



The meal at Emmaus, Monreale Cathedral

Walking Home with a Stranger The Riddle of Emmaus (Luke 24, 13-35)

Bible Study

Gosbert T.M. Byamungu

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Isaiah 55,10-11)

■ INTRODUCTION

The story of Emmaus is about a painful decision of two people to let go of the past, and move on, stepping into the unknown. In the attempt to explore the content of this paschal journey of seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus and back, within the same day of the resurrection,ⁱ this bible study deals with one of the most succinct, beautiful pieces of art in the Bible, which is not without its own irony. Authored by a gifted writer with a powerful imagination, the story presents few problems of unity and utilizes very restricted vocabulary, managing to condense meaning in a relatively small account.ⁱⁱ For reasons of scope and of space, this study is limited to considering the synchronic and stylistic effects of the text, taking for granted the relevant diachronic interests, such as the profession of the paschal faith of the primitive community and the apostolic preaching concerning the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Divided into analytical, exegetical and theological aspects, it leads to inferences with hermeneutical, anthropological and ecumenical implications, aiming at discovering what the story might accomplish in us, as we contemplate it as “Word of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ Much exegetical and theological content is condensed in the footnotes.

■ READING LUKE 24, 13-35

■ ANALYTICAL

The story begins at v. 13 with mention seemingly to two of the Eleven disciples earlier cited in the preceding text (v. 10), and goes on to make reference to the women at the tomb (vv. 22-23) and to some disciples (v. 24), which is a flashback to a preceding scene (vv.1-6. 12). While reference is made to the Eleven and about those who were reunited with them (v. 33), one notices that it is the same group to which the women had come earlier to tell of the “events” that had taken place (v.9). These are unifying elements which, however, do not

resolve some inherent difficulties of coherence. At the beginning when we hear of two disciples who were on the way, it seems that they were two of the Eleven apostles who were named shortly before (v.10). Yet, in the end one understands that they did not belong to the group of apostles, because they subsequently relate their experience to the group of the Eleven (v.33). Consequently, the two disciples belonged to the group of those who were with the Eleven (cf. vv. 9.33). Indeed, while the Eleven apostles appear to have a strong conviction of the appearance of Jesus to Peter (v. 34), in the following scene, these same apostles appear surprised and full of doubts (vv. 37.38.41). All this indicates that the evangelist took his material from diverse traditions, but used them to make his own account. Our task in this bible study is to discover what Luke's objective was at presenting us with this story. Over and above that, the study will consider the "walk" from Jerusalem to Emmaus and back, a "spiritual journey" of the two disciples. The focal question would be, what would God want to reveal to us with this story? Considering that we "know" this story, I would like to ask for an "open," fresh approach to reconsider what it could still reveal to us as persons walking together the "seven miles" of ecumenical discovery.

Indeed, the story is about transformation from lack of understanding to understanding, from what is hidden to "discovery" and "recognition." It is also about walking and talking. It is about dialogue and what it can achieve. In all this, Jerusalem is strategically at the centre, being the point of departure (v.13) and the point of final destination (v.33), as the disciples walk back from Emmaus to Jerusalem (v. 33), after they recognize that the stranger was Jesus.^{iv} The same city is where the women come to visit the tomb (vv.1-11) so also Peter (v.12). It is exactly in the following scene that the disciples tell the Eleven about what happened (v. 36), in the same place where Jesus appears to the Eleven (vv. 36-49). Briefly, Jerusalem veils an important theological content of Luke's paschal message.

From an analytical point of view, the evangelist has used a stylistic device to show two successive events which help bring about a transformation of the two disciples. The two transformative events are set in a panorama consisting of three scenes, which develop toward a climax. The first scene (vv. 13-23a) is dominated by the two disciples who are escaping, and is characterized by bafflement, lack of hope and understanding, of sadness and of being downcast^v because of what happened in Jerusalem. The second scene (vv.24-33) takes place on the road, and is characterized by the first transformative event, consisting in the explanation of the Scriptures by Jesus (who is covert) and by the second transformative event, which consists in the breaking of bread,^{vi} where Jesus is recognized (vv.30-31). Thanks to these two events, we have a transformation of the two disciples, shown in the third scene (vv. 34-35) going back to Jerusalem, full of hope and joy with a clear vision and warmth of heart.^{vii} The disciples, now transformed, rejoin the community in Jerusalem and tell them what they had experienced.^{viii} To understand Luke's stylistic approach, which leads to important discoveries, we shall proceed scene by scene.

■ EXEGETICAL

(i) The Interpretation of the Scriptures

In the first scene (vv. 13-23a) where the two disciples are separating themselves from the rest of the group in Jerusalem, one appreciates how deeply the "events" of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus had affected them like a disaster, turning their lives up-side down. Their expectations were not met, their hopes were shattered.^{ix} Literally, they were walking away disappointed and heartbroken, *separating* themselves from the rest of the community. Jerusalem without Jesus had lost its meaning.

On the road, the two disciples are in conversation (*homileō*)^x about what had happened in Jerusalem. Shortly before Jesus joins them, it seems their discussion had turned into a

“heated” debate, given the double use of *homileō* and *suzētein*. He joins them, but they do not recognize him, because “their eyes are blocked” (v. 16).^{xi} Jesus’ question is curious: “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” (v.17). The exchange that follows is loaded with irony, that is not lost on the reader. It is Cleopas who answers him with apparent sarcasm: “Are **you** the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place in these days?” Here we have irony in its ultimate Greek sense: One who seems not to know is actually the one who knows more than the one who thinks he knows it all! Cleopas infers, with his sarcasm, that Jesus doesn’t know about Jesus! The humorous part of it is that he does not know that his judgement is erratic simply because he does not “see” who the person is, does not discern to whom he is talking!^{xii}

Here we must admire Jesus’ incredible restraint. Rather than rush to tell the truth of the events, he asks a simple question: “*poia?*” (which things?), which unleashes a torrent of words in response, from both Cleopas and the unnamed companion, telling him about himself, and the way his death and resurrection had disappointed them. What is interesting is this space which Jesus gives to his disciples to tell him their version of the truth of those things. By urging them to speak from their own experiences he wants them to explore and articulate their understanding of what happened. Among the things that are articulated is that Jesus was a prophet, powerful in Deed and Word. That gives a clue to what is coming.

