

**Ann M. Garrido**  
**Midday Prayer – Aquinas Institute**  
**9-7-11**  
**Col 3:1-11**

**Text:**

Brothers and sisters:  
If you were raised with Christ, seek what is above,  
where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.  
Think of what is above, not of what is on earth.  
For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.  
When Christ your life appears,  
then you too will appear with him in glory.

Put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly:  
immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire,  
and the greed that is idolatry.  
Because of these the wrath of God is coming upon the disobedient.  
By these you too once conducted yourselves, when you lived in that way.  
But now you must put them all away:  
anger, fury, malice, slander,  
and obscene language out of your mouths.  
Stop lying to one another,  
since you have taken off the old self with its practices  
and have put on the new self,  
which is being renewed, for knowledge,  
in the image of its creator.  
Here there is not Greek and Jew,  
circumcision and uncircumcision,  
barbarian, Scythian, slave, free;  
but Christ is all and in all.

**Preaching Notes:**

In my preparation for today, I want you to know that I went to the library and read Sacra Pagina, as all dutiful preachers should, but feeling a tad under-inspired, I also engaged in the dangerous activity of web surfing, googling "Colossians 3." The first entry that popped up read: "*The best Christians are dead Christians.*"

Of course, I was shocked. Had my Google search accidentally steered me to some kind of religious hate site? How had typing in "Colossians 3" taken me here? And then I thought about it for a minute and started to laugh. Ultimately the link took me to – as you might guess - a dead end, but not before I was able to figure out this was the ingenious sermon title of an unknown pastor in a tiny town I've never heard of: "The best Christians are dead Christians."

The heart of Colossians 3, of course, is the mystery of Baptism as a type of dying - one of Paul's favorite mysteries, and naturally a favorite of all those who wrote in his name.

In our cozy Sunday morning parish baptisms today, with young doting parents nuzzling sweet faced infants in lacy white dresses passed on from Great-Aunt Minnie, the notion of Baptism as death seems a bit foreign. But for Paul it was not; indeed it was central.

Baptism was a participation in the Paschal Mystery. The experience of going into the water was like a drowning. It was a dying with Christ, so that you could come out on the other side with Christ, leaving your old self behind. Some of the earliest baptismal fonts ever discovered, like the one at Dura Europas, hint at this - fashioned in the shape of a sarcophagi. Perhaps most explicit are the fonts found in Ethiopia - great crosses carved into the ground for the desiring Christian to walk down into and then walk up the other side.

I've often thought how disturbed Paul might be by many of the contemporary funeral memorial cards which mark the person's date of birth and then the "date of birth into eternal life" nearly a century later. "No! No! No!" Paul would have shouted, pulling at the roots of his thinning hair, "Your birth into eternal life is the date of your Baptism, *your Baptism.*" And to each of us he would gesticulate: "You! You! You are in your eternal life, NOW! You have been living your eternal life since the day you came out of the font."

And, of course, this is why the Colossians would have driven him nuts also. Because they didn't seem to be taking their baptism seriously. Didn't seem to remember that they were already in their eternal life... or, at least it was hard to tell by their actions toward one another.

And, so they needed a letter reminding them: "*The best Christians are dead Christians.*" The best Christians are those who've gone down into that font like it was a drowning and let their old habits die. They've died to lying, died to anger, malice, and fury. They've died to slander and gossip and saying nasty things about one another. The best Christians are those who've died to their idols and immorality and impurity. "*The best Christians are dead Christians.*"

In the last verses from this passage, the Pauline author includes a few lines that sound very familiar:

"Here there is not Greek and Jew,  
circumcision and uncircumcision,  
barbarian, Scythian, slave, free;  
but Christ is all, and in all"

These closing verses are almost identical to verses quoted elsewhere in the Pauline letters in Galatians and Corinthians. Scholars think that these verses may have been part of the Church's earliest Rite of Baptism - letting neophytes know that the Baptism they embrace will reshape their world, erasing all the strata of distinctions and hierarchies that mark

every civilization. Again, Baptism mandates death to the status quo - not just at a personal level, but even at a societal one.

The pairings chosen in this particular version hint that some of the greatest struggles that the early Christian community at Colossae faced were ethnic in origin. They were having a hard time letting go of their own racial identities and not claiming privilege because of them; having a hard time treating newcomers as truly equal members of the Christian community. They were having a hard time letting old ways of looking at the world, inbred since birth, die - so as to really see Christ in one another.

*The best Christians, though, are dead Christians* - they don't let such biases get in their way.

In many ways, today's poetic passage from Colossians can seem quite distant from us - reminiscent of another age, when Jews and Greeks really lived next door to each other, rather than only in lyrical verse. A time when Scythians actually existed and felt like a legitimate threat. A time when Baptism genuinely put one's life and livelihood at risk.

The danger, then, is that the passage might only emit a faint generic glow on the horizon of this new school year and never get very specific in our own lives.

So, let's go for shock value, like the unknown pastor from Anytown, and try on this phrase for size:

*"The best Aquinas Institute student is a dead Aquinas Institute student.  
The best A. I. faculty is a dead A.I. faculty,  
best A.I. president is a dead A.I. president."*

Sounds positively dreadful, doesn't it? And, of course, I would like to make *many* caveats, but it does make us sit up straight in our chairs, doesn't it?

Each one of us here has been baptized and are here in this building out of response to that baptismal call. So, we can expect that - here in this building - we will be given many opportunities in this coming year to enter ever more fully into that baptism - dying to self, dying to what we thought would be, dying to how we thought the world was supposed to work.

I have no idea what that will look like for you or me this upcoming year:

- Will it be learning to listen, really listen to someone from a group that I've grown up distaining, believing beneath my intellect?
- Will it be overcoming a bias toward an author that you've dismissed in the past and argued against reading?
- Will I find my anger surfacing again, just when I thought it had been put to sleep at last?
- Will you come face-to-face with an idol you thought you had slain but you find out is still dictating your life?

I don't know what my baptism will ask me to die to this year, or what yours will ask of you..... I only know that *it will ask*. And I pray that when it does ask, we will both have the sense to recognize: God wants to do something wonderful here, moving us through this death so that we can enjoy ever more fully the eternal life that is already ours, already in our grasp! - if only we could let go of the old one.