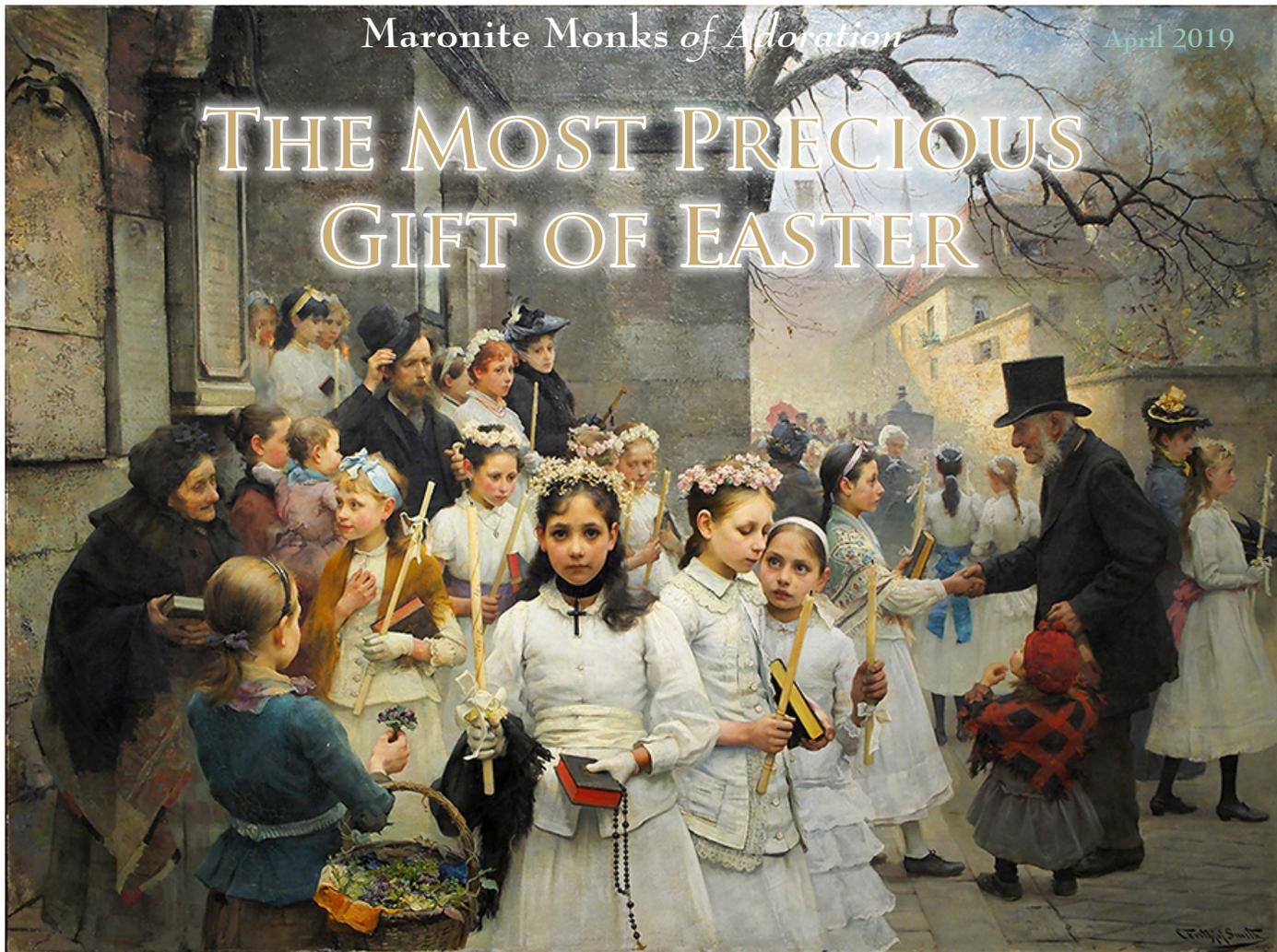


THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT OF EASTER



After First Communion by Carl Frithjof Smith, 1892

GIVEN MY AGE, I find it amazing to have only just recently discovered the painting by Norwegian artist Carlo Frithjof Smith entitled, *After First Holy Communion* (1892). The setting is Weimer (Thuringia), Germany, where the artist lived and taught for two years and, I am inclined to believe, must have actually witnessed a scene similar to what he felt compelled to depict on canvas. Were it painted these days, it might be presumed that the artist's intent were to show a bitter contrast between a lost ideal of the past and our, shall we say, less effective First Holy Communion formation of recent times. To our joy, however, Carlo Smith conveyed what he saw so realistically that we could, as it were, step timelessly into the scene ourselves to share in the experience firsthand. As such, the painting is virtually a prayer of thanksgiving to Christ, for it beautifully

radiates the intent of the Eucharist through the — in some cases ecstatic — expression of each girl. So, it is well for us to ponder this Great Gift, instituted on Holy Thursday, in light of the Resurrection when its ramifications were still not fully understood.

