

WE ARE Witnesses

EASTER RESOURCE • YEAR C

Easter Sunday

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Then Peter began to speak to them ... 'the word which spread throughout Judaea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John announced: Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went around doing good and healing all who were held in the power of the devil, because God was with him. Now we are witnesses to everything he did throughout the countryside of Judaea and in Jerusalem ... We ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He has commanded us to announce to the people and to bear witness that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets bear witness to this, that all who believe in him receive forgiveness of sins through his name.' (Acts 10:34, 37-43).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

The Catechism speaks about 'witness' in the context of the Eighth Commandment: not to bear false witness against our neighbours.

'The duty of Christians to take part in the life of the Church impels them to act as *witnesses of the Gospel* and of the obligations that flow from it. This witness is a transmission of the faith in words and deeds. Witness is an act of justice that establishes the truth or makes it known' (CCC §2472).



Christ's appearance to the apostles, by A N Mironov (2021).

Exploring the faith

You may have heard the quote attributed to St Francis of Assisi: 'Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.' The sentiment is understandable, although there is no evidence St Francis ever said this. Additionally, the Catholic tradition reveres the spoken word in evangelisation as much as it does action. The Catechism itself says that 'witness is a transmission of the faith in words and deeds' (CCC §2472). Having encountered and come to believe in the risen Lord, we must both live the faith and share it openly with others, with gentleness and courage, clarity and conviction.

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This responsibility—an aspect of justice—rests with all the baptised. Lay, ordained, or religious, the calling is the same even if how we live it out is different. According to the Second Vatican Council, each of us share in the priestly, prophet, and kingly offices of Christ so as to advance his kingdom throughout the world.

Reading from *Lumen gentium*

34. The supreme and eternal Priest, Christ Jesus, since he wills to continue his witness and service also through the laity, vivifies them in this Spirit and increasingly urges them on to every good and perfect work.

For besides intimately linking them to His life and His mission, He also gives them a sharing in His priestly function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God and the salvation of men. For this reason the laity, dedicated to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvellously called and wonderfully prepared so that ever more abundant fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavours, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become ‘spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (1 Pt 2:4-5). Together with the offering of the Lord’s body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.

35. Christ, the great Prophet, who proclaimed the Kingdom of His Father both by the testimony of His life and the power of His words, continually fulfills His prophetic office until the complete manifestation of glory. He does this not only through the hierarchy who teach in His name and with His authority, but also through the laity whom He made His witnesses and to whom He gave understanding of the faith (*sensus fidei*) and an attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life. They conduct themselves as children of the promise, and thus strong in faith and in hope they make the most of the present, and with patience await the glory that is to come. Let them not, then, hide this hope in the depths of their hearts, but even in the program of their secular life let them express it by a continual conversion and by wrestling ‘against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness’ (Eph 6:12).

...

36. Christ, becoming obedient even unto death and because of this exalted by the Father, entered into the glory of His kingdom. To Him all things are made subject until He subjects Himself and all created things to the Father that God may be all in all. Now Christ has communicated this royal power to His disciples that they might be constituted in royal freedom and that by true penance and a holy life they might conquer the reign of sin in themselves. Further, He has shared this power so that serving Christ in their fellow men they might by humility and patience lead their brethren to that King for whom to serve is to reign. But the Lord wishes to spread His kingdom also by means of the laity, namely, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace. In this kingdom creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God. Clearly then a great promise and a great trust is committed to the disciples: ‘All things are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s’ (1 Cor 3:21-22).

Questions for reflection

- » The apostles were powerful witnesses because they ‘ate and drank’ with Jesus after his resurrection. They knew him personally. How well do you know Jesus? How important do you think a personal relationship with Jesus is for evangelisation?
- » What about this reading from *Lumen gentium* stands out to you? Why?
- » Have you ever thought about your calling as being *priestly*, *prophetic*, and *kingly*? How can you live these callings out in your own life and circumstances?