Having *listened* patiently to their version, he will now explain (*diermēneuō*)^{xiii} to them the Scriptures. With a rare mastery of what the Scriptures say about the events, he makes them understand the substance of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem, casting light upon all that happened. What happened had to happen, because it had been “written” in the *Torah* (Moses) and the Prophets (*Nebiim*). Why did they not understand?

This stranger (Jesus) is affirming something deeper than meets the eye. Namely, he is telling the disciples that the Scriptures have a *performative* constraint. They must be fulfilled. This is the sacramental perspective of scriptural utterances. The problem of “understanding” on the part of the disciples, therefore, consists in this absence of belief in the inevitability of events prescribed by the Scriptures. In Genesis, God says, and things come to be. The Word of God does not come out of God’s mouth without realising that which it says (Cf. epigraph above, Isaiah 55,10-11). That is what the disciples had not understood.

Yet, Jesus is also saying that the disciples may have known the Scriptures, but then were reluctant to accept their bitter content: the “scandal of the cross.” They had known Jesus, had followed him, putting hope in his cause. His passion and death simply did not make sense: “We had hoped...”! Thus what is rebuked as lack of understanding, leading to sadness and to the decision “to walk away” from Jerusalem, is simply the unwillingness to accept the “death” of the messiah as a way of fulfilment of his prophetic mission. Put differently, their disappointment consists in the incongruence of logic: the messiah is not meant to die. He is meant to save. With his death, Jesus’ messianicity seems to come to an end. The messiah is the messiah of their own measure, a product of their own thought. He is the messiah of their expectations.^{xiv} That is what goes “wrong” with their interpretation of the events in Jerusalem.

This is what occasions the second moment of irony in the story. In vv.22-24, in the space given by Jesus to the disciples to tell their story, they refer to the visit of the women to the tomb (*mnēmeion*). Greek *mnēmeion* has an English nuance of a “memento,” a reminder, a souvenir. It is an icon of what “used to be but is no longer.” Consistent with that, the disciples tell Jesus that some of them went to verify the report of the women, finding that they were right in every detail, except one, namely the alleged fact that Jesus was alive! The irony lies in the use of words: “but him they did not see” (v.24). It is ironic that the disciples are reporting to Jesus that their companions did “not see” Jesus, not knowing that they are actually talking to Jesus himself, and do not “see” him, even as he proves to be alive by listening to their story!

Let us put this into perspective. The story of Emmaus is about “not knowing.” The two disciples do not know that the person who was conversing with them is Jesus. As we have also noted, they did not know that the death and apparent disappearance of Jesus were not as catastrophic as they had thought, motivating them to escape from Jerusalem.

Put technically, this element of the “unknown” — which one does not know that it is unknown — puts into crisis our certainties and our rigidities in holding certain theological standpoints unbendingly. The story would suggest that it is not always necessary to know something, but that it is most important to know that you don’t know all the answers in advance. That paves the way to opening the doors yet to be discovered, which would allow new answers to unfold. Emmaus proves how Christianity is necessarily a “pilgrim religion,”^{xv} a spiritual journey which involves going beyond hope and fear, a stepping into unknown territory. Christian truth is a life engagement, unfolding itself more and more as we come closer to Jesus and listen to his “interpretation of the Word,” which makes hearts “burn.”^{xvi}

In hermeneutical understanding, by making peace with the fact that we don’t know, we become more patient with interpretations of the Word which differ from our own, knowing that the Word contains an inexhaustible wealth of Revelation and truth, much of which is still hidden from us. This appears to be a warning against a possible unwise option to explain God’s salvific ways in a narrow perspective. While the Church must have the courage to proclaim its convictions, it also must have the humility to learn.

Thus the road to Emmaus is a journey of discovery. Exegetes and archeologists have raked their minds trying to identify the village, but with no success. There are not less than nine hypothetical locations of Emmaus.^{xvii} It seems that these efforts have not seriously considered the option to appraise Emmaus symbolically. Because Luke likes the metaphor of a journey,^{xviii} Emmaus could well be considered symbolically as not being located anywhere, but as connoting an unknown destination. That would make the Emmaus journey a spiritual path of discernment, in which the two disciples know where they are coming from or where they are running from, but do not know where they are going! Put simply, they are fleeing Jerusalem in search of a new meaning for their lives. A journey of faith, therefore, but toward the unknown. For Luke, a ‘disciple’ of Christ is, above all, a companion on the road to discovery. The road to Emmaus therefore assumes an eschatological sense of destination, a spiritual path full of ambiguity and tension, valid for the whole of pilgrim humanity.

But, considering what Enzo Bianchi has called a “running away from the cross, from death, a distancing of themselves from the holy city ...towards darkness,”^{xix} Emmaus could also represent the wrong direction. Known as a place of historical rebellion (Cf. 1 Macc 3 and 4) of Judah Maccabeus and the Seleucids (B.C 165), and of the Bar-Kochba revolt (AD 132-135) against the Romans, Emmaus as destination could represent a change of mind on the part of the two disciples. The death of the person who had been identified as the Messiah, meant to lead the nation against the occupying power of the Romans, could have marked the end of their messianic hopes, and so the two disciples could have been planning to join the Zealots in an armed struggle against the Romans. In this way Emmaus could become a symbol of a false messianic choice: the embrace of violence as option to bring about the required change to solve their problems. Emmaus thus represents our vision of the world which is tainted with negativity, self-interest and insecurity. The irony is that Cleopas and his companion will meet in Emmaus, the very person they had thought dead and therefore now, out of the picture.

