**2nd EASTER SUNDAY “of Divine Mercy” or “*in albis*”**

Acts 5:12-16; Rev 1:9-11, 12-13, 17, 19; Jn 20:19-31

**COMMENTARY**
*Resurrecting for the Mission: The Mission of the Sent One of God and His Disciples*

“Peace be with you.” These are the first words of Jesus “on the evening of that first day of the week.” He appeared to his disciples for the first time on the same day of resurrection, as the Gospel of John tells us today. Again, according to the Gospel passage heard, the Risen One greeted his disciples “a week later” with the same words, when he appeared to them the second time in the same place. This “Peace be with you” thus becomes the characteristic sign which, as seen also by the other Gospels, unites the apparitions of the Risen One in a single great Paschal Event-Mystery that the apostles experienced in the period from that memorable “first day” to Jesus’ definitive return to the Father. An apparition is repeated, connected and completed with the other. All happened in these intense days in which the risen Christ communicated / gave his disciples the “first fruits” of the resurrection, guiding them in the final preparation for their mission. And He did this patiently as always, especially with the doubting disciples and the “hard of heart” like the two of Emmaus or Thomas Didymus!

It was, therefore, a time of intense “missionary formation” for the first disciples, and so it will be for us, his disciples of today, who are called to live the Paschal Mystery ever more intensely and deeply every day of this period, particularly every Sunday, that is to say every “eighth day”, “day of the Lord”. The Easter Season is even spiritually a stronger period than that of Lent. It must be experienced by the believers in daily life and in the liturgy of this very special time, when the celebrations have an enormous richness of prayers and biblical readings. Through them the risen and therefore living Christ still wants to speak to the heart of all his disciples to prepare them again for the mission.

In such a missionary formation context, every phrase and action of the Risen One is of fundamental importance. Leaving to attentive readers / listeners the pleasure of deepening all the interesting aspects of today’s readings and Gospel, I will focus only on three points starting from Jesus’ words and gestures in his first appearance to the disciples.

1. *“Peace be with you”*

It is the first gift, indeed the supreme one, of the Risen One who communicates / transmits it to the disciples with his presence. While resembling an ordinary greeting of that culture, this actually announces the fulfillment of the mission, acclaimed during Jesus’ solemn entry into Jerusalem before the Passion (which we celebrated and meditated on during Palm Sunday). Where the Risen One is, there reigns his peace, that *shalom* gift of the Messiah which indicates life with and in God, the source of all happiness, well-being and joy. Now everything is truly accomplished with and in the presence of the Risen Christ, who had confided to his disciples as a testament during the Last Supper before his Passion and death: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.” (Jn 14:27). Thus, now, to his disciples gathered in the place behind closed doors “for fear of the Jews”, as underlined in the Gospel passage, Jesus reaffirms his gift: “Peace be with you,” so “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.” The Messianic peace begins with the inner peace of the heart that the Risen One now gives to his disciples, so that they can pass it on to others.

In this fulfillment perspective, not by chance but precisely after the gift of peace, the Risen One shows the disciples the signs of his Passion: “When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side of him.” This seems to suggest that these wounds of Jesus are not only proofs to recognize his identity, but also an indication or demonstration of the “means”, indeed of the “price” with which he “purchased” the peace to be given now to his disciples. “By his wounds we were healed” (Is 53,5), and by them we find peace in God. They are signs of the messianic mission, accomplished in love and fidelity, and will remain so for eternity in Jesus’ glorious body, according to God’s wisdom. They are forever signs of divine love and mercy on a mission!

The gift of peace of the Risen One is fundamental for the mission. It comes from the fact that Christ repeated the statement before announcing the sending of his disciples: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Precisely here, we see the phrase of peace is not a simple initial greeting: the missionary mandate comes after the gift of peace. For every disciple, therefore, it will always be useful, indeed necessary, to receive the peace of the Risen One as a gift of communion with him, and to live with and in it, in order to carry out that mission entrusted by him. This peace of the Risen One will be the strength for the missionary disciples amidst human weaknesses and adversities. Indeed, the relaunching of the mission starts with a return to peace and intimate communion with the Lord. What has been said seems banal and obvious, but it is very important not to neglect or underestimate it, especially in the face of the frenetic pace of modern life and persecutions against Christian mission. It is then especially true in this Easter Season, in which the Risen One wants to communicate once again to all his disciples *his* peace, together with the other gifts of his resurrection.

2. *“…As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”*

After giving his peace, the Risen One solemnly declares the missionary mandate to his disciples with a theologically profound affirmation: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” On the one hand, the beautiful chain of mission clearly emerges here: Father - Son - disciples. The mission of the disciples therefore continues that of the Son and reflects it. So much so that, as we heard in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter’s activities with the people’s reaction are described just like those of Jesus in the Gospels: “Thus they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on one or another of them. A large number of people from the towns in the vicinity of Jerusalem also gathered, bringing the sick and those disturbed by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.” (Acts 5:15-16)

On the other hand, with the words “as ..., so (also)…” a dizzying comparison is highlighted: the divine mission Christ fulfilled now passes to the disciples who will be the plenipotentiary envoys of the Son, as the Son was the exclusive one sent, on whom the Father had “set his seal” (cf. Jn 6:27; 1:18). The sending of the apostles by the risen Christ finds its model and its *raison d’être* in the sending of the Son by the Father: this is an original thought of John’s Gospel, as the exegete Raymond Brown noted. As the Son is the face and image of the Father, so his missionary disciples now represent the Son who sends them. For this reason, Jesus himself had solemnly declared to his disciples in his farewell speech at the Last Supper: “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent myself.” (Jn 13:20).

