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Blessed Weakness

Homilies for Sundays in Year B

André Louf, OCSO

Translated by Paul Rowe, OCSO



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Contents

Foreword xi
Jane Foulcher

First Sunday of Advent: The Vigil of Love 1

Second Sunday of Advent: The Two Baptisms 4

Third Sunday of Advent: The *Chiaroscuro* of Faith 7

Fourth Sunday of Advent: To Consent to Grace 10

Christmas: The Human Beings Whom He Loves 14

Feast of the Holy Family: Assured of Seeing Him 18

Epiphany: A Subversive King 22

Feast of the Baptism of Jesus: The Word of Paternal Love 26

Ash Wednesday: The Abasement: A Pedagogy of Love 29

First Sunday of Lent: "Clothed in Weakness" 32

Second Sunday of Lent: "Listen to Him" 35

Third Sunday of Lent: God's Strength Is Weakness 38

Fourth Sunday of Lent: The Graced Shame That Is a Source of Grace 42

Fifth Sunday of Lent: Everyone's Ultimate Temptation 45

Palm / Passion Sunday: To Die Praying (The Passion According to Saint Mark) 49

Holy Thursday: Lower than This, Jesus Could Not Have Gone 52

Good Friday: Learning through Suffering 56

Easter: The Son Recovered 59

Second Sunday of Easter: The Faith That Has Not Seen 62

Third Sunday of Easter: The Word and the Bread 66

Fourth Sunday of Easter: The Free Gift of Love unto Death 70

Fifth Sunday of Easter: To Remain in Jesus 73

Sixth Sunday of Easter: Gratuitously Loved 76

Ascension: An Active Absence 79

Seventh Sunday of Easter: The Upper Room 82

Pentecost: The Johannine Pentecost 86

Holy Trinity: To Know the Three 89

Corpus Christi: Jewish Passover, Christian Passover, Eternal Passover 92

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time: To Remain with Jesus 96

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time: To Follow Empty Handed 99

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Power of the Word 102

Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Of Diseases and of Deaths for the Sake of Life 105

Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Impossible Healing 108

Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time: Healed by a Miracle of Mercy 111

Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Unrepentant Lover 115

Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Desire and the Law 119

Tenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: How to Know Jesus? 123

Eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Hidden Power of the Kingdom 127

Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Weakness Snuggling Up against God 130

Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Utter Weakness and Omnipotence of Faith 133

Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Eyes of Faith 137

Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Chosen with Our Small Means 140

Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Heart Touched 143

Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Impasse of Love 146

Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Other Bread for the Other Hunger 150

Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Inner Attraction 153

Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time: To Live from His Life 156

Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time: A Free Love 159

Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time: Beyond the Law 162

Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Interior Ears 166

Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time: To Truly Know Jesus 169

Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Last Place 172

Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Handicapped of the Kingdom 175

Twenty-seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time: Man and Woman 179

Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Missed Opportunity 183

Twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time: The Baptism and the Cup 187

Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Believing or Unbelieving 191

Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time: God Close at Hand in the Neighbor 194

Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time: Poor, to Become Rich 197

Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time: Jesus Already Near 200

Thirty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Solemnity of Christ the King (on the occasion of a monastic profession): The King's Militia 204

All Saints' Day: The Beatitudes: Grace, Not Effort 208

Foreword

This collection of Dom André Louf's homilies for Year B was originally published in French in 1996. It was the first of three volumes covering the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, the others being released over the following two years. Louf had already published a set of homilies on the Gospels during the 1980s, but these three new volumes, collectively titled *Heureuse faiblesse* (*Blessed Weakness*), offered a fresh selection. Br. Paul Rowe's fine translations bring these homilies to English readers for the first time.

The period from 1996 to 1998 was a time of significant transition for Dom André Louf, OCSO (1929–2010). In 1997 he resigned as abbot of the Cistercian abbey of Notre-Dame Mont-des-Cats after leading the monastic community for almost thirty-five years. He had been elected as abbot in early 1963 at the age of thirty-three and had led the community through the tumultuous reforms of Vatican II into a period of renewal and growth. He remained faithful to this charge despite his own vocational uncertainties. Louf left Mont-des-Cats in October 1997 just a year short of fifty after he had entered the monastery as a postulant at the age of seventeen. Mont-des-Cats had been at the center of his life, the anchor in a monastic life that had often taken him beyond its walls. He spent the last years of his life living as a hermit beside the Benedictine community of Sainte-Lioba

in Provence, finally fulfilling a long-held desire for a life of solitude and prayer.

