

*Meditation of the day*  
COMMENTARY ON LK 24:15-35

Friday, 7/19

Lk 30-32 : *And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him. But he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way, and opened the Scriptures to us?"*

**Commentary**

We have arrived at the high point of our journey following in the steps of our two friends. We have arrived in Emmaus, the disciples are at ease with the mysterious stranger who seemed to know nothing about the new events but actually knows more about them than anyone, because he knows the deep dynamics of the events.

We see them all sitting at the table, and suddenly the story takes an unexpected turn for the two disciples who had invited Jesus to dine with them. The parts are reversed: now they are no longer the ones offering something to Jesus, but Jesus is the one giving them the bread.

And not only that: this reversal opens the eyes of these disciples, who until that moment had been as if blind: they had talked with Jesus, walked with him for a long time, listened to him interpret the Bible, but had not recognized him.

It seems impossible; we wonder how they had not realized before that it was Jesus, but here the evangelist Luke is using a narrative strategy, which he uses to give us a thorough understanding of this story.

This strategy is called agnition narrative, from an ancient Greek word meaning recognition or acknowledgement. It has been used extensively in literature since ancient times; Aristotle already mentioned it, calling it "a transition from ignorance to knowledge accompanied by reversal" (*Poetics*).

The first aspect of an agnition narrative is an absence, the loss of a loved one that causes so much suffering. Suffering underlies the path that through signs, insights, memories or testimonies will lead to recognition.

Recognition - it is important to note - is not only that of the loved one finally being found, but it also means an understanding of what that person represents.

Think of Odysseus, who returns to Ithaca dressed in rags, as a beggar, and at first no one recognizes him except his dog, who, however, cannot speak. The first person to recognize him will be a humble woman who is one of the palace servants, Odysseus' nurse. The sign that allows the nurse to recognize him is a scar that Odysseus bears on his body, an indelible and unique mark.

In our Gospel passage, the disciples need Jesus to break the bread for the veils to fall from their eyes, for recognition to take place.



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The breaking of bread is Jesus' indelible sign and hallmark.

His giving of himself, making himself bread for all and inviting others to do the same. It is something that is engraved in him much like a scar is: an unmistakable mark.

Only Jesus breaks bread like this, and this gesture sums up his life.

The disciples now see and see Jesus *alive*. The theme of blindness is recurring and important in the gospels.

And it is also so in literature. The highest literary pages teach us just that; we can remove the blindfolds from our eyes, and no longer be blind to our own faults and the virtues of others, to open our eyes wide to the truth.

"But again, all good stories, in one way or another, revolve around seeing": characters can be dazzled by desires that obsess them, for example, but there is also "blindness" as the focus of social oppression.

The truth is that in real life, even more than in books, we are captive to illusions and prejudices, to the things we want to see and hear. Isn't blindness to others the source of all evil in the real world? If the masters had seen the slaves for what they were - human beings like themselves - would they have been able to inflict such cruelty?" (Nafisi).

*Their eyes were opened*, Luke writes of the disciples, and Dante in the dark forest says: *I found myself*: these are awakenings.

"Jesus' witness of God's presence points to the mode of an awakening by which we make contact with the One who abandons no one....

There is no point in wondering where God is and how he can help us.

It is not God who is far away, it is man who has fallen asleep, who is absent and disintegrated, lost to himself" (Mancini).

The evangelist Luke tells us that the disciples' eyes were opened at the precise moment when Jesus broke the bread and shared it.

Only then did they understand the meaning of the other sign they had received: the burning of their hearts as Jesus interpreted the Scriptures along the way.

Only now do they become able to connect one sign to the other.

These verses about recognizing Jesus have extraordinary power: in very few words they encapsulate a fundamental process of faith.

When we recognize God within our lives -- by an intuition, an experience, a word read or heard -- we become able to link together the signs of God's presence that we have received over time but did not previously recognize and understand.

Let's try to think of the game that children play: there's a sheet of paper with lots of dots on it in bulk, and when you look at it you just see a collection of dots and you don't get any meaning from it.

However, when the child takes a pencil and draws lines connecting the dots to each other, lo and behold, they reveal a shape, a design, for example, the shape of an animal or a house, and it is like a recognition: the design was already there on the paper but the child's eyes could not see it before.

The disciples see Jesus breaking and offering the bread, connect the dots, and finally understand. Here a pattern appears; there is no longer the confusion as before.

And the design that appears, what is it?



"The central symbol of the new vision of life, the kingdom of God, is a community gathered together in a festive meal, where the bread that sustains life and the joy that sustains the spirit are shared with all" (McFague).

"A communion with God and a communion with the earth and a communion with God through the earth" (Fr. Teilhard de Chardin, quoted in McFague).

