

January 23, 2011

Third Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus "in the days of His flesh" (5:7), he does not refer to the Incarnation. He refers, rather, to the eternal Word's voluntary subjection to man's fallen state; he means the time of Jesus' earthly life, which ended in His death. The "days of His flesh" does not include the life of the risen Christ.

Yet, the risen Christ is still "in the flesh" in the sense that He exists in His body. He can tell the disciples, "Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have" (Luke 24:39). Through the massive disruption of His descent into the realm of death and His Resurrection from it, there persisted the personal identity of the one Christ. The body that rose is the same body that had died: "What is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power" (1 Corinthians 15:42-43). The risen Jesus is, in short, the same Jesus.

In the course of forty days, Jesus was not only seen by the disciples, He also conversed with them. He communicated with them in ordinary speech, very much as He had done in the days of His public ministry. For this reason, it is appropriate that our reflections on "Jesus in the flesh" should include some consideration of that time during which "He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs" (Acts 1:3). Certain stories of the risen Jesus call out for examination in this respect.

Although the Resurrection of Christ was the most important event in history, there were no eyewitnesses to it, and, consequently, we have no description of it.

What we have, rather, are the testimonies of those who saw and heard Jesus--- and even touched Him---in His risen state. These accounts, analyzed from a literary and theological perspective, appear to fall into two categories.

The first category may be called kerygmatic and probative. That is to say, some of the post-Resurrection references seem to have come from the Christian apologetic witness to the world. This is why, in these stories, there is a great deal of emphasis on the reliability of eyewitness testimony, much as there might be in a courtroom. Such accounts stress the perceived physical reality of the Resurrection in documentable terms. This forensic testimony must be clear and unmistakable, emphasizing the identity of the risen Jesus beyond doubt.

Indeed, before the Gospels were composed there was already an official list of qualified witnesses well known among the early Christians: "I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received . . . that He rose again according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, and then by the twelve; after that He was seen by more than five hundred brethren at once. . . . After that He was seen by James, then by all the Apostles. And last of all He was seen by me" (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). One observes here the heavy emphasis on apostolic authority; in the main, the people listed in this text were official spokesmen for the Church. They were the established witnesses, to the world, of the Lord's Resurrection (cf. also Acts 1:21-22).

We find this eyewitness emphasis in a few Gospel accounts (Luke 24:36-43; John 21:24-29). This phenomenon is rare, nonetheless, and in the Gospels the apologetic interest is rather muted, on the whole. For example, none of the evangelists describes the apparition of the risen Lord to either Peter or James alone, or to the "more than five hundred brethren at once."

In general the interest and concern of the four Gospels is less apologetic and more theological and devotional. What we have in the Gospels are the cherished memories of that first Paschal morning and the delirious ensuing days of the new spring. Here we learn of Mary Magdalene's sentient recognition of Jesus' voice speaking her own name, the mysterious experience of the two disciples along the road and at the inn, and that morning encounter at the lakeside, where Jesus served breakfast to those fishermen who had toiled all through the night. We see Thomas's trembling finger extended to touch the wounded hand of the Savior. We behold the Lord's feet embraced by the myrrh-bearing women who lie prostrate in adoration before Him.

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