One ponders then whether this compilation of Sunday homilies was perhaps a legacy project—carried out in the somewhat difficult last years of his abbacy—a sort of best-of collection not only for his community but for the wider church. The homilies certainly bear the marks of the teaching that his audience had come to know through his books. By 1996 that audience was vast. The figure of Dom Louf had loomed large in the Cistercian world and beyond. His writings had nourished a whole generation of readers, monastic and lay, and had been translated into multiple languages.

The life and writings of this gifted monk are interwoven. As Charles Wright observes in his invaluable and unflinching biography of Louf, "All that he wrote he had first lived."[1] This is equally true of Louf's Sunday homilies, which were delivered orally to his monastic community year after year from careful notes, and then transcribed by his secretary and distributed to the brothers.[2] Asked by a friend about his homiletic method, Louf replied, "I expose myself to the Word, and I share with my brothers where I am from a spiritual point of view."[3] His homilies, like all his writings, are personal.

In fact most of Louf's published writing began as talks, conferences, or homilies. As Louf himself confessed, being an abbot did not afford the stretches of time required to write a book.[4] His books, as Wright so aptly expresses it,

[1] Charles Wright, *The Way of the Heart: The Spiritual Experience of André Louf*, trans. Brian Kerns, Monastic Wisdom Series 72 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2024), xxvii.

[2] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 7.

[3] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 126.

[4] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 127.

were "the literary fall out of his teaching."[5] It is, perhaps, this origin in oral teaching that accounts for the sense of intimacy one often feels in reading Louf's work: it really does feel as though he is speaking to you, and not from on high. These pieces of writing, and they are pieces rather than lengthy orations, are not speeches crafted for a large audience but rather words crafted for smaller audiences of fellow travelers, mostly fellow monastics. This is perhaps also why there is some dissonance between the Louf we meet in these writings and the Louf who played a political role on the Cistercian stage. In that arena, particularly at gatherings of the general chapter, where he held the position of "promoter" for almost twenty years, he was an influential presence, able to argue with masterly force. His interventions were perceived by some as manipulative.[6] His sharp intelligence and immense oratorical skill were on display in both contexts: the intimate teaching space and the more public political space. Very much as is true of Bernard of Clairvaux, there are apparent contradictions in Louf's character.

But in the homilies we meet Louf as a fellow pilgrim of the way of Jesus, and as a gentle teacher. And he is a teacher who knows his class well: Louf understood his role as abbot primarily in terms of "spiritual fatherhood," as the guard and facilitator of the personal growth of each of the monks in his community.[7] His homilies display the same concern for personal spiritual growth.

What more do we need to know about Louf in order to read and appreciate this collection of homilies? They can, of course, be read without knowing much at all. The gospel readings are the focus, and Louf's homilies open out these

[5] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 126.
[6] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 227–28.
[7] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 143.

readings in rich and sometimes surprising ways. However, some further insight into Louf's world, both the world that shaped him and the world that he shaped, may deepen our appreciation. Wright's biography, *The Way of the Heart: The Spiritual Experience of André Louf,* offers an in-depth picture of this world. Drawing on Wright's work I simply outline some of its key contours, particularly those elements that help us in approaching the homilies.

Louf was born in Louvain, Belgium, in 1929, into a middle-class family, and grew up in Bruges. Blessed with a sharp intelligence and prodigious memory, the young Jaak Louf excelled as a student, especially at languages. While he was raised in a Flemish-speaking community, French became his primary language. Over his lifetime he mastered multiple languages, both living and dead, and contributed a substantial body of translations, including the writings of Isaac the Syrian (seventh century) and the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec (1293–1381)—intellectual work that he continued into retirement.

As well as offering a thorough humanistic education, Louf's Jesuit teachers formed him spiritually, as did his involvement in a Flemish youth arm of the Catholic Action movement. He sensed a religious vocation at an early age but struggled over whether the call was to monastic or apostolic life, a call to prayer for the world in the context of monastic life or a call to service in the world. This tension followed him, in different forms, for most of his life. Ultimately, though, it was a profound religious experience during a visit to Mont-des-Cats that led him to enter this French Cistercian abbey as a postulant in 1947. After some hesitations he made his solemn profession in 1954.