"The Christian mystery is a mystery of communion" (Vannucci).

"Not the holiness of the elect, but the fullness of all" (Schüssler in Sallie 82).

The Eucharist: such a deep and vast theme... When I started thinking about it, I felt that it is like a huge tapestry of many colors. You follow a thread, and you find a knot that connects you to another thread and then you find another knot and another thread again, and so the weave widens, it becomes vast, and you realize that the tapestry encompasses the whole Gospel.

The Eucharist, a total symbol, holds within it the whole proclamation of Jesus. Therefore, the sense of awe, of wonder it arouses is great. The thrill of a mystery so deep, so rooted in life, that if I dig, I find even more depth and then again and again...

What happens, though, is that anything that lasts a long time and that we repeat often tends to lose its charge of excitement. The wonder, the sense of mystery fades and routine takes over.

This is normal; it is in the order of things that what is steeped in time over the years will become tarnished. It happens to even the most beautiful and precious events.

It happens like silver, which oxidizes over time. The luster is still there but it is left underneath, covered by sediment and the processes of time.

This also applies to the Eucharist.

What happens is that time and repetition turn the sacred gesture into routine for us, empties it of mystery, tarnishes awe. People can enter Mass without feeling wonder or joy, and leave without feeling their hearts burn, without having recognized Jesus alive among them.

Then we need to do as with silver: polish it.

When Jesus spoke to his own about eating his body and drinking his blood, everyone winced. It was unheard of, and it was shocking. Some disciples walked away, disappointed and disgruntled that they had wasted their time behind that eccentric lunatic of a Galilean.

For us, however, the Eucharist is no longer the unheard of. We do not find it shocking. Over time it has been domesticated, it has become what it was not at first: an outward act of worship separates from life while it should be a life-transforming experience.

Let us liberate the Eucharist from the dull patina. Let us rediscover its beating heart.

I have been to Greece. One of the first words you learn when you go there, within reach of even the tourist least able to get by in languages other than his own, is eucharisties. You hear it all the time and you learn it willingly, because it is a useful word.

In Greek, thank you is still the same word the church uses to identify the Lord's Supper. And it is a word on the lips of everyone, believer and non-believer, every day. It is a word that tastes like home, a word of the mother tongue.

Too bad this is not the case in Italian. When the church uses a word that is not in the language of everyday life, that word can become specialized for a single religious use, the only one in which it



has meaning. So, it has happened that the word eucharistia seems to have nothing to do with everyday life.

But instead, what is more immersed in life and more familiar, spontaneous, natural than a thank you?

We say thank you many times a day, and we do so because we are beings who have needs, dependent beings who continually receive: from other human beings and nature, from air, water, sun, animals and plants... If we did not continuously receive, we could not stay alive.

The Italian word *grazie*, although it has no connection with the word *eucharist*, nevertheless maintains a very clear connection with the word *gratis*. The eucharist is a *thank you* for something we receive *for free*; it is therefore a gift, *a gift in response to our need*.

I do not know if this is clear for all people who go to Mass. I am afraid that by some (or many, I don't know) participation in the Eucharist is not felt as a gift for a need we have, but on the contrary as a request from God to us. It therefore takes on a sense of a duty, an obligation. But this is not what Jesus had in mind; in fact, it is the exact reverse.

*Jesus thought of the Eucharist as a gift for our need, an answer to our hunger and thirst.*

So, I think a priest before celebrating the Eucharist should ask himself: what are my people hungry for today? What do they need to receive from the Eucharist? What do they lack? Thus, the priest will function emulating Jesus, who came to serve, Jesus always serving people's needs.

I believe that this is the right direction and not the reverse direction, the one that questions what condition people must be in in order to approach God.

The right direction is always that of Jesus, of course, who never started from people's sins but from their needs. As when he asks blind Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk 10:51; Lk 18:41). Or, when he cares for the hunger of the crowd who have come to listen to him, or again when he responds to the thirst of the woman with many husbands by offering her living water, or when he serves bread and wine even to the man who will betray him, because Judas' hunger is the same as everyone else's.

Perhaps, we have not yet metabolized the truth Jesus brought us: the God of the last supper, of the washing of feet, with a towel on, kneeling on the ground, removing the scabs of dirt from his friends' feet. A God at our service, our foot-washer.

So shocking, so scandalous is this idea, that we have not yet assimilated it. And maybe we don't want to assimilate it -- even though the gospel speaks clearly -- because if we really understand that Jesus does this for us, then we should do the same to one another.

And it is good to close with words not mine but Pope Francis'. They are words addressed particularly to priests but to be extended, I would say, to all of us when we find ourselves speaking about the gospel to others:

"Anyone who wants to preach must first let the word of God move him deeply and become incarnate in his daily life." (EG 150).