

Second Sunday of Easter: The Power to Conquer Doubts

During the Lent to Pentecost cycle, the Church presents the community with instructions to be given to those coming into the faith. The reason for this is not just to instruct the catechumens, as they were during Lent, or the neophytes, as they are properly called during the Easter season, but to encourage all of the people to return to the fundamentals of being a Christian. Therefore, the catechumens are presented with basics such as the Creed and Our Father and our scrutinized regarding their desire to leave a world that has rejected the Lord. This message was a reminder for all of us. During Easter time, the newly baptized or neophytes are encouraged to stand up for the faith, to withstand attacks to the faith, to incorporate their faith in every aspect of their lives. This period is called the mystagogia.

This Sunday's gospel reading tackles a problems that the neophytes most probably must face. But this is also a problem that effects all of us: the problem of doubting our faith. The gospel reading reminds us that faith is trusting in God, not finding physical proofs. If you notice, those in the gospel who are gifted with the appearance of the Resurrected Savior are those who already, to some degree or other, have faith in Jesus. He doesn't appear to strangers. Perhaps the best symbol of the Resurrection is the empty tomb. Those who have faith in Jesus are called now to believe that he has been raised from the dead as he said. The very Empty Tomb is not a proof of faith but a call to faith. It is a sign that reality has been transformed.

This is the ideal for which we strive. However, we happen to be human. We are not just spiritual, we are physical. Most of our knowledge comes from the physical side of our nature. We see, hear, touch, etc then we evaluate. Faith does not provide this. Faith demands that we subordinate our physical, scientific capabilities to our spiritual side. Our belief in the Word of God that Jesus has transformed reality takes primacy over whether we can see, feel, heal or touch any sort of change in reality.

It is easy to understand why there is a lot of doubting Thomas in each of us. We are called to believe in the Resurrection of someone we have never seen. We are called to believe that he lives in the Church and in each of us. We are called to let our faith gift us with a new knowledge not available to our senses.

How can we do this? How can we just ignore our demands for physical proofs in favor of simple trusting in the Lord?

"And Jesus said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" God himself is within us. He gives us the strength to trust him, to have faith. He gives us the strength to transform challenges to our faith, doubts, into ways of growing in faith.

As long as we are alive we will have doubts in faith. These doubts might be regarding the dogmas of the faith, morality, the Church, or even the very existence of God and his goodness.

Doubts in faith begins for most people in their pre-teen and teen years. At this stage of our lives we are learning adult thought processes. Adults can think abstractly. Children can only think concretely. Adults can think about a thought. Children can only think about something they can visualize. Children need stories to point to truths. Adults need explanations. When a person begins thinking like an adult, he or she needs to view faith from an adult perspective not a childish perspective. That's why it is perfectly normal for pre-teens and teens to question the faith. As I often tell them, you really are not questioning God or questioning the faith, you are seeking God. And that is good. Still, their doubts and all our doubts when we went through this stage of development wear on them and us.

Another time of doubts in faith comes when tragedy strikes, as it does strike all of us. It is human and natural for us to be tempted to challenge God. It is normal and natural of us to demand that He explain why such a terrible thing has happened. We don't understand life and we want to understand life. In times of tragedy we have to shore up our faith by praying like the man did in the Gospel of Luke, "Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief." Or, like Thomas did in our Gospel for today, "You are my Lord and my God."

Sometimes people will ask me and other priests, "Will God forgive me for doubting Him?" This is Divine Mercy Sunday. The compassion and love of our Savior is so great that He sees our hurt, not the results of our pain. He gave us the Holy Spirit. St. Paul wrote that without the Holy Spirit we could not even call on the name of the Lord. In times of doubts, we have to remember that it is the Holy Spirit within us who gives us the strength to believe.

So, to all the recently baptized, and to all the baptized, to all who are tempted to doubt because it is part of the human condition to doubt, to all of us, the Church reminds us today, "Blessed are those who have not seen but believe."