At the time, before Vatican II, Cistercian life was austere, highly prescribed, ordered to an almost military degree. The young Louf, eager to prove himself equal to the challenge and wearing the signs of his austerities with pride,

pushed himself to point where his health broke down.[8] Shades of Bernard of Clairvaux again. At the very beginning of his monastic journey Louf tasted humiliating human weakness, the inability to make one's own salvation. This experience, a recurrent theme of his own spiritual journey, underpins his persistent emphasis on "blessed weakness" and on humanity's utter dependence on God's grace.[9]

Louf straddles two very different Catholic worlds—the before and after of Vatican II—with their quite different sensibilities. Alongside this initiation into the rigors of Cistercian asceticism he was also introduced, during his novitiate, to the most significant Catholic theological and pastoral renewal movement of the twentieth century: the *ressourcement* or "return to the sources." It was this movement that underpinned much of the reform that emerged with Vatican II (1962–1965). Louf himself later contributed substantially to this *ressourcement* and to the reform and renewal of Cistercian monasticism. His novice master, Dom Francis Decroix, encouraged novices to read ancient monastic texts and early Cistercian writings, including Cassian and Bernard of Clairvaux, and to ponder the roots and interior meaning of the monastic practices they had inherited. This approach was unusual at the time. Even more significantly, he led the novices to the Bible. Louf's exposure to Scripture, like that of most Catholics of the time, had been limited.[10] Decroix encouraged novices to take to heart the challenge expressed in Louis Bouyer's influential 1950 book, *Le sens de la vie monastique:* "What the Exercises are for the Jesuit, methodical prayer for the Sulpician, contemplative

[8] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 21–25.

[9] Thomas X. Davis draws out the significance of this theme in his introduction to the homilies for Year A (André Louf, *Blessed Weakness: Homilies for Sundays in Year A*, trans. Paul Rowe, Monastic Wisdom Series 69 [Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2025], x–xiv).

[10] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 25–26.

prayer for the Carmelite, *lectio divina* should be for the monk."[11]

Lectio divina, the slow, meditative reading of Scripture, became the wellspring of prayer for Louf as for a whole new generation of monks. However, it was his exposure to the work of Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) that offered him the intellectual grounding for an understanding of the dynamic operation of the Word of God through Scripture. In 1952, without the knowledge of his abbot, Louf purchased and read the first volume of Barth's dogmatics, newly translated into French.[12] Here Barth proposed that the words of Scripture become revelation through the action of God, what he called "the event of the Word of God."[13] Through the operation of the Holy Spirit the Word meets us in the present, as an event. This theology not only sat perfectly alongside the practice of *lectio divina* but also revolutionized it. As Louf later said, *lectio divina* is foundational "not because it is reading that tells us about God, but because it is reading in which God speaks to us."[14] Together the practice of *lectio divina* and a theology of the Word of God helped Louf begin to experience Scripture in a spiritually fruitful way.

An understanding of the dynamism and power of the Word underpins all of Louf's homilies. He sometimes articulates it directly. For example, in his homily for the Third Sunday of Easter (Luke 24:35-48), after noting the unexpected and terrifying appearance of the risen Jesus among the disciples, Louf draws our attention to Jesus' careful opening up of the Scriptures to his disoriented friends.

[11] Quoted in Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 26.

[12] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 28.

[13] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1.2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978).

[14] Quoted in Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 27.

While the experience of seeing and touching the risen Jesus initially calms their fears, it is the Scriptures that sustain their vision. He continues: "since Jesus' resurrection, the entire Bible has become paschal. Just as the risen flesh of Jesus is now overflowing with the Spirit, so has the letter of Scripture become entirely Spirit. On every page, it contains in hiddenness the power of Jesus' Passover, it opens the eyes and hearts of disciples, it renders Jesus present to them" (68).

Louf concludes this homily with a reminder that the same Word sustains the church into the present: "Finally, his Word too is always available to us, more than ever inspired and indwelt by the Spirit, since the latter was first poured forth on Pentecost morning, the Spirit who recalls to us the words of Jesus and leads us into the fullness of their truth. The Spirit who enkindles our hearts within us each time Jesus opens the Scriptures to us along the way (Luke 24:32)" (69).

