

In the Heartland

April issue of the *Mirror* “God’s Plan and Us”

The Easter season so beautifully unfolds God’s plan attaching the revelation of the Hebrew Scriptures to those of the New Testament in a manner that we can appreciate how we, even in the present moment, are incorporated into this plan.

In the remarkable scriptures proclaimed at the Easter Vigil we follow the history which gives evidence of God’s presence. The beautiful story of creation as portrayed in Genesis pinpoints the motivation for the act of creating as well as sustaining the universe. It is simply love. God is love.

In Exodus God demonstrates fidelity to the Israelites. They are beneficiaries of the Passover – the blood of the lamb turns away the avenging angel from their houses. This people, God’s people, is delivered from the wrath of Pharaoh and his fellow Egyptians into freedom.

The prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, Baruch, detail how God is patient, forgiving, ever loyal to his people. In the midst of captivity and personal and national subjugation – God holds up hope. Moreover, he takes their hearts of stone and gives them hearts of flesh.

This promised freedom is fulfilled beyond all expectations on Easter morning when Jesus the anointed one, bursts the chains of death and rising from the tomb destroys the last of human enemies – death. It now becomes apparent that he indeed is the Messiah. And His mission is not now exclusively tied to one nation, rather, it embraces men and women of all time. This new and eternal people all created at the loving hands of God are invited to take their rightful relationship with God as members of his family.

In the immediate aftermath of the Resurrection the followers of Jesus, apostles and disciples, began to realize that they too were a part of God’s plan. The women who first went to the tomb early on that Easter morning brought the unbelievable news to Peter, John and all who were crestfallen with the death of Jesus. All were beginning to see, appreciate and grow progressively stronger in the new reality and what was expected of them.

The disciples of Jesus who were on the way to Emmaus on Easter evening had God’s plan unfolded as the evolving movement in scriptures was revealed to them. They experienced what has been gifted to us in the Easter Vigil. Unsuspecting of his true identity, they were enabled to interiorize the forceful truth of Jesus’ teaching and then they recognized him “in the breaking of the bread.”

We encounter skeptics, doubters in our midst on a routine basis. We understand how one like Thomas, who was among the intimates of Jesus, insisted on physical proof of the

resurrection. Thomas refused to believe until actually touching the nail and sword imprints on Jesus' body. When such happened, he gushed "My Lord and My God."

As the reality of Christ's resurrection penetrated the hearts and minds of his disciples they came to the realization that they were now instruments of God's plan as it was to be proclaimed and fulfilled to the ends of the world. We cannot but stand in amazement at the transformation that occurred in them as they absorbed the Resurrection of the Lord. They were forever changed. They were now to explicitly engage in the building of God's Kingdom.

Ever so important to us is that God's plan continues to unfold. Only now, it is you and I who are God's partners achieving this plan. It is incumbent upon each of us to continually discern our role individually and as a community in accomplishing God's vision for his people.

This task entrusted to the early Church is identified as Evangelization. It is achieved in multiple ways, both explicitly and implicitly, as we attempt to make Jesus Christ known and loved in our times by choosing to live out the Gospel in every moment.

The early Christians, many of whom were directly in touch with Jesus or with those who had contact with Jesus, developed a remarkable sense of their communion which was accomplished by the fact that their God, the very life of Jesus, lived in each of them and thus by this very fact created the relationship, the unity, among all of them. This was seen by others of this time as they observed: "See how those Christians love one another." "They were of one mind and one heart." No better model exists for us than that of the early Church as we authentically take up the responsibility of evangelization.

As we serve the modern world by casting the light of the Gospel on the path that guides our way, we are called to expand the love of God for all his sons and daughters by being exponents of the life and dignity of every person. Each human life has a transcendent, eternal value which deserves unflinching respect from conception to death. In the same vein, each person is deserving of the dignity of their God-given status – the justice and human rights inherently theirs.

Upon my return from Cuba recently after attending in solidarity with the Holy Father and the Church in Cuba, the Masses and events of Pope Benedict's visit, I was asked what is it like in Cuba? What is life like?

Unfortunately, what I saw and experienced is not positive. After decades of repressive government and a totalitarian regime – similar to that of those who lived in the Soviet Union under like circumstances – the spirit of the people is low. It is a struggle to exist. Many families try to survive on the equivalent of twenty dollars a month. Education is said to be poor. Young, gifted people are fleeing for distant opportunity in Europe and North America. Houses are crumbling. What cars there are – are from a vintage long past.

One of the chief inhibitors of growth and human development is the ongoing embargoes and lack of normal relationship with the United States. Nearly all observers concur that the purpose and benefit, if ever there were any, for these restrictions are long past. Today the effect of these policies is basically to perpetuate the suffering of the ordinary Cuban. It is conceded that lifting these restrictions would make an enormous difference for persons like you and me in Cuba.

Archbishop Dionisio García Ibáñez, Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, related that one practical manner we could be of help to the Church in Cuba is to assist in obtaining licenses necessary to purchase building materials which the Church needs for its development. American materials are cheaper and of better quality than they can obtain elsewhere, he said. Thus, again, the value of lifting the restrictions.

In order to effect change for the Cuban people, we need to besiege our own political representatives, our senators and U.S. representatives, to lift the embargoes and normalize relationships. If we do so, we can help our Cuban neighbors come to realize to a greater degree the dignity associated with being a part of God's family. This, too, is evangelization as we shine the hope of the Gospel in practical reality.

I also contend that a unified effort requiring minimal activity on our part will actualize in some small degree God's plan for our human community, in this case, the people of Cuba. We will become the partners He wants us to be. Thus, our own transformation and subsequent action in the light of the Resurrection of Jesus will ensure that this unbelievable news is heard today. Indeed, God's plan continues to unfold.