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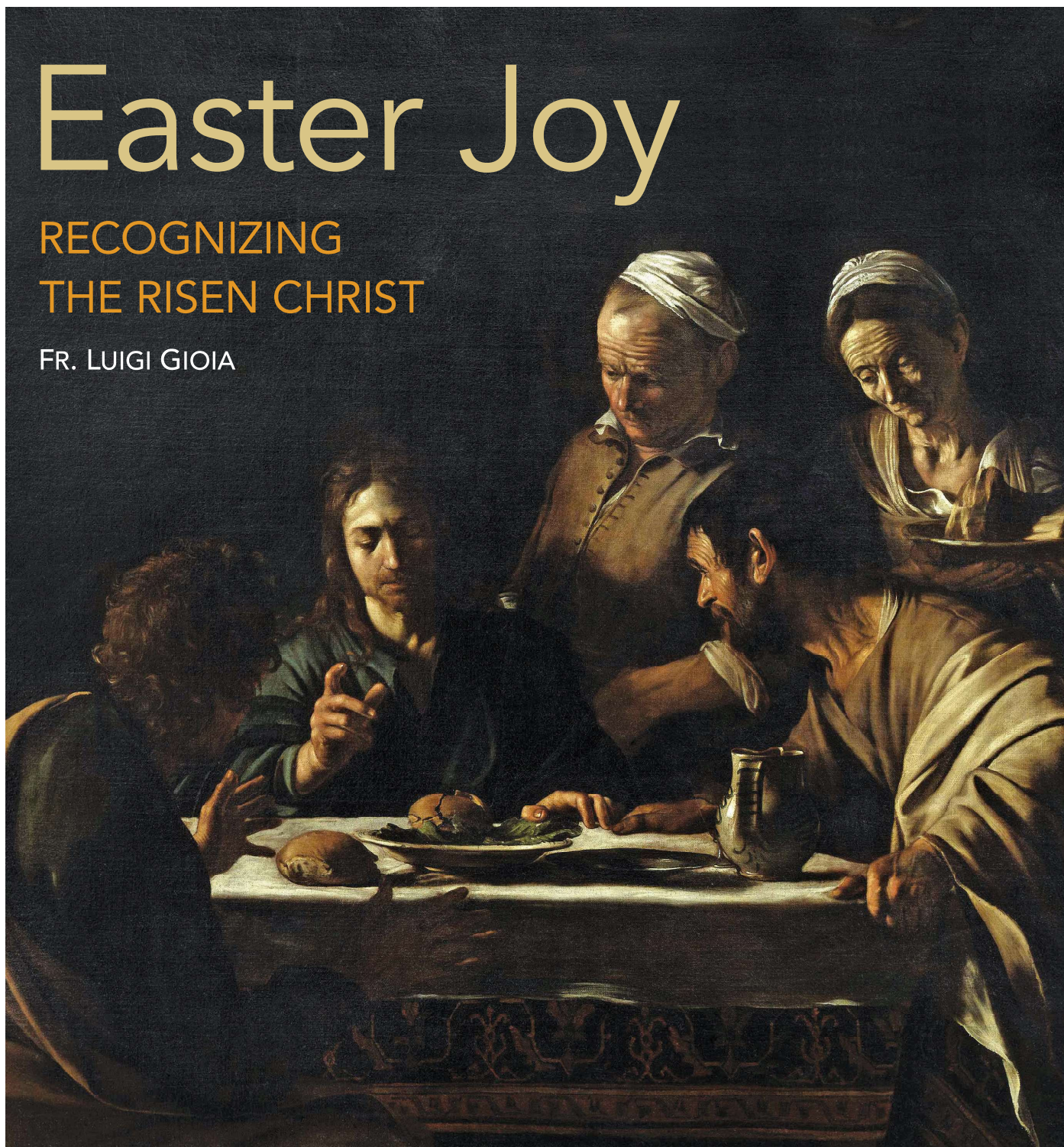
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Easter Joy

RECOGNIZING
THE RISEN CHRIST

FR. LUIGI GIOIA



The fact that the disciples didn't acknowledge Jesus immediately following his resurrection isn't their fault, nor a result of negligence. During the years they had spent living with Jesus, they had seen God under the form of a human being who was like them. After the resurrection, Jesus appears to them as the Lord. He is no longer perceptible in the same way as before. We aren't told that the disciples simply didn't recognize Jesus, but that they were *prevented* from doing so (Luke 24:16). This delay in the recognition of God is intentional. It is part of the process we have to undergo to gain access to a new form of awareness of God and ourselves. From the time of the resurrection, Jesus cannot simply be seen. He must be *recognized*. What does this mean?