It is a fact that, aside from whatever hope beyond hope the apostles and disciples may have clung to for seeing Jesus again, their expectation was that they would see, hear and touch Him as before. Nothing in the Gospels indicates that any of them had anticipated that His resurrection appearances might occur as they did. But at least one reason Our Lord did so was to demonstrate for all that His “abiding Presence” with them hereafter was not to be the familiar one. Rather, by their faith He would be recognized in the Breaking of the Bread. We cite three instances which served as clues pointing directly to the Great Sacra-

ment, that is, the Eucharist.

The first clue came early on that first glorious Easter morning when a distraught Mary Magdalene came face to face with a virtual stranger, the gardener. Yet it is a gardener Who happens to be divine, calls her by name, ignites her heart with love, and causes the veil to drop from her eyes so that she recognizes him as Jesus. The second clue to the Greatest Gift occurs at Emmaus where Jesus vanishes after He breaks bread with His two companions who, until then, had not been able to recognize Him. “Did not our hearts burn within us”, they exclaim, and, He is “known to them in the breaking of the bread.” (Luke 24:35) The third clue occurs several days later when Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John have all returned to fishing on lake Tiberias. Suddenly Jesus, again without familiar features, calls out to them from the shore. John’s heart — ever yearning for His divine Master — is inflamed at the sound of His voice, “It is the Lord!” Standing beside Jesus on the shore, still “none of the disciples was bold enough to ask, ‘Who are you?’; they knew quite well it was the Lord.” (John 21:12) Which is the point Jesus was making — it is not necessary to see familiar features to recognize His actual Presence.

It has always seemed likely that only after Jesus had ascended with finality, that St. Peter would feel impelled to offer the Apostles’ First Mass. The enchantment of an apple blossom is the promise of its fruit. And the promised fruit of the Resurrection would be the abiding Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, His sacramental Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity given for the life of the world to the end of time. It needed

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only His apostles and their successors to carry out Christ’s mandate, “Do this in memory of Me!” (Luke 22:19) Memories indeed! It is said that on St. Peter’s face there eventually formed grooves for all the tears he shed during his lifetime over the burning and unshakable memory of his cowardly denials.

“Do this in memory of Me!” But with what trepidation He would have approached the Table of Sacrifice. “This is My Body!” Four simple words not easily spoken by any mere man for the first time in history; and the

fact of Our Lord’s abiding Presence for all of salvation history depending upon Peter saying them. Padre Pio centuries later, stammering the words of institution at Holy Mass, exclaimed they

were like hot coals placed upon his tongue: “H-H-H-H-Hoc!! E-E-E-Est!! E-E-E-Enim!! C-C-C-C-Corpus!! M-M-M-Meum!!” If so difficult for St. Padre Pio, how much more for St. Peter to attempt.

Yet God’s Mother was there. Pope Leo XIII wrote in his Encyclical, *Adiutricem Populi*:

“Mary... was the wonderful help and support of the newly born Church through the holiness of her example, the authority of her counsels, the sweetness of her consolation, and the efficacy of her fervent prayer, showing herself truly to be Mother of the Church and Teacher and Queen of the Apostles.”

When the time came for Her depart from them for Her heavenly abode, they would have drawn consolation

from her teachings, particularly with regards to Her Treasure of treasures, the Eucharist.”

For she well already understood Her Son’s three-fold purpose for instituting, in His ineffable Love for us, this Greatest of Gifts: First, to perpetuate



Christ Breaking Bread at Emmaus by Pier-Leone Ghezzi (+1755)

His one Sacrifice through all the ages. Second, to nourish our union with Him and all the members of His Mystical Body, in view of His return in glory; when all would be one in Him and He in them, and the sacrifice of our praise would be united to His to the Father in the Holy Spirit forever. Third, as a consoling light and warmth of His Real Presence — Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. Starting with these earliest brethren, the Greatest of Gifts has continued as a consoling light and warmth for all who have welcomed Him down the centuries, up to our First Communicants depicted in the painting, and right up to present times. Again, a consoling light and warmth, but for those who **welcome Him!**

We see that welcome in the faces of Carlo Smith's First Communicants. In his times, and no doubt since, the Church required that no effort be spared to fix the occasion indelibly on young minds.



They learned to discern the Eucharist from ordinary bread, to realize in some measure the dignity and excellence of the Sacrament of the Altar, to believe in the Real Presence and adore Christ under the sacramental veils. This formation was considered the most important duty falling to the lot of a pastor.

So many decades ago I can only presume that the same formation must have been carried out successfully for me, because evidently the good sisters spared no effort preparing us as well. So important was it too for, like the communicants of Carlo Frithjof Smith, we were ready to just listen for Him, if you want to call it that. I heard no Voice, but I was absolutely certain that He was there. And truly by that fact, as anxious as I myself may have been for First Holy Communion, it seemed Jesus too had been eagerly awaiting this moment to give me His most precious Gift — Himself. ❖

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Wishing you all a most blessed and joyous Easter! Christ is Risen! He is truly Risen! Alleluia! Alleluia!