

DOMINICA PASCHÆ IN RESURRECTIONE DOMINI

Litteræ Ministri Generalis Ordinis Fratrum Minorum 2018



THEIR EYES WERE OPENED, AND THEY RECOGNIZED HIM!

Lk 24:31

Dear brothers,

May the presence of the Risen Lord
bring you joy!

This year the Order holds its Plenary Council in Nairobi, and at the heart of this meeting will be the theme of *listening*. In order for us to have a creative understanding of what the Word of the Lord is saying to us in daily events and in our lives as friars, active listening is essential. I thought that my letter should be written in that spirit, and that the limitless springs of the Word could provide us with some key biblical texts, leading us to deeper insight into the mystery of the Resurrection — and especially how this foundational event impacts the life of every believer.

Lent has given us many important ways of understanding our journey towards Easter. Each Sunday we have listened to passages that show God's commitment in bringing salvation to a people that the Scriptures themselves call hardheaded. In addition, the liturgy of the Second Sunday of Lent in the New Testament account of the Transfiguration of the Lord, offers a glimpse of the glorious splendor of the Son, a glory he shares with those who believe in him. But this splendor will not be ours without first facing a trial that is painful and difficult — our death. I'd like to focus first on this passage because it clearly shows a situation of confusion, bafflement, and even bewilderment on the part of the three disciples that had accompanied Jesus. Most notably, Peter wishes for a state of well-being that is in direct contrast with what Jesus had previously declared: "*whoever wishes to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake and that of the Gospel will save it*" (Mk. 8:35).

In his version, Mark the evangelist emphasizes the discouragement and confusion that the disciples experienced following their being told about the passion and death of Jesus. We see something of the same incomprehension in the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They think they have understood what has happened in Jerusalem, but Jesus considers them to have been *foolish and slow of heart* (Cf. Lk 24:25). The Transfiguration story highlights the act of *listening* — when Jesus is transfigured before them, a voice comes from the cloud, "*This is my beloved Son. Listen to him*" (Mk 9:7). This command drives home the idea that the power of death and the torment of the cross cannot defeat the mission that the Savior and Messiah has undertaken; rather, this sacrifice will become an emblem of victory proclaiming the defeat of death (Cf. 1Cor 15:55). Here, listening means choosing as Jesus chose, accepting the way he points to, following him (Cf. Mk 8:34) on a path that initially is not glorious, nor full of interest, but which will bring fullness of life — a path that leads to an authentic life of love, peace, and communion with all people.

Continuing the theme of listening, I would like to consider a second passage, that of the post-resurrection encounter of Jesus with the two disciples at Emmaus (Cf. Lk 24:13-35). This is a fascinating, beautifully written account, composed with the aim of being a lesson describing the path undertaken by disciples who are in the process of learning to recognize the Risen Lord.

The Gospel accounts of the Resurrection appearances are varied and different as regards form, style, and method, but they are consistent in underlining that it was not easy to recognize the Risen Lord — even for the disciples who

actually knew Jesus. The evangelists agree on the fact that when the disciples met the Risen Jesus, they were in doubt and they could not be sure of who he was because they were not seeing him as they had seen him a few days previously when they had seen him in the flesh and as an historical person. The Risen Lord is the same, but also completely different.

The Evangelist Luke accentuates the idea that it is not sufficient to see Jesus to believe in the Risen Lord. What is necessary is to undertake an intelligent process of understanding the Scriptures, accompanied by Jesus himself, in order to come to a real recognition of his presence. In other words, it is through meditation on the Scriptures and their application to Jesus that a conviction of the truth of the Resurrection emerges in the believing community.

Easter faith is not just the result of seeing with one's eyes, but of rethinking the Scriptures and seeing that they are fulfilled in the person of the Risen Lord. Vision alone is not enough because the apparition itself does not bring conviction; instead, conviction comes about through an explanation of the Scriptures that leads to a growing and maturing faith. Paul asserts this in the letter to the Romans: *But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach?* (Rom 10:14).

Luke sets the scene as occurring in the afternoon as the sun is setting. The disciples are headed toward Emmaus on a downhill road. They are going back home, touched by sadness and wanting to retreat into a private setting more suited to their sense of failure and disappointment. They are returning because they feel they've made a mistake, they have wasted this period of their lives. They had followed this personality, Jesus, hoping it would be he who would save Israel, but instead it has all ended tragically. At a certain point, Jesus joins them and walks at their side. The two disciples, who must have known Jesus very well because they had been with him for a long time, are now unable to recognize him. How so?