Journey Toward Recognition

The resurrection narratives in the four Gospels are endlessly intriguing. They are meant to convey the message that the resurrection is something we will never be able to fully understand. The resurrection of our Lord is complicated. The sense of absence, experienced in the form of a tomb he no longer occupies, presents a mystery. The disciples are left puzzled and confused.

They struggle to assign meaning and relevance to what has happened. Instinctively they seek reassurance in the routines familiar to them by returning to their homes, resuming their previous jobs, and ultimately going back to life as it was before they met Jesus. Luke's Gospel recounts the story of the two disciples who, after the crucifixion of Jesus, had lost hope and resolved to leave Jerusalem and return to Emmaus, which we can presume was their native village. Luke says that even though Jesus was walking with these disciples—the Jesus they had lived with for several years—they did not know it was him. Luke says “their eyes were prevented from recognizing him” (24:16). The same inability to recognize him recurs when Jesus manifests himself to all the disciples at once: “He stood in their midst,” but the disciples thought that they were seeing a ghost (Luke 24:36). Similarly, Mary Magdalene thinks Jesus is the gardener (John 20:15).



A major obstacle to recognizing Jesus is that the two disciples were so caught up with their take on the events that they were not able to pay attention to the stranger who had joined them. They were focused on the past, “conversing about all the things that had occurred” and afraid because their expectations for the future had been crushed: “We were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:14, 21).

Abide in the Present

Interestingly, their sorrow, anxiety, and distraction were heightened to the point that not only did they lack awareness of the Lord’s presence by their side, but they also had no self-awareness. They were unable to realize at the onset that something inside them began to change the very moment the stranger joined them. They acknowledged this reality only after “their eyes were opened” as he joined them for a meal: “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:31, 32).

Too often, we prevent ourselves from being in the present with worry about the past, anxiety for the future, sorrow, and disappointment. These mental blockades keep us from abiding in the present moment and realizing that the solution and the salvage to our woes is right under our noses.

The delay stems from the fact that we are not equipped for this kind of perception. Something fundamental needs to change in our way of seeing, perceiving, and tasting reality. Owing to our Westernized mindset, we constantly and inadvertently practice a form of utilitarian knowledge of reality that can be characterized as grasping, defining, judging, mastering, and objectifying things and using them for our benefit. Though this approach has made us immensely effective—allowing developments in science, technology, and our physical well-being and future—it’s not without flaws. We tend to cast everything we encounter as a problem and are confident in our ability to find a solution sooner or later. Until, of course, we come across situations that cannot be molded into this functional model.

I remember a conversation with two dear friends of mine who were dealing with something not uncommon in families. Their adolescent daughter had started to experience high anxiety and panic attacks. This agonized her parents. They felt impotent to help, started questioning whether they might have contributed to the problem, and unwittingly began compounding their child’s discomfort with their own guilt, fears, and worry. A vicious cycle ensued that’s not unusual in these cases. The temptation might be to tackle anxiety as a problem to be solved in the same way we deal with most problems, by thinking we just need to find the right solution.

However, using myself as an example, when dealing with anxiety, other people’s solutions are never very helpful and can often end up making my situation worse. Effective strategies to manage and hopefully overcome anxiety can only come from within. Doing so often involves a long process that requires

immense patience. Parents, friends, and therapists can help reduce my anxiety to a manageable level so I can orient my energy and awareness toward resources I have within myself to deal with it. But the *recognition* can only come from within me. Others can support me in this journey by being patient, trusting, and accepting their inability to solve my problems. This means they must let go of their own worry about me and resist any judgment about who or what is causing my anxiety. Nothing is more powerful than nonjudgmental support for others, whatever issue they might be facing in their lives.

In reflecting about dealing with anxiety, we are not departing from Luke’s observation that “the disciples were prevented from recognizing” the Lord. Remember that at that moment they were also prevented from recognizing that their hearts were burning. They were treating Jesus’ death and the disappearance of his body in the functional and utilitarian way I noted above—a riddle for which they felt they must find the right answer. They were so overwhelmed by their trauma, so crushed by their disappointment about the past and their worry about the future that they could not see what was offered to them in the present moment. They could not see that the Lord Jesus was with them as they walked. They were too busy looking for explanations and solutions, unable to pay attention to the actual way in which God was answering their prayer, instructing them, making himself known to them, being present to them.

Embrace the Process, Relish the Reward

It is fascinating to see how Jesus helps the disciples journey toward recognition. He could have simply told them: “It is me! I am here, I am alive!” But he doesn’t. As in the case of anxiety, here too the solution (the recognition) cannot be provided from the outside. Instead, Jesus patiently leads the disciples through four stages: listening, meditation, prayer, and letting God care for them. Only when they had gone through all these stages could recognition well up from within. We must apply the same steps in our quest to recognize our Lord.

