

THE EMMAUS IMAGINATION

The Emmaus Imagination:
a case study in “the restructuring of the imagination.”
Fr. Tom McKenna





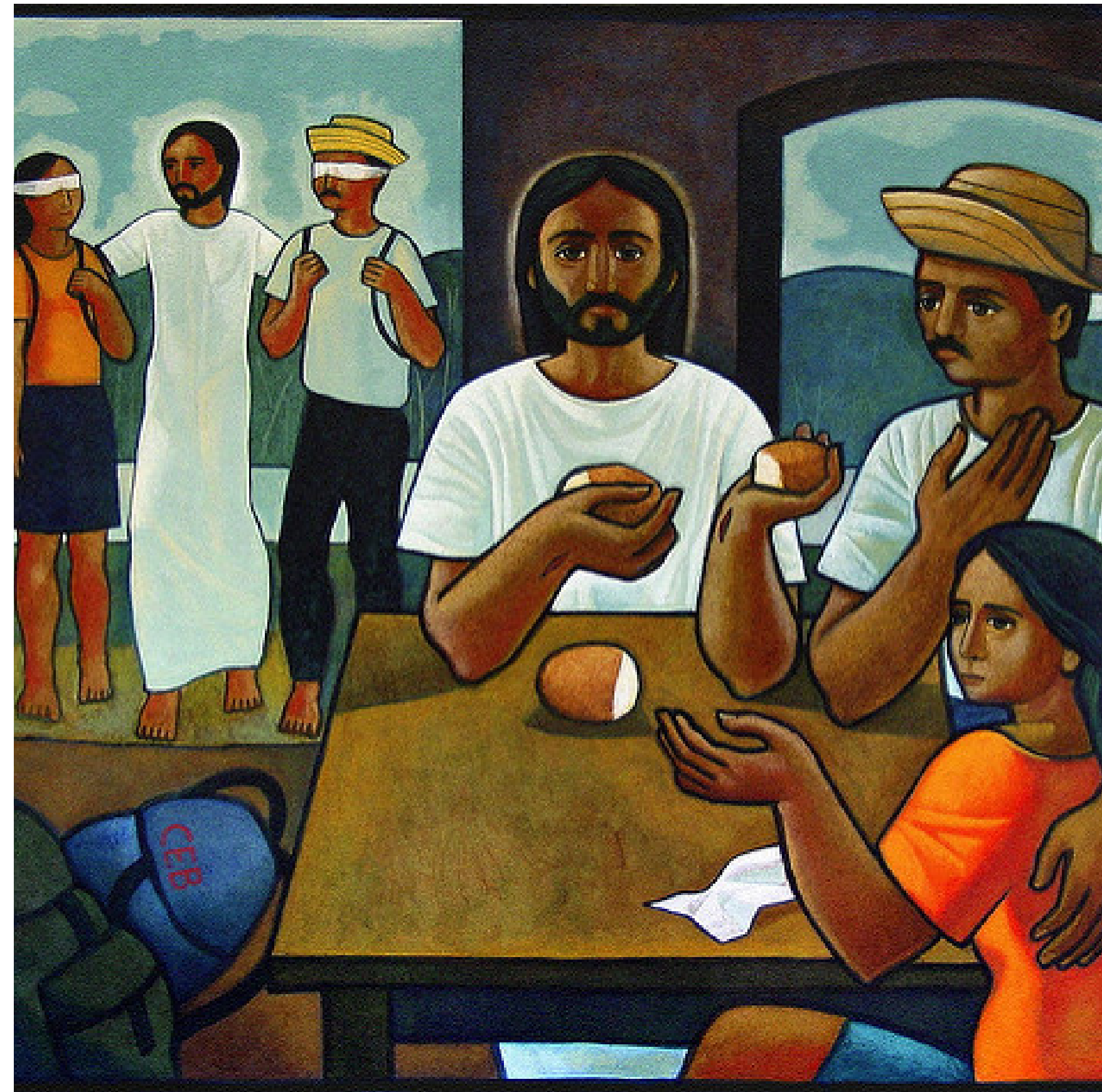
The Emmaus story is one of those rich Bible incidents which has generated all sorts of commentary, insight, lessons and resolutions. One I saw recently sees it as: a case study in “the restructuring of the imagination.”