WE ARE Witnesses

EASTER RESOURCE • YEAR C

2nd Sunday of Easter

DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY

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By the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. One in heart, they all used to meet in the Portico of Solomon. No one else dared to join them, but the people were loud in their praise and those who came to believe in the Lord continued to increase, great numbers of both men and women, so that the sick were even taken out into the street and laid on beds and mats in the hope that at least the shadow of Peter might fall across some of them as he went past. People even came crowding in from the towns round about Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and all of them were cured. (Acts 5:12-16).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

'In this age of the Church Christ now lives and acts in and with his Church, in a new way appropriate to this new age. He acts through the sacraments ... the communication (or "dispensation") of the fruits of Christ's Paschal mystery in the celebration of the Church's sacramental liturgy' (CCC §1076).

Exploring the faith

The readings this Sunday are strikingly physical. In the Gospel, Jesus shows the disciples his hands and side, the wounds of his crucifixion. He breathes on them, a close, intimate gesture, echoing the first moments of creation when God breathes life into dirt and fashions humanity. Now, through his own Holy Spirit, Jesus intends on re-fashioning us.



*Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man,
by Nicolas Poussin (1655).*

In the Acts of the Apostles, too, the people crowd the apostles. It is by the hands of the apostles that miracles take place—some even seeking their shadows. The people bring everything: their physical ailments, their spiritual ailments; their curiosity, their ardent desire. They know that with the Church there is grace and healing to be found. There, in the Lord's embrace, there is mercy.

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Sometimes, the criticism arises that Catholic evangelisation cares only to convert people to a specific sect, when we should be caring only about their personal relationship with Jesus. But this presents a false dichotomy: the Scriptures and the living tradition of the Church testify to the fact that each sacrament is an intimate and uniquely personal encounter with Jesus Christ. The grace of Christ's passion, death and resurrection is 'tasted' in each sacrament. If we want people to have the richest, most personal relationship with Christ as they can have on this earth, the sacraments is where they will find it.

Reading from *Ad gentes*

1. Divinely sent to the nations of the world to be unto them 'a universal sacrament of salvation,' (LG §48) the Church, driven by the inner necessity of her own catholicity, and obeying the mandate of her Founder (cf. Mark 16:16), strives ever to proclaim the Gospel to all men. The Apostles themselves, on whom the Church was founded, following in the footsteps of Christ, 'preached the word of truth and begot churches.' It is the duty of their successors to make this task endure 'so that the word of God may run and be glorified and the kingdom of God be proclaimed and established throughout the world.

...

8. No one is freed from sin by himself and by his own power, no one is raised above himself, no one is completely rid of his sickness or his solitude or his servitude. On the contrary, all stand in need of Christ, their model, their mentor, their liberator, their Savior, their source of life.

...

9. And so the time for missionary activity extends between the first coming of the Lord and the second, in which latter the Church will be gathered from the four winds like a harvest into the kingdom of God. For the Gospel must be preached to all nations before the Lord shall come.

Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany, or a manifesting of God's decree, and its fulfillment in the world and in world history, in the course of which God, by means of mission, manifestly works out the history of salvation. By the preaching of the word and by the celebration of the sacraments, the centre and summit of which is the most holy Eucharist, He brings about the presence of Christ, the author of salvation. But whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God, He frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its maker, who overthrows the devil's domain and wards off the manifold malice of vice. And so, whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples,

not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God, the shame of the demon, and the bliss of men ... By missionary activity, the mystical body grows to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ, and the spiritual temple, where God is adored in spirit and in truth, grows and is built up upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the supreme corner stone.

Questions

- » What has been your experience with the sacraments of the Church? Have you experienced them as crucial to your personal relationship with Christ?
- » What about the reading from *Ad gentes* stands out most to you? Why?
- » How were you taught about the sacraments growing up? Was it memorable? How can we get better about inviting others into the beautiful truth of what the sacraments are?

Notes

WE ARE Witnesses

EASTER RESOURCE • YEAR C

3rd Sunday of Easter

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When they had brought them before the council, the high priest questioned them, saying, 'We gave you a strong warning not to teach in this name, and see, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you want to bring this man's death down on us.' In reply Peter and the apostles said, 'Obedience to God comes before obedience to human beings; the God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you executed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his right hand as leader and Saviour, to give to Israel repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We are witnesses to these things, we and the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.' (Acts 5:27-32, 40-42).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

Obedience and faith are intimately connected.

