

Life in the Resurrection and the Kingdom of God

Biblical Reflection for 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, NOV. 2, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Christian faith in the resurrection has met with incomprehension and opposition from the very beginning. On no point does the Christian faith encounter more opposition than on the resurrection of the body. The question of the resurrection is vital not only to the Christian faith but to all people who reflect on life and death.

No spirit of inquiry

Judaism has never been monolithic, and to say "the Jews believed" is to be misinformed and to misinform. In today's Gospel (Luke 20:27-38) we encounter the Sadducees, one of several groups or parties within Judaism. Sadducees were of the priestly class, many of them aristocratic, wealthy, and theologically conservative. Scripture for them consisted of only the five books of Moses. No teaching was authoritative if it was not found in the Pentateuch, and they found no doctrine of the resurrection in the books of Moses.

These Jerusalem religious leaders or their representatives attempt to incriminate Jesus with the Romans and to discredit him with the people. Their air is to argue, to embarrass, to force Jesus into one particular school of thought, or perhaps just to divide the audience. There is among them no spirit of inquiry or desire to learn. They are simply baiting Jesus with one of their classic "what if" questions, a question on which their minds had been settled long ago: There is no resurrection of the dead (v. 27; Acts 23:8).

Belief in the resurrection

The Pharisees and many of the Lord's contemporaries hoped for the resurrection. They not only included the prophets and the writings in their Scripture but also believed in the authority of the oral tradition from Moses. The basis for belief in the resurrection was found in that oral tradition. The subject was heatedly debated between the two parties of Pharisees and Sadducees, a fact that Paul made use of to draw attention away from himself during his trial before the Jewish Council (Acts 23:6-10)

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. Their question in today's Gospel, based on the law of levirate marriage recorded in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, details the duty of a man toward a deceased brother. The Sadducees ridicule the idea of the resurrection. Jesus rejects their naïve understanding of the resurrection (vv. 35-36) and then argues on behalf of the resurrection of the dead on the basis of the written law (vv. 37-38) that the Sadducees accept.

Jesus' answer is twofold. The first part (vv. 34-36) simply points out the inappropriateness of the question, given the difference between life in this age and the age to come. In this age, the fact of death makes marriage and perpetuation of life essential. However, in the age to come there is no death, but those who attain to the resurrection are equal to the angels, they are children of God.

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In the second part of his answer, Jesus draws on the Sadducees' own Bible, the book of Moses (vv. 37-40). Jesus answers them with Exodus 3:6: God is a God of the living and not of the dead. It follows then, says Jesus, that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are living, not dead.

The two parts of Jesus' answer to the Sadducees constitute an argument from reason (condition of this life do not constitute proof of conditions in the next) and Scripture (Exodus 3:6) for the belief in the resurrection of the dead. In this belief Jesus was in agreement with the Pharisees. The argumentation has to do with the resurrection of Jesus, not with a doctrine of resurrection in general.

Acquaintance and true knowledge

In Jesus time, The Pharisees and the Sadducees were externally acquainted with Jesus, they learned his teaching and knew many details about him but they did not know him in his truth. The members of these groups or parties know him, but superficially; they know various things about him, but they do not really know him.

On the other hand, the Twelve Apostles have at least understood in substance and begun to discover who Jesus is. This different manner of knowing still exists today: There are learned people who know many details about Jesus and never get to really know and love him. Many such people have even studied theology! There are also many simple, unlearned people who have no knowledge of these details but have known him in the fullness of his truth and beauty.

Gift and mystery

Marriage has as its natural end the procreation of children, it assures the continuance of the human race and the creation of new beings, since human beings are destined to die and need to leave successors. How many times did the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II tell us, "The future of humanity passes through the family."

Consecrated celibacy and chastity are signs of the resurrection and of the Kingdom of God which is drawing near, for in the resurrection and the kingdom there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage. Celibacy and chastity in the Church draw attention to the new order of the Gospel. They relate to the resurrection of the dead; they are signs of eternity, of incorruptibility, of life.