A restructured imagination: it’s the kind of thing that happens when someone becomes newly enculturated. That is, as a foreigner you walk onto the scene of the new country and, looking at it for the first time, see much of it from the point of view of your old country.

“Some of these foods taste terrible. These people are awfully stand-offish. How can they put up with all this dirt on the streets and all around?”

And then two years later: “There’s a certain soulfulness these people have; they’re genuine, they’re gentle. I’ve come to just love some of their special seasonings. They seem to be more into living than into always just doing. And when I went back home, I felt a little weird, out of place – even critical of the way I saw things there.”

What happened? Over the two years, that person’s mental map of the world got redrawn. The very frame through which she saw reality shifted around, even got bent – such that some previously hidden aspects came forward, and other characteristics that had been so solidly upfront faded off into the background.





Psychologists would speak of an altered imagination. That is, the field of images through which we see things and react to them got transposed. Through what were some of the dark spots on the negative, light is now shining. On the screen, some foreground has switched with background. I see things I missed before, and from my present point of view wonder how I could have ever missed them.

And so, from the angle of this idea, listen again to the story.

“...Jesus drew near, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.” Then, the disciples tell him their story of what happened in Jerusalem, connecting the dots as they themselves have lined them up on their maps of reality. Jesus comes back with, ‘O how foolish you are... Then, beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to Him in the Scriptures.’”



In other words, he rearranged the whole sky against which they had read the Hebrew testament. And, this new arrangement of how-things-fit fired them up, pulled up currents in them more profound than they ever realized they were swimming in.

And for the climax. This stranger takes them again into the movement of that Last Supper; He acts out once more his new covenant. In the process of doing that — and through the lens of that action —their view of things (imagination) gets transformed in a yet more light-filled way.

We're not saying that what happened was all in their imagination, in the sense that it was they who produced this new vision. Rather that the effect of their encounter with the Risen Lord was that it rearranged their world map, changed the structure of their imaginations. They now looked out across a whole new field, lined things up against a new horizon.

The word Jesus used, “interpreted,” is the key here. It’s something like the experience of picking up an old book, but recognizing a brand new way in which its parts fit together. Or it’s like viewing an old map, but now seeing different boundary lines on it, maybe even turning it upside down to put the south on top and north on the bottom. His act of interpreting opens up a new world for these disciples.



Some implications:

What happens to the two disciples is touching on something of what Louise and Vincent tried to do in their day: restructure imaginations.

They invited people to look out at different world, see it lined up another way; i.e., a way in which the rich and the famous were not front and center but rather the so called no-accounts were the ones up in the lights.

And in a lot of ways, haven't all of us in the Vincentian Family been "enculturated" into something like this different world. Through our contact with Vincent's legacy, our imaginations have been restructured, moved in the direction of letting Jesus more and more "re-interpret things," of letting Jesus tell us "how foolish we are for having missed it," of letting Jesus open our eyes to what's really going on when we re-enact his Paschal meal and go out to serve the least of the brothers and sisters.

There's a special contemporary challenge in all of this: a good portion of the world around us doesn't operate with an Emmaus imagination. It doesn't particularly notice the worth of the vulnerable and mentally ill and the up-against-it. Emmaus people are in what the sociologists call a cognitive minority.



I remember a few nights ago walking through the city streets just after coming out from a well celebrated Easter Vigil. Touched by the death and loving sacrifice and glorious new life of the Lord there, I looked around at the street and got hit with the contrast: no one seemed to be noticing this Easter glow and it didn't seem to be making any real difference.

And I wondered if this is what it was like for those two people "on the Emmaus road," both before and after Jesus revealed himself. That is, in this street, I was walking with those confused and deflated disciples, hoping things were different, but not seeing much difference and so not counting on it all that much. But I was also in the mind of remembering what had just happened in Church, in the breaking of the bread, in the new light shining through everything in that sacred space.





And isn't that the story of many of us believers today: living with two imaginations, as it were, both of them operating at the same time. Living somewhere in that disorienting juncture between the already and the not yet, living in the border land between the secular and the sacred where different imaginations run up against each other and roil our waters.

So we join the disciples on the Emmaus road, both as they fail to see and as they do see, operating with both the first and the second imaginations. We ask that more of the second might seep into us – as to be to be increasingly able to see the Lord in the breaking of the bread as that bread is broken both in and beyond this meal “done in memory of me.”



**In what ways has being part of the Society
restructured your imagination?**