

The Definitive Birth

Paolo Bartolini interviews Fr Alberto Maggi OSM about central themes in Christianity: renewal, death, and resurrection (17 November 2013)

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PB: I think that beyond any possible development in the interpretation of the New Testament, the central dogmas of Christianity are destined to remain these three: the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the Resurrection. My impression is that for most believers, the Resurrection represents a neuralgic point for understanding and living out the message of Christ. On the other hand, the issue is so delicate and controversial that even St Paul had to affirm in a categorical way: ‘If Christ has not been raised, our faith is in vain’ (1 Cor 15:14). You often say that eternal life refers to not *bios* but *zoe*—What does this mean for those people that almost exclusively search for the certainty of individual post-mortem survival in the resurrection?

AM: Greek philosophy was dominant in the culture of early Christianity and profoundly influenced its genuine message. Whereas Jesus spoke of the resurrection of bodies, the Greeks believed in the immortality of souls, which they believed with the death of the person returned to their place of origin: the heavens. However, the Christian message has been framed by these foreign philosophical ideas in the teaching of the Gospel writers. In the Gospels, it is *not* the survival of a soul completely separated from the body that is discussed; but rather the continuity of life of the person. As the preface to the Eucharist for the dead says: ‘Life is not taken away, but transformed’, one of the most ancient passages in the whole Missal. It is the life itself of the person that, transformed, continues toward a fullness without end. We often think of life and death as polar opposites, but this is not accurate. There is birth and then death, both fundamental points of the one life that continues forever. For this reason, death is not an end but a beginning (the first believers called it “the day of birth”), it does not destroy the person but liberates their capacity for love that was enclosed and which in the short course of earthly existence was not able to bloom fully. Death does not limit the person but transforms them, just as the grain of wheat that once fell in the ground finds the ideal conditions for transforming into the ear of wheat (John 12:24).

PB: According to the Gospels, Jesus Christ rises from the dead but he does not remain as an immortal among his disciples. His presence among us instead takes the form of a renewed capacity to love, which multiplies solidarity, justice, and sharing with others (in their joy and

pain). Communion expresses the maximum level of this living presence. If my premise is correct, do you think that *only* a symbolic and not a literal understanding of the Resurrection can, with time, find room in the Christian world without attracting excommunication or easy accusations of heresy?

AM: Among a “symbolic” or “literal” understanding of the Resurrection of Christ, there is the “real” understanding. The message of the Gospel writers—which does not intend to communicate a chronicled report but a truth of faith—is that Jesus Christ really has been raised from the dead and he continues to live: He is the Living One and the one who enlivens the community. Those who embrace his message and orient their own lives toward the service of others will experience the presence of Christ in their existence. The experience of the Risen Christ, in fact, is not a privilege given to only a few hundred people two thousand years ago, but a possibility for believers in every age. It is not reserved for elect souls, but for all those who will be able to become bread—food of life for others—just as the first disciples did when they recognized Christ “in the breaking of bread” (Luke 24:35).

PB: Through the example of his extraordinary life, Jesus tenaciously contrasted authentic faith with institutionalized religion (here I mean the hierarchical organization of rites, norms, and beliefs, tending toward power, and controlled by human beings through the concept of sin). It is not surprising then that according to the same words of the Gospel no one has directly witnessed the act of resurrection. As we remember from the psychoanalyst Gaetano Benedetti, the resurrection is not an episode that poses itself on the shared level of historical facts, like the other related events in the life of Jesus. If that is not the case, then humanity is not asked for a free act of faith and the Truth would impose itself on everyone as an undeniable and irrefutable worldly event. Therefore, in respect to the resurrection, what is the role played by human freedom in embracing this mystery?

