not to honor a lifeless image, but rather to give reverence to the spirit and power of the One who takes away the sins of our world.

In John's Gospel, the hour of Jesus' death is the same hour at which the Passover lambs are traditionally slain on the temple mount. The meaning of this tragic event is clear in the fourth Gospel—Jesus is the true Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and establishes, once and for all time, a new covenant between humanity and God. And only by delivering up his spirit in death, can his "holy" spirit be released for establishing the new life of grace in the Church.

That "new life" is symbolically represented in the Communion Rite that follows our veneration. Here is the link between Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. Herein lies the hope that undergirds this Sacred Triduum and the reason that we dare to refer to this day of Jesus' self-immolation as a "Good" day. This "Good Friday" anticipates that day when all sorrow, pain and deprivation will be removed in the Kingdom of Heaven. For we are assured that if we share in his suffering, we will share in his glory.

My brothers and sisters, let us come and venerate the Cross of Christ with devotion, reverence and love. For by this Cross, you and I have been given the promise of eternal life. "We adore you, Oh Christ, and we praise you because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world."