LISTENING: Jesus joins the disciples as they walk, listening to their anxious conversation for a while. As noted earlier, listening is the greatest support we can offer to those who are dealing with shock, trauma, worry, discouragement, and anxiety. In Scripture, God asks us to listen to him, but in the Gospels, we often see that the way Jesus heals begins with listening. He listens to our needs, our requests, our cry for help.

MEDITATION: Jesus starts by sharing a meditation of Scripture with the two disciples: “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27). Jewish people meditated on Scripture by abiding with the text long enough to allow associations to generate between previously memorized Scriptures and the current passages. By this meditation, Jesus

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helped the disciples hear the voice of God through Scripture and become alert to God's presence in their lives. Even after this meditation, however, the disciples were still kept from recognizing him. More was needed.

PRAYER: "As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. But they urged him, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over'" (Luke 24:28). The meditation hadn't solved their problem, but it did manage to assuage their sorrow, calm their anxious thoughts, and alleviate their worries. Things started to change in them, and for this reason they felt the urge to pray: "Stay with us." This prayer expressed their commitment and desire to go deeper in this process. At this point, we reach the decisive stage. They were still unable to recognize Jesus, but thanks to the process (listening, meditation, and prayer) they became willing to pay attention.

They were ready to **LET GOD CARE FOR THEM**—come closer, share a meal with them, feed them, and love them: "While he was with them at table, he took 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" (Luke 24:30–31). Only at this moment was Christ revealed! Two things happen at once: the recognition of the risen Lord and a new form of self-awareness, as they acknowledge in Luke 24:32: "Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?"

Listening, meditation, and prayer formed a prelude to this. Each step of the process helped the disciples suspend their judgment, abide with the mystery, and begin to trust that there might be another way to overcome their impasse. They let go of their trauma and anxiety and let themselves be vulnerable—a space in which Christ could make himself known to them in the extraordinary way in which he is present today. The breaking of the bread was the moment Jesus reminded them what he had revealed to them during the Last Supper: he had come not only to instruct them, but especially to feed and care for them.

In that instant, they overcame their reliance on facts, explanation, and certainties—allowing our Lord to give them what they were really seeking—the assurance that the love of God is stronger than death. The form of knowledge associated with science, technology, and modern thinking referred to earlier teaches us: *I think, therefore I am*. That is: *I assert my identity and achieve recognition by my ability to establish facts, reach certainty, explain reality, and put this to use*.

In reality, however, my identity is a gift that I truly welcome only when I realize that I matter to someone else. The validation

and recognition I need for authentic self-awareness is not obtained through rational certainty. Rather, it grows from the discovery that I am cared for, I am loved—which is the meaning of the breaking of the bread. This understanding shifts the mindset to: *I matter to someone else, therefore I am*. We recognize God only when we become aware of being cared for by him, hence the burning of the heart.

Our Mission

Our call as Christians is empowered by the understanding that we are loved. Concerning our dealings with other people, Jesus says: "This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Just as Jesus validates us by his care for us and we recognize him as Lord by accepting this care, so also can we support others in their journey toward recognition. We can walk with them, beside them, listen attentively, and meditate with them. Then, wait for the prayer and the caring to work. This requires patience and a trust that are among the purest and deepest forms of love.

When we deal with reality and especially with our environment, something similar is at play. If I see a patch of land, acquire the skills and expertise to tend to the earth, I make use of it—this is the utilitarian way of knowing it. But there is another way, which Jesus refers to when he invites us to "look at the birds in the sky" and "learn from the way wild flowers grow" (Matthew 6:26, 28). We can learn to recognize reality as a gift, as one of the ways in which God cares for us, feeds us, breaks the bread for us. Through this perception, I no longer merely see a patch of land but a field teeming with life that benefits me in meaningful ways: through the soothing hum of insects, the songs of birds, the beauty of flowers, and the miracle of the alliance between plants, earth, water, and sun. Looking at nature in this way is a form of meditation, another way of discovering God's love. Cherishing and respecting the environment then becomes another way of recognizing God and living our mission as Catholic disciples. Open your eyes and embrace the risen Christ.

Fr. Luigi Gioia, a theologian and researcher at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom, serves as associate pastor at St. Paul's Church, Knightsbridge, in London. Fr. Gioia speaks seven languages and has published academic works and mainstream articles. His book on Benedictine spirituality, *St. Benedict's Wisdom* (Liturgical Press, 2021), earned first place in the "Spirituality" category from the Catholic Media Association.

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EDITOR: ELIZABETH A. HERZING-GEHART