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The Resurrection: Mystery of Faith

A Complete Renewal in Love

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"From now on the Church has her eyes fixed on the Risen Christ …She, the Bride, contemplates in the face of Christ her treasure, her joy."

(John Paul II, *Novo Millenio Ineunte*, 28)

If we are Christian, **the mystery of the Resurrection** is truly **our mystery**. The liturgy insists on this and we understand why. "If Jesus has not been raised, our faith is in vain" (1 Co. 15:14), Saint Paul tells us; for whatever does not reach its finality is in vain. These words truly show us, therefore, that the finality of faith is to orient us towards the life of the Risen Christ – the life of Jesus that we will live eternally -, and that faith makes us live of this life already, on earth, although in a very hidden way that completely surpasses us, because we reach it in an act of faith, of contemplative faith, which configures us to the mystery of Christ[1]. Through the Resurrection we live of "Heavenly realities" (Col. 3:1-2), and this is what our Christian life is. Grace makes us "citizens of Heaven" (Ph. 3:20), it makes us live of Heaven *now*; we are transformed little by little by Jesus, so that with Him and in Him we can live of the Father eternally.

It is, moreover, for this reason that it is so difficult to speak about the Resurrection. Jesus knows this! He makes the task easier for us by apparitions, which always involve a descriptive aspect. The apparition to Mary Magdalene, among others, shows us an astonishing scene that reaches its pinnacle at the moment when Mary Magdalene discovers the risen Jesus (cf. Jn. 20:11-17). At that moment, when she has no more initiatives, it is Jesus who gives her an order: "Go and tell the Apostles" (Jn. 20:17). She is there, in front of Him, she who must have been so agitated on Easter morning … the stone has been rolled away, the body of Jesus stolen, the tomb empty! We must acknowledge that it is a terrible shock. Poor Mary Magdalene! She had everything well prepared, she who wanted to be first, to arrive at the tomb before the Apostles to give them a good lesson, she who doubtless suffered even more than the Apostles… And she loves Jesus so much that she can't remain before the empty tomb without knowing where His body is. This shows how united she is to Jesus, but it also shows that on her side, this union is not yet pure enough. "Do not touch me!" Jesus says to her when she

[1] John Paul II, *The consecrated life*, 16

wants to re-live what she lived before the Cross – throwing herself at Jesus' feet and perhaps anointing them with perfume – since Mark and Luke tell us that she had bought and prepared spices to anoint Jesus' body (Mk. 16:1; Lk. 24:1). We can see that for her it was a means of manifesting her love. It is moving, because it shows how much she loved Jesus. And straightaway He wants to make her understand that as from the Resurrection He is no longer of this world. That is what characterizes the Resurrection: **Jesus is no longer of this world**; He appears, but He is no longer from here below: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here…" (Lk. 24:5-6).

It is very interesting to do a theology of the apparitions, to see how Jesus Himself awakens the faith of Mary Magdalene, of Peter, of the Apostles, of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Each time Jesus has recourse to a divine pedagogy in order to awaken their faith. This education through apparitions is not psychological, it is objective: it is Jesus Himself who appears, and it is Jesus Himself who wakes up from torpor a faith that was no longer very alive.

This pedagogy through the apparitions helps us a lot to speak about the Resurrection, for it is difficult to speak about the mystery itself, precisely because Jesus is no longer of this world. We have no tangible experience of Jesus' Resurrection; we have only witness accounts, or to put it differently, another's experience. **The Resurrection itself remains a mystery of faith**. If Jesus had wanted to do apologetics, if He had wanted to give us human proofs of the Resurrection, He would not have chosen to appear to Mary Magdalene, to the Apostles, to friends, to believers; He would have appeared to Pilate during the night. If we had advised the Holy Spirit we would have told Him: "Jesus must appear to Pilate: He is already a bit afraid, he'll be completely terrified … he'll end up on his knees!" Jesus could also have appeared to the High Priests; the High Priests converting – that would have caused a real stir!

It is important to understand this to see how the people of Israel rediscover Jesus again. For, after being raised up, Jesus could have appeared straightaway. But no; it is amazing to see how the mystery of the Resurrection remains a hidden mystery even though it is a mystery of glory. The divine character of this glory, the supernatural character of this mystery (the fact that the Risen Christ is no longer of this world), Jesus reveals to us in a negative way. When Mary Magdalene wants to go back to the life before the Resurrection, before the death of Jesus, He says to her: "Do not touch me", to show us how much the mystery of the Resurrection is an interior mystery. The Easter liturgy helps us, but it can be a beautiful distraction as regards the mystery, even if our singing is not Opera singing! The liturgy of Holy Saturday should lead us to the mystery of the sepulchre, and then to the stone rolled away. The first experience of the Resurrection is negative: the tomb is empty (this is why the secularization of theology and of faith leads to a negative philosophy). With the Resurrection everything begins

anew, it is a complete and radical renewal, but divine education begins with the negative: the stone rolled away, the empty sepulchre. Even those who were best prepared had lost time – except of course Mary, the Mother of Jesus, who lived of the mystery straight away without any loss of time. For all the others a negative experience was necessary, which hollows out in them an intense desire to discover Jesus again.

