

April 18, 2021 Can We Recognize Him Homily: In my childhood and late adolescence I was raised on a steady diet of television crime drama fare. My personal favorite was “Kojak”, featuring the legendary actor, Telly Savalas in the role of a police Lieutenant. In a scene that turns up frequently in many of the episodes a detective is in possession of a photograph. It may be the image of a victim or key suspect. He shows the photograph to a potential witness and asks, “Do you recognize the person in this photograph?” Progress in the case can only be made if the person is indeed recognized and ultimately identified as the perpetrator of the crime. Face recognition is crucial in solving a case!

In the gospel accounts of the Resurrection appearances, the disciples consistently failed to recognize Jesus.

On Easter morning, Mary of Magdala thought he was a gardener; the disciples on the way to Emmaus thought he was a lonely traveler, an unrecognized stranger; the disciples on the seashore thought he was a beachcomber.

In John’s gospel we read, “As day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach, yet the disciples did not know it was Jesus”; and in today’s gospel the disciples were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost.

What was needed for the disciples to recognize the risen Christ? Clearly it was a gesture or word. Jesus said to his unsuspecting disciples, “Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have”. (Lk. 24:29-30)

They see his wounds in his hands and feet; they touch him; they dine with him; they recognize him in the breaking of the bread.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church sheds light on this profound mystery:

“By means of touch and the sharing of a meal the risen Christ establishes direct contact with his disciples. He invites them in this way to recognize that he is not a ghost and above all to verify that the risen body in which he appeared to Thomas is the same body that had been tortured and crucified, for it still bears the marks of the Passion.” (#685)

Why is it so hard to recognize Jesus today? Do we see the presence of the Risen Christ in others, and in ourselves? Are we conscious that Jesus’ resurrected body is a foretaste and promise of what God intends for all of us?

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a canonized saint of the Church, once told the following story about one of her sisters, a Missionary of Charity:

“One day, one of our sisters picked up a man from the street, and in lifting him up, his skin remained on the footpath. The sister took him home but it took her a long time to care for him, for his body was full of worms. After two or three hours, he died with the most wonderful smile on his face. I asked the sister: ‘What did you feel when you were touching that body? When you were touching so closely?’”

“She said: ‘Mother, I’ve never before felt the presence of Christ, but really, really, I was sure, I was touching his body.’”

Another time Mother Teresa came to the aid of a man dying on a city street. Upon opening his eyes, he caught a glimpse of the nun. He asked her, “Are you Jesus?” She smiled and replied, “No, but I do try to imitate him in my life.”

Joy is the touchstone of the Catholic faith. Let us recall that after recognizing the risen Christ in their midst, the Evangelist Luke writes, “they were incredulous for joy and were amazed”. (Lk. 24:41)

Alleluia!