

Catholic Courier

Text of Bishop Clark's pastoral letter "To Enter Into His Glory" A Pastoral Reflection on Change and Transition"

'Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures. 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.' So he went in to stay with them. And it happened that, 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," (Luke 24: 26 – 31a)

TO ENTER INTO HIS GLORY **A Pastoral Reflection on Change and Transition**

Introduction

The words of our Lord to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus capture my heart. I can imagine how startling his revelation must have been to them. Despite all of the times that Jesus spoke of the suffering to come during his ministry, somehow these disciples were not prepared for it. They had other plans in mind for how the Messiah would usher in the kingdom. This new way of thinking required a change in their minds and hearts, a transformation that needed to occur so that the Good News could be revealed to the world.

I sympathize with the two disciples, because I know how difficult it can be to encounter change of any kind. Whether it is change in our personal lives, times of transition in our communities or transformation in our church, change can be difficult. That is why I have chosen this topic for reflection, especially as I enter into a new moment in my own life journey, with my upcoming retirement.

We often have our own ideas about how life should unfold, or how situations should be resolved. I realize that times of personal change and transition are the norm for all people, in different ways at different moments in our lives. I also see in our communities in the Diocese of Rochester that we are undergoing significant change and transition as well. Even our church is in a constant process of change in its own way, as we continue to try to share the mission of our Lord in an ever-changing world.

It can seem that the only constant in life is change itself.

To have so many moments of change in our lives can seem overwhelming; however, moments of transition can also be fruitful times of engagement. How appropriate, then, is the call of Pope Benedict, that in the upcoming Year of Faith we should take time to reflect on the pastoral circumstances of our local church and consider how our faith supports and challenges us today. Faith itself is the transition from death to life, and reflecting on this transition as Christians can offer us a proactive way to approach all types of change.

Questions for Further Reflection

In the midst of the changes we face, both personally and communally, I believe there is great insight for us in the words of our Lord to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. I would encourage everyone to read through and reflect on the entire passage (Luke 24: 13-34). In this story I believe we can find a meaningful way to approach times of change and transition in our lives based on how our Lord helps the two disciples through their moment of transition in understanding. The words of our Lord point to the need to develop a special kind of spirituality, based on the mystery of his life, death and resurrection; a "paschal" spirituality that can help us keep an open heart and strong spirit during times of great change. A paschal spirituality is one that enters into the mystery of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord as a means to flourish during times of change, transition and tension, so that we may be open to transformation.

The Road to Emmaus

Let us consider, then, the turmoil of the two disciples and our Lord's response to them on the road to Emmaus. Remember that during his ministry on earth, Jesus was often the cause of some confusion for his followers. Regularly we hear in the gospels that his followers saw him as the leader that Israel had longed for, the one who would reign as King over all the land and finally bring Israel back to a place of prominence. Jesus' power over demons, his ability to heal, his popularity with the multitudes who flocked to hear him speak, all pointed to a type of Messiah that ruled the land as a political and spiritual titan. This was the expectation for many who followed Jesus. This was the type of power and prestige that they assumed would occur, and in which they would share as those who understood and supported Jesus early on. They would be seen as of people of wisdom for their ability to see in Jesus all that was to come. They would be leaders in their own right.

This was the kingdom many of the disciples expected and wanted. This impression was understandable. Even when Jesus offered insights to his followers that things were not as they thought, what he offered was so radically different than their expectations it must have been nearly impossible to hear. It is no wonder that so few stayed with Jesus to the cross. Not only did their Messiah hang on the cross, but all of their hopes, dreams, and expectations.

In the full passage about the road to Emmaus, we read that these disciples were walking away from Jerusalem, heading home after the crucifixion of their Jesus. When they are approached by the stranger they acknowledge him, but do not really "see" him. The disciples share anguish over their loss, but they also mention that there had been some talk of a resurrection. Women had testified to seeing angels who proclaimed Jesus was alive. Others had gone to the tomb and found it empty. This was remarkable news! Yet these disciples could not see how it was possible. Even after hearing that Jesus was alive, they were still on their way home, away from Jerusalem.

The stranger on the road made room for the disciples' grief. He listened to their stories and gave them the time and space to share their pain. But he did not leave it at that. He also challenged them to hear the scriptures differently, to reframe their expectations and orient them towards something larger, something beyond their imagination. He opened their minds and set their hearts on fire with a new possibility. In the breaking of the bread, their eyes were fully opened and their spirits were aflame with hope and faith. As they ran back towards Jerusalem, they certainly did not know what lay ahead. However, they were now ready to be a part of the resurrection and all that it could mean for the world.

The very strength of their encounter with the Risen Lord was not that he showed them exactly how events would unfold or gave them explicit directions on what to do next. The power of their encounter with the Risen Lord was that it freed them from being enslaved by their own expectations. It freed them from themselves, so that they too could make room for the Spirit. They did not know what would come next, the trials, the tribulations, the joys and the sorrows. However, they were now ready to see differently, with the eyes of Christ, and to be open to God's grace.

Developing a Paschal Spirituality as a Disciple

The journey on the road to Emmaus is important for every disciple and every community in our church. The two disciples on the road show us all what can happen when we participate in the paschal mystery, and when we develop a paschal spirituality about being a disciple and being a part of the People of God, even during times of change. In the beginning of the story, the two disciples were so overwhelmed by their sadness and grief that they could not see Christ before them. Their apparent loss blinded them. In order to experience the true Good News, the disciples in Luke had to die to their own expectations about what they thought the Good News would be. They had to die to the future they had created in their own minds about the kingdom of God. They had to die to their pre-conceptions, to their prejudices, and to themselves to create space to experience the resurrection.

