

Commentary to the Second Sunday of Easter

The Battle against Doubts



The Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter is always from John 20: 19-31, the Gospel of Doubting Thomas. Perhaps, the reason for this is that the second part of this Gospel takes place the Sunday after the Resurrection. But there is more than this. Jesus appeared to just a few people after the Resurrection. There was Mary Magdeline and any others that may have been with her, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and the eleven and anyone with them in the Upper Room, Easter Sunday and the Sunday after Easter, the disciples who saw the Lord on the shore while they were fishing, and finally those who were present at the Lord's Ascension into heaven. Everyone else is left with an empty tomb.

We have to have faith that what Jesus promised happened; He rose from the dead. We have to have faith in the witness of the first disciples. So the Gospel for this Sunday tackles a problem we all have, doubting our faith. This is the messy side of our humanity. We want to believe, but we are often besieged with doubts. Sometimes we feel very bad about ourselves. How can I doubt Christ? Why would I doubt the teachings of the Apostles, or the authentic teachings of the Church? We need to remember that this is all part of being a human being. We will only be free of doubts when we see God face to face. With this understood, we can fight off some of our doubts by considering their origin.

All doubts ultimately flow from the evil one. The devil placed the first doubts into the minds of Adam and Eve. So putting a fight against doubts is good work, It is part of our battle against evil. I've noticed four areas of doubt where together with the Lord we need to do battle. There are intellectual doubts, doubts in other human beings, doubts due to the disjunction of our faith and lifestyle, and doubts that flow from the crises of our lives. First, intellectual doubts. These would be the doubts we have when our minds refuse to allow us to accept spiritual truths. So we look at a basic Christian belief, such as

the Trinity, and say that it is not possible for there to be one God, but three persons, each God. Or, how can the Second Person be both fully God and fully man? The problem here is that we are trying to solve eternal mysteries with the finite knowledge of our intellect. Even the greatest mind in the world is limited in the knowledge it can attain on its own.

But there is a knowledge deeper than the mind can ever come to. This is the knowledge that is revealed to us by God. If we are full of pride, and refuse to recognize our intellectual limitation, we will not be open to God's deeper knowledge. Just because we cannot understand something, does not mean that it isn't true. An extremely intelligent seven year old is incapable of understanding calculus. That does not mean that theorems and rules of calculus don't exist. It just means that the seven year old's mind cannot grasp them. Some of the greatest minds in history limited themselves by refusing to acknowledge the existence of truth beyond their rational capabilities. Other great minds, such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Pope John Paul II, allowed their knowledge to expand by accepting their limitations and being open to that which is beyond them. It takes humility to recognize our dependency on God for knowledge beyond our grasp.

The devil uses our pride to prevent us from being open to the Truths of the Lord. So we fight the pride of the devil with our humility. As I read the Gospel, it occurs to me that Thomas did not doubt Jesus as much as he doubted the other disciples. After all, these were people full of human failings. One was a tax collector, making his living stealing from his fellow countrymen. One was a political zealot, domineered by his determination to destroy the occupying Romans by any means possible. Their leader, Peter, had even publically denied Christ. When Jesus was crucified, all of them, except John, but including Thomas, had abandoned the Lord. Why should Thomas believe these people?

We do this too. We all doubt in human beings. We hear a message from a priest, and we think of all the failures of priests and refuse to believe the message. We hear an instruction from the bishops, and we deny that they have the moral authority to instruct us in anything. We even question the authority of the Pope, citing the examples of papal immorality from the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance. When we are tempted to do this, we are more concerned with the person who is pointing than what he or she is pointing at. That's what a pet dog does. If you point at something, the dog looks at your arm. Humans, though, don't look at your arm. They look where you are pointing.

A sad example of this is the number of people who have written letters to the editors, or who have sent emails to many of the priests, including me, objecting to this or that statement of the Church by citing the moral failures of priests. This is the ad hominem argument, an argument that cannot deal with the facts so instead attacks the person speaking. Again, the evil one wants to distract us from truth by confusing the truth with those who are proclaiming it. A third source of our doubts flows from disjunction in life. By this I mean the separation of faith and morality.

Some attempt to be people of faith here, but live immorally out there. That does not work. When people commit themselves to an immoral lifestyle, they soon begin questioning their faith. How many people have told me that they began doubting their faith when they began cheating in their marriage, or destroying themselves with substance abuse, etc. The evil one wants us to think that they can be part of a believing group while living like pagans. When we fall for his lies, we end up believing him rather than believing in Jesus. The immoral person may say that he or she is a person of faith, but in reality, he or she is more comfortable with the devil than with Christ.

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