



ORDO FRANCISCANUS SAECULARIS

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"Why do you seek the living one among the dead?" (Lk. 24.5)

My dear sisters and brothers all over the world:
May the good Lord give you his peace!

I begin this letter for Easter with the main task that has been given to all of us, namely to proclaim the good news.

Christ has risen! Alleluia!

This is one of the most joyful time of the year for us, Christians, because this is the moment to experience: life has overcome death. We have to remember this, also in these hard times, when many of our sisters and brothers are affected by various natural disasters, like coronavirus, earthquake, bushfire, extreme weather, not to forget about other difficulties, like the economic collapse of some countries. Let us pray for those who are suffering in these situations, who have lost beloved ones, family members, who got ill, who have lost properties, who have lost their jobs. We have to remember all of them, specially our sisters and brothers in the Secular Franciscan Order. My word to you is, that we belong together, we want to know about you, and we are praying for you. In this situation it is very important, that we have the strong experience, that Christ, who died on the cross but has risen on the third day, did not abandon us, he is still with us, as he promised: "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Mt. 28:20)

We know this, but it is not always easy to understand it and to believe it. I know, it is not easy to understand it today either, when many of the people ask: where is God now, where is Christ today? How can we meet him? It was not that easy for the disciples either to understand Jesus. Just remember, what has happened after Holy Saturday. What everyone knew for sure it was, that Jesus has died, but his body was not in the tomb where he was buried. In spite of the visible facts, it was almost impossible for them to understand and believe that Christ has risen. Jesus was not there where they thought he ought to be. As also today, we often seek God where we think he ought to be, but he is often not there. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD." (Is. 55:08)

I would like to bring here four people in order to learn from their example as much as possible: Mary Magdalene, Thomas, the disciples of Emmaus and Peter. I invite you to contemplate: what was their experience, and what can we learn from them for our own life and for the life of our fraternities? Individually and also in the fraternity, we should examine these four kinds of despair, and their joy, too. Mary Magdalene has a deep sorrow and grief ("they took my master away"), Thomas had doubts ("if I do not see, I will not believe"), the disciples of Emmaus were disappointed ("we hoped to be, but"), and Peter has left his vocation, getting back to the old practice ("I am going fishing"). All of them had the deep feeling that Jesus has abandoned them. I am sure that many of us had already this same feeling, when we are seeking the will of God, not exactly understanding what is happening around and why do we have to go through all these things. We also feel that Jesus has left us without his presence. But Jesus had an answer to all of them, and I am sure that as they did, also we can find the joy of Easter, in spite of all the difficulties, should they be personal ones or of a fraternity, a community, or of a whole nation.

We are living extraordinary times, with extraordinary changes. As pope Francis said: "this is not simply an era of changes but the change of eras." (*"non è semplicemente un'epoca di cambiamenti, ma è un cambiamento di epoca"*. pp Francesco, Natale 2019) We cannot continue tomorrow as if nothing had happened. The world is changing, and we have to change, too, though we do not like to change, because we like to live in security and safety. This change however has to make us focus on, how can we find Jesus in the new situation, how can the risen Lord be present in our personal life, and in the life of our fraternities on the various levels. He has not abandoned us, but wants us to search and find him in a different way, in a different manner, in other places and among other persons than before. If we look at the figures of Mary Magdalene, Thomas, the disciples of Emmaus or Peter, it is common, that after their despair they have met Jesus, and it has changed their life, as also our life can only be changed in meeting Christ.

I would like to call your attention to four stages of the stories of Mary Magdalene, Thomas, the disciples of Emmaus and Peter. We have to go through these four stages too, in order to be able to live the joy of Easter and to continue being stronger, more opened, more determined, and more ready to have a new start with Christ.

1. Jesus was not there

Jesus was not there, where they thought he ought to be.

We often seek him where he is not there, and he does not intend to be there: in our own plans, in our self-accomplishments. We often build great projects in our personal life or in the life of the fraternity, and at the end we do not find Jesus there. As Mary Magdalene has found the tomb being empty, we too, often find our lives - both individually and also in the fraternity - empty. We often put a lot of efforts to roll the stone of the tomb to see Christ, and we've come up with some great practices. We have our oil with us and we have planned everything, what and how we are going to do. No question, we do it with the best of our intentions. Then we are disappointed that our efforts were in vain and we cannot find Jesus. This experience is really painful. How often do we say, that unless we do not have a strong experience of the kind we want, we do not believe he's present! How often do we walk on the way of our lives without being aware that Jesus is in our company! Many, many times we think that Jesus is not present, because we have a strong idea where should he be, and how should he behave. Yet Jesus is there, but in a very much different way. Closer than we think and easier to reach him than we think.