This is a fundamental point of the Jewish *shaliah* (sending) institution, according to which the one sent has all the “power” of the one who sends him, because the one sent and the sender are a single juridical reality, which in the case of Jesus is also true on an existential level: “The Father and I are one.” (Jn 10:30). Therefore, in fulfilling the mission entrusted to him by the Father, Jesus announces: “Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me. (...) I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and speak.” (Jn 12:45, 49).

Thus, now, what has been said about Christ’s faithful union with the Father who sent him will be the ultimate measure for every missionary disciple. In other words, the disciples sent now by Jesus will have to ensure that everyone can see Jesus in them, as pointed out by the mentioned scholar Raymond Brown. They will have to faithfully convey to others all the words of the Master, so that all can feel and experience Jesus himself in them. This is the lofty essence of the vocation of every missionary disciple of Christ, called to be a faithful reflection of Christ in the world, indeed a revived Christ, an *alter Christus* (another Christ), according to the mystical and inspired expression of St. Paul the apostle: “I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me.” (Gal 2:19b-20a). And what St. Paul describes as a way of life for the apostles-missionaries of his generation will be the primary task of every missionary disciple of all times: “[We] always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body (2Cor 4:10). It is the highest honor the disciples sent by Jesus have: to make Him manifest through them and in them, just as he, sent by the Father, made the Father known.

3. *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,“Receive the holy Spirit.”*

As suggested by the context and the conjunction phrase (“When he had said this”), the proclamation of the sending of the disciples is intrinsically connected with Jesus’ action to breath on them, giving them the Holy Spirit, which is thus the Spirit of the Risen One, the Spirit of Jesus himself. Here we witness the scene, called by some scholars the “Johannine Pentecost”, which precisely marks the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. This “Pentecost” in John’s Gospel recalls and is linked to that described in the Acts of the Apostles, which however happens fifty days after Easter. Here too, as with the resurrection and the apparitions of the Risen One, we are dealing with the various manifestations of a single “divine Mystery, which as such always remains elusive to the human mind,” as underlined in my previous comment. Without going too far into the exegetical-theological considerations on the subject, we will dwell only on some important points from the spiritual perspective.

Despite the temporal difference due to the different settings of the individual sacred authors, the two events actually underline a single fundamental theological truth: the Holy Spirit is the gift of the Risen One to his disciples sent by him into the world. What is described here in St. John’s “Pentecost” actually reflects the content of Christ’s announcement to the disciples before ascending to the Father in the Acts of the Apostles: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses (...) to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). And this announcement took place on Pentecost day. (On the margin, I would strongly recommend all to read Pope Francis’ Message for World Mission Day of this year 2022, which offers reflections on the quoted Acts 1:8).

In his theological-spiritual sensitivity, St. John the Evangelist puts the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the same first day of the resurrection to exalt the importance of the event and of the gift. As well it emphasizes more strongly the intrinsic connection between the resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Spirit, between the risen Christ and the Spirit given to the disciples sent by Christ to the mission. Furthermore, Jesus’ action of blowing or emitting his breath on the disciples recalls that of God in the creation of the first man, molded from the earth (cf. Gen 2:7: the LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.) We therefore have here, with the Risen One, the scene of the new creation of man or the creation of the new man. The disciples became new human beings who carry within themselves the Spirit of the Risen One to share it with others, thus making these recipients new in the Spirit who purifies from sins. This is why here, in the Johannine “Pentecost”, the Risen One connects the gift of the Spirit with the power to forgive sins: “Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” The positive *and* negative formulation expresses the exclusive character of the remission of sins in the Spirit, now entrusted to the disciples, called to carry out the mission, that of Divine Mercy, just like Christ. All of this alludes to the reality of baptism in water and in the Spirit for the remission of sins. This Gospel message, therefore, appears quite fitting to celebrate both Divine Mercy Sunday and, more traditionally, that of *Dominica in albis* “Sunday in white [clothes]” for the newly baptized at Easter to mark the culmination of one-week thanksgiving for the received grace of Baptism.

Finally, the fulfillment of Christ’s promises to the disciples before the Passion regarding the Holy Spirit and the mission of the disciples is emphasized. The Spirit is given to the disciples to enable them to continue the same mission as Jesus and like Jesus. This is exactly what Jesus said during the Last Supper: “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and *appointed* [lit. *constitute*] you to go and bear fruit that will remain.” (Jn 15:16). This apostolic-missionary “constitution” is realized with and in the Spirit that Jesus communicates to the disciples after the resurrection. It will therefore be important for us, today’s missionary disciples, to let the Risen One mystically breathe his Spirit on us in this Easter Season, in which the Mystery of Christ’s resurrection is still being fulfilled for us. Let us listen to Pope Francis’ fundamental words in the aforementioned Message for World Mission Day 2022:

Just as “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’, except by the Holy Spirit” (*1 Cor* 12:3), so no Christian is able to bear full and genuine witness to Christ the Lord without the Spirit’s inspiration and assistance. All Christ’s missionary disciples are called to recognize the essential importance of the Spirit’s work, to dwell in his presence daily and to receive his unfailing strength and guidance. Indeed, *it is precisely when we feel tired, unmotivated or confused that we should remember to have recourse to the Holy Spirit in prayer.* Let me emphasize once again that prayer plays a fundamental role in the missionary life, for it allows us to be refreshed and strengthened by the Spirit as the inexhaustible divine source of renewed energy and joy in sharing Christ’s life with others.