'To obey (from the Latin *ob-audire*, to "hear or listen to") in faith is to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself' (CCC 144).

Exploring the faith

A phrase that recurs in St Paul's epistle to the Romans is 'the obedience of faith' (1:5; 16:26). The term *obedience* is one that has, for some, negative connotations, evoking servility or even passivity. In this light, obedience may suggest the forsaking of one's critical faculties in blind service to a 'higher cause'. Indeed, there are few contexts in which we would say obedience is a virtue. But we as Catholics have a much deeper and richer understanding of the word.



Obedience, by C. H. Pabst.

Obedience, as the Catechism points out, is about *listening deeply* to what has been spoken. The obedience of *faith* is about listening to what has been spoken and submitting our whole life to it, so convinced are we by its truth. It is this kind of faith we are called to. This understanding turns modern notions of obedience on their head because, as Christ himself demonstrated, it is only in obedience to the will of the Father that we can find happiness; it is only in obedience to the truth that we can find any measure of freedom.

Obedience, as the Catechism points out, is about listening deeply to what has been spoken.

This week we continue reading from *Ad gentes*, the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church. This decree makes clear that evangelisation is a matter of obedience to what Christ has asked is. But while the mission is the same for all the baptised, how it manifests may differ depending on circumstances and vocation. This is where *listening* and *obedience* really becomes personal. How is God calling us, in our own unique contexts, to live out the Great Commission?

Reading from *Ad gentes*

5. From the very beginning, the Lord Jesus called to Himself those whom He wished; and He caused twelve of them to be with Him, and to be sent out preaching. Thus the Apostles were the first budding-forth of the New Israel, and at the same time the beginning of the sacred hierarchy. Then, when He had by His death and His resurrection completed once for all in Himself the mysteries of our salvation and the renewal of all things, the Lord, having now received all power in heaven and on earth, before He was taken up into heaven, founded His Church as the sacrament of salvation and sent His Apostles into all the world just as He Himself had been sent by His Father, commanding them: 'Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Matt. 28:19). 'Go into the whole world, preach the Gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized shall be saved; but he who does not believe, shall be condemned' (Mark 16:15). Whence the duty that lies on the Church of spreading the faith and the salvation of Christ, not only in virtue of the express command which was inherited from the Apostles by the order of bishops, assisted by the priests, together with the successor of Peter and supreme shepherd of the Church, but also in virtue of that life which flows from Christ into His members; 'From Him the whole body, being closely joined and knit together through every joint of the system, according to the functioning in due measure of each single part, derives its increase to the building up of itself in love' (Eph. 4:16). The mission of the Church, therefore, is fulfilled by that activity which makes her, obeying the command of Christ and influenced by the grace and love of the Holy Spirit, fully present to all men or nations, in order that, by the example of her life and by her preaching, by the sacraments and other means of grace, she may lead them to the faith, the freedom and the peace of Christ; that thus there may lie open before them a firm and free road to full participation in the mystery of Christ.

Since this mission goes on and in the course of history unfolds the mission of

Christ Himself, who was sent to preach the Gospel to the poor, the Church, prompted by the Holy Spirit, must walk in the same path on which Christ walked: a path of poverty and obedience, of service and self-sacrifice to the death, from which death He came forth a victor by His resurrection. For thus did all the Apostles walk in hope, and by many trials and sufferings they filled up those things wanting to the Passion of Christ for His body which is the Church. For often, the blood of Christians was like a seed.

6. This duty, to be fulfilled by the order of bishops, under the successor of Peter and with the prayers and help of the whole Church, is one and the same everywhere and in every condition, even though it may be carried out differently according to circumstances. Hence, the differences recognizable in this, the Church's activity, are not due to the inner nature of the mission itself, but rather to the circumstances in which this mission is exercised.

Questions

- » How often do you try and listen deeply to Jesus? How can you try and do it more?
- » What about this passage from *Ad gentes* stands out? Why?
- » How has God called you to live out the Great Commission in your unique circumstances? How might he be calling you to grow in this area?