Louf's discovery of the Bible during the early years of his monastic life was both transformative and enduring—Scripture remained the primary nourishment for his life and teaching. In the 1950s Louf engaged more directly with the critical biblical studies arising from the move "back to the sources," first during a semester at the Catholic University of Louvain and later at the Jesuit Biblical Institute in Rome.[15] This period also saw his increasing disenchantment with the Thomist theology that still dominated most theological curricula, and his discovery of the rich tradition of monastic theology, grounded in Scripture and the Fathers, that was being brought to light by the *ressourcement*. Dom Jean Leclercq's seminal 1957 book *L'amour des lettres et le désir de*

[15] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 33, 39–40.

Dieu (*The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*) was a key influence on Louf.[16]

This long, rich monastic theological tradition rests on an anthropology that privileges will over intellect.[17] It is theology, as Louf himself suggested, that begins "with the mystical life itself, and of trying to take it into account, even when rational concepts show themselves as too strict and rigid to express mystical experience adequately."[18] The heart is privileged over the intellect. This reorientation—the shift from head to heart—was crucial for Louf personally and was foundational to his teaching and preaching, as well as to his extensive ministry in spiritual accompaniment. Further, Louf was open to the insights of modern psychology, which he saw as a partner in the exploration of human interiority. The shift from head to heart is a serious undertaking. Wright rightly styles Louf as "an adventurer": "[Louf] went out basically as a pioneer, to go and meet the great questions of existence through poverty and fundamental human solitude, to unmask every single one of its illusions and myths, and to experience what he called 'the very bottom of human existence.'"[19]

Louf embarked on a lifelong adventure of the heart, a path pioneered by the desert monks and mystics he treasured. It is a way that still calls to us in the twenty-first century. The notes he made along the way still speak eloquently and deeply to our human condition. In these late homilies we are offered not prepackaged wisdom tied neatly with a bow but rather an affirmation of the ongoing struggle of the human journey, a journey shared by the Jesus we meet

[16] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 40–43. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974).

[17] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, xxii.

[18] Quoted in Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, 43.

[19] Wright, *The Way of the Heart*, xxiv.

in the gospels. Underneath each of these short reflections on the gospel of the day there is the unseen bulk of the iceberg of Louf's learning and experience: solid biblical scholarship, meditative and prayerful reading of the text, the inherited wisdom of the monastic and contemplative traditions, a lifetime's experience of listening for God in his and others' lives, and, above all, faith in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word who speaks to us, now. Rich food for our shared adventure.

The Rev. Dr. Jane Foulcher
St Bernard's, Reidsdale,
New South Wales

First Sunday of Advent

The Vigil of Love

Mark 13:33-37

Jesus was speaking to his disciples about his coming: "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his own work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"

In this gospel, Jesus commands vigilance three times: "Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. . . .* What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"

Human history is marked by this expectancy and this vigilance, as is time as well. The role of the last is to contextualize the encounter between God and humanity. God had no need of time, but he created it at the same instant in

* Inserted series of three dots either with or without brackets are those of Dom Louf. Only those in brackets indicate omissions from the texts (ed.).

which he created humanity, so that the latter could be encountered by its God at a certain moment of time. For the meeting with a creature takes place necessarily at a precise moment and is prepared for by expectancy. We live turned towards this moment, full of hope, suspended tensile towards the future.

On two occasions, in the course of history, a time was appointed for us to await him. The initial occasion was the first coming of Jesus. Over the centuries, the Jews waited for a Messiah who would come to save Israel. All the events of history were read and interpreted in the light of this hope. Little by little, the Messiah's traits grew more sharply defined, through the kings and prophets who succeeded one another, until the time came when humanity would be finally ready to welcome and recognize the very Son of God. For this was God in person, who, in Jesus, came to visit his people. And his advent changed the course of history.

Indeed, when he left his world to return to his Father, Jesus left on earth an indelible trace: not only in his deeds and works, not only in his Word, the gospel today confided to the church, but above all in his own breath, in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Son and of the Father, who remains among us and whose presence, even though hidden, will considerably accelerate the progress of time and the unfolding of history. Henceforth there is an urgency, for love impels us, and it has been granted us to be able to await, once again, God's coming, the return on earth of Jesus our Lord.

