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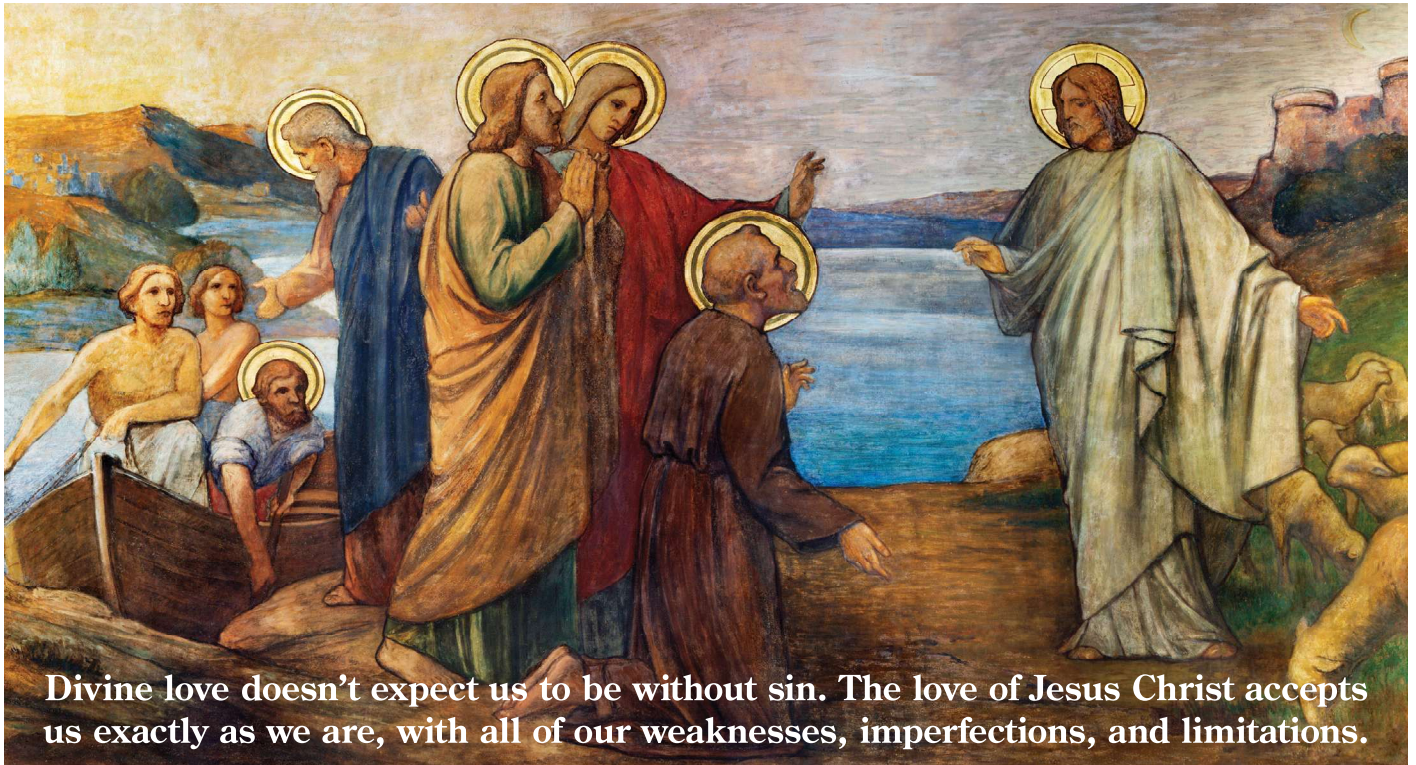
Easter Redemption

CELEBRATING THE POWER
OF THE RESURRECTION

FR. GREGORY WIEST, CSSR

As a child, I remember my aunt asking a priest, who also was a friend of the family, the following questions: "If Jesus was God, why didn't his soul just go to heaven after he died? Why did Jesus have to come back and take on a new body? Why did he have to rise from the dead?"

