

In Christ We Shall Rise!

By Bishop Victor Galeone

“How can God bring back to life someone who’s been tossed to the lions or whose body was reduced to ashes at the stake? Impossible! The resurrection of the body is pure fantasy.”

Such were the rumors that reached St. Paul’s ears some five years after he had planted the faith in the city of Corinth. His converts were backsliding. In his first letter to them, he devoted the whole of chapter 15 to address the resurrection of the body.

The doctrine of Christ’s resurrection, as well as our own, is the foundation of St. Paul’s theology. It was also the most difficult teaching to instill in pagan minds. His first attempt to do so in Athens was met with mocking laughter. So in 1st Corinthians, he countered their doubts on a number of levels.

First, he reminded them of the core gospel message - the very basis for our faith: that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he rose on the third day, and that he appeared to eyewitness: to Peter, to the twelve, to five hundred believers - many of whom were still alive - and finally, to Paul himself.

Next, he pointed out that to deny our own resurrection is to deny that of Christ; for one is impossible without the other: “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so too is your faith. Worse still, we then become false witnesses for God...who could not have raised Christ from the dead, if in fact the dead cannot be raised...If our hope in Christ is for this life only, we are the most pathetic of all people.”

He then goes on to compare the second Adam, Christ, to the first Adam: “Since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall come back to life.” Besides, if the resurrection is only Christ’s and not ours as well, he would not have the right to the titles that are his, namely, “the first-born among the dead,” and “the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.” Just as we inherited sin and death from Adam, we likewise inherit forgiveness and life (resurrection) from Christ.

Finally, St. Paul addresses the practical objection that the Corinthians had raised: “How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body will they come?” In other words, if one dies as an infant, will he have an infant body at the resurrection? And if you die in decrepit old age, will your risen body be arthritic and laden with wrinkles forever? St. Paul responds: (my paraphrase) You foolish Corinthians! That seed that you plant in the springtime - wrinkled, ugly, and seemingly dead - does it not give birth to that marvelous blossom under the summer sun? He then concludes emphatically: “The body is sown corruptible, it is raised incorruptible; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.”

As a footnote to the previous paragraph, I want to cite the opinion that St. Thomas Aquinas expressed in his Summa: At the final resurrection, our body will be that in the prime of life - about the age of 30 - but in a glorified form.

St. Paul in 1st Corinthians and I have dwelt only on the bodily resurrection to glory. But as Jesus revealed in John 5, everyone shall rise again, though not necessarily to glory: “The hour is coming when the dead will leave their graves on hearing the voice of the Son of Man - those who did good will rise again to life; and those who did evil, will rise to be condemned.”

How can we be assured of rising to life instead of to condemnation? By observing the two great commandments: Love God more than anyone or anything else, and love your neighbor as yourself.

At the end of the Creed every Sunday, we affirm: “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” Therefore, let us never lose sight of the dignity of the human body. For as St. Paul challenged the Corinthians: “Don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own. You were bought at a great price. Therefore, glorify God with your body!” (1 Cor 6:19, 20)