If this reading can be accepted, then Jesus is seen as coming to console them and to make them go back to the right path, in the direction of Jerusalem. By explaining the Scriptures to them, he intends to make them understand and come back to the faith. Indeed, thanks to Jesus’ initiative to “walk with” them and to join their dialogue, they manage to come to meaning and truth. The discernment happens through a hard process of looking for new meaning through reflection, discussion and attentive listening, which leads to a personal

progress in the discernment of the truth. What is revealing is that at the time Jesus helps interpret the Scriptures for them, he is still “hidden” to them.^{xx} This would lead to wonder how many people even today attempt to run away from Jesus to their Emmaus, only to find him there!

(ii) The Breaking of Bread

He will be “found,” therefore “known,” in the act of breaking bread. As it had got dark, the two disciples invite the stranger to their house “to stay with them.” There he takes bread (*lambanō*), blesses (*eulogeō*), breaks (*klaō*) it, and distributes (*epididōmi*) it.^{xxi} Striking is the Eucharistic sequence.^{xxii} The gesture becomes a sign, a symbol, a signal. As sign, it suggests the presence of Jesus. As symbol, it represents a relation by association.^{xxiii} As signal it becomes a *‘déjà vu’* of experience in which they “remember” previous happenings and make a conclusion.^{xxiv} Their eyes are “unblocked,” thanks to this association. They recognize that the stranger is Jesus!^{xxv} The Eucharistic synoptic sequence of the so-called “dominical sayings of the institution of the Eucharist”^{xxvi}: take, bless, break, distribute^{xxvii} become markers for assignation of meaning to the unknown. They lead from perceptive impression to recognition.

Indeed, the careful repetition of this sequence of actions would not be necessary if it were not significant. It suggests an intention to recall previous occasions on which it occurred. Recalling similar precursor experiences or events, the indexical sign effects a change of perspective leading to the identity of the person whom it serves as a sign, becoming an icon of decipherment by inferring important conclusions from seemingly insignificant clues.^{xxviii}

This is the quintessence of sacramentality. Christ makes his presence known through sacramental signs and symbols, which, *prima facie*, appear insignificant. In this case, his “covert identity” among his (two) disciples becomes “overt presence.” He manifests his presence uniquely in symbols that embody his creative and redemptive presence.

This leads to an important affirmation. The stranger’s identity is revealed thanks to symbols, which allow the penetration of simple gestures to see beneath the surface and beyond the horizon to make new meaning. The two disciples had seen the stranger all along physically. But the identification of him as the Lord was a different kind of “seeing,” a deeper perception associated with a capacity to understand the language of symbols. This can only lead to a conclusion that symbols are not poor substitutes for something which is absent. Jesus was present as he performed the ritual, thus making the symbols reveal that which was hidden.^{xxix} A symbol actively discloses and manifests what is present by evoking memories. In particular, the Emmaus meal, this earliest designation of “the Lord’s supper,” happening on Easter day, becomes an “event” of restoration of a fellowship broken by tragic death. The celebration of the Eucharist on “the Lord’s Day” enlivens the deeper meaning of the paschal victory:^{xxx} the fact that the risen Lord eats with the disciples who had forsaken him (Luke 24,30. 35. 43), indicates how this meal serves as a visible sign of his compassionate forgiveness.^{xxxi}

(iii) Transformation

This leads to an important discovery. The risk of stepping into the unknown took the disciples out of their comfort zone. The discussion and the dialogue, followed by the explication of the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread lead to an identification, which, however, is followed by an immediate physiological absence at the moment of recognition. This looks like a *ruse* of recognition, an ambivalent phenomenon split between undetectable presence and cognitive absence. There is a strange blend of the physical and the spiritual enshrouded in mysterious ambiguity of interplay between presence and absence. There is tension between material (carnal) reality and a greater spiritual reality, embracing the Logos —as speech and as action— which embodies the *mysterium* of sacramentality. What is seen is material but what

is represented in mysterious way is much deeper. Where the image provides us with immediacy and presence, the symbolic confronts us with a play of presence and absence. Both *apophatic* and *kataphatic* perspectives converge.

Luke wants to lead us to an important conclusion in the relationship between the two disciples and Jesus, namely that the two disciples were transformed from a lack of recognition to recognition of Jesus, thanks to the Word and the Sacrament. This transformation consists in a change of perspective, from a lack of understanding to understanding, from a lack of “seeing” to “seeing,” from sadness to joy. That is the core message.

Interesting is the fact that Luke puts the two moments together, prior to the recognition. The explanation of the Scriptures alone does not make the disciples recognize him. It took the breaking of bread to do this. Yet, this moment makes the disciples reveal to us that the explication of the Scriptures had made their hearts “burn.” That was the turning point. Indeed, the apparition itself is not interesting; once Jesus is recognized, he disappears. The interest lies in the discovery of the very person of Jesus in the semblance of a stranger. Jesus’ sudden disappearance dramatizes the recognition of his physical presence, because it does not last long. What is suggested is that the symbols of the Eucharistic gestures “take over” his physical presence.^{xxxii} The reality symbolized is actually present. Effectively, after his death and resurrection, Jesus’ physical presence has run its course. His presence will be assured under sacramental representation.^{xxxiii} Faith replaces vision: “Jesus is no longer beside them but in the heart itself, at the root of their lives. He hides inside them.”^{xxxiv}

All this is difficult for us to understand because of our Cartesian categories of thinking and understanding. Symbolic categories of thought have disappeared with modernity, with its scientific analytical tools. We have lost the sense of the miraculous and the symbolic. But the Biblical text is replete with sacramental categories of thought, in which God’s transcendental presence is symbolized using natural material reality. Symbolism responds to the exigencies of human nature, which is not a purely intellectual nature but which needs a sensible basis for elevating itself to superior spheres. Emmaus is once again symbolically a turning point. That is the meaning of the two disciples going back to Jerusalem “at the very hour” (v. 35). It represents the conversion of mind and heart, of the way of seeing the world and of understanding the ways of God.