After the Risen Lord physically approaches the disciples, he initiates a further approach,

asking *What are you discussing?* (Lk. 24:16) Jesus' pedagogy is to draw them out by asking the question — he does not reveal himself immediately, because recognition of the Risen Christ is a process. To paraphrase his question, what Jesus is saying is: *what is in your heart, what is motivating you?* His question elicits a long reply from the two disciples that is instructive and superior in its tone, and in which they seek to verbalize the failure they are experiencing at that particular moment. But this is the reason that they do not recognize him; they are convinced they know more than the traveler they have just met.

It is important to notice a detail in the fact that the evangelist has portrayed two disciples, but only Cleopas is named. Who could the other be? Taking into account the narrative structure of biblical accounts, we can assume that the narrator has left a space for the reader to feel involved and to occupy a place within the story. So, the other disciple is me, you, or any believer who accepts this message. Many other details in these texts could be underlined, but rather than trying to examine them in full, I would prefer to ask a question: are we friars of the present time convinced and able to recognize the Risen Lord who walks along the way with us?

I have had the privilege of visiting Entities in our Order and I can say with confidence that the great majority of our brothers and sisters witness in their lives to the Resurrection of the Lord. However, I have also noted that in some places there is still some "noise" (from outside and from within) that hinders the intention of listening to the Lord. This din prevents us from embarking on a process of profound discernment similar to the one experienced by the two disciples in the story, when they understood that they had shared a sublime Eucharistic moment of salvation with Jesus.

Looking at these Gospel accounts, I see a dual risk. On the one hand, when we have to face adversities both fear and confusion induce us to stay in our "comfort zones", thus avoiding choosing the way of the cross proposed by Jesus. It is as if we try to spare ourselves from pain in order to experience a state of spurious wellbeing

that leads us to give priority to our own goals, while we leave God's plans in the background.

On the other hand, we can adopt the approach initially taken by the two disciples in the Emmaus story. This is the attitude of those who believe that they know everything and that their role is to educate others — to the point of even promoting pessimism and discouragement, without stopping for a moment to listen to the other. Now and then it pains me to come into contact with situations where friars suffer the consequences of a lack of communication in local and provincial fraternities. It further convinces me that people who are “puffed up” with themselves are not capable of creating space to listen to the voice of another person. They are unable to quiet the many voices that speak simultaneously, unable to give priority to the silence that provides the space to listen to God and to read the signs of the times with daring as well as wisdom. And when their plans do not work out as intended, then trouble really strikes, and they find themselves in the same position as the disciples on the road to Emmaus — facing disappointment, failure, desolation; wanting to give up, to retreat and forget everything. Because we believed we were at the center of everything, we removed Jesus, the true foundation of every project, and so we see the collapse of our personal projects.

The Resurrection event cannot be reduced to the contemplation of a dead person coming back to life. The Resurrection transcends the physical dimension and through the effects it produces leads us to an experience of authentic salvation, just as the first-generation disciples experienced it. Luke the Evangelist insists that the Risen Lord can only be recognized when we walk with him,

while he teaches and opens up the Scriptures to us, and especially when we sit at table with him sharing the bread that is broken. *Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him*, says the text, to emphasize that despite their foolishness, after having walked the way with him, they managed to rediscover the new presence of the Risen Lord. This is the good news that the Gospel itself proclaims: we too will be able to overcome every temptation to self-absorption or skepticism if we practice listening to God and our brothers — if we are able to understand with our hearts and minds the revealed Word that is handed on to us. In St. Francis, we have an obvious example of a person who, in the company of with his brothers and the poor, walks the Gospel way and whose heart is full of joy because he recognizes the One who transformed his life for good.

Let me end this letter with the words with which we were gifted by Pope Francis in his Lenten letter this year. “During the Easter Vigil, we will celebrate once more the moving rite of the lighting of the Easter candle. Drawn from the “new fire”, this light will slowly overcome the darkness and illuminate the liturgical assembly. “May the light of Christ rising in glory dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds” and enable all of us to relive the experience of the disciples on the way to Emmaus. By listening to God's word and drawing nourishment from the table of the Eucharist, may our hearts be ever more ardent in faith, hope and love.” (*Message of the Holy Father Francis for Lent 2018*)

I wish you all a blessed and Happy Easter. May you journey in a spirit of listening and discernment, thus living a life renewed in Christ.

Rome, 29 March 2018

Holy Thursday



Fr. Michael Anthony Perry, OFM
Br. Michael Anthony Perry, OFM
Minister general and servant