**THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER (YEAR C)**

Acts 5:27b-32, 40b-41; Ps 30; Rev 5:11-14; Jn 21:1-19

**COMMENTARY**

*Restarting from the Essential*

It is significant that on the third Sunday of Easter we hear the story of the third apparition of the risen Christ in the Gospel of John, as the evangelist himself points out: “This was now the third time Jesus was revealed to his disciples after being raised from the dead.” It will also be the last episode of Jesus with his followers in the fourth Gospel, which, however, states at the end: “There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written” (Jn 21:25). This statement implicitly includes, on the one hand, other Jesus’ actions / apparitions not mentioned in the book, and on the other, it highlights the exemplary importance of everything that the evangelist has chosen to pass on to posterity. This is particularly true for this third and last “manifestation” of the Risen One according to the Johannine chronology. Through the subtle details of Jesus’ encounter and dialogue with Peter, the story transmits some fundamental messages on Peter’s apostolic vocation, through which one can also glimpse the essence of the missionary life of the disciples of the Risen One in every age.

1. *By “a Charcoal Fire”*

The circumstances of this third apparition, which the evangelist calls a “manifestation” of Christ, are very curious. Every detail is unique, *sui generis*, with a strong spiritual symbolism to meditate, scrutinize, taste. The disciple, author of the story, seemed to constantly carry in his heart that unforgettable encounter with the risen Master, so that he recounted it with such precision in detail and at the same time with incredible spiritual richness. I would very much like to share with you all the literary-theological subtleties of this Gospel narrative, because they are very beautiful and allow you to experience more the encounter of the Risen One with his disciples. However, to save you time, I will focus only on one point: the presence of “a charcoal fire” in the setting of the episode. This apparently casual and insignificant mention is very interesting in two respects.

First of all, the evangelist reports that after the miraculous catch of fish, “when they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread.” It is therefore the fire with which Jesus prepared for his disciples a breakfast of roasted fish with bread. Indeed, He, as narrated in the Gospel, explicitly invited them “Come, have breakfast” and, probably to the most fearful ones, “Jesus came over and took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish.” By the way, we see here for the only time in the Gospels a Jesus the cook, a Jesus who cooked for his own disciples. Furthermore, the fact that they ate fish in the morning should not surprise or shock anyone, especially those accustomed to a light breakfast with coffee and biscuits, because this is still the case in many Asian cultures (and elsewhere). Indeed, roasted fish (with bread or rice) will even be a sign of a festive solemn breakfast.

Can we see in the story some allusion to the “Eucharistic” supper, where the gesture of Jesus (“[He] took the bread and gave it to them”) is the same as during the Last Supper? Maybe yes, but maybe not (because the similarities are rather too vague). In any case, the third apparition / manifestation of the Risen One thus has at its center a convivial meal, that of sharing and communion between him and his closest disciples. In this perspective of “communion”, it seems significant that for the meal, even if Jesus had already prepared everything necessary, fire, fish, bread, he still invited the disciples to contribute with what they had taken, following his indication: “Bring some of the fish you just caught!” Moreover, before Jesus had even asked them cordially, “Children, have you caught anything to eat?”, as if He totally depended on the result of their work. This was in order to push them to start again with a new fishing (otherwise, everyone would have remained with an empty stomach). The fishermen of Galilee are invited to participate again in the communion of intentions, of action, of life with the risen Master, to continue the mission of miraculous catches under his guidance (from a distance) and to then share with him the extraordinary fruit of their effort: “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father.” (Jn 14:12). The sharing of food indicates the sharing of life and mission.

The mention of “a charcoal fire” seems to have another even more important function for what follows in the story, namely for the famous conversation between Jesus and Simon Peter, “when they had finished breakfast”. This expression, curiously, occurs only once more in the Gospel of John, in the episode of Peter’s triple denial during the passion of Jesus: “Now the slaves and the guards were standing around *a charcoal fire* that they had made, because it was cold, and were warming themselves. Peter was also standing there keeping warm.” (Jn 18:18). The two scenes therefore recall each other through this common and exclusive image, a *dejà vu* not only for attentive readers of the Gospel but also and above all for the protagonists of the story, Simon Peter first. On the literary level, to connect the two episodes, the “charcoal fire” will be a stronger sign than Jesus’ triple question to Peter to obtain a triple confession of love, because the number three is simply a conventional symbol of completeness. In other words, we should not say that, since Peter had denied Jesus three times, he was asked three times about love. The intimate conversation between Jesus and Peter after the meal is not a kind of acquitting the due debt (as if Jesus were doing it according to logic: since you have denied me three times, I must then make you confess as many times to settle the score). Instead, it is the occasion that Jesus wants to create, so that Peter can once again profess his love for Jesus, that love “damaged” by his denial by a similar charcoal fire. This profession, which serves to reach a full awareness of the true love Jesus asked for, will be fundamental for the particular mission the Risen One will entrust to Peter.

2. *“Do you love me more than these?”*

Jesus’ three questions and Peter’s answers have been the subject of many comments and in-depth studies since Christian antiquity. Here too, for our brief reflection, I do not intend to give all the possible explanations on the nuances of the two different words for the notion of love used in the conversation between Jesus and Peter. I only focus on Jesus’ first question, which in reality lies implied in the other two, as well as Peter’s last answer which seems to mark the very culmination of his profession of love.

