

*"Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Luke 24:5*

Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus,

There are some truths that bear repeating a great deal and often, like telling your spouse, child, or parent, "I love you." I fear I repeat myself a great deal in my writing, but I hope it is for good reason, so forgive me if I have said all of this before...

### **Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!**

On this bright and glorious day of the resurrection of our Lord, God, and Savior, Jesus Christ, our thoughts turn to renewal, to new life and renewed hope, despite the fact that Easter, falling as late as it does, seems to have kept spring from showing its face until now, and old winter has stayed far longer than its welcome. But even when, as I write this, snow blankets the earth and not a single crocus is to be found, the days are already longer than the nights and the gloomy pallor of winter has begun to give way to the muddy promise of spring.

How can our hearts not become at least a little lighter, a little younger, a little more hopeful than they had been just a few weeks ago? Baby chicks and bunnies, eggs and little lambs—all are symbols and reminders of the season of renewal upon which we in the northern hemisphere now enter.

But I have to confess that I am not a great fan of bunnies and chicks as symbols of this holiday. Lest you think I am some kind of Ebenezer Scrooge of Easter, I should explain.

The joy that spring and the symbols of spring bring us, like all real joy, is wonderful and good as far as it goes. It is a holy joy, but it is a purely natural joy, one that does not point to any significant difference between the Christian Pasch and any other spring festival, pagan or otherwise. Indeed, even the English name for the feast, "Easter," is derived from the name of the old Germanic goddess Eostre, goddess of the dawn ("east"), whose feast was celebrated in connection with the spring equinox, as is our Pascha.

Bunnies and chicks and spring flowers are loaded with symbolism having to do with new life and renewal, but this is not the kind of new life we are talking about when we are talking about the Resurrection. Symbols and signs carry meaning, and it is the meaning that matters. The symbols of spring renewal carry a meaning that is *something like* the meaning of the Resurrection, but it is not the same thing; however, it is the very similarity of the two meanings that leads to a greater possibility of serious deception.

When we celebrate Pascha (and this is one reason I personally prefer to call the feast "Pascha" rather than "Easter"), we are not celebrating the spring equinox and

the return of greenness to the earth. Historically speaking, there is no doubt a direct line between pagan spring festivals and the Jewish Passover (Pesach), and, from there, to the Christian Passover (Pascha). But the point of each of these festivals has to do with the transformation of meaning that has occurred both historically and theologically in each case.

I think this bears some reflection, for it is emblematic of the way old beliefs have a tendency to live on in the costume of a new set of beliefs. The meanings are similar, but not the same, and the potential for deception is great. Nowhere is this more evident than in our everyday mindset, supposedly Christian, which is happy to accept the person of Jesus Christ while simultaneously rejecting His message. Because the everyday, practical mentality of the Christian is, for all intents and purposes, no different than anyone else's, Christian people have found ways both subtle and stark to go through the motions of Christian faith without allowing any real change to happen to them, their lives, or their values. Indeed, in some cases old beliefs are simply "baptized," as it were, given a new name and rationally expounded in Christian theological language, while remaining substantially pagan, or at least non-Christian.

Such is the case, for instance, with the Christian theory of the "just war." This theory has no basis whatsoever in the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus, but when the Roman Empire changed its policy from the persecution of Christians to embracing Christianity as its official religion, the Stoic<sup>1</sup> theory of the just war, which had been formulated as an attempt to make pagan Roman warfare a little less barbaric and brutal, found its way into Christian doctrine and theology, as did much of Stoicism. Christians had much more at stake in the new Christian order than the pagan empire had guaranteed them, such as the privileges of citizenship, private property, and the means of livelihood, and so tended to embrace some of the values of the old order by reformulating them in Christian words and concepts.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this tendency to paint pagan beliefs and practices with Christian colors, we describe the process by which a person comes to know and accept Jesus—that is, both His person and His message—as life-giving. In fact, we call it "salvation." It is a process, culminating in the mystery (or sacrament) of Baptism, which results in a person's being "born again." Becoming a baptized Christian means living a totally new life and having a totally new orientation in one's life. It means acquiring a new set of values and beliefs that the one who is baptized promises will be the dominant influences in his or her life.