Notes

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EASTER RESOURCE • YEAR C

4th Sunday of Easter

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Paul [and his companions] carried on from Perga till they reached Antioch in Pisidia ... The next Sabbath almost the whole town assembled to hear the word of God. When they saw the crowds, the Jews were filled with zeal and abusively spoke against everything Paul said. However, Paul and Barnabas spoke out fearlessly. 'It was necessary that the word of God should be proclaimed first to you, but since you reject it, and do not think yourselves worthy of eternal life, look, we are turning to the gentiles. For so the Lord commanded us, saying: *I have made you a light in the nations, that you should bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.*' It made the gentiles very happy to hear this and they praised the word of the Lord. As many as were destined for eternal life became believers, and the word of the Lord spread through the whole countryside.' (Acts 13:13-14, 43-49).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

In Catholic theology, freedom is not license to do as one pleases. Authentic freedom is found in ordering our lives towards what is good—and, ultimately, to God.

'The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to "the slavery of sin"' (CCC §1733).



Detail of St Paul Preaching at Athens from a stained glass window in St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh. Photo by Fr Lawrence Lew OP.

Exploring the faith

Two things are immediately apparent from today's readings. Firstly, the gift on offer is of infinite value: eternal life. Secondly, this gift can be either received or rejected in a profound act of human freedom. It was precisely this rejection that led Paul and his companions to start carrying the Gospel to the gentiles.

The mystery of human freedom is a crucial aspect of the Church's faith. As Pope John Paul II says in *Redemptoris missio*: 'The Church proposes; she imposes nothing' (§39). Evangelisation is an invitation. Like so many of Christ's parables, the invitation goes far and wide for people to join the heavenly feast, but God will never violate our freedom. At the same time we recognise that genuine freedom, because it is a means and not an end in itself, can only be nurtured by choosing what is good, true, and beautiful. Anything else is a distortion of freedom. Indeed, the Council's Declaration on Human Dignity, *Dignitatis humanae*, makes clear that the pursuit of these things, especially truth, is an obligation—one that rests on all of us.

This is why, even as we speak of invitation and proposal, we can also speak of accompaniment, of dialogue, debate, and conversation. We teach, argue, explain and persuade in order to help others along 'the quest for truth' (DH §3). Being an invitational faith does not mean we cannot engage in these things, too.

Ultimately, no matter how we perceive the choice and actions of others, 'we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God' (CCC §1861).

Reading from *Dignitatis humanae*

2. It is in accordance with their dignity as persons—that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility—that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth. However, men cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom.

...

3. Further light is shed on the subject if one considers that the highest norm of human life is the divine law—eternal, objective and universal—whereby God orders, directs and governs the entire universe and all the ways of the human community by a plan conceived in wisdom and love. Man has been made by God to participate in this law, with the result that, under the gentle disposition of divine Providence, he can come to perceive ever more fully the truth that is unchanging. Wherefore every man has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true judgments of conscience, under use of all suitable means.

Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth.

...

11. God calls men to serve Him in spirit and in truth, hence they are bound in conscience but they stand under no compulsion ... This truth appears at its height in Christ Jesus, in whom God manifested Himself and His ways with men. Christ is at once our Master and our

Lord and also meek and humble of heart. In attracting and inviting His disciples He used patience. He wrought miracles to illuminate His teaching and to establish its truth, but His intention was to rouse faith in His hearers and to confirm them in faith, not to exert coercion upon them. He did indeed denounce the unbelief of some who listened to Him, but He left vengeance to God in expectation of the day of judgment. When He sent His Apostles into the world, He said to them: 'He who believes and is baptized will be saved. He who does not believe will be condemned' (Mark 16:16). But He Himself, noting that the cockle had been sown amid the wheat, gave orders that both should be allowed to grow until the harvest time, which will come at the end of the world. He refused to be a political messiah, ruling by force: He preferred to call Himself the Son of Man, who came 'to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many' (Mark 10:45). He showed Himself the perfect servant of God, who 'does not break the bruised reed nor extinguish the smoking flax' (Matt. 12:20).