In the encounters during my visits I have heard many times about this experience of the fraternities, but many times I have heard about the beautiful reality, that they could overcome this situation.

What is common in all the stories is two things: the personal conversion and the reconciliation, the reconciliation with God, with myself and with my sisters and brothers in the fraternities. The conversion and the reconciliation did let Christ appear in the fraternities again, and he turned the sisters and brothers to each other and gave them new intentions and motivation. Fraternal life became renewed. They have found Christ where he was, and not where they thought he ought to be.

Let's not focus on where he is not there, but where he is instead. My first invitation is to go, and not to be afraid of the difficulties, of the unusual circumstances. Rather, do everything to be opened to a personal conversion and to the reconciliation. Be opened to one another, and you will find Jesus! Christ is not always going to be part of our projects, but always wants us to be part of his ones. Hold on, and do not be afraid if he is not there in somewhere. You might be surprised, where will you find him.

2. Jesus has approached them

The second moment is, that Jesus took the initiative, and he has approached them. We are seeking God, but God was seeking us first. "We love because he first loved us." (1Jn 4:19) If we do not recognize this, we will never find God.

God is often coming to us in an unusual way, surprising us. Maybe, he wouldn't have chosen right that moment to appear in the middle of the apostles, if he hadn't known before the desperate doubts of Thomas. We cannot be sure if Jesus had anything to do in Emmaus, but he had to know already before the disciples that they need consolation.

Jesus appears at any moment of our life, suddenly, unexpectedly, to be with us. Do not be surprised when he appears next to you in the figure of the gardener, as he showed up for Mary Magdalene, in the figure of the homeless, of the jobless, or in the figure of the policemen, the shopkeeper, or even in the figure of your neighbor in the entrance of your apartment house. You will never know. Do not be shocked, when he appears in the middle of the fraternity in order to strengthen you in a very special way. Do not be surprised when he appears on your side when you are walking on your way of your life, with your head full of concerns and disappointment. Do not be scared when he appears in the darkness of the night of your life, coming towards you of the lake.

No matter how he approaches you. It can be very unusual or unexpected. My second invitation is that be opened for the appearance of Jesus, and be thankful for his coming! Be grateful to the God for his surprises! He will appear behind the locked doors, too.

3. Jesus has called them.

Jesus not only approached them but had a personal message to each of them. Just read these messages. To Mary Magdalene: "Go to my brothers and tell them" (Jn. 20:17), to Thomas: "Put your finger here and see my hands" (Jn. 20:27) to the disciples of Emmaus: "he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them" (Lk. 24:30), and to Peter: "Cast the net over the right side of the boat " (Jn. 21:06)

We have to be ready even to have a sudden and strong experience of Jesus, like Thomas. For this, the very first thing is that Jesus is present for us in the Eucharist, making our hearts burning like he did with the disciples of Emmaus. We have to give witness of Jesus, like Mary Magdalene. And finally, we have to cast our net, and as Jesus told Peter later, we have to tend his sheep, we have to do our apostolic work.

Also in these special circumstances, we have to hear his message. My third invitation to you is to open your ears and try to hear the message of Jesus: Come closer, touch me, stay close, and give witness to your brothers. Then go and cast your net, do your work in the world. We can do it also in this special situation, also when we experience difficulties.

4. Importance of being in community

For us, belonging to the fraternity either means a place that helps us to live the presence of the risen Christ, also in this special situation, in a special way, and also it means a strong call to share our joy. Like for these four figures, fraternity is an essential place also for us. It is a place where we can hear the words of Jesus and can be strengthened in our vocation.

Their story arrives to the community. Mary Magdalene, who went out, has returned to the apostles. Also Thomas was in the community of the apostles when he had seen and touched the Lord. The disciples of Emmaus were going away from Jerusalem, but after having met Jesus they turned back. Peter has left everything to go fishing, but also he turned back and met the Lord on the lakeshore together with the others. The presence of Jesus, or the hope of his presence has turned all of them. Jesus lead them back to the community.

We have to hold together, specially in these extraordinary times. We are going to have a different experience of community, of the fraternity. When in some countries it is difficult to come together, we have to strengthen our sense of belonging, and be aware that we are family. We belong to the same international family of the OFS, and to the big Franciscan Family. Let us pray for each other, let us support each other. Also the friars and religious sisters need our support now. Help each other, and with our being talented and inventive, let us find the ways how can we pull the fraternal bonds tighter. Do not be afraid of using contemporary instruments and tools. Share your feelings, your experiences with each other, make phone calls, write e-mails, short messages, organize videoconferences, when it is applicable, or just shout over the streets from the balconies. Share your favorite spiritual readings, your favorite music. Let each other learn more and more about you, because thus everyone will learn more and more about God.