Indeed, something extraordinary happens to the two disciples after this experience. They are no longer afraid, feeling strangely at peace. The comfort of their Master’s presence transforms their hearts, giving them “power.” The first thing they do is to “rise up” (v. 33). The resurrection of Christ concretizes itself in the resurrection of the disciples. There is newness in which life regains its meaning, which they want to share with the rest of the community in Jerusalem. An intimate encounter with Jesus affects them so much that they decide to “go back” to Jerusalem, braving the circumstances which had originally made them flee to Emmaus amidst feelings of sadness and loss. This is conversion, a return (Hebrew *šûb*). As was the case for Elijah after Horeb, it is a movement in the opposite direction, “a return to one’s own steps” (1 Kings 19,15). The *oikoumene* is a spiritual process, in which the question is not about a way backwards but about a way forwards.^{xxxv} Now they will believe in the words of his being alive, proclaiming boldly that He is risen! It confirms that “I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own.”^{xxxvi}

■ THEOLOGICAL

The ecumenical journey is like travelling along the road to Emmaus. It is an ambiguous road filled with memories of past events, not without gratitude, certainly, but altogether disappointed: “we had hoped...”! Looking at the two disciples on the road, sharing one another’s disillusionments and expectations, two events gain importance of perspective: the

explication of Scriptures and the breaking of bread. Through them Christ heals the memories and revives the hope of the disciples, putting their hearts on fire.

(i) Interpretation

The Lukan insistence on the effectiveness of the Word of God to transform the hearts of the disciples, and the breaking of the bread to recognize that Jesus is alive (sacramentally), urges us to reflect on the importance of the interpretation of the Word and the sharing of the Eucharist for a possible ecumenical breakthrough in our quest for meaning and *koinonia*. I believe that we would not be stretching the text too much if we affirmed that the “lack of understanding” which led to sadness and to separation in the first scene, alludes to the problem of interpretation of divine truths according to “our versions.” That the two disciples were holding a lengthy discussion as they walked to Emmaus, tells of our tendencies to have things on our own terms. But it also tells of the need for dialogue over matters that divide the churches, and says something about the attitude of “making room” for differing theological concerns and voices with their particular truth-claims. It is thanks to listening and researching in the light of the Word of God that we can come to new insights which better interpret the will of God for the world.

Also crucial in this attitude is the readiness to let the Word penetrate the blind spots of our own theological field of vision as well as to let our own most cherished “truths” be scrutinized, criticized and questioned by the same Word, so that through open discussion and dialogue of the hard questions we can finally hope to arrive at a common theological truth. We should argue not to win but so that the truth can win.

Indeed, the possession or discovery of the truth of revelation, was not enough to make the two disciples “recognize Jesus” in their midst. It happened only after the breaking of bread. Does this not underscore the importance of Eucharistic *koinonia*?

Surely, a “costly” Eucharistic vision is vital. Interesting is that only one of the two disciples, Cleopas, is mentioned by name. The second one is anonymous, which means that he represents any one of us.^{xxxvii} The two disciples “walk together,” and “listen” to Jesus the stranger, together, just as they will “recognize him” together, after the breaking of the bread. This Eucharistic experience forms the matrix of all theology and spirituality of Christianity. Church unity can be expected to succeed only as long as there is a common Eucharistic vision and communion. Despite our separations, there is only One who is walking with us in secret, and who wants us to recognize his presence among us, and the text seems to suggest that we can do that if we “break bread” together. Following our walking and discussing together, we also have to gather *epi to auto* (into one place) where we shall be surprised to discover the redemptive mystery of the one who is walking with us but whom our eyes are hindered from recognizing, because we have not yet “broken bread” together.^{xxxviii}

The inference I’m trying to make is that our “dialogues” ought to lead to a certain degree of consensus, climaxing in the “breaking of the bread” together. That does not imply glossing over differences or embracing doctrinal indifferentism, but argues that listening to the Word and exchanging our positions deriving from our different understandings, ought to lead to mutual enrichment and possible convergence of vision so that truth be found, honoured and celebrated together.

(ii) Anthropological

There is another consideration. The experience of breaking the bread and the subsequent identification of the stranger could not have taken place unless the two disciples had invited the stranger to “stay with them,” because “it was getting dark.” To the initiative of Jesus joining the two disciples on their walk, there is the initiative of the two disciples to invite the stranger to their home. The reason is altruistic: it was dangerous to continue with the journey

alone, in the dark. There is a certain way in which these two disciples want to continue to share something with this stranger, whose presence gives them a peaceful feeling and a kind of comfort.^{xxxix} The irony is that Jesus who accepts the invitation soon takes over the role of the host.^{xl} At the heart of any true hospitality, it is God who is the host. On the road to Emmaus the disciples had listened to him in such a way that their hearts “burned.” As an effect of the Word of God in their hearts, the disciples generously extended compassionate hospitality. This suggests to me that prior to the invitation of the stranger to “stay with them,” and prior to Jesus’ gesture of breaking bread, the three individuals had already achieved a profound communion of heart and mind. The Word of the Scriptures and the dialogical exchange had transformed their hearts into a community of faith and love. In consequence, the disciples and the stranger became “gifts to one another.” The “exchange of gifts”^{xli} is a natural consequence of our meditation of the Word of God and of our hearts “burning” together. At that point, hospitality becomes a natural, positive human response to God’s own plan of salvation for the world. That is why hospitality occupied a prominent and virtuous position among the Jews. The Letter to the Hebrews confirms this: “Do not forget hospitality, some have received angels without knowing” (Hebr 13,2).^{xlii}