Questions

- » What stands out to you from this passage in *Dignitatis humanae*? Why?
- » What does it mean to be a creature endowed with free will? Reflect on what you think the implications of this are.
- » How can we personally nurture the gift of freedom we have been given?

Notes

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5th Sunday of Easter

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Having proclaimed the good news in that town and made a considerable number of disciples, they went back to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. They put fresh heart into the disciples, encouraging them to persevere in the faith, saying, 'It is through many trials that we must enter the kingdom of God.' In each of these churches they appointed elders, and with prayer and fasting they commended them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe ... On their arrival [in Antioch] they assembled the church and gave an account of all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith to the gentiles. (Acts 14:21-27).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

'The theological virtues [of faith, hope, and charity] are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character ... They are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life' (CCC §1813).

Exploring the faith

When speaking of 'mission' or 'evangelisation', it is easy to become disheartened by what exactly that means. People, predominantly laity who work in the 'ordinary world' with their families, professions, and all of the anxieties and burdens that come along with that, are right to wonder: what does 'evangelisation' mean *for me*? And how do I fit this into my already busy schedule?

Thankfully, Vatican II spoke at length about the 'apostolate of the laity', the Council's term for the 'mission' of the laity. According to the Council, the laity do not exist randomly in



Apple harvest at Eragny, by Camille Pissarro (circa 1888).

the world. Wherever they are, they have been commissioned to be there by God, sharing in Christ's three-fold office of priest, prophet, and king. While the burdens of secular work and concerns can feel weighty at times, these are precisely the spheres the laity are meant to live and breathe their faith. Mission does not need to 'fit' into the schedule because where we are is already the mission field. In fact, the decree on the apostolate of the laity, *Apostolicum actuositatem*, describes 'the good things of life and the prosperity of the family, culture, economic matters, the arts and professions, the laws of the political community, international relations, and other matters of this kind' as needing to be both enjoyed *and* renewed, in love, by the light of the Gospel (AA §7).

Mission does not need
to 'fit' into the schedule
because where we are is
already the mission field.

For laity, this realisation can be both liberating and energising. Just because something is 'secular' in nature does not make it bad. If it is a genuine good, it is there to be freely pursued and enjoyed. But every good thing is prone to be distorted by us, broken and selfish creatures that we are (AA §7). We must pray that God grows the right spiritual fruit in us so that these good things can be renewed for his kingdom.

Reading from *Lumen gentium*

31. The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.

What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature. It is true that those in holy orders can at times be engaged in secular activities, and even have a secular profession. But they are by reason of their particular vocation especially and professedly ordained to the sacred ministry. Similarly, by their state in life, religious give splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes. But the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer.

...

38. Each individual layman must stand before the world as a witness to the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus and a symbol of the living God. All the laity as a community and each one according to his

ability must nourish the world with spiritual fruits. They must diffuse in the world that spirit which animates the poor, the meek, the peace makers—whom the Lord in the Gospel proclaimed as blessed. In a word, ‘Christians must be to the world what the soul is to the body.’

Questions

- » What do you think it means for Christians to ‘be to the world what the soul is to the body’?
- » What stands out to you from this passage in *Lumen gentium*? Why?
- » Have you ever experienced the tension between ‘ordinary’ or ‘secular’ life and the call to mission? Does *Lumen gentium* go some way to help you find a harmony between the two? If so, how?

Notes

WE ARE Witnesses

EASTER RESOURCE • YEAR C

6th Sunday of Easter

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Then some men came down from Judaea and began to teach the brothers, 'Unless you have yourselves been circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved. As this occasioned disagreement and no little discussion for Paul and Barnabas with these men, they appointed Paul and Barnabas and some others of the church to go up to Jerusalem and discuss the question with the apostles and elders ... Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose delegates from among themselves to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas, known as Barsabbas, and Silas, both leading men in the brotherhood, and gave them this letter to take with them:

'The apostles and elders, your brothers and sisters, greet the brothers of gentile birth in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. We hear that some people coming from here, but acting without any authority from ourselves, have disturbed by their words and have unsettled your minds ... It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves not to impose on you any burden beyond these essentials: you are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from illicit marriages. Keep yourselves from these, and you will do well. Farewell.'
(Acts 15:1-2, 22-29).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

In Catholic theology, 'the Magisterium' refers to the teaching office of the Church, made up of the bishops, in communion with the successor of St Peter, the pope. The Magisterium has been given the 'task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition ... in the name of Jesus Christ' (CCC §85).



