

- Reflections for a Time of Pandemic –
Third Sunday of Easter

Do we Seek the Power of the Risen Jesus for Our Lives?

Daily life throws up many worries and challenges. These come from married and family life; from work and home routines; from financial, health and other hardships; from community life, along with peer and social pressures. We become aware of life worries and challenges from childhood.

These days we have the additional challenge of our lives being ‘reset’, as it were, because of the coronavirus. For some, the challenges have become extreme because of jobs lost, loneliness, grief because we cannot meet up with friends, financial security evaporating and relationships not sustaining pressures from regulations designed to protect people’s health.

We seek the power of the Risen Jesus for our lives through sacraments

Through miracles, Jesus showed from the start of his ministry that he offers people his power as the Son of God to help them in their lives. People could approach him to ask for this.

But he came, not just for the people of that time, but for the whole human race. Therefore, he gave us sacraments so that he could be approached forever in the future anywhere in the world.

A sacrament, therefore, is a means instituted by Jesus so that people can seek his power for their lives, which the Holy Spirit communicates to us. Different sacraments are for different life situations.

No sacrament is simply a religious devotion for the pious – a nice extra in the Christian life. Each is an encounter with the Risen Jesus for those seeking his power.

The sacraments are fundamental to Jesus’ teachings about Christianity as an empowering faith. It is not just a series of ethical teachings by a wise religious leader.

The disciples’ journey to Emmaus

Today’s Gospel is about coming to recognise the Risen Jesus through the most important of the sacraments, the Eucharist. The two parts of the story of the journey of the disciples to Emmaus relate to the two parts of the Eucharist – the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharistic Sacrifice.¹

Lack of training in how to draw on Christ’s power through the Eucharist

The Eucharist is not widely understood by Catholics these days. This is why most have given up its practice. Many simply say: ‘The Eucharist is not relevant to my life: I don’t need it.’ Some say also, ‘I don’t need the Eucharist to be a good person’ or ‘I don’t need the Eucharist to be a good Christian.’

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1346

Statements such as these reveal lack of appreciation for what the Risen Jesus offers believers today through the Eucharist for their daily lives, including their worries and challenges. Most importantly, they reveal lack of training in *how* to draw on what Jesus offers through the Eucharist.

Given it is more than likely that our loved ones, our friends and others will face new worries and challenges over coming months - and perhaps over coming years - it is important for us to encourage them to rethink their practice of not seeking Christ's guidance and power through the Mass for their daily lives.

The attitude of the disciples

The two disciples on the journey to Emmaus were deeply disillusioned just as many who have given up religious practice are disillusioned today. They were turning away from Jesus who had taught that ²

Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must renounce self and take up the cross every day and follow me.

For the two disciples, Jesus had been crucified and they wanted none of it! They had not understood what Jesus is about, and thought of him as a political liberator of Israel from Roman tyranny. ³ They were disillusioned because he did not fulfil their expectations.

The disciples did not believe Jesus is Risen, even though they had been told. ⁴ They would only have faith after they had actively experienced him personally.

Many who have given up religious practice today have been told that Jesus is Risen: that he gave us the Eucharist. But they cannot yet believe until they experience the Risen Lord through the Eucharist. To do this, they need to be able to draw on his power for their lives through this sacrament.

If they are to believe and seek the power of the Risen Jesus in the face of the worries and challenges of the coming months and years, we need to help them. This requires two basic steps:

- the first is to help them to appreciate what the Risen Jesus offers through the Liturgies of the Word
- the second is to help them to open their hearts to let in the Risen Jesus and all he is offering them through the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

² Luke 9:23

³ Luke 24:21

⁴ Luke 24:23

The Eucharist is a *thanks giving* sacrifice. It is the most important means for thanking God for all the blessings in our lives – the people who love us, prayers answered, guidance and help.

The Liturgy of the Word

In a time when people's lives are being turned upside down, the desire of the Risen Jesus who loves them to the point of death is *to give guidance*. He seeks to answer their questions, guide them through problems and help them to see through their confusion.

In the gospels, we read of him doing this, for example, for

- the rich young man who was struggling to find meaning in life ⁵
- the sibling concerned about his share of his late father's estate ⁶
- the Pharisees who asked why he ate with tax collectors and sinners ⁷
- his disciples who had difficulty in understanding his teachings. ⁸

The most important way the Risen Jesus offers guidance today is through liturgies of the Word. Through these liturgies, it is Jesus who, through the Holy Spirit, teaches through inner thoughts and insights which are *stirred as we reflect* upon how his Gospel *relates to our lives*.

As the Word of God and our lives connect, our hearts are moved so that, like the disciples walking with Jesus to Emmaus, we can say ⁹

Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?

If we fail to reflect, we will not recognise gradually the inner thoughts and then insights. It is by reflecting that people open themselves to the Spirit who leads them then to discover answers to their questions, guidance through their problems and direction through confusion.

There can be a flash of insight. But, more commonly, the guidance becomes clear in the quiet prayer time after the homily; during the coming week; or only when the situation for which they actually need answers, guidance or direction arrives.