(iii) Ecumenical

Finally, the identification of the Lord leads the two disciples to go back to Jerusalem to rejoin their friends. Originally they had “walked away” from them, now they “walk back” to them, thanks to the two “events” on the road (the explication of the Scriptures) and at Emmaus (the breaking of bread). It is a reunion made possible thanks to the Word and the Eucharist. Having moved nearer to Jesus Christ, in him we necessarily move nearer to one another. The hearts of the two disciples were no longer afraid. So transformed were they that they desired rejoining the community. It stands to reason, therefore, that listening to the Word of God and taking part in the Eucharist ought to put people in touch with God’s grace and power, and this ought to re-ignite the desire for unity. Both the Word and the Eucharist are a means to overcome difficulties (the night, cf. v.29), to prevail over division and to strengthen community.^{xliii} Ecumenism ought to bear some visible fruits of dialogue.

Indeed, Emmaus is also a way whose climax is not only recognition but also disappearance! The physical presence of Christ is no longer necessary, because it can also pose itself as an obstacle to the recognition of his true identity. We can gain access to the person of Christ if we renounce the desire to see him, touch him as proof that he is actually with us. In John he will say to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen but have believed” (John 20,29). Our faith in his resurrection ought to lead us to a certainty that he is risen and present even as he seems to be absent.

■ CONCLUSION

With a story like that of the two disciples of Emmaus, you go on a journey in time and space, in life and creation, almost always travelling. Four things emerge from this study.

First is that fitting the metaphor of a journey of faith, the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus involves doubt, invites discussion and dialogue, aiming at a deeper discovery of the mission, person and cause of Jesus. The path of the two disciples of Emmaus has taught us how much the core truth of Christian faith does not fall like snow from heaven but that it is a fruit of the experience of real human persons. Their experience would lead us to affirm that true dialogue on religious truths should not be based on abstract, unbending principles – because every religion or confession always remains stuck in its own scheme of thought – but that dialogue takes place among real human beings who can achieve the truth only through discovery of those events, words and symbols which have meaning to all of them together. At that point, each will feel involved, addressed, touched and convinced of the responsibility deriving from the compelling truth. Emmaus is a path to discovery.

Secondly, this discovery consists of the realization that He covertly joins us on the journey, offering us companionship especially when times are difficult and when our certainties falter. That he discreetly gets involved in our discussions, leaving us space for our own interpretations, that he subtly transforms us through making us understand the scriptures, which unpack the inevitability of the fulfilment of the Word of God for the world. This gives absolute value to what “comes out of the mouth of God.” Our interpretation of the Scriptures ought to make our “hearts burn,” in such a way that we are led to embrace his will, however painful and incomprehensible it might be. Only then shall we be transformed.

Thirdly, this transformation ought to have an impact on our humanity, leading us to realize that talking is a way to loving. There is a certain way in which we never want to let go of a pleasant experience or encounter. The company of good friends who make us feel good about ourselves or who say things that give us strength and empower us, is something we usually want to “remain” with us. There is deep anthropology to be appreciated in the gesture of hospitality of the two disciples to Jesus, but also in the gesture of Jesus accepting the invitation. The two gestures would have us think that it is essential to do something proactive in order to make good things happen. If today’s problems of division and separation, of suffering and death represent some kind of “darkness,” it is not enough to curse the darkness. It is crucial to light candles. Inferentially, Christian unity becomes urgent because the times require the lights of Christian spirituality.

Ultimately, what this suggests is that both theology and anthropology converge at Emmaus to advocate a generosity which blossoms into sacramental convergence. The protagonist is the invited stranger, who reveals himself to be Jesus, and who breaks the bread, usurping the role of host rather than remaining the guest. That is how sacraments unveil their capacity to transform us thanks to their capacity to make God mysteriously present. Their symbolic depth make his physical presence no longer an absolute necessity; as if to say, if you break bread together, share it among yourselves, I will be with you, and you will “stay with me, and I with you.” What an ecumenical challenge for Eucharistic koinonia! The surprise would have us ponder about how much we miss every time we keep “alterity” at a distance. We cannot escape the conclusion that the different ways of being church, of worshipping God or of doing theology need not present themselves as obstacles to koinonia. They harbour a hidden potential to represent different ways of being disciples to him. Far from proposing a conformity, a kind of feeble sacramental unity which is not compelling, the breaking of bread at Emmaus transforms the hearts of the disciples from sadness to joy and exaltation, leading to “walking back” from Emmaus to Jerusalem to rejoin the community left behind. The logic of the Gospel is that the breaking of bread together comes prior to reunion and not vice-versa! It is a reunion which overcomes separation and creates a new community of faith, hope and love, in the context of the transcendent value of the resurrection. A fruit of “walking with,” “discussing with” and inviting a “stranger” home, it reveals how much God can accomplish in us when we are willing to listen to the “strange other” in the bid to search for meaning and truth. There is no point in dialogue if there is no truth. What is crucial is that there be a shared search for truth. Emmaus cannot but be a difficult path of discovery, hospitality and conversion.