The Apostle Saint Peter, by Peter Paul Rubens (1610-1612).

'It is the Magisterium's task to preserve God's people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the truth faith without error. Thus, the pastoral duty of the Magisterium is aimed at seeing to it that the people of God abides in the truth that liberates' (CCC §890).

Exploring the faith

A recurring theme in the documents of Vatican II is that the mission of the whole Church is the same, but how people live that mission will differ depending on their circumstances, gifts, and calling. One very special gift given to the Church is the ordained hierarchy and the Magisterium. The Magisterium is a gift because the Church journeys through history, and history is messy. From the very beginning, as the Acts of the Apostles demonstrates, there have been major disputes that needed settling. Sometimes these are over basic doctrines, and sometimes they are over practical obligations. Neither of these are trivial disputes. When they get out of hand, they can scandalise and lead people astray. But how are they to be settled? Thankfully, Christ gave the Church the apostles and their successors, the bishops—people who can speak with authority and say, 'It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves ...'

But this authority is at the service of mission. It is not for its own sake. The Magisterium teaches and brings clarity in certain areas so that we can have peace of mind, so that we can discern what is genuinely of the faith and what is counterfeit. This is why it is such a gift. Without that teaching authority, could you imagine where we would be as a Church?

Reading from *Lumen gentium*

18. For the nurturing and constant growth of the People of God, Christ the Lord instituted in His Church a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body. For those ministers, who are endowed with sacred power, serve their brethren, so that all who are of the People of God, and therefore enjoy a true Christian dignity, working toward a common goal freely and in an orderly way, may arrive at salvation.

...

19. The Lord Jesus, after praying to the Father, calling to Himself those whom He desired, appointed twelve to be with Him, and whom He would send to preach the Kingdom of God; and these apostles He formed after the manner of a college or a stable group, over which He placed Peter chosen from among them. He sent them first to the children of Israel and then to all nations, so that as sharers in His power they might make all peoples His disciples, and sanctify and govern them, and thus spread His Church, and by ministering to it under the guidance of the Lord, direct it all days even to the consummation of the world. And in this mission they were fully confirmed on the day of Pentecost in accordance with the Lord's promise: 'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and in Samaria, and even to the very ends of the earth'. And the apostles, by preaching the Gospel everywhere, and it being accepted by their hearers under the influence of the Holy Spirit, gather together the universal Church, which the Lord established on the apostles and built upon blessed Peter, their chief, Christ Jesus Himself being the supreme cornerstone.

20. That divine mission, entrusted by Christ to the apostles, will last until the end of the world, since the Gospel they are to teach is for all time the source of all life for the Church. And for this reason the apostles, appointed as rulers in this society, took care to appoint successors.

For they not only had helpers in their ministry, but also, in order that the mission assigned to them might continue after their

death, they passed on to their immediate cooperators, as it were, in the form of a testament, the duty of confirming and finishing the work begun by themselves, recommending to them that they attend to the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit placed them to shepherd the Church of God. They therefore appointed such men, and gave them the order that, when they should have died, other approved men would take up their ministry. Among those various ministries which, according to tradition, were exercised in the Church from the earliest times, the chief place belongs to the office of those who, appointed to the episcopate, by a succession running from the beginning, are passers-on of the apostolic seed. Thus, as St. Irenaeus testifies, through those who were appointed bishops by the apostles, and through their successors down in our own time, the apostolic tradition is manifested and preserved.

Questions

- » What stands out to you from this passage in *Lumen gentium*? Why?
- » Are there any areas of Catholic doctrine or teaching you have struggled to understand?
- » How can you better support the teaching mission of the Church?

