

Recognizing the Risen Lord at the time of the pandemic

The difficulty the disciples had after the Resurrection was that of recognizing the Risen Lord. In John 20, Mary of Magdala comes to the tomb in early hours of the morning and discovers the tomb open and empty. As she sits beside the tomb weeping, Jesus appears to her but she does not recognize Him. She thinks He is the gardener. When Jesus then calls her by her name, her eyes open and she recognizes Him. Calling Him Master, she wants to hold onto Him but Jesus says to her “*Noli me tangere*” (“do not touch me”; John 20:17). Other translations make it an ongoing action, “stop clinging to me” or “cease holding onto me”. This is not a form of social distancing but a commissioning to go and share the news of the Resurrection with the brethren. Jesus says “Go instead to my brothers and tell them...”

In today's Gospel the two disciples, on the way to Emmaus, have a similar problem. Jesus comes and joins them as the unknown stranger on their way. They fail to recognize Him. This unknown stranger discusses with them the meaning of the scriptures regarding the Messiah. When they get to the house, He breaks the bread with them. Notice Jesus' actions here. When He sits at table with them He does four things:

He takes the bread,

He blesses the bread,

He breaks the bread

and He gives the bread.

These are exactly the same four actions that occur at the Last Supper. So when Jesus does this, He is reenacting the same thing He does on Holy Thursday in the upper room when he celebrates the Last Supper with His disciples and institutes the Eucharist. As soon as He does this, the two disciples' eyes open and they recognize Him and I guess with that excitement they want to hug and hold Him, but he vanishes.

Think about what is happening here, for just a second. In Jesus' risen body, He is no longer bound by space. In his glorified body, He is no longer bound by time. He can walk through walls. He can hide his appearance. And in the Eucharist that is exactly what He is doing. He stays with us but hides Himself under the appearance of bread and wine.

St. Thomas Aquinas in his wonderful hymn to the Eucharist *Adoro Te Devote* describes the Holy Eucharist thus:

Hidden God, devoutly I adore Thee, truly present underneath these veils: all my heart subdues itself before Thee, since it all before Thee faints and fails. Not to sight, or taste, or touch be credit, Hearing only do we trust secure; I believe, for God the Son has said it – Word of Truth that ever shall endure. On the cross was veiled Thy Godhead's splendor, here Thy manhood lies hidden too; unto both alike my faith I render, and, as sued the contrite thief, I sue.....

The basic issue we need to understand is why does Jesus vanish after breaking the bread? Why does He disappear? The answer is simple and profound: He is trying to get the disciples to direct their eyes, their vision, to the ways in which He is going to be with them from then on.

One of these ways is the Eucharistic form, that is, the breaking of the bread. In other words, in answer to their request to stay with them, He does stay with them. This is a fulfillment of His promise to be with His disciples even when the smallest number of two or three gather in His name. He is NOT going to be physically present in the way He has previously been in His earthly body. He is now going to stay with them under the appearance of bread and wine in the Eucharist. This is the sacramental presence. The Catechism calls this the Real Presence. The Catechism teaches:

His presence in the Eucharist is called “real”, not “to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be ‘real’ too, but because [his presence in the Eucharist] is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely ‘present’” (CCC, No. 1374).

Apart from this form there is another form which we are tempted to neglect: this form is the bond of love among people, the bond of love in fellowship. This means that “the risen Lord is with us, not as a person to touch, but as the bond of love and solidarity between people. So he vanishes or he says do not touch me, rather touch and deal with other people in the spirit of love” (cf. *Salvo J Zizek, Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World, OR Books, New York-London, 2020*). Love is the regenerative force that transforms and extinguishes the sting and stench of death.

The implications of this are profound. If you see Christ in the bond of love between husband and wife you will keep your marriage sacred and holy; if you see Him in the

bond of love that exists in your homes you will hold this more precious; if you see Jesus in the bond of love among friends you will value this relationship more deeply; if you see Jesus in the bond of love in the fellowship of believers you will cherish this more; and if you see Him in the bond of love and solidarity in neighborhoods you will respect and love your neighbors more, and so it goes on.

There is also another form in which the Risen Lord is among us. Many contemplative thinkers see Jesus not only hidden under the appearance of bread and wine but in the appearance of the poor, the marginalized, the sick, the suffering, etc. They also see a strong connection between the poor and Christ in the Eucharist.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, for instance, sees the poor as another manifestation of the presence of Christ. She says:

If we really understand the Eucharist, if we really center our lives on Jesus' body and blood, if we nourish our lives with the bread of the Eucharist, it will be easy for us to see Christ in that hungry one next door, the one lying in the gutter, that alcoholic man we shun, our husband or our wife, or our restless child. For in them, we will recognize the distressing disguises of the poor: Jesus in our midst.

Tomas Halik says that when somebody is unable to meet Jesus in the traditional ways, such as at church during prayer, in the homilies of the Mass or at catechism classes, there is another great possibility: to meet Jesus where people are suffering (*cf. Tomas Halik, Berühre die Wunden, Herder, Freiburg 2013*). A good Latin adage expresses this in a nutshell: *Ubi dolor, ubi Christus* (where there is suffering, there is Christ).

In an ancient story in the Jewish Talmud, Rabbi ben Levi asks Elijah the prophet when the Messiah will come. The prophet replies, "Go and ask him yourself". Rabbi ben Levi asks again where he will see him. Elijah replies again, "You will see him sitting at the gates of the city". "But how will I recognize him?" asks Levi. Elijah replies "He is sitting among the poor and covered with wounds" (*cf. Henri Nouwen, The Wounded Healer, Darton, Longman and Todd, Great Britain, 1994*).

Jesus stands at the street corners, He comes to us as a neighbor in desperate need, He is lying neglected in the slums, has no home to go to when there is a lockdown, He is the prisoner waiting for trial, and the one scavenging for food in the waste bins and dumps. We may find it difficult to recognize Him at these odd places but the Christian message is that God comes to us in ways that defy our expectations.

The basis of judgment on the last day is written clearly in the Gospel: ‘I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me, naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me’. Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” (*Matthew 25:35-40, NIV trans.*)

Now, as we hope and look forward to a slow and gradual recovery from the pandemic, let not the regulation of social distancing or regular washing of hands or wearing face masks turn to a culture of self-centered indifference, as this is an even worse virus spread through selfishness and greed. Instead, the present pandemic reminds us that there are no differences or borders between those who suffer, between those who are poor and those who are rich. The virus crosses all manmade borders, walls and social classes. It shows that we are all frail and vulnerable. Humanity is in the same boat. The whole world is profoundly shaken by what is happening all around us. The time has come to eliminate greed and inequality, to heal the injustice that is undermining the health and progress of the entire human family. Beyond the washing of hands let us show love, kindness, solidarity and empathy and then we shall see the face of the Risen Lord.

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