We see the difference between two nights that ought to be put in parallel, the night of Christmas and the night of the Resurrection. One is joyful and the other, the night of the sepulchre, is sorrowful and serious at the beginning: there is an atmosphere of suspicion because it is feared that the Apostles will come in the night and steal the body of Jesus (cf. Mt. 27:64). It can't have been pleasant that night to be around in Jerusalem; the enemies, those who had wanted the death of Christ and had demanded it, were watching over His corpse, that nobody come and collect it. It is in this atmosphere that the renewal takes place, this renewal *par excellence* that is the Resurrection. The present renewal of the Church should be understood in the light of the Resurrection. It is in the light of the mystery of the Resurrection that we should see the renewal that the Holy Father asks for, because it is a radical renewal, even if for the human intelligence (for our reason) it is something negative. A renewal begins in faith, contemplative faith. As John Paul II says, "when Mary is together with the Apostles in the Upper Room in Jerusalem at the dawn of the Church, her faith, born in the words of the Annunciation, receives its confirmation. The angel had said to her "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you must name Him Jesus. He will be great … He will rule over the house of Jacob for ever and His reign will have no end" (Lk. 1:31-32). The recent events on Calvary had clouded this promise in shadow; and yet, even at the foot of the Cross, Mary's faith had not failed. She was still one who, like Abraham, "believed, hoping against all hope" (Ro. 4:18). And now, after the Resurrection, hope had revealed its true colour, and t*he promise had begun to be a reality*"[2]. As Tertullian, St. Augustine and other Fathers say, the Church was born from the wound of the heart of Jesus[3]. His death is the starting point of the Church; the term, or end of the Church – her completion – will be the return of Christ, which is the extension of the mystery of the Resurrection: "We proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, we celebrate your Resurrection, we await your coming in glory"[4]. The Resurrection, once again, is truly a renewal in all its force. That is why each year the Feast of Easter must be a radical renewal for us: everything we

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[2] *The Mother of the Redeemer*, 26

[3] See St. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John*, IX, 10 (Bibl. augustinienne 71, DDB 1969, p. 531): "Adam sleeps so that Eve may be formed; Christ dies that the Church might be formed. During Adam's sleep, Eve is formed from his side; after Christ's death His side is struck by the lance so that the sacraments flow forth from which the Church will be formed". St. Augustine returns several times to this theme (see op. cit., XV, 8, pp. 767-769; see also note 69, pp. 904-905), that we first find in Tertullian (*De anima* ch. 43, P.L. 2, col. 723 B; see also ch. 11, col. 665 A), then in St. Hilary of Poitiers (*Traité des mystères*, I, 3; Sources chrétiennes 19 bis [1974], pp.77-81).

[4] See John Paul II, *The Church lives of the Eucharist*, 18.

were living before demands to be radically renewed in the mystery of the Resurrection, if we are truly Christian. *A fortiori* for religious; the mystery of the Resurrection must be a radical, complete, new beginning in which the Holy Spirit does everything. At the starting point of the Incarnation the Holy Spirit does everything in Mary in a hidden way. The Resurrection is a renewal for eternity: "Christ, having been raised from the dead will never die again" (Ro. 6:9). He is no longer of this world; He is entirely for the Father, with the Father. To contemplate "Heavenly realities", *that* is what the Resurrection is; **the renewal of the Church requires us to contemplate Heavenly realities, to set off again with a new momentum, in faith, hope and charity**.

