

# THE SEVENTH WEEK OF EASTER

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- SUN**            **THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD**  
**May 8**        **Doing the Work of the Lord**  
A reflection inspired by a text of Sr. Dianne Bergant
- MON**           **Monday of the Seventh Week of Easter**  
**9**              **Rejoice Even in Suffering**  
A reflection inspired by a text from Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller
- TUES**          **Tuesday of the Seventh Week of Easter**  
**10**            **Following Christ to Heaven**  
A reflection from a homily by St. Augustine of Hippo
- WED**           **Memorial of the Holy Abbots of Cluny**  
**11**            **Keeping One Another Faithful to the Way of Love**  
A fraternal correction by Peter the Venerable to St. Bernard
- THURS**        **Thursday of the Seventh Week of Easter**  
**12**            **Maturing Through Faith**  
A reflection from a sermon by St. Leo the Great
- FRI**            **Friday of the Seventh Week of Easter**  
**13**            **Loving Without Doubting**  
A reflection taken from a letter by St. Bernard
- SAT**            **Feast of St. Matthias, Apostle**  
**14**            **The Humility of Loving Trust in God**  
A reflection inspired by a text of Cardinal Newman
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# **Doing the Work of the Lord**

**A reflection inspired by a text of Sr. Dianne Bergant**

Whenever the New Testament speaks of the Lord's Ascension the emphasis is placed on the Risen Jesus' commission to his first disciples and to us. When Luke has angels confront the disciples amazed and dumbfounded at the Lord's "going up into heaven" they simply ask them why they are standing around instead of getting to work preaching the Gospel message to everyone on every possible occasion. It is as though they were saying to us: Don't just stand there! Get to work!

What is our work? We know we are to share what God has shown and then given us in giving us Jesus as our Savior. What did he show us and share with us? We usually answer that he showed us mercy and love and that we have to show them to others in imitation. But Luke says something none of the others do. He says that the disciples went to the Temple and prayed in thanksgiving. Of course, everyone knew they were Jesus' disciples and that he had been crucified and supposedly resurrected. And here were his followers praising God with all their might and thanking God from taking their Risen Lord away from them! What did that mean? A huge number of ancient homilies tell us why the departure of the Risen Lord was, and is, and ought to remain, a cause of great Joy.

When he talks about Jesus being "carried up into heaven" Luke uses a Greek word that ordinarily applies to a sacred offering "rising up" to God. Jesus has become our offering of Atonement—of making us one with God in fact, now and always. Jesus is in fact "at God's right hand"; i.e., Jesus has been established as God's principle instrument for bringing all the Chosen into a sharing of divine life. Does that seem as important to you as it did to our first Christian ancestors? To them it means that the primary message to be preached is: Come and get it! It is like a dinner bell telling all the workers in God's harvest to come and rejoice in a banquet celebrating all that is God's, and so ours! Our message is that the most marvelous gift possible is here for us all to accept!

So our first task is to rejoice. We are to act out our wonder and happiness in what we have been given, and invite everyone else to come and share it. So what have we been given? What Jesus has! We are given God's own life working in and through us to give new life to everyone we meet. Our commission from Jesus is to show that new life in a way that makes its goodness and wonder obvious, and attractive. Look ahead to Pentecost. The disciples are all "speaking in tongues" and everyone can understand what they say. They are speaking about the wonderful works of God. What people saw was something they wanted. So thousands asked for baptism and the Body of Christ was off to a running start! The gift of tongues was given to them too and they experienced it as part of a new and richer life. God fulfills the promises to Israel! What you see is what you get! That is our mission. Show what all can get and in a way that whets their appetite. Start with praising God! Start with prayer! Start with joy filled prayer! Pray so that others will want to pray with you. Start as did the first disciples.