Notes

WE ARE Witnesses

EASTER RESOURCE • YEAR C

Ascension Sunday

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In my earlier work, Theophilus, I wrote about everything Jesus began to do and teach from the beginning until the day when, after giving instructions to the apostles he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, he was taken up to heaven. He had presented himself alive to them after his Passion by many proofs: for forty days he had continued to appear to them speaking about the kingdom of God. While at table with them, he had told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for what the Father had promised. He had said, 'This is what you have heard me speak about: for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

Now having met together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time for you to restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know times or dates that the Father has laid down by his own authority, but you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon you, and you will be my witnesses both in Jerusalem and throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth.'

As he said this he was lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took him up out of their sight. And while they were staring into the sky as he went, suddenly two men in white were standing beside them, and they said, 'Why are you Galileans standing here looking into the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come back in the same way as you saw him go into heaven' (Acts 1:1-9).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

'Only the one who "came from the Father" can return to the Father: Christ Jesus ... Left to its own natural powers humanity does not have access to



The Ascension, by John Singleton Copley (1775).

the "Father's house," to God's life and happiness. Only Christ can open to man such access that we, his members, might have confidence that we too shall go where he, our Head and our Source, has preceded us' (CCC §661).

Exploring the faith

It is easy, as humans, to get stuck in unnecessary 'either/or' conversations. Often we pit unnecessary extremes against each other, all the while lacking a larger vision that helps us see how things fit together in a much more harmonious way. Or, lacking the Catholic 'both/and', as it has become known.

One of these 'either/or' conversations has been about heaven and earth. Christians, some have claimed, are so focussed upon going to heaven that they neglect the work of charity and justice on earth. Others might counter that people are so focussed on the things of earth that they neglect the things of heaven. At the heart of this is a struggle to understand the tension between our heavenly destiny and our life on earth.

The Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, goes some way to bringing these together for us. In its passages on the development of truly human cultures, the Council reminds us that we have an obligation to be at work in the world. But this work is informed by, and directed towards, the contemplation of God. We enter more deeply into the world, fulfilling our original vocation in Genesis, so that the eternal truth, goodness and beauty of God can be made clearer.

Reading from *Gaudium et spes*

57. Christians, on pilgrimage toward the heavenly city, should seek and think of these things which are above. This duty in no way decreases, rather it increases, the importance of their obligation to work with all men in the building of a more human world. Indeed, the mystery of the Christian faith furnishes them with an excellent stimulant and aid to fulfill this duty more courageously and especially to uncover the full meaning of this activity, one which gives to human culture its eminent place in the integral vocation of man.

When man develops the earth by the work of his hands or with the aid of technology, in order that it might bear fruit and become a dwelling worthy of the whole human family and when he consciously takes part in the life of social groups, he carries out the design of God manifested at the beginning of time, that he should subdue the earth, perfect creation and develop himself. At the same time he obeys the commandment of Christ that he place himself at the service of his brethren.

Furthermore, when man gives himself to the various disciplines of philosophy, history and of mathematical and natural science, and when he cultivates the arts, he can do very much to elevate the human family to a more sublime understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty, and to the formation of considered opinions which have universal value. Thus mankind may be more clearly enlightened by that marvellous Wisdom which was with God from all eternity, composing all things with him, rejoicing in the earth, delighting in the sons of men.

In this way, the human spirit, being less subjected to material things, can be more easily drawn to the worship and contemplation of the Creator.

...

58. The Gospel of Christ constantly renews the life and culture of fallen man, it combats and removes the errors and evils resulting from the permanent allurements of sin. It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples. By riches coming from above, it makes fruitful, as it were from within, the spiritual qualities and

traditions of every people of every age. It strengthens, perfects and restores them in Christ. Thus the Church, in the very fulfillment of her own function, stimulates and advances human and civic culture; by her action, also by her liturgy, she leads them toward interior liberty.

Questions

- » Do you see a tension between 'the things above' and 'the things below'? Have you experienced this tension yourself?
- » What stands out to you from this passage in *Gaudium et spes*? Why?
- » How can we nurture a culture of contemplating 'the things which are above'?