ⁱ This is Luke’s theology of the “today of salvation,” which embraces the totality of human history. While he normally demonstrates historical and chronological precision, so that in Acts he will tell us that the ascension happened forty days after the resurrection (1,3. 9-11) and that Pentecost happened fifty days after (Acts 2,1 ff), here he affirms theologically that the event and therefore the day of the resurrection is the day of salvation. By inference, that day is without chronology: every day of our lives is an occasion to transform our struggles into events of salvation.

- ⁱⁱ The unicity of time corresponds to the integrity of the message.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Biblical *Dābār* denotes “Word made Action,” indicating message, expressed through words and actions, indissolubly intertwined. The prophet is the man of the compelling word. It is Word made life, made flesh, made real.
- ^{iv} Jerusalem as ‘holy city,’ is the locus of salvation, “a light for the illumination of peoples” (Lk 2,32.)
- ^v The adjective *skythropos* can mean to be sad or angry—in Mt 6,1 it describes the “long face” of the fasting Pharisees—and here, from context, it takes on the sense of “sorrow.”
- ^{vi} This terminology ‘the breaking of bread’ is found in Acts 2,42. 46; 20,7.11; 27,35; 1 Cor 10,16. For the sake of scope no attempt is made here to treat its significance in the primitive Christian community. Yet, its use in the story of the journey to Emmaus makes the text worth an investigation for this meeting, because it maintains the combination of instruction (Word) and the breaking of the bread (Sacrament; Eucharist). The instruction which Jesus gives in conjunction with this meal becomes an occasion for revealing the purpose of God being realized in the destiny of Christ, a destiny which will also shape the lives of his followers. On this point, cf. R. Dillon, *From Eye-Witnesses to Ministers of the Word: Tradition and Composition in Luke 24*. Analecta Biblica 82. Rome, Biblical Institute Press: 1978, 105-8; W. Bösen, *Jesusmahl, Eucharistisches Mahl, Endzeitmahl: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Lukas*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 97, Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk: 1980, 87.
- ^{vii} ‘Joy’ and simplicity of heart seem to characterize ‘the breaking of bread’ in the primitive Christian community (cf. Acts 2,46-47a); also A. B. Du Toit, *Des Aspekt der Freude im urchristlichen Abendmahl*, Winterthur, 1965, 105-112, esp. 106. This joy ought to be considered soteriological in character, based on the awareness of sharing in the fruits of Christ’s redemptive death.
- ^{viii} There is a parallel account at the beginning of the Gospel, where forty days after his birth in Luke 2,22-24, in fulfilling the Law (Lev. 12,2-4), Simeon and Anna will prophesy his passion (Lk 2,25ff). He will go back to Jerusalem at twelve years of age for the “*bar-mitzwah*” (Lk 2,42) where he will reveal himself as one who “must stay with his Father” (2,49). Joseph and Mary look for him for three days, because he had disappeared. On the third day, they find him, in the temple, where he is explaining the Scriptures. This is where he defends his deed, saying that he needs to “stay with his Father.” The text says, “they, however, did not understand his words” (Lk 2,50). The two episodes, one at the beginning of the Gospel, the other at the end, have the same structure and harbor common elements. Two persons leave the holy city, they both discuss about him, they both look for him for three days, and they both find him on the third day, while he explains to them the Scriptures (cf. Enzo Bianchi, *Emmaus, Parola e Eucaristia*, p. 4-5).
- ^{ix} Origen of Alexandria would have it that his death on the cross, burial and resurrection, “created an absence of meaning, intensified by his absence in the tomb on the day of the resurrection. This absence of meaning is the cause for sadness, is the deferral of hope, occlusion, discontinuity.” Cf. Origen of Alexandria, *On First Principles*, 1.2.2; 1.2.8. For the quotation, see Patricia Cox Miller, *The Poetry of Thought in Late Antiquity: Essays in Imagination and Religion*, Aldershot, Ashgate: 2001, 184.
- ^x Cf. also 20,11; 24,26). Used in the imperfect, it implies an extended discussion. In the next verse, the verb *suzētein* has much the same sense of discussion, with added nuance of “inquiring,” or “examining.” This gives a picture of the disciples trying to figure out the meaning of the events.
- ^{xi} The text introduces another irony, as the two disciples try to explain “the events” in Jerusalem. V. 23 speaks about the women who went to the tomb, found it empty, but who had a “vision” of angels, who said he was alive. They come and tell the Twelve. Some of them go to the tomb, wanting to verify, as it were. They find the tomb empty, as the women had said, but, adds the text, “him they did not see” (v. 24). The point of the irony is that those who are acting in the story are talking to “him” but are not “seeing him!” There is a pun on “seeing” and “not seeing” realities that are present or not present. That seems to have relevance to sacramental representation and the paradox between “real presence” which is not visible and “representational presence” which is visible.
- ^{xii} This irony alludes to the Shakespearean comedy of Laurel and Hardy, where the humorous irony consists in two personages, a dumb one and a smart one, who, however, was dumber than the dumb one.
- ^{xiii} This verb is a cognate to *hermeneuō*, which means to “translate” or to “interpret.” Luke shows the risen Jesus teaching the Church the proper way to read the texts of Torah, i.e. messianically.
- ^{xiv} Remember Peter’s attitude and Jesus’ rebuke of him in Matt. 16,23 concerning the same question: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”
- ^{xv} LG 8; UR 4; 6-8; UUS 15-17.
- ^{xvi} This is an important hermeneutical process, in which the Word of God comes to us through the vehicle of a human word, enshrouded in language and transmitted symbolically. Although not every sign is a symbol, every symbol gives birth to understanding by means of an interpretation. Conversely, every symbol is a sign, and signs intend something beyond what they stand for. This makes them opaque, in the sense that the first,

