

John Paul II

The Apparitions of the Risen Christ

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Jesus Son and Savior: Catechesis on the Creed, part II

St. Paul was chronologically the first to record the truth of Christ's resurrection. We are familiar with the passage of the First Letter to the Corinthians in which he states: "I handed on to you...what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve..." (1 Cor 15:3-5). It was a question of a truth handed on, received and again handed on. It is a truth pertaining to the "deposit of revelation" which Jesus himself, through his apostles and evangelists, left to his Church.

Jesus gradually revealed this truth in his prepaschal teaching. It was realized in the concrete in the paschal events at Jerusalem. These events were historically verified, but fraught with mystery.

The announcements and the facts were confirmed especially by the meetings with the risen Christ, which the Gospels and Paul record. It must be said that the Pauline text presents the meetings—in which the risen Christ is revealed—in a global and synthetic way. He added at the end his own meeting with the risen one at the gates of Damascus (cf. Acts 9:3-6). The Gospel accounts of the meetings are rather fragmentary.

It is not difficult to gather and compare some characteristics of each of these apparitions and of all of them taken together, to arrive still closer at the discovery of the meaning of this revealed truth.

First of all, we can observe that, after the resurrection, Jesus presented himself to the women and the disciples with his body transformed, made spiritual and sharing in the glory of the soul—but in no way triumphalistic. He appeared with great simplicity. He spoke as a friend to his friends, in the ordinary circumstances of their daily lives. He did not wish to confront his adversaries, adopting a victorious attitude. He was not concerned to show them his superiority; still less did he wish to annihilate them. It does not appear that he even met them. Everything that the Gospel says leads to the conclusion that he did not appear, for example, to Pilate, who had handed him over to the high priests to be crucified (cf. Jn 19:16), or to Caiaphas who had rent his garments because Christ claimed to be God (cf. Mt 26:63-66).

To those to whom he appeared, Jesus made himself known in his physical identity: that face, those hands, those features which they knew so well, the side which had been pierced, the voice which they had heard so often. Only in the meeting with Saul near Damascus did the light which surrounds the risen one blind the rabid persecutor of the Christians and strike him to the ground (cf. Acts 9:3-8). However, it was a manifestation of the power of him who, already ascended to heaven, struck a man whom he

wished to make a "chosen instrument" (Acts 9:15), a missionary of the Gospel.

It is significant that Jesus appeared first to the women, his faithful followers, before appearing to the disciples and even to the apostles whom he had chosen to preach his Gospel to the world. It was to the women that he first disclosed the mystery of his resurrection. They were the first witnesses to this truth. Perhaps he wished to reward their delicacy, their sensitiveness to his message, and their strength that drove them all the way to Calvary. Perhaps he wished to reveal an exquisite trait of his humanity, consisting in the kindness and gentleness with which he approached and rewarded those who counted less in the great world of his time. That is what seems to follow from a text of Matthew: "And behold, Jesus met them (the women who were running to give the news to the disciples) and said, 'Hail!' And they came and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me'" (28:9-10).

Moreover, the appearance to Mary Magdalene (cf. Jn 20:11-18) is of extraordinary delicacy. This is true both on the part of the woman who revealed all her passionate and reserved devotedness to the following of Jesus, and on the part of the Master who treated her with exquisite delicacy and kindness. This special place given to woman in the paschal events is an inspiration to the Church which, in the course of history, has been able to rely on them for her life of faith, prayer and apostolate.

Some characteristics of these postpaschal meetings are in a certain way typical examples of the spiritual situations which so often arise in personal relationships with Christ when people feel called or "visited" by him. Above all, there is an initial difficulty in recognizing Christ on the part of those who meet him. This can be seen in the case of Mary Magdalene (cf. Jn 20:14-16) and of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:16). There is a certain element of fear in his presence. He is loved and he is sought, but when found, there is a certain hesitation....

In the case of Mary Magdalene (cf. Jn 20:16), of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:26 ff.), and similarly in the case of the other disciples (cf. Lk 24:25-48), Jesus gradually led them to recognize him and to believe in him. It is a sign of Christ's patient pedagogy in revealing himself to people, in attracting them, in converting them and in leading them to the knowledge of the riches of his heart and to salvation.

It is interesting to analyze the psychological process that the various meetings give us a glimpse of. The disciples experienced a certain difficulty not only in recognizing the truth of the resurrection, but also the identity of the one who stood before them. He appeared as the same and yet as different: a transformed

Christ. It was not easy for them to identify him immediately. Yes, they perceived that it was Jesus, but at the same time they felt that he was not in the same condition as he was before. In his presence they were seized with reverence and fear.

When they realized with his help that it was not a case of someone different, but of himself transformed, a new capacity for discovery, understanding, charity and faith was released in them. It was like an awakening of faith: "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened the Scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32). "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28). "I have seen the Lord!" (Jn 20:18). Then they began to understand the event of the cross in an absolutely new light. The mystery of Christ's suffering and death was seen to end in the glory of new life! This would be one of the principal elements of the announcement of salvation brought by the apostles from the very beginning to the Jewish people and gradually to all nations.

Finally, an important characteristic of the appearances of the risen Christ, especially in the last appearances, was his entrusting to the apostles (and to the Church) the mission of evangelizing the world by the announcement of his Word and the gift of his grace.

Remember the apparition to the disciples in the upper room on the evening of the first Easter Day: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you..." (Jn 20:21). He granted them the power to forgive sins.

Then in the apparition at the Sea of Tiberias, followed by the miraculous catch of fish which symbolized and foretold the fruitfulness of their mission, it was evident that Jesus wished to direct their attention to the work that awaited them (cf. Jn 21:1-23). This was confirmed by the definitive conferring of the special mission on Peter (Jn 21:15-18): "Do you love me?... You know that I love you.... Feed my lambs.... Feed my sheep...."

John notes that "this was the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead" (Jn 21:14). This time they not only took note of his identity: "It is the Lord!" (Jn 21:7). They also understood that all that had happened and was happening during those Easter days committed each of them, and especially Peter, to building a new era of history, an era that had begun on Easter morning.