We are the Church, too. If you can not go out to find Him outside, you can find him inside. The Church is not only the building. We are the parishes, we are the fraternities, we are the Order, and He is waiting to meet us.

Therefore, this is my fourth invitation to you. Seek and find him in the prayer, in the common prayer of the Church. Seek and find him in the new ways of formation and of the fraternal sharing, too. Seek and find him when you "join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church, reliving the mysteries of the life of Christ" (OFS Rule 8), because it really strengthens the sense of belonging to the Church and to the Order. Be aware, that in each single moment around the clock a secular franciscan sister or brother is praying somewhere in the world. What a unity! Let us hope, that this common way of prayer will make us even more joyful when we will be able to meet in person. Remember, we are family.

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We, secular franciscans, when we are in a difficult situation, are often like these disciples. I ask you to examine our attitude and our habits, both individually and in the fraternities, how do we face the difficulties, the unusual situations? Are we missing him, but don't recognize him like Mary Magdalene? Do we not believe that he is with us, like Thomas? Do we brawl right beside him like

the disciples of Emmaus? Are we going back to the old practices and habits like Peter? Do we feel abandoned? Jesus never told us to be sad or disappointed. Jesus never told us to give up. On the contrary, he always asked us to live the joy of Easter, clarifying, that we cannot have Easter without Good Friday.

The word of Jesus - 'I am with you always, until the end of the age' - does not mean a passive presence. It means that he loves us every day, and we can feel that love day by day, but even if we do not feel it, we know that his love is there and we can take courage and strength from it. It also means that he is with us, the Secular Franciscan Order. Jesus is with us when he is not there where we think to be but is there, when he approaches us personally and in the fraternities in his special way, when he calls all of us with his very personal words, and when inspires all of us to respond to his loving presence. He is with us in our changes and in our development, he is with us in our difficulties that we have to face, he is with us in our joys and in our sorrows, too. Not only as a distant relative who visits from time to time and we tell him what happened during the last times, and not just as an external consultant at a company who helps with his cold mindfulness to move ahead from time to time, but he is with us every day through his compassionate love that is willing to help us, sometimes also in an incredible, miraculous way. This is a resource that we should not ignore because every time we do not look for Him, we do not seek His will, we risk not only to take wrong decisions, but we also risk the opportunity to do something very big with his help.

He is ready to show up at the entrance doors of our homes and fill our families with the Easter joy. Easter always changes our lives. The fresh impression, the liturgy, the common joy makes us feel renewed. This year for the majority of us it is very much different. One thing we can take for granted: Christ is here, Christ is risen. This is why we have to be sure that Easter changes our lives, and we cannot continue as we did things before. This special Lenten time has prepared all of us in a different way than before. Looking upon the cross was healing us, because "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn. 3:14-15). Be sure, that we all are being healed, so that we may have eternal life. God has prepared us during the Lenten time in a special way. Let us have a look with gratitude at all the good things that we were given by God, when we felt locked down, but could stay more with our families, when we had less inputs from outside, but could listen more to God, when we did reach out for less material goods, but had the time to get more of the spiritual ones. It was a time of healing, a time of a special preparation for the joy of Easter.

As the disciples after Easter but before Pentecost, we often have fear of courageous decisions, we feel tired, or have an internal unrest - just like the four figures of the Gospel whom I mentioned before. But with the risen Lord we will be renewed, regardless in what conditions we are or how we feel. In difficult situations we cannot hide our weakness, but also our strength may become more visible, and we can do such great things that we could not imagine before. I wish all of you the same joy, certainty, wonderment and readiness to act, which were present in the life of Mary Magdalene, Thomas, the disciples of Emmaus and Peter, after they have met Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. The same way, the renewal of the Order always builds on his resurrection and takes its strength from the meeting with Him.

Let us live the mysteries of Easter this special way that God has offered us this year. I pray that we will be stronger, bolder, more sincere and will have more solidarity with those in need when we will get out from this situation. It will be a real sign of resurrection, and a symbol here on Earth of what we will live in the eternal life. Rejoice, and keep on seeking him among the living, because he is risen, and he wants that we "might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn.10:10)

All of you and each one of you are very important for me. I feel all of you close to me, and I pray for each one of you. May the joy of Easter fill all of you. I wish you all a Holy, blessed Easter! Christ has risen, indeed risen, Alleluia!

Your minor brother and your minister



Tibor Kauser
CIOFS Minister General