At the present hour, which is that of the church, time is ripening before our eyes. Jesus draws closer and closer. The years follow one another with an accelerated cadence, and each of them hastens us on, so to speak, to the arms of Jesus, to the encounter. The hour of this meeting remains unknown, of course. Until the times are fulfilled, it is known only to the Father, like a secret of love and of mercy for each one of us. We know only that it will come when we least

expect it—like a thief in the night, says Jesus (Matt 24:43), but only so for the negligent, who are sleeping. Or again, as Jesus says in another place, it will come like a bridegroom, in the silence of midnight, but only for those who wait and keep watch (Matt 25:1-13). For only in love can we rightly wait and keep watch.

How precious is this present time, which we can inhabit with what is most precious to us: our desire to see the Lord. For the purpose of this time is to stir up our desire, to increase it, to deepen it. The closer we are to Jesus, the more it sometimes seems to us that we are withdrawn from him. The more imminent the encounter with him, the more the years seem to stretch out endlessly. Time renders us humble before God, it purifies the excessive ardor of our first fervor, it reduces us little by little to what we essentially are: in bewildered but peaceful expectation of him whom we love and who awaits us much more intensely than we could ever await him.

It is important not to try to evade time, which would be tantamount to evading God. Nor ought we ever to interrupt its flow, which would risk cutting ourselves off from God. We must rather gently, humbly persevere in time, refuse to be distracted from it, to be diverted by simple pastimes. God is greater than time; he is greater than our waiting, just as he is greater than our hearts. But he inhabits our time until it blooms into eternity, until Jesus comes in person at the moment he wills, in the way he wills, where he wills. "What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"

First Sunday of Lent

"Clothed in Weakness"

Mark 1:12-14

When Jesus had been baptized, at once the Sprit drove him out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.

After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

For Jesus, everything begins with forty days of temptation in the desert. Before he is able to announce the proximity of the kingdom, before he inaugurates the way that leads to Jerusalem and to his passion, there opens before him this time of testing, face to face with Satan.

An ineluctable trial. It does not appear that Jesus would have chosen to have it this way, but he nevertheless could not have escaped it. Ever since the Spirit had taken hold of him at the hour of his baptism, Jesus was living under its sway, and it is because he is indeed "driven by the Spirit," as the evangelist notes, that he withdraws to the desert to confront the adversary.

Even if Jesus himself had not chosen this detour through the desert, some years later, someone like the author of the Letter to the Hebrews could see its absolute necessity. It is for this reason that Jesus had come, he will say; it was necessary that he should be tempted in every way that we are, but without sin (Heb 4:15), exploring and experiencing, in his body and in his heart, the vertiginous weakness of human beings, that he might become an understanding and compassionate high priest, capable of healing this weakness in us. He was "clothed in weakness" according to the same author (Heb 5:2); that is to say, human weakness, our own, served him as priestly vestments, draped in which he could advance to offer the sacrifice of his passion.

"Clothed in our weakness": thus did Jesus enter upon the temptations of the desert. And it had to be that way, so that his temptation might become a true temptation, just like ours, and not an inoffensive imitation. Jesus, the foremost, had to be seized by the vertigo of cravings and, as it were, to vacillate under their deceptive attractions. The other evangelists have preserved for us the details of these temptations, details that are all too familiar. Jesus is installed in the desert, and there the hunger for earthly nourishment, the will to power, and the desire for glory ravage his heart and become, literally, hallucinations. So do they ravage our own hearts as well and try to fool us with their false splendor.

One does not expose oneself to such a trial and come out unscathed. Nor does Jesus. The weakness of his body of sin, this body that he shares with us, left to itself, would have succumbed to temptation just as we so easily succumb to it. But it is the Spirit that led him in this temptation. Yet ever since his baptism, since the voice of his Father made itself heard above him, Jesus has never been completely alone: in every place, his Father is always with him, even there at the center of the temptation. And God's strength will deploy all

its power in him, in human weakness and in temptation. Thus passing through temptation, and triumphing over it by the power of the Spirit, Jesus comes to open a way where every one of us will be able to follow him, through his own temptations and his own weakness.