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Divine love doesn't expect us to be without sin. The love of Jesus Christ accepts us exactly as we are, with all of our weaknesses, imperfections, and limitations.

My aunt was absolutely right in one sense: Jesus did not have to rise from the dead. Jesus was God, and after his crucifixion he could have gone to heaven and been alive purely as a spirit, eternal and all-powerful, but he had other plans. In the resurrection, Jesus confirmed his desire to be with us as both God and as a human being. Jesus exists above creation and within it.

If Jesus did not choose to take up his body after his death, distance would still exist between God and us. Now, God not only understands us, he also identifies with us—our reconciliation with God is complete. Our humanness is not a problem to be avoided or denied; it is the doorway to salvation itself. It means God can be found in everything we experience as humans: the evil and the virtuous, the hurtful and the delightful, the shameful and the glorious. We don't need to look outside our lives for love. True love exists in the very depths of our life, because, in his humanness, Jesus can be found there.

Exemplifying Restorative Power

Our reasons for being Christian are simple and powerful: We are Christians because the person of Jesus reaches out to us, speaks to us, touches us, reassures us, guides us, and changes us for the better. Our encounter with the living person of Jesus of Nazareth is nothing less than the power of the resurrection itself. Power is a force that makes things happen. The resurrection of Jesus and the redemption we celebrate in the Easter season also exemplify power. Of course, it is quite powerful for a man to die and then come alive again. But the power we refer to throughout this article far exceeds even that astounding reality.

To understand the scope of the power of the resurrection, we must understand Jesus' power here on earth before he died.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus fortified people physically. He restored sight to the eyes of the blind, gave strength to

the legs of the lame, and flooded the ears of the deaf with sound. He also healed people spiritually. He brought peace to disturbed minds and diminished the torment of demons to the hearts of humanity. This power extended into social situations, too. Gathering the outcast, the neglected, and the condemned, he created new communities of acceptance. For Jesus, the earth was meant for the meek. He blessed peacemakers and forbade retaliation. His power and leadership materialized as service to the poor. He uplifted the rejected and gave importance to the lowly of the world.

Jesus' restorative power was in direct opposition to the power of Rome during Jesus' time. Jesus invoked hope in ordinary people, while Rome delivered poverty to them. Jesus conveyed compassion; Rome remitted retribution. Jesus bestowed forgiveness; Rome inflicted punishment. Jesus sought to give dignity to the weak; Rome cared only for the strong and powerful. Eventually, these two kinds of power would collide.

Recognizing the Power of Selfless Sacrifice

Jesus knew if he stayed away from Jerusalem and ministered far north in Galilee, he could remain safe. When Jesus, however, traveled to Jerusalem where Pontius Pilate governed, he put himself in danger. The Jewish people had to use temple currency to buy sacrificial animals. But first they had to exchange their Roman coins for temple coins. Rome made money on those transactions as well as on the sale of the animals. Jesus sealed his fate when he cleansed the temple on what came to be known as Palm Sunday, rebuking the act of "making [his] Father's house a marketplace" (John 2:13–25), but more importantly, he sent a message to the Romans. Their way of business had nothing to do with God's business. Rome exercised its authority by crucifying people. It was a way to inspire fear and annihilate any opposition. Jesus' entire life inspired a different kind of power: faith in a good and gracious

God. Rome's gods were nothing like the God of Israel, whom Jesus called "Father."

Pontius Pilate was well aware that Jesus' power could quickly undermine Rome's agenda of domination. And so Pilate crucified Jesus. It sent a message to everyone who looked upon the crucified person. It said: "Rome overtly rejects Jesus and all he represents." When Pilate condemned Jesus to the cross, he wished to not only physically wipe Jesus from the face of the earth, but also reverse any confidence people had placed in Jesus.

When God raised Jesus from the dead, God ultimately defeated everything Pontius Pilate hoped to achieve. God showed that Jesus, not Rome, had the final say. The power of Jesus, his love, healing, and justice were triumphant—not even death could stop Jesus from fulfilling his God-given mission.