If they allowed themselves to die as Christ did, though, then they could also live as new creations in the resurrection as well. The crucifixion was not the end, but it could not be ignored. Dying to their expectations, dying to their pre-conceptions was necessary for them to live in a way they never imagined was possible. They rose with Christ.

They did not do it alone. They had the guidance of our Lord and His return to scripture as a foundation for a renewed vision of mission. The disciples were able to break free because of the illuminating power of the breaking of the bread and the presence of our Lord. If the two disciples had not said yes to dying to themselves, they would never have been able to see the Lord. If they had clung to their fear and loss, they would never have met the risen Lord.

Yet the disciples did say yes. They allowed Christ to open their eyes and their hearts to being re-created as the disciples that God wanted them to become. They participated in the resurrection as they participated in the crucifixion. This didn't mean they no longer would have questions or be confused about their direction in the years to come. It meant that they cooperated with God in their own transformation by being open to it, even when they did not know how it would turn out in the end. In that way, the two disciples began to develop a paschal spirituality. They began to cultivate a way of looking at their lives and the world that said yes to the unimaginable, yes to dying with Christ, and yes to rising with Him as well.

Living a Paschal Spirituality in Our Own Times of Change and Transition

How often do we ourselves encounter moments of change with grief and sadness? This sadness can overcome our ability to see what is possible, or even to see our Lord with us on the road. Even those of us who are excited by change can be nervous about that which is being lost. For us to follow in the example of the disciples, we, too, must create space to grieve what is being lost but also embrace what is possible. We must follow the disciples on the road, where they began to experience a paschal spirituality that helped them through their critical time of change. A paschal spirituality is one that is open to the surprise of the kingdom led by God, not by humanity, but which can only come about through our own participation in its creation. As disciples, each of us is called to enter into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is not something we do once, but something that we do every day, in large ways and in small. We do it as individuals, in our spiritual life, in our relationships, and we do it as communities, as the People of God who are on a mission. We develop a paschal attitude and embrace a paschal spirituality when we ask during times of change, "To what must I die today, so that I may rise with Christ?"

To ask that question we must risk entering into the unknown. We must create some space for ourselves, in prayer and in silence, to hear God's invitation to say yes to what we cannot imagine. It may mean letting go of something we thought we needed, or being open to someone we thought we knew. It could mean loosening our grip on our own plans and expectations and considering that other possibilities exist. It certainly means that we acknowledge we do not know all there is to know about the world, other people, or even ourselves. In entering into that truth during times of change, we find the source of our security and hope: our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ.

Our hope, made possible through our relationship with our Lord, then propels us into rising with him and saying yes to his mission on earth. Our ability as his disciples to focus on his mission, not our own *expectations* for his mission, allows us to live without fear of the changes and challenges that face us individually and as the People of God. We are not paralyzed by the challenges of sharing that mission in our own time, and are not fearful of what may come. Our security comes from saying yes to the mission of Christ, which is guided and sustained by the Spirit.

Our Nourishment in Times of Change

This type of spiritual growth cannot occur without support and nourishment. On the road to Emmaus we see the disciples receive support from their encounter with our Lord, with their comfort to one another, and in the breaking of the bread. As Catholics today, we too find that support in our scripture and tradition; our lives together as church; and our sacraments. Our encounter with the Word of God revealed in scripture and our Tradition roots us in our moment in time while connecting us with the divine and the communion of saints. Together as a family of faith we support, encourage and challenge one another to continue forward through times of transition. In our sacraments we encounter the gift and grace of our Lord to give us strength through the unknown.

This nourishment is especially experienced in the celebration of the Eucharist together. Our openness to a paschal spirituality, as individual disciples and as a people, must be sustained through the celebration of the Eucharist. As with the disciples, it is in the breaking of the bread that our Lord truly becomes present to us. It is in the sharing of the sacrament that we are sustained in our spiritual lives. It is in the nourishment of the body and blood of Jesus that we are able to enter again and again into his life, death and resurrection. The tangible experience of the Eucharist helps us to persevere and to adapt in times of change. It calls us together as a people, unites us in meaning and purpose, and connects us to all who have been disciples before and all who will come behind us.

To Enter into His Glory

Our willingness to enter into the life, death and resurrection of our Lord every day, in every aspect of our lives as individuals and as a people, can help us become transformed into that which God dreams for us. When we are in intense moments of change, this may seem too much to imagine. Yet the promise of our Lord is that we have not been left alone to navigate the unknown in our lives. When we say yes to death, in the knowledge that we do so as those who believe death has been overcome, we begin to live a life without fear. The fear that can come with times of change, with transition in life, or simply with the unknown, can be seen through the lens of those who hold the truth in their hearts. For indeed we have been assured there is nothing to fear from death. Our Lord has conquered the power of death over us and offered us the possibility of new life. By following His Way through the unknown, we too will enter into His glory.

Questions for Further Reflection

As we come to new moments of change and transition in our individual and communal lives, let us reflect on how we can develop a "paschal" spirituality:

- What have been significant moments of change or transition in my life/our lives?
- What has been my/our reaction to those changes? Was it difficult? Exciting? Did I/we resist the change or embrace it?
- How does developing a paschal spirituality challenge me/us to think differently about these moments of change and transition?
- How can I/we better share the Good News with others because of my/our experiences of change?

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