

PART THREE: A CHANGE OF HEART

REV. PETER ARMENIO

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

We continue our walk with Jesus to Emmaus. Going to Emmaus, as we've contemplated, signifies a lack of hope, a sadness, a disillusionment. And, as is the case with virtually every gospel character that Jesus draws to himself, that a change of heart begins with an encounter with Jesus. It doesn't begin with an immediate exhortation to examine one's conscience or a reprimand as a consequence of reading into someone's heart, let alone a guilt trip. Jesus doesn't begin by moralizing. Every encounter is kind of folksy, seems almost accidental - Jesus runs into somebody, that encounter generates a conversation, conversation segues into a deep act of repentance, either explicitly narrated or implicitly stated. And as we were contemplating in this particular gospel, this very special Easter season gospel, that this walk to and from Emmaus back to Jerusalem is an allegory of discipleship, of Christian encounter with Christ, repentance, conversation with him, change of heart, and an energetic desire or zeal to announce the Resurrection to others.

In this particular time of prayer, the theme is on change of heart, repentance. We continue reading this narrative: "While they were talking and discussing- discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?' And they stood still looking sad. Then one of them named Cleopas answered him, 'Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?'" So, Jesus prompts a conversation and obviously knows what happened in Jerusalem because he is the protagonist of the events in Jerusalem. And so, he gets them to talk and perhaps there was a bit of consternation, maybe impatience, since this was very much the talk of the whole region, the talk of the town - this alleged Messiah has died on the cross.

But Jesus gets them to talk. They could have rejected him. They could have given into their deep despair and made it very clear to this mysterious companion, we don't walk to speak, we don't want to talk about this. But no, they answer his question and there's a certain attraction they have to this mysterious person. They don't recognize he's the Resurrected Jesus and they- but they continue to speak with him. And he said to them, what things, and now they just unload. And he said to them- and they said to him, excuse me, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this it is now the third day since this

happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb in the morning and did not find his body. They came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see.”

So they open up, and it requires a bit of meditational digesting or perceiving. Well, they didn't believe the women. They didn't believe the predictions Jesus made that he would rise from the dead. He- they did not trust him - they were impressed with them, they loved him – but, they didn't trust in his words, didn't trust in him that he would come back to life. And so, they're not returning to Emmaus brimming with joy that the women discovered that the body was not in the tomb. No, they were dejected. And this emptiness, this sadness, this interior restlessness, these are symptoms of an absence of Christ. The actions of leaving Jerusalem, of disbelieving the women, is geographically an alienation of Christ. They're leaving the locale of the redemption. They're- they've dismissed the message delivered to them by the women which corroborates what the Lord said in predicting his Passion and Resurrection.

They're undergoing interior pain. I'm sure what caught Jesus' attention when he was walking with them was they were anything but cheerful. And in a certain sense, using an idea of St. John Paul, in his encyclical on the Holy Spirit, that sin consists in a disbelief in Christ and his message. What is sin? What is the collective sin of our modern world, modern society? It is an absence of Christ. He's not there. In my priestly ministry, I noticed that joy does not rest on what the world would call success, attractive appearance, material security, good health - it doesn't rest on that. I've seen happy people that are happy over what the world could never understand, even though humanly speaking, they may appear to have motives of disenchantment. They are happy, why? Because they are in the presence of Christ. Their main passion, their mission statement, is to seek out Christ. And the opposite also is true. People who are talented, perhaps wealthy, have experience of achievement, popularity - these people, many times, are very sad. And it's not a clinical depression, but sad because they're unfulfilled, they're left unfilled, and they become more and more desperate and empty because they've looked for fulfillment in the wrong way, in the wrong, partial good. A lot of it's sensual indulgence or gratification. Others cast about with ceaseless, frenetic activity, loading up their schedule, glutting themselves with every sort of experience under the guise of time management. Other people place a high premium in health, in appearance, working out - nothing wrong with that, working out, that is, as long as appearance and shape and health doesn't become an absolute good. Others, many, simply are indifferent towards God. Many feel wrongly so that feeling does not match deeper sentiments that they're fine that they don't know Jesus is God. They- that Jesus doesn't exist for them. And to a man, to a woman, they're empty. There's that restlessness inside and they can't put their finger on it, but they're looking for that fulfillment.

