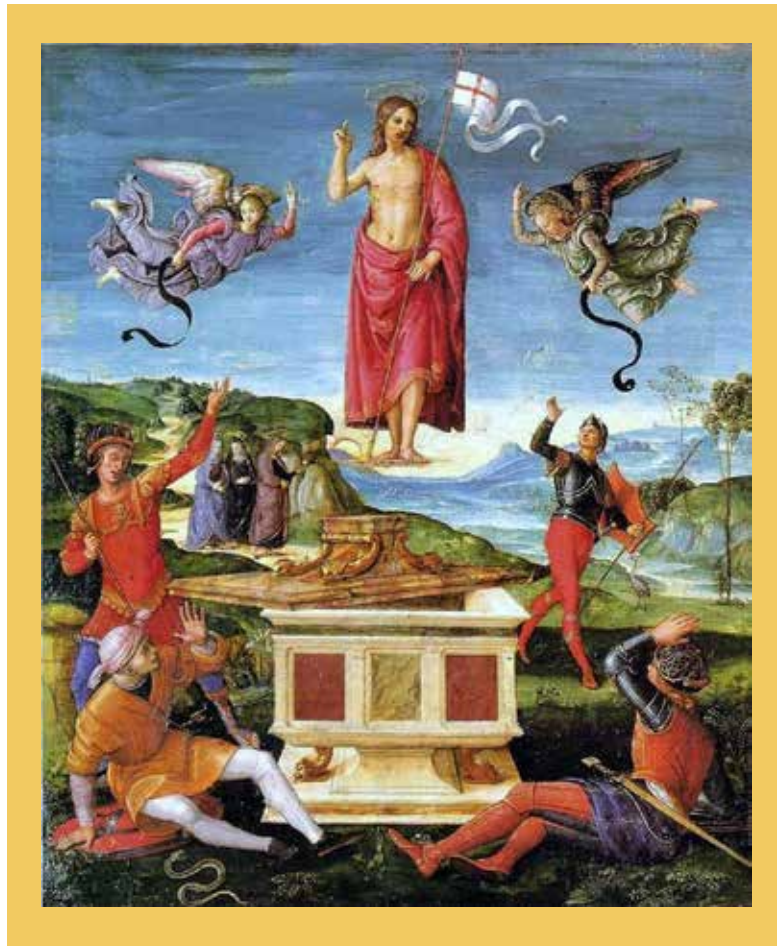


Christ's Gentleness and Mercy in the Resurrection

WHEN IT comes to the question of the divine origin of the Christian faith and the question of the authenticity and historical reliability of the accounts that we find in the Gospels, there are all kinds of reasons that one could give in support of the truth of these claims. One of the arguments which could be given is the very story we find in the Gospels of how God went about accomplishing the redemption of the human race. There is something about this story that seems to go beyond normal human categories and ways of thinking. The spirit of God permeates the story itself; it is full of surprises. If God had asked some great literary genius to write the story of how He would redeem the human race, I don't think anyone could have come up with anything close to what God actually did. And if God had asked me to write the script for the Resurrection of Christ from the dead, I would most likely have done things much differently. If I had written the script, Christ most definitely would have



The Resurrection of Christ by Raphael, c.1500

made a dramatic appearance before the council of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin and all those who had condemned Him to death in order to make it clear to them who it was they had condemned. There would also have been a dramatic appearance before Pontius Pilate, in order to let him know who was **really** in charge of the world and who really had power. And when Our Lord appeared to His disciples, there would have been at least some word about how they had failed and needed to reform their ways. But, of course, as God arranged things, we have none of this. We see in Our Lord's appearances, after His resurrection, a spirit of deep humility. One sees in the manner in which Our Lord deals with those to whom He appears both a kind of gentleness and a quiet strength. The Gospel accounts tell us that the first person to whom he appeared was a repentant sinner, Mary Magdalene. There is a venerable tradition in the Church that the Risen Lord first appeared to

His mother, even though this is not recorded in the Gospels. This tradition is based on faithful and sound theological reasons that it is inconceivable that Our Lord would not share His glorious victory, in the first place, with the one who was so closely associated with Him in His passion and death. In any case, the Gospels make it clear that Our Lord wanted to show Himself publicly first of all to a repentant sinner and then to the other holy women who, out of their great love and devotion, had had the courage to come out to the tomb early in the morning. Our Lord sends these women to go and give word to His disciples. When Our Lord, on that first evening, does appear to His disciples in the upper room, it is in a spirit of peace and forgiveness. No doubt the Apostles were feeling rather guilty and had a deep sense of shame. But Our Lord acts in a way to completely dispel those feelings. Our Lord never humiliates those who humiliated Him; He never shames those who shamed Him. He only rebukes the disciples about one thing: the fact that they did not believe the report of the women He sent.



We can't be sure what all the reasons were for the fact that the disciples didn't believe the women's report; it could be that the news was just too incredible to accept. But perhaps there was also a sense among the disciples that, if the Lord was, in fact, alive and appearing to people, why wouldn't he come to us first? We are the ones He chose; we are the ones He said would sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. But by acting the way He does, Our Lord is teaching His disciples a lesson about what is primary in the Church — He is teaching them that having authority over others is not what is first, but rather a union of heart with Him. As Pope Benedict XVI pointed out on various occasions, when it comes to the two aspects of the Church, the Marian aspect and the Petrine aspect, it is the Marian that holds primacy of place.

In the account of Our Lord's second appearance to the disciples in the upper room, this time with Thomas present, one finds this same attitude of gentleness and forgiveness. When Our Lord appears He does not offer a sharp rebuke to Thomas for his unbelief. Our Lord shows Himself to be like a skillful physician who goes right to the heart of the problem. He takes the doubt of Thomas seriously; He meets Thomas where he is at and addresses Thomas' wound of unbelief by His own wounds. Our Lord's whole interest is centered on the good of Thomas' soul — on drawing him into communion with Him.

All these appearances of Our Lord reveal what Our Lord is especially after; they show us what He wants more than anything — to draw men to Himself. His deepest desire is to show mercy and to bring about reconciliation. Mankind has been estranged from God because of sin. Man's sin has resulted in a relationship of distrust, of suspicion, of hostility. And after we put God's own Son to death, one might think that this would only increase the hostility. But, in fact, it was through this act that He wants to draw all men to Himself. In all the appearances of Christ after the Resurrection, Our Lord is not acting in a way that we would expect a man to act who had been tortured to death by his enemies and abandoned by his followers; all the appearances of Our Lord are bathed in the light of divine mercy.

If we are striving to live a life like Our Lord's, and to the degree that we are inspired by the same spirit that inspired Him, we should expect that we will meet the same kind of opposition and hostility that He met. There is no question that the hostility towards Christians is growing in our world. It would be very human, easy, and natural for us to react to this opposition with anger and hostility, but Our Lord calls us to a higher way, a way that surpasses the merely human — the way of divine mercy. ❖