# **Rejoice in Suffering for Jesus**

**A reflection inspired by a text of Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller**

Luke began his Acts presentation of the history of the Body of Christ in its journey through history toward the Last Day by repeating what his Gospel says about the Lord's Ascension. He then goes on to tell us a tale of persecutions and suffering. Why were our ancestors hurt, persecuted, and even killed? Because their sharing of God's gift of new life was so effective! When Christians explained to others the reason for their excitement and joy those who heard them wanted to share what they saw. This was true in Jerusalem and it was true all over the non-Jewish world, as illustrated by the story of Paul's missionary work. The same effectiveness accompanies those who today show in their lives what they share. Mother Teresa of Calcutta didn't long lack companions to do the work of loving the poorest of the poor and helping them die with dignity. What was true in ancient times is equally true today. The government of India hasn't passed anti-conversion laws because the Christian message is so ineffective!

In Acts we hear that Paul liked to remind his converts that it wasn't his rhetoric that brought them to Christ but the deeds of power performed in Christ's Spirit and Name. That same Spirit and that same Name live and work in us. Think of the unglamorous things Paul and Mother Teresa did with most of their time. Yet all they did was done as a work of love to show what it is like to share Jesus' gift of the Spirit and its power. If it is a power to love someone no one else cares about or pays attention to does that make it less wonderful, or a less persuasive demonstration of the new life that is ours in Christ? It isn't really what we do that draws people to God through Jesus. It is the "Spirit" through which and in which we do whatever we do. What do those who work with you see in what you do? That is the only question we need to ask.

Think of the horrible stories of violence in Acts. Yet moments that seem merely horrible are turned into times of prayer and love and forgiveness. That is the point of the story of St. Stephen's martyrdom. He did just what Jesus did; he showed it by repeating Jesus' words. That was not happenstance. We have been given the power to do the same sort of thing. We can make times of tragedy or unleashed hatred moments of transforming love. We just have to step forward and imitate Jesus by returning love for hatred, forgiveness for savagery, concern for callous indifference. It needn't be done in an emergency. Christ's love belongs everywhere and at all times.

We have loved our Lord without benefit of dramatic miracles or signs. But we have seen extraordinary things in ordinary people doing ordinary tasks. If you saw Paul doing his work with canvas to support his missionary efforts could you tell the difference between him and the other workers in the same shop? It was hard but ordinary work yet done in a special spirit. He didn't stop proclaiming the Gospel when he stopped talking, as St. Francis has so famously reminded us. He didn't stop sharing when he was walking or sailing between towns, or even when he was sick and suffering. We are called to do this too. We can do "everything for Christ", and so for the Gospel of Christ.

# **Following Christ to Heaven**

**A reflection from a homily by St. Augustine of Hippo**

See what sort of love the Heavenly Father has given us so that as a result we are called and really are Children of God. That is what is pointed out in the First Letter of John. Many people have names which don't correspond to what they are. Some are called doctor but cannot cure illnesses, and some are called watchmen but actually sleep all night long and some are called Christians but aren't in reality. One's life and conduct has to justify the name one is given; if one's life is not filled with faith and hope and charity then one is not a Christian in fact.

St. John says to us: Beloved, we are children of God. Already? Then what are we waiting for? He continues: It has not yet been shown us what we shall be in the future. But can we become anything more than "children of God"? Listen to what follows: We know that when Christ comes we shall be like him, because we will see him as he is. What are we being promised?

To answer this question we need to return to the fact that we have an anointing which teaches us things inwardly that cannot be expressed in words. It helps us realize the meaning of the promise by reminding us that we don't yet see Christ as he is but only desire to. Desire creates in one a capacity that will be filled when what we now long to see has come. We need to long with all our heart so as to become able to be filled by what we long for.

