

3rd Sunday of Easter (B)

14th April 2024

'Keeping body & soul together'

Acts 3: *the God of our ancestors ... has glorified His servant Jesus*

Ps 4: *Lift up the light of Your face on us, O Lord*

1Jn 2: *we can be sure that know God only be keeping His commandments*

Lk 24: 35–48: *Yes, it is I indeed. Touch me and see for yourselves.*

This 3rd Sunday of Easter, we're still considering the *day of the Resurrection itself*, the evening of that Sunday on which Our Lord rose. After His appearance at dusk to the 2 disciples walking to Emmaus, then, as we've just heard, He appears back in Jerusalem to the gathered Apostles who are amazed — overwhelmed! — at this occurrence. But what is it about the *wounds*, and the *fish*? Such a key spiritual moment, and yet Jesus seems to make a big thing of showing the apostles His *hands and feet*, the marks of the nails that pierced His body on the Cross. And then, as they still remain dumbstruck, he takes some grilled fish from their dinner table and eats it. What is the meaning of these actions of Jesus? Well, surely it's to assure them that they must accept for real His bodily resurrection. All sorts of doubts arise in their hearts when He appears, and Jesus knows this. Most likely, they simply didn't believe the evidence of their eyes. He wants to instil in their minds an

assurance that His Resurrection is a definite reality, not some sort of fantasy, phantasm, or mistaken enthusiasm.

It is, in fact, really important, to understand that Our Lord's Resurrection wasn't just some spiritual resurgence, or a releasing of the spirit of the Son of God from an imprisoning human body, but a truly bodily event. Whilst His risen body is now freed from some of its material limitations, yet it is still a body, and the same body. It is still Jesus, still 'God made man.' Our divine Lord's insistence on keeping His humanity assures us that God made us body and soul for a good reason: both mankind's body and soul are good, and both should be cared for, kept holy, and kept together. Jesus did *not* 'flee' the body at the earliest opportunity; no, He rose again in that body, has sanctified the flesh, and carried that human flesh into the glory of heaven. This means that we should care for the body, care for our *own* body, as it is a gift from God, keeping it healthy, avoiding activities that clearly harm the body; and also care for the bodies of others, making sure that their *life* is protected, that we feed and clothe those

dependent on us, especially the very young and the very old. Jesus died and rose for us in His human body, so let's love and respect our own bodies, and the bodies of others.

In the past week or so, Pope Francis has authorized the publication of a magisterial document, [*Dignitas Infinita*](#), "on Human Dignity," a key part of which insists on the bodily integrity of the human being; it mounts a strong defence of traditional Catholic teachings against so many prevalent violations of the human person and the human body. In an extensive Ch.4, *Some Grave Violations of Human Dignity*, the Church deals with various scenarios of ethical dilemma: the drama of poverty; war; the travail of migrants; human trafficking; sexual abuse; violence against woman; abortion; surrogacy; euthanasia & assisted suicide; the marginalization of people with disabilities; gender theory; sex change; digital violence. Quite a list! But the Church has robust teaching on all these matters, taking as its starting point the fundamental principle of our being *willed and created by God in His image*:

18. The first conviction, drawn from Revelation, holds that the dignity of the human person comes from the love of the Creator,

who has imprinted the indelible features of His image on every person. The Creator calls each person to know Him, to love Him, and to live in a covenantal relationship with Him, while calling the person also to live in fraternity, justice, and peace with all others. In this perspective, dignity refers not only to the soul but also to the person as an inseparable unity of body and soul. Accordingly, dignity is also inherent in each person's body, which participates in its own way in being *in imago Dei* (in the image of God) and is also called to share in the soul's glory in the divine beatitude.

The Incarnation of the Son and the event of Jesus's Resurrection enhances our understanding of bodily dignity:

20. ... After the Creation and the Incarnation, Christ's Resurrection reveals a further aspect of human dignity. Indeed, "the dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God," destined to last forever. Thus, "the dignity of this life is linked not only to its beginning, to the fact that it comes from God, but also to its final end, to its destiny of fellowship with God in knowledge and love of Him.

The new Vatican document acknowledges the constant threats in contemporary societies to human dignity, e.g. the ever-present pressure to legislate for euthanasia. The island of Jersey has already passed some votes on this; and the Isle of Man, and Scotland, have also indicated they intend to press ahead and hold parliamentary debates on it. Against this threat, the Church consistently teaches the *grave wrong* of deliberately killing a human person:

... it must be strongly reiterated that suffering does not cause the sick to lose their dignity, which is intrinsically and inalienably their

own. Instead, suffering can become an opportunity to strengthen the bonds of mutual belonging and gain greater awareness of the precious value of each person to the whole human family.