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<sup>1</sup> Stoicism is a school of thought going back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. It taught a way of life founded on clear, unbiased thinking, which would enable the wise person to perceive the inner rationality of all things and thus to live in accordance with nature, unimpeded by the negative emotions that come from a misperception of things. Stoic ideals included strength of will, an open mind, self-control, and a minimum of strong emotion.

<sup>2</sup> Insofar as the Christian Just War tradition derives more from pre-Gospel philosophy than from the teachings of Jesus, I believe it to be a fair question to ask just who converted whom when the Roman Empire became Christian. I use the Christian Just War Theory as but one example of the way old beliefs have been made acceptable to Christians over the course of history. There are many others.

As the liturgy of Baptism puts it, we “reject Satan, all his works, all his services, and all his pride,” and we “unite ourselves to Christ.” We identify ourselves so closely with the Crucified One that we say we are one with him, and *then* we are immersed in the mystery of his death (in the waters of Baptism) and raised in the mystery of his resurrection. Only *after* that total immersion of our whole being do we become capable, through the mystery (sacrament) of Chrismation, of receiving the “seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit,” God’s promise to give us the power to become what we have promised to be.

When beliefs and values that do not come from the Gospel are given Christian names or are identified with cultural norms that may be called Christian, even though they derive from sources other than the Gospel, we are in trouble. The Church becomes confused and disoriented. It calls what is white, “black,” and what is up, it calls “down.” It is not difficult to see why this should happen, however. The Person in whom Christians are totally immersed is the One who preached the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and the Sermon on the Mount describes a way of life that is not easy. It begins by turning everything upside-down, calling “blessed” (happy) those who are poor, who are meek, those who mourn, who hunger and thirst—and those who are pure of heart. This introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, called the “Beatitudes,” is the framework for a way of life based on the Gospel.

But the Beatitudes are pretty useless for just about anything else. They are not the keys to success in business, politics, or academia. They do not teach us how to win friends and influence people. They do not promise wealth or security. They do not guarantee glowing health, eternal youth, or even “minty fresh breath.” As marketing slogans and as a means of pitching a product, they are a disaster.

We Christians call these sayings of Jesus “Beatitudes” precisely because we believe that they are the things that lead to happiness, joy, and eternal life. Yet not one of us expects to sign a contract based on these principles in order to buy our next automobile or refrigerator. Any recruit who raises his or her right hand and pledges to obey any lawful order, provided it does not conflict with Christ’s commandment to love his or her enemy, is not likely to make it very far in the military. If you were to go to the bank with a business plan based on giving things away without getting anything in return, it is unlikely you will be given a loan.

So what is it, then, about our country—or any country—that entitles it to be called “Christian?” Is it because more people go to church than to synagogue, mosque, or temple? Is it because it is said to have been founded on “Christian principles?” Which principles? How many of them? While, for instance, principles regarding the equality of all people and their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are admirable, there is nothing specifically Christian about them. They are implicit in every great religious tradition, not to mention any number of philosophies that have little or nothing to do with religion, such as the philosophical rationalism of the Enlightenment, of Rousseau, Locke, Hobbes, and others, that are

the real theoretical framework behind the founding documents of the American state.

In fact, the Sermon on the Mount says nothing at all about country, culture, economics, or politics. But it says everything (dare I say, everything that needs to be said?) about human life and destiny, about personhood, and about God. Thus, while the Sermon on the Mount is not a theory of politics, culture, economics, or statecraft, these things, being human activities, are nevertheless implicit in what the Sermon on the Mount teaches about humans. They are among those human activities that need to be converted if they are to be called Christian in any meaningful sense.

As endearing and innocent as bunnies, chicks, and Easter lilies are as symbols of Easter, they tell us next to nothing about what it is that Christ accomplished in his resurrection. To know what Christ accomplished for us, we need the Church, the community of believers who together are the Body of Christ. Christians whose appreciation of the feast goes no further than these symbols are missing out on important, essential truth.