literal, patent meaning analogically intends a second meaning which is not given otherwise than in the first. This opaqueness is the symbol's very profundity, an inexhaustible depth. This is what makes interpretation important, because symbols hide in their first or obvious "meanings" second and deeper meanings, discoverable only through interpretation. Thus the word *diermēneuō* brings with it the nuance of "translation" and of "rendering clear." Here lies the perpetual tension between denotation and connotation, at the root of all understanding and truth. To find a common "understanding" requires honest exchange, even when the topic is as hard as the passion and death of the Messiah. The text suggests that the exchange of the two disciples was animated, seemingly the two not agreeing on the interpretation of the events in Jerusalem. They finally come to some agreement only after Jesus had interpreted the events for them pointing to the Scriptures. Phenomenologically, both the significative and the expressive elements come together within the complex constitution of symbol. Cf. Victor Warnach, O.S.B., "Symbol and Reality in the Eucharist," in *The Breaking of Bread*, eds. Pierre Benoit, O.P., et al., *Concilium*, vol 40 (1969) 82-105, 87.

^{xvii} Cf. J. Korbacher, *Die Emmaus Geschichte –etwas anders gelesen*, Glauben und Leben Band 24; Münster, Lit Verlag: 2005, 17. There is a problem of distance (the Greek puts it literally: "about sixty *stadia*" [about seven miles]) and some hypotheses of localization have been advanced: (i) 'Amwas, (cf. 1 Mac 3,40.57; 4,3), but then it lies at a distance of about 30 km from Jerusalem! Could the two disciples have undertaken a return journey on the same day? (ii) El-Quobeideh is at a distance of 12 Km, and (iii) Qoloniyyeh is even closer to the Jerusalem, at a distance of 6 km, and therefore would better correspond to the possible return journey undertaken by the two disciples!

^{xviii} Jesus is born in a certain sense on a journey to Bethlehem. His ministry is a journey of salvation, progressing towards Jerusalem. The parables frequently describe an itinerary: that of the prodigal son, of the Good Samaritan, etc. The mission of the apostles will be an itinerary from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

^{xix} Cf. *Emmaus: Parole e Eucharistia*, 5.

^{xx} The text uses a theological passive, saying their eyes "were held (*krateō*) in order that they might not recognize (*epiginōskō*) him" (Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, SJ, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday: 1985, 1563, 1568.

^{xxi} Here Luke does not use the imperfect *edidou* of 9,16 or the aorist *edōken* of 22,19, but rather the imperfect of the compound form *epididōmi*, "to hand over" (cf. also 4,17; 11,11-12).

^{xxii} What is not in the sequence is the "giving of thanks" (*eucharisteō*) as in 22,19.

^{xxiii} Indeed, Latin *symbolum* implies an idea of a token, a mark, something that the Greek *symbolon* renders to include the perspective of identification.

^{xxiv} Joachim Jeremias thinks that "the breaking of bread should be understood in a literal sense, and that "it must be taken to mean that Jesus had a special manner, characteristic of him, in which he tore the loaf (perhaps lifting his eyes to heaven, cf. Mark 6,41)" [Cf. J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, Philadelphia, Trinity Press International: ⁸1990, p. 120, note 3]. This explains "indexicality," one of Peirce's greatest contributions to the study of semiosis or the language of 'signs,' with an index defined as "a sign which refers to the Object it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object" [Cf. Thomas A. Sebeok chapter on "Indexical Signs" in his *Signs. An Introduction to Semiotics*, Toronto/Buffalo/London, Toronto University Press: ²2001, 83-101]. There are a number of English quasi-synonyms of index, among which are *symptom*, *cue*, *clue*, *track*, *trail*, etc.

^{xxv} "Their eyes were opened." This is also a passive construction corresponding to v. 16, "their eyes were bound." They do not simply "see" Jesus, but rather recognize (*epiginōskō*) him.

^{xxvi} Cf. Mark 14,22-25.

^{xxvii} Denis Farkasfalvy sees in this phraseological sequence not only "Eucharistic overtones" that link the formula to the institution of the Eucharist (Matt. 14,19; 15,36; Mark 6,41; 8,6; Luke 9,16; John 6,11. See also Matt. 26,28 / Mark 14,24; Cf. Luke 22,20 / 1 Cor 11,25), but also to Israel's desert experience of miraculous feeding. Cf. "The Eucharistic Provenance of New Testament Texts," in R. A. Kereszty, O.Cist., ed., *Rediscovering the Eucharist*. Ecumenical Conversations, New York/Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press: 2003, 27-51, 30-31.

^{xxviii} In the Gospel, Jesus performs similar actions at a meal twice before, at the last supper and at the feeding of the multitude in 9,10-17. The description of the Emmaus meal is closer to the feeding of the multitude than to the Last Supper in some details. The sequence in 9,16 is: taking, giving a blessing, breaking and distributing. In 24,30 he is at table with them (*kataklinō*) when he takes bread, gives thanks, breaks and gives it to them. On the point of indexicality, cf. Thomas A. Sebeok, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, Toronto and London, University of Toronto Press: ²2001, 87.

^{xxix} This is the essence of sacramental representation, wrapped in mystery.

^{xxx} Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, nos. 72-73.

^{xxxi} Cf. J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 204, note 3. Also N. Johansson, *Det ukristina nattvardsfirandet*, Lund: 1944 stresses that table fellowship with Jesus signifies a guarantee of forgiveness.

