

Easter – 2017

A very warm welcome to everyone to our Easter Celebration.

We've heard a lot of words...; I'd invite everyone now to take a couple of moments – to breathe deeply – get in touch with the state of our hearts.... What are *we* bringing to this moment? We're all in different places: joy, happiness; maybe we are struggling: in our relationship, our family, the workplace; maybe we're lonely, sad... at the loss of a recently deceased loved one; perhaps we're struggling with an illness or injury..., an addiction. Maybe we're anxious, fearful, depressed... . Maybe there is some angst at the present situation of our nation as well...

Wherever we're at, sisters and brothers, I think the celebration of Easter – Christ's Resurrection – has something to say to us, whoever we are.

Reflecting on Easter in his Exhortation The Joy of the Gospel (¶276), Pope Francis writes:

“Christ's resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated this world. Where all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up. It is an irresistible force. Often it seems that God does not exist: all around us we see persistent injustice, evil, indifference and cruelty. But it is also true that in the midst of darkness something new always springs to life and sooner or later produces fruit. On razed land life breaks through, stubbornly yet invincibly. However dark things are, goodness always re-emerges and spreads. Each day in our world beauty is born anew; it rises transformed through the storms of history. Values always tend to reappear under new guises and human beings have arisen time after time from situations that seemed doomed. Such is the power of the resurrection...!”

The spiritual writer and monk Thomas Merton puts it this way:

“Easter is more than believing that Christ once rose, thereby proving that he is God. Resurrection is more than a doctrine we try to prove or problem we argue about. No! Easter reminds us that: we are invited... called to experience the Resurrection in our own lives by following the Christ who lives within us and among us – when we love one another. The bottom line – the heart of the Gospel is God is love... and where there is love there is God!!”

Sisters and brothers, Merton goes on to say: “True encounter with the risen Christ awakens something in the depths of our being – something we didn’t know was there. True encounter with the risen Christ liberates something in us

- ❖ a power we did not know we had,
- ❖ a hope
- ❖ a capacity for life
- ❖ a resilience
- ❖ an ability to bounce back – when we thought we were completely defeated
- ❖ a capacity to grow
- ❖ a capacity to change
- ❖ a power of creative transformation

For the Christian there is no defeat... because Christ is risen and lives within and among us!

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Pope Francis, Thomas Merton and the Spiritual Giants remind us that there are two levels to this transformation and rebirthing: personal and social.

First, the personal: in order to get in touch with the hope, the capacity to grow, to change, to become – little-by-little – transformed into the persons God created us to be, we need to stop; we need to get off the treadmill, the merry-go-round that can numb us to what’s going on in our center – our true self – our heart, where the spark of the divine – the risen Jesus is present.

The story is told of the South American tribe that went on march: continuing day after day, when all of a sudden they would stop walking, sit down to rest and make camp for a couple of days before going any further. They explained that they needed time to rest so that their souls could catch up with them ...

Perhaps during our Lenten spring-cleaning-of-our-hearts we took an extra few minutes in prayer and reflection, maybe we could continue or begin some Sabbath time during the Easter Season.... Centering ourselves in whatever way works for us: a reflective walk, getting up a few minutes earlier ... lighting a candle and just sitting for a few moments with a cup of coffee...; whatever works.

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Secondly: Pope Francis, Thomas Merton and all the Spiritual Giants tell us too that true personal transformation always pushes us out to connect with others – especially those who are hurting and broken..., to be involved with social transformation: joining with other people of goodwill in birthing the world God intends. The risen Christ lives in us and leads us through mutual encounter and commitment into a new justice that we build together for one another. That future is called *The Reign of God - The Realm of God* ... “thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”!

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I love the image of the Kingdom of God as a tiny mustard seed – broken-open with the blood and water from Jesus’ side and sprouting on Easter to grow... to become the largest of shrubs! But to be honest, that mustard bush in the Spring of 2017 has experienced some frost, and even a freeze these last few months, and there are some pretty cold storm clouds ahead. One example – and I share this story not as a Republican or Democrat, a liberal or conservative, as progressive or traditional, but as a struggling Christian disciple:

A couple of weeks ago, our Congress was just 33 votes short of passing The American Healthcare Act. Imagine: the most modern, affluent, practical, experienced democracy of the world... was just 33 votes short of eliminating 24 million people from any kind of health care; just 33 votes short of raising premiums as people get older when most series health care challenges set in; just 33 votes short of eliminating maternal care and mental health services among other basic benefits; and some of these no votes were from representatives who thought the American Healthcare Act was too generous; ...that the government ought to stay out of this type of benefits program. Now as we enter the Easter Season, nation budget negotiations begin and we hear talk of balancing the budget by eliminating Food Stamps, by defunding Meals on Wheels, cutting back on after school programs which serve hot meals to hungry children and the list goes on....

Sisters and brothers, whatever our political perspective, now is the season to stand up for what matters; to stand against hate; to stand for respect; to stand for the protection of the vulnerable; to care for the earth.

Brothers and sisters, no country, no group can become great by being cruel, by taking *from* the vulnerable sectors of society *to* enrich the privileged. Sisters and brothers, any Christian church that remains silent in the face of injustice and cruelty and suffering — ceases to be a living faith and becomes a mere ritualistic formality. Such Christianity is no longer life in the risen Christ, but rather a formal cult of the dead Christ, considered not as Light and Savior of the world, but as a kind of divine “thing” – a theological relic. Instead of the living presence and light of Christ, the church becomes a structure of pious images and abstract concepts, until Christ becomes a shadow – a corpse, like a figure of wax that people go to extraordinary lengths to venerate and embalm; an imperial religion, a civil religion... assimilated by the powers and principalities.

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Sisters and brothers, the journey of Holy Week began with a challenge: two processions entered Jerusalem that day – from the West came Pilate, with a royal, imperial military procession demonstrating power and violence and domination. From the East came Jesus, on a donkey, leading a peasant procession, a peoples’ procession, surrounded by the poor, the women, the lame, the lepers, the prostitutes, the tax collectors... an anti-imperial, nonviolent procession.

Now, as then... the first procession leads to a Capital City, an Imperial City and a place of collaboration between religion and violence.

Now, as then... the alternative journey is the path of personal transformation that leads to journeying with the risen Christ Jesus, whose journey – with his followers – leads to the birthing of the Reign of God...! Holy Week and Easter presents us with the always relevant question: which procession are we in?

Amen!