This renewal in the Resurrection is punctuated by different apparitions, thanks to which it spreads. Only one person had no need of an apparition: Mary the Mother of Jesus, because of the fullness of her faith. That is what is so great in the mystery of Mary; sanctifying grace is always first with her, and the charismatic, miraculous aspects are second. John Paul II says, "sustained by the presence of Christ, the Church marches throughout the centuries towards the end of time, and goes out to meet Christ who comes; but on this path – and I point it out straight away – she progresses by following the journey accomplished by the Blessed Virgin Mary who "went forward in her pilgrimage of faith, faithfully guarding the union with her Son up to the Cross""[5]. "Blessed is she who believed" (Lk. 1:45). If therefore, we truly want to be children of Mary, we have to understand this wonderful education of the Holy Spirit concerning her. At the Annunciation God asks Mary for a pure act of faith, a pure act of hope, an immediate act of charity. The incarnation of this wholly pure act of faith will involve a miracle, a charism, but it started by an act of faith. We should always come back to this in order to understand how the Holy Spirit leads us. He always leads us in faith; in order to know if something is from God or not from God, we must look at its starting point, this primacy of faith. The Holy Father reminds us also that, as St. Augustine and St. Leo the Great taught, Mary conceived her Son "in her spirit before conceiving Him in her womb, precisely by her faith"[6]. *Prius concepit in corde quam in carne*[7], she conceived in her heart - that is to say in her faith, her hope and her charity - before conceiving Jesus miraculously in her flesh. It is the same thing at the Cross. The Mother of Jesus stands at the foot of the Cross in a wholly pure and perfect faith. And when Jesus asks her to be the Mother of John, when He asks her to look no longer at Him, but to see John as her son, Mary 'conceives' John firstly in her faith. Everything is commanded by faith. And it is the same thing for the Resurrection. Mary believes in the mystery of the

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[5] *The Mother of the Redeemer*, 2; cf. Second Vatican Council, *Lumien Gentium*, 58.
[6] *The Mother of the Redeemer*, 13.
[7] "Mary, St. Augustine comments, was more happy to receive the faith of Christ than to conceive the flesh of Christ … The maternal link would not have meant anything to her, if she had not had a greater beatitude in carrying Christ in her heart than in her flesh" (*Consecrated Virginity*, III, 3. Nouvelle bibliothèque augustinienne 1, Institut d'études augustiniennes 1992, p.82).

Resurrection and it is her faith, her hope and her charity that enable her not to waste any time. Our faith hope and charity mean that we always avoid every loss or waste of time, because they make us live at God's rhythm, at the very rhythm of the Most Holy Trinity. They make us live *what God lives*. Charisms help us, but they do not make us live what God lives; they wake us up (charisms are for that), but it us the life of grace that makes us live of the very mystery of God, from the inside, and not from the outside, because we can only live the life of God from the inside, in faith hope and charity.

In the mystery of Jesus' Resurrection it is amazing to see the intensity of the Virgin Mary's interiority, and how God wanted Mary Magdalene to become more interior. Mary Magdalene is the most striking example that the Holy Spirit gives us and St John understands this. The account of the apparitions, which in the Gospel of St John begins with the apparition to Mary Magdalene, is astonishing. We must often come back to it in order to understand the education of God, of the Holy Spirit concerning us. Mary Magdalene is generous but her faith retains a very human aspect, The first thing that Jesus does for her, and it is to show her that He loves her, is to awaken her faith. After Mary the Mother of Jesus, it is she who is the most awake; she is more awake than the Apostles, more even than John. She hurries to the tomb in the morning to be the first one there. She couldn't bear somebody else to be there before her; there was only one thing to do therefore: set off very early. It is the intense desire in her heart that takes her there; and when she sees the stone rolled away, she doesn't waste any time: she goes straight to the Apostles, no doubt straight to John, since she must have suffered when she saw that Peter was not there at the Cross… Peter, the one considered the leader of the Apostles is absent! But John, the 'Benjamin' (the youngest one) is there. At least there is one of them! That must have consoled her; otherwise she would perhaps have had doubts about Jesus' choice. He had chosen Peter, and Peter was not there…

All this is extremely eloquent, and shows that there is a new order, since it is a total renewal. In this new order it is love that is first and not prudence … in the order of prudence Mary Magdalene would not have been first, nor John. It is an order according to the perfection of love. In this new order, Mary of Magdala is first in generosity, or perhaps John before her, since as soon as he saw the empty tomb and the cloth rolled up he believed immediately (cf. Jn. 20:8). Up to then he had not understood: the sorrow had been too great; but when he sees the empty sepulchre, with the details that he gives, John believes…

Fr Feuillet's exegesis on this passage is very beautiful; he tries to understand *how* John believed, in entering and seeing the cloth rolled up. How did Jesus leave the sepulchre? He did not leave it like the sun rises in the early morning, nor did He have an angelic 'wake-up call'. Jesus left the sepulchre in an élan of love, "through the power of

His divinity"[8] which is one with the Father's power[9]. In response to Jesus' prayer – "Father glorify your Son…" (Jn. 17:1)[10], the Father grants the soul of Jesus to give life again to His body, by the power of the Word and that of the Holy Spirit, which are one with that of the Father. This now glorious body is victorious over all physical conditioning, because it is entirely seized by divine light and divine love; and so death, the linen cloths, all those obstacles which had been victorious over Christ's body because God had willed them to be (otherwise they would not have been), are overcome. God used the corpse of Christ and the prayer of His separated soul to communicate grace, to communicate love. Peter looked at the empty tomb but John did not look at that; he looked at what remained in the tomb, because emptiness doesn't teach us anything. What could tell him something was what remained there, namely the shroud that had enveloped Jesus' body.