The celibate state is a sign of the world to come, which we priests of the Latin Rite strive to live with our whole existence as a follower of Jesus Christ, in the ministry of the Gospel, in contemplative prayer at the feet of the Master, in proclaiming the coming kingdom of God, and in offering the sacrifice of the Eucharist, which sums up our entire priesthood. This was what Christ intended when founding the state of voluntary celibacy and chastity "for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven": establishing a resemblance to Christ, which is not only spiritual but physical and practical too. Voluntary celibacy and freely chosen chastity are a state particularly suited to the service of the kingdom. Like Jesus, the priest can commit himself entirely -- spiritually and humanly -- to the ministry and service. We are not celibate and chaste so as to be more peaceful and free to do what we wish, but to resemble Christ in his commitment to the kingdom.

The reason for celibacy

Let me apply today's Gospel to my life as an ordained priest and consecrated religious. The world asks today: "Why does the Church continue to defend a practice that seems so unnatural and unnecessary and even cruel?" "Is married life is spiritually suspect?" "Are priests spiritual athletes above reproach? Is that the reason why we priests shouldn't be married?"

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Genesis tells us that God saw great goodness in what he created and took delight in it. But there is more to the doctrine of creation than an affirmation of the goodness of the world. This distinction between God and the world is the ground for the anti-idolatry principle that is reiterated from the beginning to the end of the Bible: Do not turn something less than God into God. The doctrine of creation involves both a great "yes" and a great "no" to the universe. Detachment is the refusal to make anything less than God the organizing principle or center of one's life. Everything in this world -- including sex and intimate friendship -- is good, but impermanently and imperfectly so.

In the biblical stories of the Old Testament, when God wanted to make a certain truth vividly known and visible to his people, he often chose a prophet and commanded him to act out that truth, to embody it concretely. For example, God told Hosea to marry the unfaithful Gomer in order to sacramentalize God's fidelity to wavering and sinful Israel. Thus, the truth of the non-ultimacy of sex, family and worldly relationship can and should be proclaimed through words, but it will be believed only when people can see it in flesh and blood.

I really believe that this is why God chooses certain people to be celibate. Our mission is to witness to a transcendent form of love, the way that we will love in heaven. In our life with God, we will experience a communion (bodily and spiritual) compared to which even the most intense forms of earthly communion pale into insignificance. Celibates make this truth blatantly real for a world that is bent on the immediate, the visible, the tangible, and the now. Though we might be able to articulate practical reasons for it, celibacy only finally makes sense in the eschatological context. It is ultimately a matter for the world yet to come!

The longer I am a priest (soon to be 25 years), and a consecrated religious (soon to be 30 years), I am more and more convinced that the compelling quality of the priesthood is not a matter of superficial celebrity, masterful administration, clerical savvy, brilliant oratory, youthful agility or diplomatic charm. It is something much more mysterious, deeper, and even mystical. It is a fascination for something we cannot yet fully grasp, see or understand. It is a profound matter of the heart, a real "cor ad cor loquitur" [heart speaking to heart], in the words of Blessed John Henry Newman. It is, in the final analysis, a matter of knowing and loving Jesus Christ, being totally seized by him, becoming a true "witness to his Resurrection." Encounters with the Risen Christ characterize the Christian hope of resurrection. We shall rise like Christ, with him, and through him. That is indeed cause for rejoicing in these dying November days.

A prayer for us this week

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting encouragement and good hope through his grace, encourage our hearts and strengthen them in every good deed and word. Our Lord is faithful; he will strengthen us and guard us from the evil one. May he direct our hearts to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ (Thessalonians 2:16-3:5)

Lord, when your glory appears, my joy will be full. Keep me as the apple of your eye, hide me in the shadow of your wings. But I in justice shall behold your face; on waking I shall be content in your presence. (Psalm 17:1, 5-6, 8, 15)

[The readings for the 32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time are 2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14; 2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5; Luke 20:27-38 or Luke 20:27, 34-38]

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