Opening the conversation, Jesus asked Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”. Peter is solemnly called by name and “surname”, that is to say the mention of his father’s name. This way recalls the solemn moment when Jesus praised Peter after his profession of faith at Caesarea of Philippi (cf. Mt 16:17). Actually, the parallelism between the two situations makes us understand the importance of the moment and of Jesus’ very words to Peter: “Do you love me more than these?” As a matter of fact, this is something that Jesus already required from all his followers during his public ministry, when He declared, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10:37). The “requirement” sounds even stronger in the Lucan version: “If any one comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” (Lk 14:26). Such exclusive love for Jesus is now required directly from Peter and, in the context of the narrative, one is asked to love Jesus not only more than all the other people around, but also all the things that Peter loved up until now, including his profession (“I am going fishing”- said Peter at the beginning of the episode) *and his own life*. It is no coincidence therefore, at the conclusion of Peter’s profession, that Jesus revealed the future, “what kind of death he [Peter] would glorify God,” where the expression thus formulated seems to imply *martyrdom*, that is witness with life. It will be an exclusive love for Jesus that will lead him to this end, to this “glorification to God,” which Peter failed to do in the past.

Peter understood his failure in love only after Jesus had insisted for the third time. If, as Jesus declared, “no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13), and if Peter had promised Jesus to give his life for him, Peter has failed not only in keeping the promise but also failed in love. Therefore, we see a “distressed” Peter in the end who responded with more humility, with a different formulation from the previous ones, more “Christ-oriented” and not with so much self-confidence “Yes, Lord”: “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

Only Jesus knows how much love a disciple has for him and how exclusive it is. And every disciple is called to recognize this truth, as Peter in this episode, in order to constantly renew his love for Jesus, who first loved his own disciples “to the end”, that on the cross. This is even more true for Peter to whom Jesus now wants to entrust the mission of taking care of *all* his sheep, literally to feed and to protect them from dangers. Apparently, Peter understood the Master’s intention well, because he will write later to the other “pastors” of the Church the moving exhortation regarding the true care of the flock entrusted according to the thought of Jesus, the “Supreme Shepherd” (cf. 1Pt 5:1-4). Furthermore, only such humble love, which lays on Jesus and His greatest Love, will give strength, wisdom, and courage to the disciple to bear witness to Christ, to speak of that Love to everyone, not with arrogance, but with humble firmness to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), as Peter did in the passage heard today from the Acts of the Apostles.

3. *“Follow me.” - the Last Call of the Risen One*

It is significant that Jesus’ invitation to Peter to follow Him only resounds at the end, after the renewal of love and the revelation of Peter’s death. Moreover, if in the synoptic Gospels this explicit imperative for Peter was made at the beginning of the public activities of Jesus, in the Gospel of John it is found only here, during the last manifestation of the Risen Christ. What does it mean?

From the spiritual point of view, the vocation that Peter received in the past is renewed even after Jesus’ resurrection, and this always in the sign of love. In other words, in the communion with the Risen Christ Peter’s vocation was also reborn and now entered the new dimension. It has been reconfirmed, strengthened, rectified, and all this in view of the continuation of the mission accomplished by Christ. This will also be the invitation of the Risen Christ to all his missionary disciples of today to renew, indeed to found again *the exclusive love* for Him. On this Sunday as every day of this Easter season, it is necessary to truly re-enter a closer personal communion with the risen Jesus in order to hear his voice in the heart which calls every disciple of his by name and asks: “Do you love me more than these? Follow me.”

*Useful points to consider*:

**POPE FRANCIS, *Christus vivit*,** *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God*:

1. Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life. The very first words, then, that I would like to say to every young Christian are these: Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive!

*Courageous missionaries*

175. Filled with the love of Christ, young people are called to be witnesses of the Gospel wherever they find themselves, by the way they live. (…)

176. The importance of witness does not mean that we should be silent about the word. Why should we not speak of Jesus, why should we not tell others that he gives us strength in life, that we enjoy talking with him, that we benefit from meditating on his words? Young people, do not let the world draw you only into things that are wrong and superficial. Learn to swim against the tide, learn how to share Jesus and the faith he has given you. May you be moved by that same irresistible impulse that led Saint Paul to say: “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel” (*1 Cor*9:16)!

177. “Where does Jesus send us? There are no borders, no limits: he sends us everywhere. The Gospel is for everyone, not just for some. It is not only for those who seem closer to us, more receptive, more welcoming. It is for everyone. Do not be afraid to go and bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society, even to those who seem farthest away and most indifferent. The Lord seeks all; he wants everyone to feel the warmth of his mercy and his love”. He invites us to be fearless missionaries wherever we are and in whatever company we find ourselves: in our neighbourhoods, in school or sports or social life, in volunteer service or in the workplace. Wherever we are, we always have an opportunity to share the joy of the Gospel. That is how the Lord goes out to meet everyone. He loves you, dear young people, for you are the means by which he can spread his light and hope. He is counting on your courage, your boldness and your enthusiasm.