St. Augustine could have been a character of the 21st century - kind of a star, achieved greatness as a student, as a literary figure, came from a wealthy home, experienced in sensual indulgence, had a mistress from the age of sixteen to practically to the time of his conversion, had nothing to do with Christian faith in spite of his mother's overtures, and he went a long time alienated from God. And he came to the profound

conclusion - one of the most famous statements of the ancient tradition of the Church - "Lord, our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Going back to Emmaus... what is the trajectory of conversion? What is it? It involves first a conversation with Christ and perhaps a blind act of faith like these characters of the trek towards Emmaus where they had to, in a sense, make a little decision - are we going to talk to this person, are we going to open up, are we going to talk about our inner sentiments or the cause of this profound sadness? And they talk about it. They speak about what happened and that they left Jerusalem because their hopes have been dashed. They've decided implicitly, not through dislike of Jesus, that now they will leave his message, his promise behind, they'll go Christ-less. They've opted to not give those predictions, those promises of Christ a chance. They've chosen to ignore these women who found an empty tomb just as Jesus had predicted. And in a certain sense, they're overcome with grief because of this absence.

So, Jesus always begins a conversion with a conversation. With St. Peter, at - I was going to say the breakfast table - but at the- on the shores- on the shore of Galilee where he's grilling fish, he has a conversation with him. Do you love me, son of John? Do you love me more than the others? Conversation that leads to an examination of conscience and repentance. The Samaritan Woman - Jesus asks her, give me a drink. He's thirsty, he's exhausted. He doesn't have the energy to go into town to buy provisions, though what- the real motive was to make this woman one of his disciples. And they engage in a conversation, and it is through conversation you see your interlocutor's goodness. It's through words that a bond of love, a bond of confidence arises.

So, she enters into a conversation like these two disciples of Emmaus. And in the course of the conversation, they sense an attraction, they've never been recipients of that exquisite, unadulterated, unconditional kindness, affection, mercy, compassion, love. And, the more they were in their presence- in his presence, the more these different characters opened up - whether it's Zacchaeus who climbed up a tree and Jesus caught sight of him and came to his house for dinner or supper; Peter the Apostle at the shores of Galilee; John and James when John the Baptist introduced those two disciples to Christ. Where do you live? They spent an afternoon with him.

So, change of heart, commitment to holiness, always begins with this conversation with Jesus whom we need to deal with through faith. We don't see him; we don't have visions. Many times in our prayer we don't sense that I've touched his presence. Maybe we have, maybe we haven't. But it's not the determining factor of whether our prayer is effective. And what does Jesus do? Okay, now the conversation takes a turn. First, he wants them to speak and open up. He's extremely interested in their plight. And, he wants them to open up and after he opens up, now Jesus helps them to examine themselves. And in a chummy way, he says the following: "Oh foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Why have you alienated yourself for me in light of all those prophecies?" I heard a book on tape a number of years ago that there's 457 prophecies concerning Jesus. So, that's a lot. "Oh foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary that Christ should suffer these things and enter into

his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”

So, “they drew near to the village in which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, ‘Stay with us for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.’” So, the conversation, this particular conversation, results in a deep enlightenment of the mind, the heart, the conscience - he is trying to provoke repentance. You should have believed; you should not have doubted the power of the Cross.

And so, what is an examination of conscience? Well, again, it- it has to be connected with- with Christ. That’s very important. I have to see my sins and my weaknesses as barriers between myself and a friendship with Christ. So, I have to see it in that light and need to ward off, with the help of grace, the temptations of the Great Accuser, either trying to persuade us that my sins are special or persuade us that I can’t rummage back into my past life and cough up this particular sin that I do not want anybody to know of. I don’t even want to bring it to the forefront of my mind. Or, my wrongdoings have been such that there’s no hope left for me, or the false humility of Simon Peter when he caught that boatload of fish and thought, maybe Jesus doesn’t know what he’s doing in calling me to be the leader of the Apostles - depart from me, Lord, for I- for I am a sinful man.