To put it another way: on a recent road trip, I saw two signs that impressed me with the importance of the messages they bore. One said, “Celebrate Easter,” and the other urged the reader to “Live responsibly.” Unfortunately, the first sign was an electronic billboard with a photograph of a sliced ham and the Kroger logo. The second was a bumper sticker with a Miller Lite logo. Now, celebrating Easter is an eminently Christian activity, and living responsibly is a virtue all can admire. But what Kroger and Miller Lite were really saying was “buy our ham and drink our beer,” or at least, if they were not precisely saying that, one could take it for granted that these are what they would like one to do. One can add to one’s celebration of Easter by eating Kroger’s ham, presumably, and not drinking so much of Miller’s beer as to be destructive to oneself or others is, I suppose, a responsible thing to do.

Eating ham might not be all there is to honoring the meaning of the Resurrection, and living an honest and responsible life may entail more than drinking beer in moderation. The difficulty I see is that it is Kroger and Miller (and the government, and the media, etc.) to whom we turn for clues about how to live our lives, and not Christ and his Church. It is true that it is Kroger and Miller who are doing the marketing—they have a bigger budget for it than the Church, and a proportionately larger voice in our society—but there is more to the matter than marketing. If we were actually to pay serious attention to what the Christ of the Gospels says and to what the Church actually teaches, we might find ourselves challenged to move way beyond our “comfort zones” in choosing how we live our lives.

It is not up to our culture or our government to tell us what is and what is not consistent with following Christ. It is not up to media and commercial elites to provide the information we need in order to live up to our baptismal commitments. These things are for the Church to do, and by that I mean the *whole* Church, not just the clergy and hierarchy, though they do have a special responsibility within the

mission of the Church. However, it seems to me that in many ways, the Church has given up a big part of this mission, not to mention its credibility, because Christians themselves do not believe that Christ can deliver what he promises, or, if he can, we don't really want what he promises anyway. As G. K. Chesterton once wryly noted, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

Peter Maurin, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, says in his book, *Catholic Radicalism* (1949):

Leadership cannot be found  
among politicians, businessmen, and college professors.  
The appointed leaders of mankind  
are the Catholic Bishops.<sup>3</sup>  
Catholic bishops have ceased to lead  
because Catholic laymen and women  
do not consider the Bishops as their leaders  
in political and economic matters.

Catholic laymen and women  
look up to the Bishops in spiritual matters and look up  
to politicians and business men in political and economic matters.  
Catholic laymen and women  
commit the great modern error of separating the spiritual  
from the material.  
This great modern error,  
known under the name of secularism,  
is called a "modern plague" by Pope Pius XI.<sup>4</sup>

Secularism is the phenomenon that has led to the compartmentalization of our existence into sacred vs. secular, political vs. religious, business vs. personal life, etc. It is a phenomenon that is as difficult to grasp as it is to ignore. And woe betide

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<sup>3</sup> This startling expression needs some consideration. I do not think Maurin is writing out of an excess of piety or a sense of ecclesiastical obedience. Nor do I think he means to say that bishops know everything about everything. Still less is he proposing some kind of theocracy or Christian "Taliban." What he says is much more challenging, particularly to bishops. If Christ is the Savior and Redeemer of the world, and his Body, the Church, is responsible for proclaiming the truth of Christ's Gospel for the life of the world, and bishops, as successors to the Apostles, are given the particular task of proclaiming this Good News to the world; furthermore, if, within the Church, they have a somewhat unique task of handing on Christian doctrine faithfully and leading the faithful community authentically by their own faithful witness, then the life of the world somehow depends on whether a bishop leads or does not lead, teaches the truth of Christ or teaches something that merely *sounds* like the truth of Christ.