Notes

WE ARE Witnesses

EASTER RESOURCE • YEAR C

Pentecost Sunday

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When Pentecost day had come, they were all together, when suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of a rushing wind, filling the entire house in which they were sitting; and there appeared to them tongues as of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak different languages as the Spirit gave them power to express themselves. Now there were devout men living in Jerusalem from every nation under nation, and at this sound they all assembled, and they were bewildered because each one heard them speaking his own language. They were amazed and astonished, saying, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? How is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ... we hear them speaking in our own languages about the marvels of God.' (Acts 2:1-11).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

'While water signifies birth and the fruitfulness of life given in his Holy Spirit, fire symbolises the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit's actions. The prayer of the prophet Elijah, who "arose like fire" and whose "word burned like a torch," brought down fire from heaven on the sacrifice on Mount Carmel. This event was a "figure" of the fire of the Holy Spirit, who transforms what he touches' (CCC §696).



Pentecost, by Juan Bautista Maino (1615-1620).

Exploring the faith

For some, the Holy Spirit may be the hardest of the Holy Trinity for people to understand or engage with. But he is the most important principle in the life of the Church. The Holy Spirit is the great gathering force and the great transforming fire. He fills us with God's own life, making us adopted children of the Father; he empowers us with gifts from on high to go and share the Gospel with others; he prays within us, leading us into deeper union with Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is the great gathering force and the great transforming fire.

But this transforming fire is not a destructive force. At least, he does not destroy anything that is good, true and beautiful in God's creation. On the contrary, the Council teaches us, the Holy Spirit grows and perfects it. Whatever the genius of individual persons or cultures, the gifts of the Holy Spirit elevate and perfect us, forging a bond between members of the Church that neither time, distance or death can break. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are claimed as God's own and given what we need to live that way.

Reading from *Lumen gentium*

4. When the work which the Father gave the Son to do on earth was accomplished, the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that He might continually sanctify the Church, and thus, all those who believe would have access through Christ in one Spirit to the Father. He is the Spirit of Life, a fountain of water springing up to life eternal. To men, dead in sin, the Father gives life through Him, until, in Christ, He brings to life their mortal bodies. The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple. In them He prays on their behalf and bears witness to the fact that they are adopted sons. The Church, which the Spirit guides in way of all truth and which He unified in communion and in works of ministry, He both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with His fruits. By the power of the Gospel He makes the Church keep the freshness of youth. Uninterruptedly He renews it and leads it to perfect union with its Spouse. The Spirit and the Bride both say to Jesus, the Lord, 'Come!' (Rev 22:17).

Thus, the Church has been seen as 'a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'

...

13. ... God sent the Spirit of His Son as Lord and Life-giver. He it is who brings together the whole Church and each and every one of those who believe, and who is the well-spring of their unity in the teaching of the apostles and in fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers.

It follows that though there are many nations there is but one people of God, which takes its citizens from every race, making them citizens of a kingdom which is of a heavenly rather than of an earthly nature. All the faithful, scattered though they be throughout the world, are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit, and so, he who dwells in Rome knows that the people of India are his members. Since the kingdom of Christ is not of this world the Church or people of God in establishing that kingdom takes nothing away from the temporal welfare of any people. On the contrary it fosters and takes

to itself, insofar as they are good, the ability, riches and customs in which the genius of each people expresses itself. Taking them to itself it purifies, strengthens, elevates and ennobles them. The Church in this is mindful that she must bring together the nations for that king to whom they were given as an inheritance, and to whose city they bring gifts and offerings. This characteristic of universality which adorns the people of God is a gift from the Lord Himself. By reason of it, the Catholic Church strives constantly and with due effect to bring all humanity and all its possessions back to its source In Christ, with Him as its head and united in His Spirit.

Questions

- » Is the Holy Spirit a neglected person of the Trinity in your own spiritual life?
- » What stands out to you from this passage in *Lumen gentium*? Why?
- » How can you nurture a more intentional relationship with the Holy Spirit?

Notes