Proclaiming the Lord Who Is Coming

Scripture uses two images to express the notion of Jesus' glorification: The image of exaltation and the image of the resurrection. When these two images are put together, they allow for better understanding of his coming presence.

Jesus was lifted up from the earth (John 12:32), glorified in God (John 17:5), and highly exalted (Philippians 2:9) far above...every name that is named (Ephesians 1:21). He is no longer in the world. In all these he is elsewhere, apparently absent. But without contradicting the image of exaltation, the image of the resurrection removes the idea of absence. By raising him, God restored him to the world; he who had left it by death, but who is now unique by his death to the world.

Jesus was both taken away and presented. This twofold movement is simultaneous, and its two parts provide for each other: Jesus comes to us by being elsewhere and because he is elsewhere where he has become a "life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45). His coming to us is a result of his death, which glorified him. In his death and resurrection, Jesus is both the event of salvation and its coming.

Jesus announced the reign of God. He insinuated that the reign would come in his person (Luke 11:20). But it was only through great suffering that the Son of Man would rise again. Forming into one and the same image, the exaltation to heaven and his coming (which equals the coming of the kingdom), Jesus declared, "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matthew 26:64). In none of Jesus' sayings do the resurrection and the Second Coming appear as separate events.

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Embracing Redemptive Grace

As Christians, during Easter we celebrate our own encounter with the risen Jesus and the loving transformation he brings. However, do we stop to consider the unique quality of this encounter? What is the defining aspect of the Easter redemption? It seems many of us overlook it. I've noticed how many Christians go through life believing Jesus' love is doled out sparingly and only in the proportion to which we deserve. In other words, often we relate the breadth of Jesus' love directly to the good we have performed and the evil we have avoided. We consider ourselves blessed if Jesus grants us only the minimum of the grace we need.

The Easter season corrects this misunderstanding. Jesus taught that the love of God rises like the sun on both the good and the wicked and pours like rain on saints and sinners without discrimination (Matthew 5:45). It shows us that redemptive grace is available, inexhaustible, and abundant, never what we simply earn, and always more than what we can imagine. It is the season that illustrates perfectly the motto chosen for the Redemptorists by its founder, St. Alphonsus Liguori: "*Copiosa apud eum redemptio*," which means, "With God there is plentiful redemption" (Psalm 129:7).

Saint Alphonsus wanted this motto to be more than an identifier of Redemptorist property. He wanted it to be a seal on Redemptorist hearts, to represent the Redemptorist charism and shape the lives of its members and the order's mission.

Early in his spiritual life, St. Alphonsus believed God to be a distant, demanding judge who watched every act and held each wrong against him. He lived with crushing self-doubt and was crippled by an unrealistic view of perfectionism. The Holy Spirit, however, led St. Alphonsus to a wise and caring priest who acted as his confessor and spiritual director. In these sessions, the risen Jesus reached out to him and St. Alphonsus was met with a true Easter experience. He began to understand that God's will is not to frighten us, but affirm us; not to reject us, but embrace us deeply and call us to deeper intimacy. Divine love doesn't expect us to be without sin. The love of Jesus Christ accepts us exactly as we are, with all of our weaknesses, imperfections, and limitations.

Encountering the Risen Jesus

The resurrection of Jesus reveals God to be this overflowing and excessive love. From the desolation of the cross, God does not just reward Jesus with immortality. At Easter, Jesus does not simply return from the dead. In the resurrection, people meet Jesus as Christ, the anointed one of God, who sits at the right hand of God. Jesus is not just alive, he is the conqueror of death itself. The resurrection is the exaltation of Jesus. As the risen Jesus says to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). This is a way of saying that, in the resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth now mediates everything from God. Contact with Jesus is also contact with God. God's grace flows into the desolation of the cross and summons forth an eternal, universal Redeemer for all peoples, places, and times.