AM: Paradoxically, the disciples were more deluded by the resurrection of Christ than by his death. If Jesus was dead, it meant that they had mistaken him for the Messiah, who could not die and therefore they must await another. If Jesus was raised instead, it meant that their dreams of glory for the restoration of the monarchy of Israel, and for its dominance over the pagans were completely dashed. Hence the resurrection is not the fruit of a hope or of a longing for the disciples, but rather the experience of a community that has found alive the one who they had abandoned the corpse on a cross. And if no Evangelist describes the resurrection of Jesus (the traditional image with the triumphant Christ coming out of the grave, with the guards knocked out, is not in fact in the Gospels but rather in an apocryphal text called the Gospel of Peter), then this indicates how to experience the risen Christ in their own existence, through practicing the message of Jesus.

PB: When our loved ones pass away, the pain is sometimes deafening, others heartbreaking, however difficult to bear. As modern psychology teaches us in the first phases of grief one cannot take a massive dose of suffering, of rage, and desire to have them again with us. What do you feel you should say to those going through this experience of loss and cannot, by nature or culture, retain the plausibility of the traditional message that the Church has for centuries given in merit of the Resurrection?

AM: Perhaps it's time to refresh the traditional message a bit. The resurrection is not at the end of time. If when a loved one dies, to console ourselves we say that they will be resuscitated, this not only does not provide comfort, but it throws us into profound despair. Because it is *now* that we miss our loved ones, and even those who we want to have again with us at the end of time when it will also be our turn to die and be resurrected! For this reason, Jesus says that God is not among the dead, but the living (Matthew 22:32). Not a God that resuscitates the dead but a God that to the living communicates his own life, and when life proceeds from God, it is indestructible. For this reason, death is not an enemy that takes us away from this life, but (as Francis of Assisi had perceived, "Sister death") the friend that introduces us to the full and definitive dimension of existence. We never die; we are born twice, and the second time is forever.

PB: The Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh says—in full agreement with the original message of the Buddha—that anyone who is immersed in the current of Life is, then, subject to a continual metamorphosis. A mother, father, partner, that is no longer with us, in reality has only changed form, because in the end, nothing is born and nothing dies, rather everything becomes and is transformed. Our loved ones can be found again and we can caress them in the wind, a flower, a ray of sunshine, in short, in their new manifestations. How do you think about these words in light of your faith in the risen Christ?

AM: Wind, flowers, sunshine, everything certainly speaks to me of God who is in all things, and whoever has eyes to see notices being placed in an ocean of love where everything is a reflection of the love of God. But with death, we do not become absorbed in God, because it is God that comes to dwell in us. We do not return "to the house of the Father", because the Father has come to dwell in us, we do not go to "heaven" because heaven is inside us and has rendered our life eternal—that is, indestructible. The love with which the Father loves his children has no limits or expiration date, and death does not interrupt it, but renders his love even more powerful, because the barriers fall that were obstacles for us receiving this love. The love of God is eternal, just as

the life that God communicates to us. Therefore, no, we do not become rays of sunshine, wind, or flowers, but we will continue to be that which we are, that which we have lived and loved and we will collaborate in the Father's creative action communicating life and love.

PB: This is the most difficult part to understand, at least for me. Can you help me to understand the meaning of "we will continue to be that which we are"? In one sense, whoever is dead on the biological level continues to participate, as you say, in the creative action of the Father? You know very well that this point solicits delicate issues on an intellectual level. Chiefly, what form must we assume to act together with God communicating life and love?

AM: The life of the human being is a continual transformation, one dies continually to that which one is and one becomes anew, we are always changing but we remain the same. We can understand this through a photo of us as a child. Certainly we recognize ourselves, we are the same, but the baby that was photographed is no longer there ... everything has changed and transformed, our hair, skin, bones, everything ... but we are the same person now. With death, there is the final transformation of our existence, and the wasting away of the body is contrasted with the luxuriant growth of the spirit, just as Paul writes to the Corinthians: 'So we do not lose heart, Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day' (2 Cor 4:16). The authors of the New Testament have been able to express this truth only by referring to the image of nature, of the seed, of growth and transformation, as John writes in his Gospel about the seed that meets the ground develops all its energies, or Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians, discussing the resurrection writes:

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be [born], but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in squalor; it is raised in splendor. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. (1 Cor 15:36-38, 42-44)

