

2nd Sunday of Easter cycle C

Atheism is nothing new; but of late, there is a new kind of atheism, one very much in conformity with our current generation; these neo-atheists go beyond denying the existence of God to actively and vehemently attacking the God whom they say doesn't exist; attacking the God whom, they purport, has been created by believers and who lives only in the minds of believers. Author Richard Dawkins dismisses, as he puts it, "the God of the Old Testament" as "arguably the most unpleasant character in fiction," a "capriciously malevolent bully." I wouldn't even dare to quote in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament the blasphemies that he included in between these two, but those quotes can give you a good idea of where Dawkins is at. Author Sam Harris, the new darling poster-child of the neo-atheists, recently wrote "there is not a person on Earth who has a good reason to believe that Jesus rose from the dead" and that these religious ideas "hobble science, inflame human conflict and squander scarce resources." Perhaps here he is speaking of the trees which were cut down to produce our missalettes and the gasoline many of you burned to get to church today. But no matter; the fact is that skepticism has been with man from early on, and skepticism has been swirling around the resurrection ever since that first Easter. Whether the mild skepticism of the "Doubting Thomas" or the certain and angry rhetoric of today's atheists, it's still the same old denial: It's the voices that say "prove it," and when God does prove it, still dismiss the proof as coincidence—because the fact is, they don't want to believe; the fact is, they want very much, very deeply, very strongly, to NOT believe.

"I won't believe unless I see the nail marks left in his hands, and the wound in his side." That was the criteria which Thomas laid down as being necessary for him to come to belief in the resurrection of Jesus. It was a bit much to ask for; one might think that simply seeing Jesus would be enough for anyone, but Thomas wanted more. And Jesus gave it to him; one can only imagine the stammering, incredulous Thomas standing there, invited by Jesus to go ahead, and place his fingers in the holes of his hand and his hand into Jesus' side, and Thomas thinking "you know, seeing might just be good enough." In the end, upon seeing Jesus again, Thomas believed; but God gave him what he needed to come to faith in the resurrection. God does not have to, nor does he, offer *unlimited* evidence. A lot of people have held that if Jesus just stayed around, the only person to keep on living from generation to generation, it might be easier to bring more people to faith. But faith, in order to have the component of love, ultimately must be freely chosen, and so God gives us the revelation we need to come to faith, and then man may accept or reject him. In the Acts of the Apostles, we heard of how many signs and wonders were worked at the hands of the apostles; some saw and came to faith, others saw and did not arrive at the same conclusion. I personally have seen things that reinforced my faith—from physical healings to

emotional healings to miracles of conversion; and yes, these could have been coincidences, as all things could be coincidences. But at some point, the odds of all these things being coincidences, or the odds of these things being the power of the mind, or the odds of these things being well-preserved lies, are so ridiculously astronomical that the reasonable mind cannot accept that Christian revelation is made up. And *if man were* to simply fashion a belief system to give him hope in the afterlife, why not fashion one which doesn't place so many demands upon oneself, one which would *enhance* worldly power and pleasures rather than rein them in? There is no adequate retort to that, precisely because Christianity is not a matter of delusion, but is truly a matter of conversion.

This weekend has been designated as Divine Mercy Sunday by the Church. Saint Faustina was chosen by God to relay to us much knowledge about God's Divine Mercy; nothing new, no new revelations as much as clarifications as to the extent and to the greatness of his merciful love. And while most of us love the idea of mercy—divine and otherwise—some aren't so in love with it, and not because they desire to withhold mercy necessarily. Just as some resist even believing in God, so also some people resist God's forgiveness and compassion precisely because it means admitting that we are in need of his mercy; it means owning up to the fact that we are sinners, and that even though we may be filled with good intentions, our actions do not always conform to those intentions; we mess up sometimes, and sometimes, we just choose to be bad. Embracing the notion of the Divine Mercy means having a receptivity to change, a willingness to work with God's graces so that we may overcome faults and failings, and strive to become the person whom God envisions us being: made in his image and likeness, and not marred by things such as pettiness and anger and hatred and lust. Embracing the Divine Mercy means having a docile spirit that will accept the authority of the Church to absolve sins in Jesus' name: whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, whose sins you retain, they are retained.

Going hand in hand with mercy is God's justice; and some hate the idea of that as well. What God's mercy is not is a pass to do whatever we want and never incur any consequences, or to be whatever we want to be rather than becoming the person God has in mind for us to be. God still calls for us to have contrition: true sorrow for our sins. Even in the face of mercy, justice requires an intention on our part to cooperate with God's graces so that we may overcome our faults and failings and weaknesses; we invite his strength along with his forgiveness, and repudiate all evil actions because, no matter how benevolent God may be, evil will always distance us from him. Mercy doesn't erase the need for purgation, in fact, if anything, it clinches it; because purgation of every last vestige of our sins and faults, even the most seemingly innocuous venial sins, is

necessary for God's kingdom to be perfect, and perfect it must be; purgatory is a doctrine which underscores both God's mercy and justice, and his relentless love.

One of the highlights of my life was meeting Pope John Paul II back in 1996. But if someone told me to prove it, someone who either didn't want to believe that Pope John Paul II ever existed, or someone who didn't want to believe that I had ever met him, I don't think I could. Oh, I could produce the rosary each of us received that day; but I could buy a rosary anywhere and say it was blessed by the Pope. I could produce the ticket stub from Central Park; but anyone who knows a professional printer could turn out an "artifact" such as that. I could produce a picture of me, with the Pope; and they could say "photoshop." I could dig out the videotape of me reading at Vespers, and they could claim it was spliced, or that the video itself never showed me shaking hands with John Paul II. And yet, if I show these things to people, they believe me, because a reasonable mind knows that most people won't go to such great lengths to simply perpetuate a lie that doesn't even gain them any profit. Thomas needed more evidence than the other ten, and God gave him what he needed. But there are some so determined to not believe, that no evidence is enough. For me, it's not about reading the Bible and then choosing to believe because I like the demands of faith, and it's not about a deep seated need to believe in the afterlife. It's not even completely about the historical evidence, which is substantial. It's about the one thing that the neo-atheists don't get, and won't get; and that is, that I've had experiences of faith; experiences in which I knew I was encountering Jesus just as much as I shook hands with the Pope; felt the Holy Spirit within me, as cognizant of him as I am of myself. I have experienced the peace and relief which come from knowing God's mercy; and it was as real, and as certain, as this pulpit I'm leaning against; and the likes of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris can deny it, but they cannot prove that I had no such experience, and that it was real. What Thomas almost did is what many still do today: they think they are demanding proof, but in fact, they are denying themselves truth. By doubting, Thomas for a moment was denying that the others had in fact really seen Jesus; how wrong he was. The encounters with our resurrected Lord had already begun, and they continue to this day through his Church and in his Sacraments. Yes, faith is a choice, but it's also a very real encounter: a walk through life with our risen and merciful Savior.

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