

Homily for June 28<sup>th</sup> 2017

*The Feast of St. Irenaeus*

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Irenaeus, a Father of the Church. He expressed the heart of Christian spirituality when he said, “Gloria Dei homo vivens”—the glory of God is a human being fully alive. He was Martyred on this day in 202.

His theological masterpiece is called *Adversus Haereses* (Against the Heresies), but it is much more than a refutation of the major objections to Christian faith in his time. It is one of the most impressive expressions of Christian doctrine in the history of the church. The master idea in Irenaeus’s theology is that God has no need of anything outside of himself.

Irenaeus knew all about the pagan gods and goddesses who stood in desperate need of human praise and sacrifice, and he saw that a chief consequence of this theology is that people lived in fear. Since the gods needed us, they were wont to manipulate us to satisfy their desires, and if they were not sufficiently honored, they could (and would) lash out.

Take for instance, the Greek myth of Prometheus. Here the human hero steals precious fire from the gods and spreads it on the earth to the benefit of all, but when the gods learn of this theft, they are outraged. They track down Prometheus, tie him to a rock, and send an eagle every day to tear out his liver.

But the God of the Bible, who is utterly perfect in himself, has no need of anything at all. Even in his great act of making the universe, he doesn’t require any pre-existing material with which to work; rather (and Irenaeus was the first major Christian theologian to see this), he creates the universe *ex nihilo* (from nothing). And precisely because he doesn’t need the world, he makes the world in a sheerly generous act of love. Love, is not primarily a feeling or a sentiment, but instead an act of the will. It is to will the good of the other as other. Well, the God who has no self-interest at all, can only love.

From this the whole theology of Irenaeus flows. God creates the cosmos in an explosion of generosity, giving rise to myriad plants, animals, planets, stars, angels, and human beings, all designed to reflect some aspect of his own splendor. Irenaeus loved to use the metaphor of God as artist. Each element of creation is like a color applied to the canvas or a stone in the mosaic, or a note in an overarching harmony.

At the summit of God’s physical creation stands the human being, loved into existence as all things are, but invited to participate even more fully in God’s perfection by loving his Creator in return. It is in relationship to the rest of the created order that Irenaeus declares “the glory of God is a human being fully alive.” Do you see how this is precisely logical outworking of the assertion that God needs nothing? The glory of the pagan gods and goddesses was not a human being fully alive, but rather a human being in submission, a human being doing what he’s been commanded to do. But the true God doesn’t play such manipulative games. He finds his joy in willing, in the fullest measure, our good.

Therefore in Christianity, God is not our rival; rather he is the one who rejoices in our being fully alive. God pours out the whole of creation in an effervescent act of generosity, and then, even more surprisingly, he draws his human creatures, through Christ, into the intimacy of friendship with him.

When we discover this profound relationship that exists between us and God we can with Abram look up at the night sky and discover that its majesty points to our majesty. Look at the night sky, so will your descendants be, says the Lord. Today's psalm celebrates God's faithfulness to his covenant as the psalm refrain declares:

**He is mindful of his covenant forever,**

What happens in the lives of those who know God's faithfulness? Their lives are described in Jesus' parable. Fruit that grows on the tree of God's love whereby we know that to be fully alive is to be in relation to the Lord of All, who in non-competitive because He is by nature desiring us to live trustingly in relationship with him.

This is why what we believe about God is so important and why Jesus warns:

***"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."***

False understandings about God lead to our distorting what it means to be human. When this happens we cannot thrive but die spiritually, emotionally and physically.

Thanks be to God for St. Irenaeus who throughout his life combatted heresy and false prophecy and is therefore remembered today as the most fruitful theologian of the Second Century.