52. Certainly, the dignity of those who are critically or terminally ill calls for all suitable and necessary efforts to alleviate their suffering through appropriate palliative care and by avoiding aggressive treatments or disproportionate medical procedures. This approach corresponds with the “enduring responsibility to appreciate the needs of the sick person: care needs, pain relief, and affective and spiritual needs.” However, an effort of this nature is entirely different from — and is indeed contrary to — a decision to end one’s own life or that of another person who is burdened by suffering. Even in its sorrowful state, human life carries a dignity that must always be upheld, that can never be lost, and that calls for unconditional respect. Indeed, there are no circumstances under which human life would cease from being dignified and could, as a result, be put to an end.

Another hot-button topic that this timely document addresses is that of *gender theory* and so-called ‘sex change.’ The Church accepts that this is an area fraught with difficulties, but again appeals to the God-given nature of our make-up — our *biology* as well as our spiritual dignity. I quote a few lines:

the Church recalls that human life in all its dimensions, both physical and spiritual, is a gift from God. This gift is to be accepted with gratitude and placed at the service of the good. Desiring a personal self-determination, as gender theory prescribes, apart from this fundamental truth that human life is a gift, amounts to a concession to the age-old temptation to make oneself God, entering into competition with the true God of love revealed to us in the Gospel.

58. Another prominent aspect of gender theory is that it intends to deny the greatest possible difference that exists between living beings: sexual difference. This foundational difference is not only the greatest imaginable difference but is also the most beautiful and most powerful of them. In the male–female couple, this difference achieves the most marvellous of reciprocities. It thus becomes the source of that miracle that never ceases to surprise us: the arrival of new human beings in the world.

59. In this sense, respect for both one’s own body and that of others is crucial in light of the proliferation of claims to new rights advanced by gender theory. This ideology “envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family.” ... It needs to be emphasized that ‘biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated.’ ” Therefore, all attempts to obscure reference to the ineliminable sexual difference between man and woman are to be rejected: “We cannot separate the masculine and the feminine from God’s work of creation, which is prior to all our decisions and experiences, and where biological elements exist which are impossible to ignore.”

As a result, the Church rejects as unacceptable the possibility of changing one’s sex:

60. The dignity of the body cannot be considered inferior to that of the person as such. ... Constituting the person’s being, the soul and the body both participate in the dignity that characterizes every human. Moreover, the body participates in that dignity as it is endowed with personal meanings, particularly in its sexed condition. ... Teaching about the need to respect the natural order of the human person, Pope Francis affirmed that “creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift. At the same time, we are called to protect our humanity, and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created.” It follows that any sex-change intervention, as a rule, risks threatening the unique dignity the person has received from the moment of conception. This is not to exclude the possibility that a person with genital abnormalities that

are already evident at birth or that develop later may choose to receive the assistance of healthcare professionals to resolve these abnormalities. However, in this case, such a medical procedure would not constitute a sex change in the sense intended here.

If we had a Redeemer whose very salvation of the world consisted in getting us out of this bodily condition, we could do anything we liked with our bodies — indeed there have been heretical sects who advocated just that, down the ages — but that's not Christianity. We do *not* denigrate the body; we honour it, as it's who we are: embodied souls, ensouled bodies, complete human beings, God's so-wondrous union of the material and the spiritual.

A final point in what follows from Jesus's appearance to the Apostles that Easter Sunday: it's that He doesn't only assure them of the reality of His bodily resurrection that night, but also points them beyond that, in to the future, on to their mission, the centuries of the Church to come: "*in His Name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem: you are witnesses to this.*" St Augustine makes an interesting comment on this passage. He says that whilst the Apostles could see the risen Christ

bodily before them, yet they could not see the 'body of the Christ,' the Church; that was still to come. We, on the other hand, can see the extent of the global Church existing for 2000yrs, but cannot with our eyes see the risen Jesus. Yet both are a necessary part of what Augustine habitually calls "the whole Christ": *Christ the Head*, the Son of God, who died and truly rose; and *Christ the Body* (His members) which is the Church. The apostles saw Christ the Head, and had to take the Church's coming-to-be on faith; we can see the Church in all her long history, but we see the risen Jesus by the eyes of faith. We cannot have one without the other, and we rely by faith on the witness of those apostles who *did see*; just as we the Church are testimony to their faith that Christ's body of members would grow through time and across the world as Jesus Himself willed. May our keeping this holy Easter season, as the Church, and thanks to our deep *Easter faith* shared with the Apostles, give us a truly personal encounter with the risen, victorious & living Jesus, who loves us and guides us into all truth, body & soul!