

YOU ARE WITNESSES
(Third Sunday of Easter, Year B)

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If you like books about espionage
you know about **the Witness Protection Program.**

In this program, the federal government provides key witnesses
with a new identity
in a place where no one will recognize them
or ask them too many questions.

This is one way to think of the word, “witness.”
Someone who has information that no one else has.

In today’s gospel,
the Risen Christ says to his apostles:
“You are my witnesses.”
“You are witnesses to my death on the Cross
And, now, you are witnesses to my resurrection from the tomb.”

This is not information to keep secret,
but information that everyone in the Church is expected to share
with every person they meet.

Before we talk about giving witness to our faith, however,
I would like to talk about a young man name Francisco Cantu.

Francisco grew up in Arizona.
His grandfather was an immigrant from Mexico.
Upon graduating from college, he joined the border guard.

Why did he do this?
Because he wanted TO BE A WITNESS.

He wanted *to witness* first hand
the experience of the border.

In college, he read books about the border.
He attended classes about the border.
But he was young and idealistic
and he wanted to **witness** life on the border first hand.

As someone who could speak Spanish,
as someone who felt at home in both cultures,
he felt he had something to offer.
He saw a problem and wanted to be part of the solution.

So, he worked as a Border Agent for four years.
He learned a lot.
He wrote a book about the experience called, *When the Line Becomes a River*.
It's an excellent book and I highly recommend it.

Its central message is this:
**you can't witness suffering
without it transforming you.**

Think of the difference between a boy playing a video game
and a soldier
with boots on the ground and a gun in his hand.

One is a game that you can put aside.
The other is reality.
A reality that affects your soul
and changes you forever.

That's the difference between **watching** something
and **witnessing** something.

"You are witnesses," says the Lord.
"You witnessed to my Life, my Death.
And, now, you are witnessing my Resurrection."

When you and I offer the Holy Mass,
are we *watching* or *witnessing*?

Is it a game?
Or is it reality?

Ever think about how the Mass looks to people outside the church?

The world looks in at us and sees nothing but a group of people
inside a half-empty room believing some made-up myth.

The world sees nothing more than candles,
long robes,
bread and wine
and a meaningless ritual.

And, sometimes, so do we. . . .
if we settle for *watching* as opposed to *witnessing*.

“You witnessed my suffering,” says the Lord.
“If you love me like you say you do,
my suffering becomes a part of you.”

At the conclusion of his book, Cantu admits that his experience on the border
changed nothing about the border.
But it changed him.

Listen to the way he describes the transformation:

One day I rode a horse into Boquillas Canyon along the Rio Grande. The trail ended at the riverbank. There are no check points or sensors there. I removed my shirt and lowered myself into the gentle current of the Rio Grande, my muscles tensing at the coolness.

Above me, two falcons circled in the sun-heated air. I reached my arms into the sediment that had settled at the bottom of the riverbed. The water flowed pale and brown, liquid earth washing over me like so many human hands, like a skin unending.

As I swam toward a bend in the canyon, the river became increasingly shallow. I stood to walk along the banks, crossing the river time and again until, finally, I forgot in which country I stood. All around me the landscape trembled and breathed as one.

To my ears, this young man's experience
echoes the experience of Baptism.

An experience of borders dissolving,
not borders that exist between countries,
 but borders that exist between one person and another,
 between my soul and your soul,
 between our world and God's.

In the sacramental of the Church,
we plunge into an experience that unites us as one in Christ,
a river that sweeps us into the Canyon of the Holy Trinity,
a mystical place with the power to heal, transform
and wash away sin in all its devastating forms.

"You are witnesses," says the Lord.
"Plunged into the river of my passion and death,
and discover a Life that never ends!"

If you **witness** something,
as oppose to **watching** something,
it changes you.

"I forgot in which country I stood," writes the young man
who was brave enough
to witness the suffering on the border.

And, so it is today at this Mass.
Look around you at this church.
This place where we worship,
this sacred ground on which God engages His people,
it is not located "this in country" or "that country."
It is not on "this planet" or "that planet."

Rather, it is threshold of Heaven.

“Behold, I make all things new,” says the Lord.

Take and eat, this is my Body.

Take and drink, this is my Blood.

“You are witnesses,” says the Lord.

“Touch the scars on my hands, my side...and never be the same again.”