

„A Year with Fr. Brisson“



Celebrating the centenary of the death of the Servant of God

THE REVEREND LOUIS BRISSON

(1817-1908)

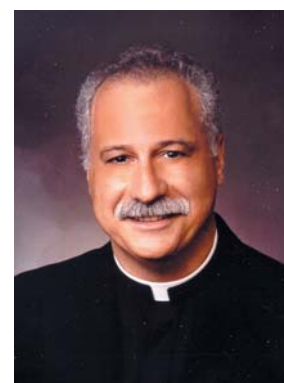
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First Friday Reflection (#2)

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by

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V + J

We are into another Easter Season, that beautiful time of the liturgical year when we joyfully celebrate the new life that Jesus has won for us through the saving events of his paschal mystery.

To *know* about the new life in Christ is one thing, but to *live* that new life is something else altogether. New life in Christ does indeed bring with it a brand new way of *perceiving* absolutely everything else. But it does more. It also brings about a brand new way of *behaving* towards others. New life in Christ, then, is both a new way of being and perceiving (grace), as well as a new way of acting in the world (Christian praxis).

But how does one transition from the old way of living to new life in Christ, from the old Adam to the new? I believe that the gospel appearance of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene can teach us much about how the transition to new life in Christ takes place (John 20:11-18).

The evangelist John is relating in this appearance narrative what had become by then a familiar account of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene. He does so with an eye to the spiritual needs of his local community. For that purpose, as I noted in a late 1999 newsletter, some scripture scholars suggest that John deliberately evokes the image of the young woman's painful search for her Beloved in the Song of Songs. The heroine of the Song of Songs, you will recall, is frantically searching everywhere for her Beloved from

whom she has become separated. She asks everyone she meets, "Have you seen him whom my heart loves?" (3:3) When the angels ask Mary Magdalene the reason for her tears, she answers them that she cannot find the one she is looking for: "the Lord has been taken away and I do not know where they have put him" (20:13). The young girl in the Song of Songs suddenly finds her Beloved (3:4). And so does Mary: "no sooner had she said this than she turned around and caught sight of Jesus standing there" (20:14). Once she finds her Beloved, the young girl takes hold of him, determined never again to let him go: "tenui nec dimittam," "Now that I have hold of you again I will never again let you go!" (3:4). When Mary finally recognizes Jesus by the familiar manner in which he speaks her name, she too grabs hold of him, equally determined never again to let him go (20:17).

As Pope Benedict XVI recently reminded us in *Deus Caritas Est*, the Song of Songs is first and foremost a love story. In using it as background to his account of the appearance of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene, the author of the fourth gospel is suggesting to his community that only love is capable of laying hold of the new life that the risen Jesus makes possible. He who suffered and died for us did so out of love. Salvation, new life in grace, and resurrection hope are the effects in those who believe of Jesus' cruel sufferings and painful death. Reason and logic alone can never make any sense of this. Only a heart that loves -indeed, loves as Jesus loved-- can grasp its truth and lay hold of its power. True Christian gnosis, then, is not to be found in the abstract philosophy of the Greeks but in the imitation of the love of Jesus who searches for those who are lost and suffers for those he finds. Loving them in this way, he saves them from both sin and death and bestows on them new life in the Spirit.

In their turn, believers have access to the new life that Jesus has won for them when they, in imitation of Christ, search for those who are lost and, upon finding them, love them as selflessly and as generously as he did. Like the crucified one whom they follow, they too are willing to suffer for others. Pope Benedict expresses in this way the Christian's love for others in imitation of Jesus' love for us: "it becomes renunciation and it is ready, even willing, for sacrifice" (*Deus Caritas Est*, nos. 6 & 10). The searching, suffering love of Christians for others is how the redemptive deed of Christ continues throughout human history and how the possibility of new life in him is renewed in each generation.

Unlike the woman in the Song of Songs, Mary Magdalene is not permitted to cling to the risen Jesus or to remain in the arms of the one she loves. Rather, Jesus immediately commissions her as his first evangelist, sending her to proclaim to his disciples the good news of his resurrection. Her message to them, "I have seen the Lord!" becomes the core of the gospel proclamation for all subsequent believers. And for the rest of Christian history, the proclamation of new life in Christ will always be rendered credible when it is also accompanied by the searching and suffering love of those who preach it from the pulpit of a Church or from the pulpit and praxis of daily life. Thus, the Christian's new life in Christ is both gift as well as "the path along which his life and love must move" (*Deus Caritas Est*, No. 12).

+ May God Be Blessed +