At times, very good people, more of the younger people, want this supernatural catharsis and they want to be liberated of their sins. They want to have an intimate relationship with Christ. They want to really seek him out effectively and get rid of those barriers. And the Holy Spirit is prompting this, but they’re held back a little bit. What will the confessor think of them? And, I tell with my penitence, with a bit of tongue and cheek, with a strain of seriousness, and maybe I can speak for all priests, we hear lots of confessions - we’ve heard it all. That’s not bragging. Sin is kind of unoriginal. Sanctity is original. Healing is original. Conversion is original. Sin is not. And in themselves, they’re boring. If I didn’t know that- or if I was not aware that this sacrament of reconciliation heals and restores spiritual life and moral life, I wouldn’t hear a confession again because sins are boring. But the Great Accuser even tempts us to be- to fall into some pride regarding our sins. My sins are special. I can’t say those sins. Nobody else sins like me. I’m special in the way I sinned.

That’s totally absurd. And maybe we have to talk to ourselves in the presence of God. Come on, even in my sinfulness do I have to be so proud? All these characters, and we’re probably encouraged, not in a sick way, that at least the characters in Jesus’ public life are for the most part pretty sinful. It’s a different story in his infancy narratives. John, who writes beautiful words concerning love, concerning the new commandment of charity, but he’s called Son of Thunder. He and his brother wanted Jesus to completely destroy a town in Samaria because they wouldn’t let them pass through. They didn’t seem to get Jesus’ exhortations on mercy and love and service. He- Jesus starts on the wrong foot with his first pope. The pope is supposed to profess the faith and defend the faith, and what does he do? He swears up and down angrily that he has nothing to do with Jesus. Thomas can’t get himself to believe in the Resurrection even though he should.

He- it was predicted. It was promised. Other people attest to it. He won't believe. Demas is on the cross next to him on his right for pretty serious crimes. Zacchaeus is an extortioner and con-artist, and he is going to restore what he stole, what he defrauded people from fourfold. Matthew the same thing. He was scorned upon by his own people because he was a traitor - not a traitor in money, but a traitor with a "t", working for the Romans, skimming off the top, extorting money from his own people to placate the Romans and to make a profit. Some of the Holy Women led checkered pasts at least in terms of numbers. The Samaritan Woman who had married five times and living with a man at the time she met Our Lord, empties out of her town and brings him to the feet of Jesus. So, we- a good disciple is a good repenter. These disciples repented. They could have said, well, I appreciate what you said, but we're still adamant in alienating ourselves, distancing ourselves from all that was taught us for the past few years. Or, he could have said, let's not talk about his subject anymore.

And so, they have this change of heart that we'll see in subsequent meditations on account of examining themselves, admitting to this mysterious companion that they were wrong, that they disbelieved, that they shouldn't be returning to Emmaus, but rather, their place is Jerusalem and beyond. What resolution can I make in order to have a change of heart, to capture the peace and joy of Jesus? With the help of Jesus speaking to him in a very simple way, heartfelt way, genuine way, and we see simply to help- help us to repent and identify what may be a barrier between ourselves and him. And we want it- and he will talk to us, he will let us know. Is it a mediocre life that is a barrier? Which it- which can be. Is it self-indulgence of some form? That's why the Lord is glorified by the humble and contrite heart. That's why he's glorified by the prayer of the publican.

So, let's ask that from Our Lord. Let's examine ourselves and make a good confession. And that's such a merciful way of forgiving us, that we speak to God but through another person, a priest. And we all have the experience - what a difference that makes that we say to a person, it gives us a great contrition, a greater experience of humility, and wins us many graces, and we actually encounter Christ, the peace of Christ, the healing of Christ. And when we do that, we're ready for serious discipleship.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you've communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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