

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
Witnessing to Christ's Resurrection

"Each individual layman must stand before the world as a witness to the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus." -- Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church

Carl F. H. Henry, founding editor of the conservative Protestant Magazine *Christianity Today*, once confronted the modern theologian Karl Barth at a news conference in Washington, D.C. Henry asked the famous theologian, "Did the resurrection of Jesus happen literally? Did Jesus really walk out of the tomb? Or is the resurrection just a pious story, a myth, or a symbol?" Barth sneered a reply: "Did you say your magazine was called *Christianity Today*, or *Christianity Yesterday*?" The secular journalists all joined in the laugh. But Henry was quick-witted and shot back: "Christianity yesterday, Christianity today, and Christianity forever!"

Henry's question to Barth went straight to the heart of the Christian faith. Whatever pious platitudes we may espouse, Christianity stands or falls on the literal, historical resurrection of Jesus. St. Paul said long ago, "If Christ be not raised our faith is in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:14)

Our secular neighbors are often willing to concede that Christianity offers hopeful stories or symbols, or that Catholics may do some social good in the world. But none of these is a sufficient reason to be Catholic. The apostles did not base their faith, their witness, or their message on feelings or on social utility. Rather, they based their faith on the objective, historical evidence that God raised Jesus bodily from the dead: "God raised up this man on the third day and permitted Him to be seen . . . by us, witnesses appointed beforehand by God, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead." (Acts 10:40-41)

The Second Vatican Council has called us as witnesses to this faith, to testify to the resurrection of Christ from the dead. To do this effectively we must heed the words of St. Peter, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." (1 Peter 3:15) With that in mind, let's briefly review the historical evidence for the literal, bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead.

The most extensive study of the resurrection of Jesus is the book *The Resurrection of the Son of God* by New Testament scholar N.T. Wright. Though it runs to over 700 pages, we can summarize Wright's case for the resurrection in three simple steps:

- 1) Jesus' tomb was really found empty on Easter Sunday morning,
- 2) the Apostles and earliest Christians reported that they saw Christ's risen, eating, drinking body and not just an apparition or ghost, or a moving, ethereal experience,
- 3) the disciples and earliest Christians really did believe that Christ rose bodily from the dead, and were willing to die for that belief.

These three facts are rarely contested by even the most skeptical historians. Confronted by this evidence, the honest investigator must ask, "What explanation makes sense of all the data? What

are the alternatives?" To cast doubt on the truth of the resurrection, you can really only offer one of four implausible explanations.

- 1) Jesus didn't really die, but rather stumbled out of his tomb and appeared to the apostles Sunday morning.

This is a very implausible explanation. The Romans knew very well how to kill people. First-century Jews knew the difference between a live person and a dead one (and they clearly testified to Jesus' death). And a bloodied, broken swooning Jesus would not have inspired the Church's belief in a victorious, risen savior.

- 2) Jesus' tomb was empty, but the apostles didn't see him raised from the dead.

The problem with this explanation is that an empty tomb alone would not give rise to belief in a resurrection, but only to belief in body snatchers. This, in fact, was the first response of those who found an empty tomb. Not "He is risen!" but "Where have you laid him?"

- 3) The tomb was empty (the body having been stolen), and the disciples experienced some sort of apparition or hallucination which they interpreted as a bodily resurrection.

The problem here is that first-century Jews knew the difference between bodily resurrection and ghostly apparitions. They *expected* apparitions, but had no belief that resurrection could take place in history. This is where N. T. Wright's research is most useful. Wright has extensively documented ancient pagan and Jewish expectations concerning the afterlife, and has shown that there was no precedent for the disciples belief in the Messiah's resurrection before the end of time. Had the disciples experienced only a hallucination, their logical conclusion would have been "Jesus has appeared to us in Spirit," not "Jesus rose from the dead."

- 4) The tomb was empty because the disciples stole the body and made up the story of the resurrection.

This explanation is the most implausible of all. The earliest witnesses to the resurrection had absolutely nothing to gain personally from the story, except persecution and martyrdom. We cannot be expected to believe that each of them was prepared to die for a belief they all knew to be false.

There is only one explanation that makes sense of all the historical data. It is the same explanation St. Paul presented to the Athenians: "[God] commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. *He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.*" (Acts 17:30-31) This Easter, take courage in your faith, be bold, and celebrate. *Christ is Risen; Truly He is Risen!*