^{xxxii} Some scholars have denied a Eucharistic interpretation of Jesus' gestures and acting in this scene, asserting that breaking bread and pronouncing words of blessing during meals was an ordinary event of every devout Jew. Yet, we cannot escape the interpretation given by the Evangelist in the Gospel of Luke and elsewhere (cf. Mt 26,26; Mc 14,12; Lk 22,19; 1 Cor 11,24). The narrators in all these instances are retelling what was taking place within the primitive Christian communities within which they were writing (cf. Acts 2,42.46; 20,11; 1 Cor 10,16). Cleopas and his companion may not have understood the gesture as a Eucharistic sharing. Yet, even if we let alone the gesture of Jesus giving bread to the two disciples, the Eucharistic interpretation attributed by the evangelist cannot be doubted (Cf. Dupont, *Le repas d'Emmaüs*, 87-90; Id., *Les pèlerins d'Emmaüs*, 362-364; Orlett, R., 'An Influence of the Early Liturgy upon the Emmaus Account,' in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 21 (1959) 218-219; J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 121; Jeanne d'Arc, *Le partage du pain à Emmaüs*, in *VieSpir*, 1976, 898-899; Wanke, J., *Die Emmauserzählung. Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Lk 24,13-35*, *Erfurter Theologische Studien* 31, Lipsia, 1973, 102; Benoit, P., *Passion et Résurrection du Seigneur*, Lire la Bible 6, Paris, 1966, 315-319; Benoit, P., - Boismard, M.E., *Synopse des Quatres Evangiles*, en français avec parallèles des Apocryphes et des Pères, II, Paris, 1965, 448; Rigaux, B., *Dieu l'a ressuscité. Exégèse et théologie biblique*, Gembloux 1973, 227; Guillaume, J. M., *Luc interprète des anciennes traditions sur la résurrection de Jésus*, *Etudes Bibliques*, Paris, 1979, 130-133).

^{xxxiii} Emphasis has to be made here of the fact that the material level of being (e.g. 'bread') is inadequate to indicate the presence of the spiritual being in space and time, given that its spiritual nature is essentially beyond the bounds of space and time. Accordingly, symbol makes visible and present such reality in a form that though inadequate discloses what it signifies. This is what Warnach calls a visible and sensible *epiphaneia* or appearance, understood as an ontological presence of a higher being. Appearance does not weaken nor question the reality of the symbolic presence. Jesus' recognized appearance and immediate disappearance seems to encompass and to complement both aspects. Cf. Warnach, *Op. Cit.*, 87.

^{xxxiv} B. Rey, *Trois chemins vers Pâques*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf: 1992, 118.

^{xxxv} Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Gott und die Welt. Glauben und Leben in unserer Zeit*. Stuttgart-Munich 2000, 3-88.

^{xxxvi} Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 14; *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 89.

^{xxxvii} Cleopas has or has not be identified with the husband of Mary at the foot of the cross (Jn 19,25). Curious is that his companion is not named. From the third century, he was identified as Peter, but the hypothesis contradicts what is said at v. 34. Others have identified the companion as wife of Cleopas, and still others in the 10th Century, as Nathanael. In the midst of all this our theological interpretation seems more convincing. Cf. also Ch. Perrot, in Benzerath, (ed.), *La Pâque du Christ*, cit., 166.

^{xxxviii} Pope John Paul II wrote an Apostolic letter whose title, *Mane nobiscum, Domine*, is taken from the words of the two disciples of Emmaus, as they invited Jesus the stranger, to "stay" with them. Cardinal Newman in one of his Eucharistic reflections entitled with the same name, underlines the element of Jesus accepting to "stay" at the request of his disciples. This invitation and the acceptance to stay can be an object of ecumenical invitation of churches "to stay together" for outside it is dark. Recognizing that the Eucharist would not make our problems disappear, John Paul uncovers its potential, nevertheless, to make us hope: "[...] amid our questions and difficulties, and even our bitter disappointments, the divine Wayfarer continues to walk at our side, leading us from the despair of darkness to the light He brings in His Word and in the Sacrament of His Body and Blood" (n.2).

^{xxxix} Lydia does the same to Paul and Silas in Acts 16,15. It is evening, time for eating the evening meal, and the desire to "stay with" is mixed with the desire to "being with." One cannot but remember Zacchaeus in 19,5, where Jesus tells the man on top of the Sycamore tree, "Today I must 'stay' at your house. That scene closes with "today, salvation has come to this house" (19,19). As it was necessary for Jesus to "stay" with Zacchaeus, it was also necessary for Jesus to stay with the two disciples of Emmaus, so that he could bring salvation to their house.

^{xl} His attitude can be explained with the words of the faithful witness of the Apocalypse: "I stand at the door and knock. If someone listens to my voice and opens the door, I will come to him and I will dine with him and he with me" (Rev 3,20).

^{xli} UUS 28.

^{xlii} Alluding to Gen 18,19. In the Gospel of Luke, hospitality is given special attention. From the beginning, Jesus is refused hospitality in his own country (4,24.29), but is received better in Cafarnaum (4,42). He prefers an unusual but tender gesture of a sinful woman to the 'cold' reception of Simon the Pharisee (7,44-48). The life of the prophet consists in moments of being well received (e.g. 8,40) and of being rejected (e.g. 8,37; 9,5). Still, the bad reception of a village of Samaria must not be punished immediately (9,53-55). And does the parable of the Good Samaritan not deal with the whole question of hospitality (10,19-37)? Is the rich man not condemned because he did not open the door to the poor Lazarus (16,19-31)? The question is about "receiving" the kingdom of God as one receives a little child (18,17). In Luke, hospitality to Jesus is offered in terms of

invitation to meals. It is at table that Jesus takes occasion to teach, to forgive, to heal. He even breaks the rules of good manners to his hosts: “When you throw a feast, invite the poor, the lame, the blind (14,13)”! The way of receiving is a proof of faith.

^{xliii} This is a favourite theme in Ignatius of Antioch. Cf. his “Epistle to the Philadelphians 4,” in *Early Christian Writings: the Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books: 1987, 94.