

May 13, 2002
St. Thomas Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

St. Thomas was a philosopher. Lest, however, this sound too obvious, let me promptly say that I don't mean Thomas Aquinas but Thomas the Apostle.

The philosophy embraced by Thomas the Apostle was not an academic brand. It was, rather, the peasant variety, a common type, the truly useful school of thought that aids an ordinary man to brace up in adversity, face disaster bravely, and cope with valor on the bitter day. A philosopher of this sort is less interested in exploring the essence of things, and more concerned about how to get through life without falling to pieces. Thus, he emphasizes sobriety of soul and is deeply suspicious of anything even faintly resembling fun. His aspirations are modest, the better to soften the inevitable disappointments that life will bring. Ever resigned to the next unforeseen but inexorable tragedy, fairly certain that all will come to a bad end, this philosopher tightens the reins on enthusiasm and dissuades his heart from inordinate hope. The last thing he would trust is a bit of good news.

If such a school of thought can be summarized in two sentences, those sentences might be a hypothesis and an imperative: "If anything can go wrong it probably will. Get used to it." One could never be too cautious, after all, or he risked getting too rosy a picture of things. Therefore, be careful. Near every silver lining lurked a cloud. Some, I suppose, would call this philosophy pessimism, but those who espouse it usually think of themselves as realists.

Such a philosopher was Thomas the Apostle, significantly known to history as "Doubting Thomas." One suspects, nonetheless, that the doubting of Thomas had less to do with his epistemological system than with his nervous system. Ever brave to drain the draught of sadness and misfortune, he dared to imbibe joy only in small sips. If ever.

Thomas, therefore, was very cautious about all those miracles and healings that he witnessed. Things were going far too well. There had to be a downside to the whole business. All these blind people were receiving their sight, to be sure, but who could say what they might see before the thing was all over?

It came as no great surprise to Thomas, then, when he learned that disaster lay just down the road. Indeed, Thomas was the first among the apostles to embrace the imperative of the Cross. When Jesus declared His intention of going to Jerusalem to "wake up" Lazarus, the other apostles expressed their fear at the prospect. "Rabbi," they answered, "lately the Jews sought to stone You, and You are going there again?" It was Thomas who found within himself the generous strength to say, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him" (John 11:8.16). In this scene, Thomas is no skeptic. He is, rather, very much the realist, the man who discerns the stark realities awaiting His Lord at Jerusalem, and he is resolute with respect to his own course in the matter. When it comes to the prospects for tragedy, Thomas is not deceived by any inappropriate optimism. Nor, let it be said, by cowardice. If there is one thing he knows how to receive, it is bad news. It is, so to speak, his specialty.

Thomas may also have been something of a loner, which would explain why, when the risen Lord paid His first visit to the assembled apostles, Thomas "was not with them when Jesus came" (20:24). He apparently had gone off to get a better grip on himself. It had been a very tough week. Just as Thomas had foreseen, Jesus' life had ended in tragedy. This, the apostle was sure, was the biggest tragedy he had ever seen. Yet, he was coping with it somehow. Years of an inner docility to inevitable fate had schooled him in the art of endurance. Yes, he would get through it. He was a man who could deal with misfortune and sorrow.

Thomas returned to the other apostles in the "upper room" that evening, having wrestled his mind into a quiet acquiescence. It was the first day of a new week. He had faced down the disaster, and his control over life was starting to return. What he had not anticipated, however, was that the other apostles, in his absence, would completely lose their minds. "Well, Thomas," one of them announced, "Fine time to be gone. We have seen the Lord, and you just missed Him!"

Thomas knew how to deal with sorrow well enough. His problem had always been how to deal with happiness. And that problem was about to get a lot worse. A whole week the risen Lord would make him wait, sharing that upper room with the ten other men to whom he had hurled his challenge: "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." As each day passed, the case for skepticism was

strengthened.

But then it happened. The upper room was suddenly filled with a great light. New evidence had arrived and stood now undeniable on the scene. Doubting Thomas sensed that his long established thinking was about to be rather deeply shaken. However embarrassed, he rose and turned toward the entering light, bracing himself to learn a bit of good news.

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