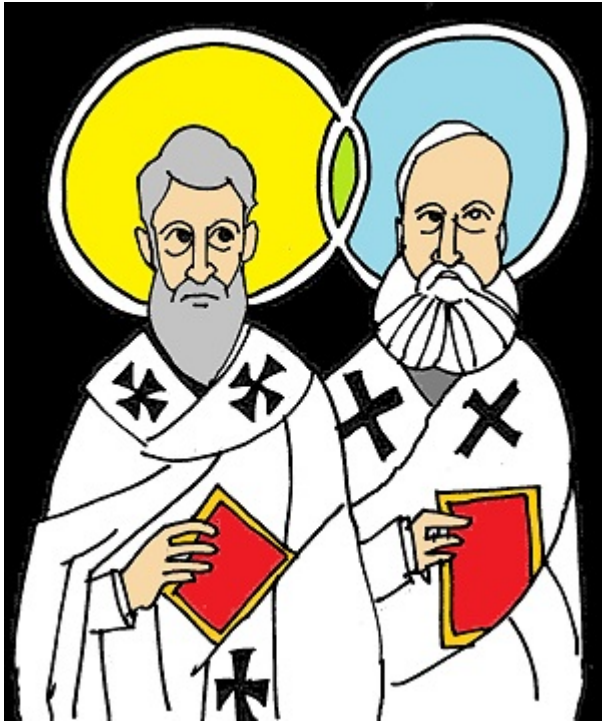


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by Pat Marrin

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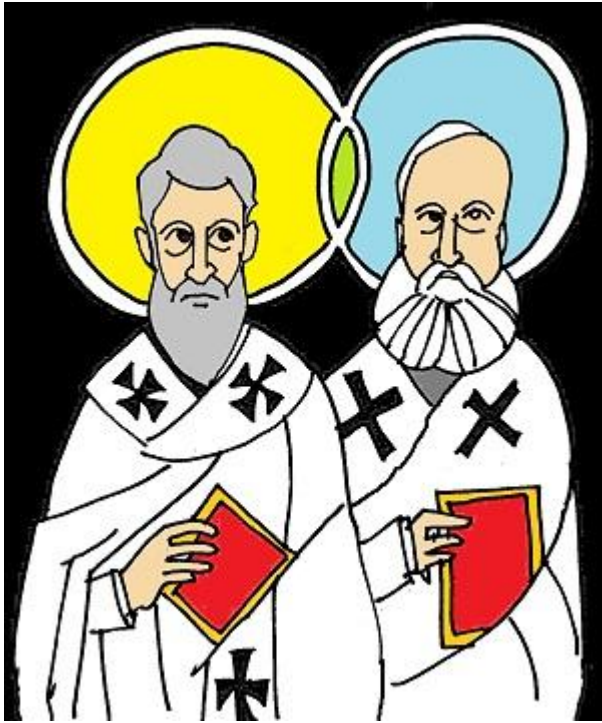
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“There is one among you whom you do not recognize” (John 1:27).

1 John 2:22-28; John 1:19-28.

There is some logic to beginning the New Year with the commemoration of Saints Gregory and Basil. These two fourth century Eastern bishops wrote against the Arian heresy that claimed Jesus was a human being who was later elevated to divine status by God, therefore not equal to God. The doctrine of the Incarnation emerging in the early church insists that Jesus was fully human and divine. This is the message of Christmas.

Today’s first reading continues the condemnation by John of those who questioned the Incarnation. To admit that the church began with fierce debates about this fundamental question is an understatement, but it serves to emphasize that the identity and mission of Jesus as Savior and Redeemer of the world would collapse if he were not the Incarnate Word and Son of God.

Today’s Gospel highlights another question related to Jesus’ identity. The author of the fourth Gospel, composed at the end of the first century or early in the second, felt the need to address the issue of why, if he was God, Jesus submitted to the baptism of John. The Baptizer, whose followers continued to revere him as a prophet and martyr, is presented as admitting that Jesus was superior to him. His baptism for the forgiveness of sins was only preparatory to Jesus’ baptism of fire and the Holy

Spirit. This adjustment to the historical memory was to protect the Incarnation.

We are witnessing the formation of the tradition that was later confirmed by church councils in the first creeds. Several generations of believers helped define and articulate the faith we affirm at our parish liturgies. Perhaps the best description of this process is found at the end of the Gospel of Luke, another late first century composition. The account of the disciples who meet a stranger on the road to Emmaus is a glimpse into the early church celebrating Eucharist (Luke 24:13-35). By reading the Scriptures and breaking the bread, the eyes of the disciples are opened to the presence of the risen Jesus.

To believe in Jesus Christ is to share this journey of faith, to overcome doubt by experiencing the power of his death and resurrection as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Here we return to the end of today's Gospel and the words: "There is one among you whom you do not recognize" (John 1:27). The risen Jesus is the mysterious stranger who accompanies us on our journey, explaining, encouraging, firing our hearts with insight and feeding us with the bread of his own life. Faith is an intimate encounter that overcomes skepticism and fear. Our eyes are opened; He is with us, sending us forth to tell others what we have seen and heard.

For many, the year 2020 looms as a year when the future of the planet and the stability of the world will be decided. Two millennia ago, a handful of disciples of Jesus, filled with faith and love, often at the cost of their lives, helped turn the ancient world toward a civilization of greater justice, equality and compassion. Will our generation have the faith and courage to do the same?

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