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The Shadow of Peter, the Touch of Thomas

Biblical Reflection for Divine Mercy Sunday

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, APRIL 4, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles (5:12-16) offers us a vivid insight into the early Christian community in Jerusalem. Luke has already mentioned the rapid growth of the early church (2:41, 47, 4:4; 6:1, 9:31). In today's reading from Acts he wants to add the fact that large numbers of women as well as men were being baptized and becoming disciples (5:14). Signs and wonders are the visible result of some of the gifts of the Spirit such as "the working of miracles" and "deeds of power" (I Corinthians 12:9, 28).

A powerful image of Peter is presented to us (vs. 15-16): "They even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed."

The shadow of Peter

I have always been moved by the image of the shadow of Peter passing over the sick and afflicted. People who passed within Peter's shadow were healed, not by Peter's shadow, but by God's power working through Peter. These miracles of healing attracted people to the early Church and confirmed the truth of the teachings of the Apostles and the fact that the power of God was with them. We also learn that the religious leaders who were jealous of Jesus' power and authority saw the Apostles as a continued threat and demanded respect for themselves. The apostles weren't demanding respect for themselves. Their goal was to bring respect and reverence to God. The Apostles had acquired the respect of the people, not because they demanded it, but because they deserved it.

Pope Benedict among us

As I reflect on today's first reading, I cannot help but call to mind the powerful images of Pope Benedict XVI as he moved among hundreds of thousands of people during his Apostolic Visit to the United States of America two years ago this month. The authentic shepherd, who models his or her life on Jesus, must love the people entrusted to him and imitate Jesus. Pope Benedict has done that very well.

Over the past weeks, the world has witnessed the scourge and pain of sexual abuse of minors and the vulnerable erupt in many European countries. The abuse is evil, devastating, and sinful. A small portion of priests and religious, who promised to protect, defend and love children, have brought disgrace upon the Church and upon society. Some people have tried to blame Pope Benedict for inaction, covert behavior, and blatant dishonesty in dealing with the sexual abuse of minors. Such blame is unjust, unacceptable, and extremely harmful to the Church, to victims, and to society in general.

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I recall Pope Benedict's visit to the USA two years ago with deep emotion and profound gratitude. During that visit, the shadow of Peter came upon America, as it has done wherever this Pope has visited over the past five years. And that shadow, which is God's healing touch, covers us all with mercy, healing and peace. When Pope Benedict walked among us, he did more than connect with us. He bonded. He moved multitudes. He showed remarkable courage, wisdom and compassion.

The media did not miss the deep significance of the Holy Father's private and moving meeting with victims of clerical sex abuse at the Vatican Embassy in Washington. The Pope was unafraid then and remains unafraid now to enter into the pain, confusion, sadness and evil of the abuse crisis. He let people know that he listened and understood and that the Pope will continue to act so that such a disaster would never repeat itself.

Ubi Petrus ibi ecclesia

An ancient Latin expression, first used by St. Ambrose in the fourth century, came to my mind in April 2008, during several moments of the historic papal visit to the USA: Ubi Petrus ibi ecclesia, which translated means: Wherever Peter is, there is the Church. Peter was in America two years ago, and his gentle smile and obvious serenity ignited a nation, a Church and a continent with hope in the midst of cynicism, despair and many who would like to hasten death for a Church that is alive and young. Only time, reflection and prayer will reveal if the healing of two years ago will bear fruit for the Church in America.

One thing is certain: In Pope Benedict XVI, the shadow of Peter fell on millions of people in America in 2008 and continues to fall on millions around the world to this day, especially upon those who are wounded and hurting from the evil actions of sexual abuse of children. Let us never forget that in Pope Benedict, Peter is still among us.

The touch of Thomas

John's Resurrection story (Chapters 20-21) is a series of encounters between Jesus and his followers that reveal diverse faith reactions. Whether these encounters are with Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple, Mary Magdalene, the disciples or Thomas, the whole scenario reminds us that in the range of belief there are different degrees of readiness and different factors that cause people to come to faith and help them in turn to become witnesses and teachers.

