

“The Transformative Power of Altruistic Love”
Homily for the Second Sunday of Easter, Year “A”
April 19, 2020; St. Mary’s Cathedral

Introduction

The second Sunday of Easter this year finds us in good company, indeed, quite distinguished company: none less than the apostles themselves. As the Gospel reading for our Mass today indicates, during these days after the Resurrection the apostles, too, were “sheltering in place.” And, like us, it was to protect themselves: in their case, from those who had Jesus crucified, out of fear that those very ones would come after them, too, for being his disciples.

Handing Over the Spirit

But the similarity ends there. It is quite clear that they did not practice social distancing! In fact, in the gravest imaginable violation of the safety protocols under which we are currently operating, what does Jesus do after greeting the apostles? He breathes on them! We are now well aware of how problematic this is for us right now. We all now know that the virus can get into droplets of our breath, which can be communicated up to six feet away. In other words, something within me enters into you. And yet, this is exactly what is going on here.

Recall what he told them: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Jesus handed over the Spirit to them. This should still ring familiar in our ears, as the Friday before last, Good Friday, we heard St. John’s account of the Passion. In narrating the moment of Jesus’ death he says: “And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit.” And here we see *to whom* he is handing over the Spirit. Recall, too, what else our Lord says at this moment when he hands over the Spirit to his apostles: first, “as the Father has sent me, so I send you”; and then, “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

By his death on the Cross Jesus gives birth to the Church, something St. John makes very clear to us with another detail in his account of the death of our Lord: the blood and water that flowed from his pierced side, indicating the life-giving sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. Jesus shares something deep within him with the Church that he founded, through the ministry of the apostles and their successors who will carry on his mission.

Eucharistic Faith

And speaking of the Eucharist, this brings us to the other part of today’s Gospel story: the account of the so-called “doubting Thomas.” I say “so-called,” because, in reality, all of the apostles doubted. This is clear from all of the other post-resurrectional accounts. Perhaps that is why St. John makes a point to mention Thomas’ other name, “Didymus,” which means “twin”: Thomas was a twin of all of the apostles (or better yet, they were all twins of his). It was his encounter with the risen Christ that led him to faith. In that encounter, he saw Christ’s divinity that was lying hidden within the humanity of his body, and when he did so, he uttered the words that have become the profession of the Church’s Eucharistic faith: “My Lord and my God.” Notice how he personalizes it: “*my* Lord” and “*my* God.” Jesus is Lord and God, period, Lord and God of everyone and of the whole universe. But now there is a personal encounter leading to a personal relationship: it is no longer a theoretical abstraction, but a reality that is completely transformative and the guiding principle for all of life – every decision, every value, every instinct. But what is that brought about this transformative faith?

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” It was the power of Christ’s crucifixion: though innocent he submitted to the most horrendous death for us, even though there is nothing we could give him back for it and he had nothing to gain for himself. It was purely for love of us. What brought about Thomas’ transformative faith was the transformative power of altruistic love.

Living the Acts of the Apostles in the Home

We stand to learn many valuable lessons from all of this, and all the more so when we consider these lessons in the light of what we hear about the early Christian community in today’s first reading from the Acts of the Apostles: “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.”

This description of these first brothers and sisters of ours in the life of the Church should be the vision to strive for in the life of the domestic church in our own homes. The teaching of the apostles: if weeks of sheltering in place has you feeling stir crazy, then try spending some time learning more about our faith. As I’m fond of telling Confirmation candidates when I have the opportunity to celebrate this sacrament for them, we have 2,000 years of very smart and very holy people reflecting on the teachings of our Lord. Our faith gives us a ton of wisdom to mine from their insights; it is inexhaustible. While remaining at home, you can avail yourself of the many resources available through social media. If you haven’t already, this would be a good time to sign up for the Augustine Institute’s catechetical platform “Formed,” which we have been promoting here in the Archdiocese for many months now. In doing so you will have at the click of your fingers libraries worth of material on the faith – both in print form and in film.

And what about the communal life? Those first Christians also lived by the principle of altruistic love, for what else do we hear about them? They “had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need.” There are endless ways to live this out in the home, small acts of kindness and thoughtfulness for which you do not expect any kindness in return. As this builds up communion in the whole Church and furthers the preaching of the Good News, so it builds up the life of the domestic church. Having all things in common: that is exactly what is meant by communion – a sharing in spiritual and material goods.

Which leads us to “the breaking of bread and ... the prayers.” This is what lies at the heart of the Christian community, whether that community be the family of faith throughout the world, the family of faith that is the parish, or the family of faith that is the domestic church: worship and prayer. The inaccessibility to sacramental Communion for almost all of our people at this time is an opportunity to renew our Eucharistic faith. “My Lord and my God”: classic Catholic devotion has us whisper these words at the elevation of the sacred host and the chalice during the consecration at Mass. Do we really see with the eyes of faith? Do we see Christ’s Body and Blood lying hidden within the appearances of bread and wine, or are we a doubting twin? Through this sacrament he appears to us, making his sacrifice present to us, as he appeared to his apostles after his Resurrection with all of the wounds of his crucifixion. This is the only truly pure act of altruistic love, and as it transformed the apostles from fear to boldly proclaiming the Gospel, so it can transform us, but only when we personalize it, when it takes over our life and is the guiding principle of all that we say, do and are.

Conclusion

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Let me conclude with just one more lesson, and perhaps the most needed at this time. What is the first word out of our Lord's mouth when he addresses his apostles after his Resurrection? Peace. He greets them with peace: "Peace be with you." And to drive the point home, he says it again: "Peace be with you." Many families find peace elusive at this time, in the midst of economic uncertainty, food instability, threat of eviction or actually having been evicted, caring for ill relatives, and so many other hardships. For many, there is cause to be fearful – as the apostles themselves were fearful. But love conquers all, and altruistic love transforms fear into peace.

That peace becomes real when we imitate the altruistic love of our Lord, giving without expecting anything in return. This is the lesson the apostles finally learned and lived out; this is the lesson to which our first ancestors in the Christian faith bore witness. It is a love that comes from a personal encounter with the risen Lord, when the idea of faith is no longer just an idea, but a lived reality, conditioning and determining all of our thoughts, actions, priorities, values, decisions, attitudes, and even our very instincts. Christ is risen, he is alive, and he has conquered death and sadness. Together in him, sharing communion as members of his Body under him who is our head, his love will conquer all, transforming our fear and sadness into hope and peace.