And what does the risen, exalted Jesus wish to do with his power? He desires to share it with us. Jesus now exalts the people he encounters and puts us on a miraculous path

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beyond what we could have imagined. As an example, consider his disciples after the crucifixion. Before they encountered the risen Jesus, the male followers of Jesus—especially the apostles—were scattered, afraid, and hiding. They all had abandoned Jesus in his time of need. The women disciples, who remained to watch over the body of Jesus, were consumed with grief and heartbreak. Both groups were spiritually crushed and morally defeated.

When Jesus appeared, I'm certain they wondered, "Will he condemn us for our weakness and fear? Will he increase the weight of the shame and guilt we already bear?" Of course, he does nothing of the sort. Rather, he reestablishes his intimacy and fellowship with his followers without condemnation, blame, or rejection. Jesus doesn't demand any kind of recompense from them.

Like the apostles, the grace of the risen Jesus can be too much for us to imagine as well. We can easily become imprisoned by our desperation and anxiety, compulsions and obsessions. Many times we can believe that the world's depravity, greed, violence, and indifference prevails over anything good and just. Peace seems impossible, social discord seems unbreakable, the unequal distribution of wealth seems inevitable, and the dissent caused by racism and sexism seems too profound to resolve.

Trusting in God's Bountiful Care

The risen Jesus, however, can always break through these challenges and grant us a new perspective. As the season of plentiful redemption, Easter should help us put away our cynicism. When we encounter the risen Jesus, he can help us overcome our despair and pessimism, increase our sense of dignity, connect us more deeply to our own worth, and guide us into nurturing relationships.

The power of Jesus' resurrection is not something that disappeared when Jesus ascended into heaven. Its power doesn't only wait for us there. Yes, when we die the resurrection of Jesus will guide us into everlasting life. But Jesus also shares the power of that triumph now. It offers us an awareness of God's bountiful care in the face of every tribulation. Because the crucifixion did not conquer Jesus, nothing desperate or threatening can conquer us.

The person of Jesus is alive. Space and time no longer limit his healing mercy. When this power meets us, in the care of the living Redeemer, it shatters every illusion and thwarts every temptation. We discover within ourselves courage, humor, and insight. It is everything Jesus encompassed before the crucifixion. Suddenly, it is Jesus' own life that embraces us today.

Even though the Roman Empire ended more than a thousand years ago, we still can be tempted to fall prey to its view of power. The Romans thought they could control life

through war and the enslavement of others. They perpetuated the belief that violence and wealth prevail. The resurrection of Jesus offers an alternative. It shows us a kind and loving God who governs all things. In everything, God's beauty and justice reign. The resurrection of Jesus means life is not to be controlled but celebrated. It means peace and humble service are the real strength. As Christians, we claim a different kind of politics. No matter what our situation, love banishes isolation, hope eliminates control, and joy dismisses our woes.

Let's celebrate this Easter season and the risen Jesus by confidently reminding ourselves that "with him there is plentiful redemption." This motto of plentiful redemption can truly focus our attention on the one who has real power over all things, the risen Jesus. He will not measure his grace based on what we deserve or even what we can handle. He will measure his love only according to his infinite generosity and goodness. The risen Jesus will always show us a better, larger reality than the sad, smaller one to which we cling. He will always show us how to define ourselves by a restorative, renewing power in which there is always copious goodness and abundant salvation for all.

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Overcoming Our Own Threat of Crucifixion

Ask yourself: What threatens my life today? Maybe you think a lack of money will hurl you into strife and suffering. Perhaps you suffer from depression, the humiliation of rejection and betrayal, and are overwhelmed by what you consider the failures of life. Perhaps your own or another's addiction floods your life with desperation. We all live with the threat of crucifixion, the menace of a destructive power that tries to eliminate goodness from our lives.

But as Christian believers, we can take comfort in the knowledge that the power of Jesus' resurrection means destruction is not an option for us. Another door is open. There is generosity in the face of financial hardships. Friendships blossom in the face of rejection. Understanding and acceptance disarm our compulsions. Jesus, in his resurrected body, represents goodness and tenderness that dwarfs every limitation.

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