In our day, the notion that this in some fashion means that bishops are supposed to teach the world how to be "world," or that bishops have been appointed by God to carry out princely authority, is utterly unpalatable. Indeed, while authority of every kind finds itself under greater and greater suspicion, Christian leadership in particular has more recently forfeited a great deal of its standing among its own people by its failure, not only to lead, but also to protect, the most vulnerable of Christ's flock. Repentance is always the first task of the Christian, and among Christians, of bishops first.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Maurin, "A Second Open Letter to Father Lord, S.J.," in *Catholic Radicalism* (1949), p. 15.

anyone who actually listens to any of those talking heads on radio or television who rail against what they call “secularism,” by which they really mean the cultural ascendancy of one form or another of institutional Christianity over against other streams of political and cultural thought (as well as other religious traditions) as the means to achieve purely secular political ends and the acquisition of power over others.

Secularism is what results when a society neither fully embraces faith nor is overtly hostile to it. It is the result of *indifference*, an indifference that, in the case of our culture, usually masquerades as tolerance, which is another thing entirely, while what it truly represents is moral relativism. It consists in the common agreement that, for purposes of getting along with one another and making a buck in the process, “what you believe about core human values and the ultimate destiny of your life is good for you, and what I believe is good for me, not because I respect your truth but because, let’s be serious, it’s all bunk anyway. After all, who really knows?”

At secularism’s center is atheistic materialism, nothing more, and in this matter, capitalist atheistic materialism and communist atheistic materialism are in total agreement. Capitalism and communism are only theories that have to do with the production and distribution of goods and services, and while they may disagree violently about how these are best carried out, they both actively work to close off humanity’s horizons, limiting human existence to the “secular” (i.e., “of this age only”) and denying it access to the transpersonal and transcendent.

Unless we are aware of this, we are likely to be victimized by ham-hawkers and charlatans who would have us be satisfied with bunnies and chicks, when what we need, what we truly, most desperately need, is the truth of the empty tomb.

The prophet Isaiah writes:

*All you who are thirsty,  
    come to the water!  
You who have no money,  
    come, buy grain and eat;  
Come, buy grain without money,  
    wine and milk without cost!  
Why spend your money for what is not bread;  
    your wages for what does not satisfy?  
Only listen to me, and you shall eat well,  
    you shall delight in rich fare.  
Pay attention and come to me;  
    listen, that you may have life.  
(Isaiah 55:1-3)*

Two men in dazzling garments asked the myrrh-bearing women, *"Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5)*

We who thirst for the waters of everlasting life and long for the bread that comes down from heaven fritter away entirely too much of our life's time pursuing what does not satisfy, what cannot even come close to satisfying, the deepest and noblest urges of our nature. It is as if we were addicted to our fears and doubts and cannot escape from the clutches of those traffickers of this drug of secularism that kills our hope and puts us at war with one another.

It is the empty tomb that gives us the courage to break out of this bondage. Christ's resurrection—which he could not have accomplished if he had not first died—is what has opened for us the passageway to the Infinite, that for which we have been created and for which we long from the depths of our misery and poverty. We know this deepest truth about ourselves only because the Church has maintained faithful testimony to this Event of events, not only showing us Christ's empty tomb but inviting us into it, into the depths of the mysteries of God, as ones who have been made worthy to bear witness to this Event ourselves.

You can be free—totally, gloriously free, even from death itself—and you were made for this. Why settle for somebody else's version of freedom—mere political or economic freedom—when you can have the freedom Christ himself has given you? Why settle for wealth when you can have the Infinite? Why compete with your neighbor when you already have been granted Victory?

For Christ is risen indeed, and we need no longer search for him among the dead habits, beliefs, and customs of passing cultures and bygone civilizations such as our own. Strengthened by our common sharing in the sacraments and by our mutual witness to his Resurrection as proof and guarantee of the truth of his teachings, let us who are the Church, the living body of Christ, leave the dead to bury their dead (Luke 9:60). We need nothing of what they have to offer. Instead, let us proclaim to them, with our lives and even with our words, if necessary: "Christ is risen!" Let us prophesy to the dry bones of our land (Ezekiel 37), building them up with our own confidence in Jesus, putting skin and flesh on them with our deeds of love in his name, reviving them with the Holy Spirit, which we have been given in order to bring about true communion between humanity in its pain and our Father in His infinite love and everlasting mercy.

With love in our risen Savior,

+john michael, a sinner  
Bishop, Eparchy of St. George in Canton