

Only Christians Believe Christ Is Risen

(Gospel Commentary for Easter Sunday)

By Father Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap

VATICAN CITY, MARCH 21, 2008 - To the women who had come to the tomb on Easter morning the angels said: "Do not be afraid. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He is risen!"

But did Jesus really rise? What assurances do we have that we are dealing with something that really happened and not an invention or suggestion? St. Paul, writing no more than 25 years after the event, lists all the people who saw Jesus after the resurrection, the majority of whom were still alive (1 Corinthians 15:8). For what fact of antiquity do we have testimony as strong as this?

But a general observation will also convince us of the truth of the event. At the moment of Jesus' death the disciples were scattered; his case was taken to be closed: "We had hoped that he would," the disciples of Emmaus say. Evidently they did not hope anymore.

And then all of a sudden we see these same men proclaim together that Jesus is alive and face, on account of this testimony, trials, persecutions and, in the end, one after the other, martyrdom and death. What could have caused such a total change if not the certainty that he had truly risen.

They could not be deceived because they spoke and ate with him after his resurrection; and then they were practical men, not at all given to easy exaltation. They themselves doubted at first and put up not a little resistance to believing. Neither could they have wanted to deceive others, because, if Jesus was not risen, they were precisely the first to be betrayed and to return. Without the fact of the resurrection, the birth of Christianity and of the Church becomes a mystery that is still more difficult to explain than the resurrection itself.

These are some objective, historical arguments, but the strongest argument that Christ is risen, is that he is alive! He is alive not because we keep him alive by talking about him, but because he keeps us alive, he communicates the sense of his presence to us, he makes us hope. "He touches Christ who believes in Christ," St. Augustine said, and the true believers experience the truth in this affirmation.

Those who do not believe in the reality of the resurrection have always advanced hypotheses that it be treated as a phenomenon of autosuggestion; the apostles "believed" to see. But this, if it were true, would constitute, in the end, a miracle no less great than the one that people try to

avoid admitting. Suppose that different people, in different situations and places, all had the same hallucination. Imaginary visions usually come to those who intensely expect and desire them, but the apostles, after the events of Good Friday, did not expect anything else.

Christ's resurrection is, for the spiritual universe, what the initial "Big Bang" was for the physical universe, according to one modern theory: such a massive explosion of energy impressed on the cosmos that expansion of energy that continues even today at a distance of billions of years. Take away from the Church faith in the resurrection and everything stops and shuts down, as when the electrical current goes out in a house.

St. Paul writes: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the death, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). "The faith of Christians is the resurrection of Christ," St. Augustine said. Everyone believes that Jesus died, even the pagans, the agnostics believe it. But only Christians believe that he has also risen, and one is not a Christian unless he believes this.

Raising Christ from the dead, it is as if God had approved his conduct, impressing it with his seal. "God has given to all men an assurance by raising Jesus from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

[Translation by Joseph G. Trabbic]

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