When Christ's body had passed through the shroud and the linen cloths to go to the Father, no eye, no human gaze saw it. It was accomplished in God, in the Most Holy Trinity. That is why there is no witness of the event of the Resurrection; it is a mystery with a wholly divine interiority. John, looking at the linen cloths and seeing the shroud, understood immediately that the glorified body of Christ had passed through all that. And in passing through them it had left a mark; that is what is so extraordinary in the shroud of Turin. A few years ago a lot of fuss was made to try and prove that the shroud could not date from the time of Christ. Later on however, the scientific conclusions were re-examined and it was acknowledged that the shroud in fact escapes science, and all that can be said is that we have never seen anything similar. The story of the Turin shroud is very moving for us, because it is something palpable, or at least something visible, for it is forbidden to touch it, and rightly so; but we can see it. It is the only visible trace of the passing of the Word of Life[11] who became incarnate! That is the delicacy of the Father for us; we have such a need for signs! Even if we have a contemplative, loving faith that wants to go beyond all signs, there exists this sign for the people of God, and also for the contemplative.

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[8] St. Thomas Aquinas states in his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 397 (Le Cerf 1998, p.200): "It does not belong to man as such, to rise from the dead; only Christ, who was "free among the dead" (Ps. 88:5) could accomplish it by the power of his divinity", and 403 (p.201): "Christ rises from the dead by His own power"; in his *Commentary on the Credo*, 88 (Nouvelles éditions latines, collection "Docteur commun", 1969, p.125): "As Jesus gave up His soul by His own power, so He took it up again by His own power; that is why we say: the Risen Christ, His Resurrection being His own work".

[9] See St Thomas Aquinas, C*ommentary on the Letter to the Romans*, no. 379: "The power of the Father and that of the Son are one and the same"; *Summa Theologica* III, q. 53, a.4; Denzinger, *Symboles et definitions de la foi catholique*, No.s 369 and 539 (Le Cerf 1996).

[10] In his *Dialogues on the Trinity*, Saint Cyril of Alexandria affirms that the glory that Jesus asks of his Father in the prayer of chapter 17 in St John's Gospel is that of the Resurrection. See M.-D. Philippe, *Le secret du Père*, Saint Paul 2000, note 24, p.96. St Thomas, commentating on this passage says: « Here He asks to be glorified in His humanity, so that what is temporal – the flesh - and doomed to corruption, receives the glory that is not in time" (*Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2192).

[11] Cf. 1 Jn 1:1

The Gospel does not tell us anything about Mary, concerning the shroud found in the tomb, but it shows us John. It is very important to be able to touch in a certain way, the moment when John, in his heart as the beloved disciple, believed in the Resurrection. John *saw*. It does not say that he touched; he saw and it was enough for him: "he saw and he believed" (Jn. 20:8). Let us ask St. John to teach us not to waste time. He did not waste any time: as soon as he saw the cloth rolled up he believed. For Mary Magdalene it was not enough; she remained in her anxiety. She thinks she sees someone near her … the gardener? Jesus appears *for her*, and she remains in a total subjectivism. She is so anxious to find someone who can give her information, that she believes she sees the gardener. Yet Peter and John are there: she could have asked John, and he would perhaps have spoken to her of his faith and she would have converted. But the Apostles do not interest her any more…

How persistent we are in our subjectivity! Subjectivism makes us stubborn and blind: instead of seeing Jesus we see the gardener, because we have a fixed idea in our head and we only see things through that … and we think we see well! The subjectivity of Mary Magdalene is born from love, but it is still a terrible subjectivism given the reality of the Resurrection.

And then Jesus calls her, "Mary". Mary, the mother of Jesus, contemplated Him in His Resurrection and His glory, and Jesus wakes up Mary of Magdala by calling her by the name of His Mother: only that could save her. All our subjectivisms can be saved by the realism of Mary. The most terrible subjectivism is that of a faith that is no longer wholly theological (and thus divine), when one thinks of one's self as a great mystic. This is a dreadful subjectivism: we think we have a stronger faith than the Apostles, and we no longer accept that the Church is the measure of our faith. Mary of Magdala has this sort of subjectivity, but she is converted by the call of Jesus. Jesus does not say "Mary Magdalene", He says "Mary". It is Mary who must transform the heart of Mary Magdalene so that she can see Jesus, her Master, in the one she took to be the gardener: "Rabbouni!". And she throws herself on Him. Peter and John had left … luckily for them (!), or they would have said, "She's going crazy!" And it's true, she goes crazy. She passes from the gardener to Jesus with an extraordinary quickness, in an instant (Jn. 20:16), because He had woken up her faith by calling on the presence of Mary, the first one who had believed in His Resurrection.