Questions may be about marriage relationships, parenting or the purpose of going on living in times of frail health or years. Seeking guidance may relate to financial or employment challenges; whether someone is the right person to marry; or, for a teenager, what to do when they leave school.

Confusion may be about the secret to lasting relationships; direction in life; or the result of a life-changing event such as the death of a loved one or a divorce.

⁵ Mark 10:17-27

⁶ Luke 12:1`3

⁷ Mark 3:17

⁸ Mark 4:10

⁹ Luke 24:32

There are as many possibilities as people.

The ritual

To help us realise our need to be responsive if we are to hear the Spirit in our hearts, the ritual of liturgies of the Word are like a conversation:

- we listen to the first reading, which usually relates to the Gospel
- we respond with the Responsorial Psalm
- we listen to the second reading, which usually reminds us that we need to live the Christian life in practice
- we respond by standing and preparing to hear the Gospel with the Alleluia verse
- we listen to the Gospel and then to the homily, the purpose of which is to suggest how the Gospel might relate to our daily lives
- we pray in silence after the homily, reflecting upon what the Gospel message is calling for from our lives
- we respond by proclaiming the Apostles' Creed, which summarises the main teachings of Jesus
- we pray the Prayer of the Faithful.

The Liturgy of the Eucharistic Sacrifice

As well as seeking *guidance* for their lives, people approached Jesus in the gospels for the help of his *power* for their daily lives. He showed himself to be

- the Redeemer, the one who *frees* from sin, or all in their lives which is not from God's original creation
- the Saviour, the one who shares his divine life which *empowers* those who seek it to live his teachings, especially the more difficult ones.

People experienced Jesus' power in different ways. These included experiencing it as healing, freeing, enlightening, strengthening, consoling and forgiving.

And believers can experience his power in these ways today to the extent that they *offer their lives as he offers himself* in sacrifice to God the Father. These are examples of what we call the Paschal Mystery.

- *Paschal* refers to the time of the death and Resurrection of Jesus during the Jewish Passover
- *Mystery* refers to personal experiences of Christ¹⁰
 - *freeing* us from the power of sin by his death
 - *sharing* with us his divine life, which empowers us to live in his new way.

¹⁰ See Catechism of the Catholic Church 654

We offer our lives when we offer our daily life joys and sorrows; struggles and successes. These arise in our married and family lives; our work and recreation; our efforts to share the Gospel with our children and others; our parish activities and daily home routines.

Of particular importance are physical and psychological sufferings, such as loneliness. As we offer all our daily life experiences to God the Father in the Eucharist, we unite ourselves with Jesus as he offers himself in the Eucharist.

The ritual

As we know, there are many elements in the ritual of the Eucharistic sacrifice – too many to recall here. We know that

- the Risen Jesus becomes fully present as Redeemer and Saviour at the Consecration, when bread and wine become his Body and Blood
- we offer our lives to the Father with him, as he offers himself in sacrifice
- we complete our participation in his sacrifice as we receive Him in Holy Communion.

The Collect Prayer: Jesus is not present in the Eucharist in any passive sense

Jesus is present actively, offering himself to God the Father. But he is also offering us his redemptive and salvific power, if we will accept this for our daily lives.

We need to be like ‘miracles seekers’

Many who come to Mass fail to open their hearts to what the Risen Jesus seeks to offer them. Here, we need to remember two kinds of people in the gospels.

The first were the *miracle seekers*. These people placed before Jesus their needs, such as for healing. They experienced his power because their hearts were open to it.

The second were ‘miracle watchers’. These people just watched Jesus’ miracles for others, but never sought what he was offering for themselves.

To experience the power of the Risen Jesus through the Eucharist, we need to be like ‘miracles seekers’. On the other hand, we are like ‘miracle watchers’ if we come to Mass without the preparation or any thought to what we are seeking through Jesus.

The Prayer of Jesus

The Eucharist is the prayer of Jesus himself. We are called to participate. We do this by uniting our lives with him as he offers himself to God the Father in thanksgiving sacrifice.

The purpose for *what is referred to as the ‘sacred silence’* before the “Collect” prayer is for us to name what we are praying for in the particular Mass. Jesus then makes our prayers his own, which gives them infinite power.

Of course, our need to love means also that our prayers will never be completely self centred. We will have in mind others for whom we are praying as well.

The ritual

The prayer is called the ‘Collect’ because it ‘collects’, as it were, the prayers of all present for Jesus to make his own. (We cannot recall teachings of Jesus related to prayer now. Questions such as ‘why does my prayer seem not to be answered always?’ need to be addressed on another occasion).

It is after the priest invites ‘Let us pray’ that we need to place before Jesus our needs for answers to personal questions, guidance and consolation. We need too to place before him all whom we are praying for.

Conversation with Christ

Before helping others to understand *how* to seek Christ’s help through the Eucharist, we need to evaluate our own practice.

Let us pause now to reflect upon our own practice of preparing for Mass by forming the prayer intentions to place before the Risen Jesus.

And let us pray to him for the faith never to come to a Mass unprepared: to fail to do so would deny us the experience of the disciples going to Emmaus discovering Jesus ¹¹

... at the breaking of the bread.

Bishop Gerard Holohan

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¹¹ Luke 24:35