No one can go to meet temptation and the vertigo of desire on his own strength, and the Christian is no exception, not even after Jesus' passion. And yet temptation will not spare any one of us, and no one will be able to elude the searing experience of his own vertiginous weakness. Just as Jesus was ravaged by temptations, we too will be ravaged by them. As he vacillated under temptation, we ourselves will vacillate in turn. For there is no other path to salvation. Fortunately, Jesus has opened it for us, in advance of us.

Because from now on, as paradoxical as it may seem, each temptation and each human weakness contains Jesus' strength, like seed that Jesus sowed at that moment when, as the vanguard, he passed through them in our name and for us. All temptations and all weaknesses thus hide a grace of Jesus. They are a potential sacrament of his paschal victory . . . on condition that we never relinquish the courage to obstinately believe in him, to unceasingly invoke his Name, and to let ourselves be fashioned and guided by the gentleness of his Spirit.

Second Sunday of Easter

The Faith That Has Not Seen

John 20:19-31

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nail marks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." Now a week later his disciples were again inside, and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." Thomas an-

swered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.



All these signs have been written down in this book, Saint John tells us, "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God" (John 20:31). Yet, curiously, the sign that has just been announced to us in the Gospel is the sign of incredulity, of the apostle Thomas's lack of faith.

And not only that of Thomas. The other apostles are scarcely any swifter to believe than he. They too need, at first, to see before they believe. Despite the testimony of those to whom Jesus has already appeared, eight hours later they are still shut up behind locked doors, "for fear of the Jews." And it is only when Jesus appears to them in person, showing them his hands and his side, that they are prepared to recognize him. They believe, because they have seen Jesus. But this is not the faith that Jesus will declare blessed.

The case of Thomas is even more striking. For Thomas, rubbing shoulders with Jesus for three years is not a sufficient basis for taking his companions at their word, for believing without seeing. Thomas first wants to see, as do the others, but in addition he demands to touch Jesus, to feel, so to speak, the irrefutable proof that Jesus has truly passed from death to life. Thomas wants first to see and to touch. This in turn is not the faith that Jesus will declare blessed.

Thomas's faith, and that of the other ten apostles, will always be different from ours. After their initial doubt, they became true eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection. Their doubts, their difficulties in recognizing Jesus, and then, suddenly, their tipping into a new certainty—all this becomes the foundation of our present faith. All this will be put into writing in this book, as Saint John tells us, so that we too may believe.

After all, the faith of the apostles and of Thomas was not surprising. They had seen. The true mystery, the one that never ceases to be produced and prolonged, is indeed the faith of all the others, of those who came after the apostles and have never seen. And it is really this that Jesus proclaims out loud, in response to Thomas's cry of faith: "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are they who have not seen and have believed."

Happy, much happier indeed, those who believe without having seen! It is in them that the paschal potency, day after day, bears fruit: they who have not seen the empty tomb, who did not meet Jesus in the garden, who never heard his voice calling them by name, who could never place their hands on his wounds. They see in another manner, for it has been granted to them to believe before seeing, and they will see in the measure that they have believed.

How? If they were asked, they would not know how to reply. What do they know about the Risen One? Everything and nothing. They could not describe his hair color, nor even the pigmentation of his skin! For they never saw him in the way that Thomas and the others had seen him. But they know him nevertheless, and almost better than if they had met him one day at a street corner. And they love him infinitely more than if they had been able to walk at his side along the roads of Galilee. Without having seen him, they believe. And even without seeing him, they love him (1 Pet 1:8). That is faith. It often emerges unexpectedly, and always

without saying why or how. We may have imagined for a long time that we already had faith, and then suddenly it somehow burst open, became illuminated and vital, palpitating, aware that Jesus is alive today. Sometimes this takes place merely through contact with one word of the Gospel, through a very simple listening to one of these stories, one of these signs of the Risen One that touch and wound the heart.

This faith of ours, which is first of all that of the humblest among believers, is the very first miracle of Easter and perhaps the greatest, the proof that Jesus is truly risen; this is the faith that moves mountains (Matt 17:19), that has conquered the world (1 John 5:4), that obtains all that it asks for (Matt 21:22): "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed!"