

# A difficult resurrection

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**INFO SSCC Brothers No 165 – 2 May 2022**

Dear brothers,

Fraternal greetings from Rome. I do hope you were able to celebrate Holy Week with joy.

The Gospel accounts that tell us about the event of the resurrection highlight the difficulties that Jesus' disciples had in opening their hearts and minds to this Good News. It was not the first and would not be the last time that the followers of Jesus fail to understand what Jesus does or says.

Immediately after the second multiplication of the loaves, the Pharisees and Sadducees, not satisfied with what they had heard, asked Jesus for a sign from heaven. It was a test to see if God not only was on their side, but was available to their invocation. But the God that Jesus was announcing was not a talisman, nor a spirit ready to respond immediately to desires, no matter how holy they may be. The God that Jesus came to know was to be discovered in his actions as Jesus announced and fulfilled the proclamation of his Kingdom. This God was a living God whose relationship Jesus cultivated in long moments of prayer. For this reason, his response to the request of the Pharisees and Sadducees was emphatic: "Sighing deeply, he says: 'Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation'" (Mk. 8:12).

The disciples of Emmaus, for their part, received an account from the women who went to the tomb of Jesus and had a vision of angels who told them that Jesus was alive. At most they were startled, surprised and bewildered. Once again the words of Jesus were clear: "How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken" (Luke 24:25). Once again Jesus explained the scriptures to them and in this way opened their hearts and their minds to his risen presence.

These warnings of Jesus are good, because they tell us that the God whom Jesus proclaims is a living God. To welcome him we must be ready with all our senses and intelligence and have the confidence of children. His words also remind us that the event of the resurrection and its transforming impact on the lives of the disciples, took time - there was incomprehension and hardness of heart that hindered its reception. The most difficult thing is not only the transition



from what we know to what we truly believe, but also more simply the transition from not seeing to seeing.

### **Lack of vocations to religious life: A sign of the times?**

A few days ago we had an online meeting of the Conference of Europe and Africa. We shared about the fact of the lack of vocations to religious life in our congregation in Europe, something that is also experienced in other areas of the Congregation. In the whole of Latin America, for example, there is now only one novice. In other parts of the Congregation, there have been no vocations for 20 years or more. The reasons for this phenomenon are diverse, depend on context, and are well known. But this phenomenon and its reasons can assume a new light and a challenge for us if we read it as a sign of the times. That is to say, without being afraid and without wanting to produce quick or hasty answers, we can ask ourselves a number of questions regarding this reality: What is it that God wants to tell us? What is God saying to us, through the men and women - our contemporaries - who are so disaffected towards God - at least certain images of God - and from any confessional belonging? When we ask for vocations, are we not like those of Jesus' generation who asked for a sign from heaven without being able to see what was happening before our very eyes in the person and actions of Jesus?

To answer these questions, let us take time to seek God and listen to him. It can do us good to open ourselves to the ever new ways God continues to call men and women, for example, by listening to the catechumens who were baptized during the Easter Vigil. Also where there are vocations for our Congregation, we can listen to the young people recount their experience of faith. Think, too, of the people who in the name of faith welcome the poor into their homes, or set up an educational NGO or decide to go to a distant country to help with a development project. What moves them to do this? Or we can be like the Risen Christ walking alongside those who were returning to Emmaus. Approaching them, he opened the conversation with a question: "What are you talking about?"

### **Leaving like Damien**

This month we celebrate our brother, Damien. What a change it must have been for him to leave Leuven for Paris and even more Paris for Hawaii! In this fundamental action of leaving, Damien accepted that it entailed ruptures and conversions from the God he had known to the God yet to be known. In his first letter to Father Euthyme Rouchouze, the Superior General, Damien shares with him what this "leaving" meant, likening it to a second "missionary" novitiate, and very different to the novitiate in Louvain or Issy: "In place of a tranquil and retired type of life, missionary life is traveling as much by sea as by land, on horseback as on foot; in place of keeping silence it is necessary to speak all sorts of languages, and with people of every background; in place of being directed, one has to direct oneself and what is often the most difficult to conserve in the midst of a thousand annoyances and miseries, a spirit of recollection and prayer." (Damien's letter to the Superior General, Euthyme Rouchouze, Hawaii, November 1, 1864).

The God that Damien came to know during his time of formation in Louvain and Issy continued to accompany him in these new lands. But Damien had to seek him and discover him with new eyes: in a different culture: in his encounters with different people, in making him known in

different languages, in new ways of praying, in the midst of worries and miseries. How his image and his relationship with God must have changed!

May Damien inspire each one of us to enter into a new missionary novitiate, disposing us to seek and listen to the living God, even in his sometimes long silences.

Fraternally,

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