

“And As He Blessed Them, He Withdrew...” A Homily

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The following homily was given at a recent meeting on the Church in China in Hong Kong.

And as he blessed them, he withdrew from them and was taken up to heaven” (Lk. 26).

It is the nature of humans to be present in a way that impinges on and engages others. Human presence is the most natural thing in the world, but it is never neutral. It always has an effect. My meeting you and your meeting me leave its mark. Human presence strikes a resonance. Colloquially, we refer to the chemistry of someone’s presence. When two people discover each other, the way they look at and talk to each other indicates that they are enfolding each other in a circle of presence. Their style of presence evokes an affinity and calls them towards a voyage of discovery with each other. The echo of their outer presence calls them nearer and nearer so that they can begin to reveal the depth of inner presence, which illumines their physical presence. The opposite experience is also common. Two people meet and find that each other’s presence pushes them away from each other. Chemistry has a secret and powerful logic. We can never predict or plan whether we will move towards or away from another’s presence. This is something that the occasion and the encounter will decide; it is a happening with its own freedom.

In the Gospel we have just read, Jesus takes the disciples out of Jerusalem. He crosses the Kedron Valley, climbs the Mount of Olives and draws near to Bethany on the other side, and there he withdraws near their physical presence. They will no longer see his face. It was a traumatic moment and yet grace intervened. Immediately, “They worshipped him.” They entered into spontaneous prayer–intimate conversation of presence, adoration,

and communion; a prayer that was based on the realization that while the Lord was no longer physically present, by no means was he absent.

Prayer issues from that threshold where soul and life underflow; it is the conversation between desire and reality. It is not to be reduced to the intermittent moments when we say prayers in words. Prayer is a deeper and more ancient conversation within us. In this sense the inner life of each person is prayer that commences in the first stir in the womb and ends with the last breath before returning to the invisible world. In a similar sense one could consider prayer as the soul-narrative of a people issuing from that threshold where the desire of a people negotiates the constraints and sufferings of its history.

Near my home there is the ruin of an old penal church. It is a two-roomed limestone ruin set in a hazel wood on the side of the valley. It is called *coilltin phobail*, i.e., the little wood of the people. This is the church where our people gathered to pray in penal times when there was a war against the faith. There was a price on the head of every priest. My father often told us that during the Mass watchmen kept lookout at different points on the horizon. The priest celebrated the Mass in one of the rooms but never showed his face to the congregation. Remaining unknown he protected both himself and the people. This little penal ruin stands as a poignant metaphor of resistance and desire for the Divine, which an empire could not kill. Scattered across the great expanse of China there are also numerous places where people gather to worship in prayer: a testament to their courage and fidelity.

Prayer is often the space where the poor and the oppressed retrieve and express their nobility and graciousness. Prayer awakens the soul and opens doors of possibility. In bleak and brutal times, it keeps the dream and longing of the heart alive. It is the only refuge of belonging in extreme times.

We have just begun three days of sharing on the Catholic Church in china. As we enter into these days we reflect in a spirit of prayer on the mystery that is the Church in China. All of us are here in some way or other because our brothers and sisters cannot be here. Their absence is the reason for our presence and our presence is borne out of love and concern for the absent. Each of us in our way try to contribute to making their presence felt—our sharing

these days is meant to help us touch or grasp something of this great mystery that is the Church in China. Most of us have had experience of visiting this extraordinary land and of being touched in ways that words can never express, by the deep faith and the extraordinary sense of belonging to the Universal Church that has been such a characteristic of Chinese Catholics.

And perhaps it is here that we begin to realize that it is often at the extremes that the eternal comes alive. When we are safely cushioned in our daily routine of duties and expectations, we forget who we are and why it is that we are here. When the suffering or hardship comes your way, the fabric of self-protection tears. Every ounce of energy gathers into one intention: the desire to survive. The history of the Church in China over the past fifty years has been an Ode to Survival—a powerful Message to the rest of the Church that so often seems to be beleaguered by other problems that are far removed from the day to day survival of many bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful in China.

I would like to end by reflecting briefly on the last phrase of today's Gospel: "Then they went back to Jerusalem full of joy." Presence and absence, absence and presence are somehow blended into one—a song of joy in the assurance of faith.

There is such goodness and beauty in the world. However, in our times, and particularly since the terrible events of September 11, it is fashionable to paint everything in the darkest of colors. The darkness becomes so absorbing that we never reach the color and light. To concentrate exclusively on the negative makes us feel powerless and victimized. It is only fair to emphasize the joy that is in creation too. Joy is a dignified presence; if we insist on being morose and depressing, it will not interrupt us or intrude on us. There is a subtle rhythm to joy. Until you break forth to embrace it, you will never know its power and delight. Every day of your life there is joy waiting for you, hidden in the heart of the significant things that happen to you or hidden secretly around the corner of the quieter things. If your heart loves delight, then you will always be able to discover the quiet joy that waits to shine forth in many situations. Prayer should help us develop the habit of delight. We weight the notion of prayer with burdens of duty, holiness, and the struggle for perfection. Prayer should have the freedom of delight. It should arise from and bring us to humor, laughter and joy.

Religion often suffers from a great amnesia; it constantly insists on the seriousness of God and forgets the magic of the divine glory. Prayer should be the wild dance of the heart too. In the silence of our prayer, we should be able to sense the roguish smile of a joyful God who, despite all the chaos and imperfection there is, ultimately shelters everything and everybody in His hands.



*may the year of the horse BRING you
Blessings of peace and happiness!*

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