John's story of Jesus and Thomas (John 20:19-31) records the first post-resurrection appearance of Jesus and provides us with an archetypal experience of doubt, struggle and faith. Herein lies every Christian's experience: to believe without having seen. In this Gospel passage, we have a story within a story: the resolution of Thomas' doubts during Jesus' appearance to encourage the fearful disciples. Thomas only believes when he hears the Lord's call to belief.

Thomas is not the eternal skeptic, nor the bullish, stubborn personality that Christian tradition has often painted. The Greek lexicon translates the word "skepsis" as "doubt, misgiving, hesitation, and disbelief." Thomas, the doubter, was permitted to do something that we would all like to do. He was allowed to touch and "experience" something that by human means was not possible. For us it is more difficult. We need to begin with faith and then blindly touch our way to the heart of our lives.

Though we know so little about Thomas, his family background and his destiny, we are given an important hint into his identity in the etymology of his name in Greek: Thomas (Didymous in Greek) means "twin". Who was Thomas' other half, his twin? Maybe we can see his twin by looking into the mirror. Thomas' other half is anyone who has struggled with the pain of unbelief, doubt and despair, and has allowed the presence of the Risen Jesus to make a difference. When this happens, the ice of skepticism thaws. Thomas and his twins throughout the world risk everything in Jesus and for Jesus and become sources of blessing for others, in spite

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of their doubts and despair and because of their doubts and despair.

Divine Mercy Sunday

Divine Mercy Sunday is not a new feast established to celebrate St. Faustina Kowalska's (1905-1938) revelations. In fact it is not about St. Faustina at all! Rather the feast recovers an ancient liturgical tradition, reflected in a teaching attributed to St. Augustine about the Easter Octave, which he called "the days of mercy and pardon," and the Octave Day itself "the compendium of the days of mercy."

There is no need to force a link between Divine Mercy and the Gospel story of Thomas and the Risen Jesus. The celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday does not compete with, nor endanger the integrity of the Easter Season, nor does it take away from Thomas' awesome encounter with the Risen Lord in today's Gospel. Divine Mercy Sunday is the Octave Day of Easter, celebrating the merciful love of God shining through the whole Easter Triduum and the whole Easter mystery.

At St. Faustina's canonization on April 30, 2000, Pope John Paul II said in his homily before more than 200,000 people in St. Peter's Square: "Jesus shows his hands and his side [to the Apostles]. He points, that is, to the wounds of the Passion, especially the wound in his heart, the source from which flows the great wave of mercy poured out on humanity."

Several years ago, when I was having difficulty in seeing the internal links between the Second Sunday of Easter, my patron saint, Thomas the Apostle, and Sr. Faustina's revelations, I came across this quote by St. Bernard (Canticle 61, 4-5: PL 183, 1072): "What I cannot obtain by myself, I appropriate (usurp!) with trust from the pierced side of the Lord, because he is full of mercy. Thomas' encounter with the Risen Lord gave me a whole new perspective on the meaning of mercy. Then I understood what this day is all about. Now more than ever in the Church and in the world, we need mercy."

Mercy within mercy within mercy

Canada's most recent shepherd, Bishop Donald Bolen of Saskatoon, was ordained to the episcopacy on March 25, 2010. Bishop Bolen, a priest of the Archdiocese of Regina in Western Canada, and former official of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity at the Vatican, chose as his episcopal motto "Mercy within mercy within mercy." The quotation is from Thomas Merton's 1953 book "The Sign of Jonas," wherein Merton has God saying: "I have always overshadowed Jonas with my mercy. Have you not had sight of me, Jonas, my child? Mercy within mercy within mercy."

At his ordination ceremony on the Feast of the Annunciation this year, Bishop Bolen said: "The Word which Mary welcomes with her 'fiat,' the Word which becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, the Word who gives himself to us completely, even unto death, but which death cannot contain: what that Word speaks is mercy within mercy within mercy. If ever there was an episcopal motto that sums up a bishop's life, it is this motto for a remarkable young bishop and leader of the Church in Canada who models mercy in high density!"

As we continue to bask in the afterglow of the resurrection of the Lord, let us not cease praying that Peter's shadow of healing and peace cover the Church, and let us beg the Lord that our lives be steeped in mercy within mercy within mercy.

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Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: rosica@saltandlighttv.org.

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The Beauty of the Resurrection

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