St. Paul says that he stretched forward so as to become able to take hold of the prize that is coming. We have not already achieved it because we are not yet perfectly like the Lord. "One thing only I do: I forget what is behind me and, stretching forward to what lies ahead, I press onward with all my might toward the prize that is our heavenly calling." He knew that as yet he was too small to take in what eye has not seen nor ear heard nor the human heart conceived. That is how our life is too. The more we exert ourselves in longing and the more we detach ourselves from loving things that are merely of this world, the more we are preoccupied with holy desires that long for Christ as really he is, the better we are prepared to receive what is really promised us.

So our life is to be a matter of stretching forward toward Christ. Then, when he has come, our longings will be fully satisfied. We shall indeed be like him then because we shall see him as he is. But what does it mean to see him as He is? It means to see the love with which he has loved us, and all those for whom he gave his life, growing and working within us and through us. It begins as you do for one another what I am now doing for you—strengthening one another's longing to become fully, in our mutual love, what Christ was for us in his passion and Cross and resurrection. When we are like Christ in love then we are like Christ in reality, Christ as he really is. Heaven is being with God and God is love. Now we suffer in learning to love. Then love will be all joy.

## **Keeping One Another Faithful to the Way of Love**

### **A fraternal correction of Peter the Venerable to St. Bernard**

I notice some belonging to the Cluniac and Cistercian sheepfolds have declared war. Those dwelling in the Lord's house have fallen from mutual love! Perhaps the cause is the diversity of observances, but to let this cause such a great evil is unreasonable, childish and foolish. If differences in practices draw Christ's servants from mutual love we do not bear one another's burdens. The law of Christ is love. There will never be a time without different practices in different churches or nations, and yet all must be one in faith and charity.

Perhaps it seems that diversity among churches is one thing and diversity among monks following the same Rule is another. But can't those who follow Cluniac order come to the same Heavenly Jerusalem as those following the Cistercian order? Think of what St. Augustine says: "Have charity and then do as you like." Think of the writer of our Rule, or of the Holy Spirit its author. Benedict says: Let the abbot temper all things and so arrange them that souls are saved. The Master of all tells us to act with a "simple eye"—with purity of intention in all we do. As long as charity is preserved the abbot can do whatever saves souls and prevents murmuring. Can you fear different observances after hearing this?

You say you are the restorers of a dying Order and of lost religious observance, and we are tepid monks going blind, and so you distinguish yourselves by ways and usages, clothing and a manifestly new fervor. There you have it, the hidden cause offending charity and dividing minds and hearts and setting our houses against one another. The apostle Paul corrected another apostle; shouldn't one monk correct another. Let us all be disciples of Christ and avoid all opportunity for pride to lead us astray. Where charity is lacking humility is lacking and where humility is absent so is charity. I have striven always to commend your brothers to the charity of ours in all our gatherings. If humility fades then necessarily pride will take its place and no effort will protect charity where humility has departed. Pride brings envy and envy kills love. One who is envious can't love the one envied. We must preserve charity! It is what stores up treasures in Heaven.

It was out of excessive love, St. Paul tells us, that God sent the Only Son in the likeness of our sinful flesh. Such charity brings everlasting joy; it rejoices for ever before our God and may that joy be yours. Let no one take it from you. When Christ comes we will be like God and we will be united to God forever by charity. I have written in reply to your letter and I assure you from the heart that I write only out of charity. You have been made a great supporting column for the Church and it remains for you to work to help eradicate this stain upon charity which has arisen between us. We have a great work to do together—restoring what is corrupt, reunifying what is divided and bringing all things together in charity. We have one faith, one baptism, one Lord, one Church and there remains for us a single everlasting and blessed life. Let us be of one heart and one mind.

# **Maturing Through Faith**

**A reflection taken from a sermon of St. Leo the Great**

The faith of the infant Church was tried and increased by the Lord's ascension. It was strengthened by the gift of the Spirit so that it could remain unshaken even by imprisonment, exiles, hunger, fire, wild beasts, and the most refined tortures brutal persecutors could devise. Women and men, girls and boys, gave their life blood in the struggle to preserve this faith. It is a faith that casts out devils, heals the sick, and even raises the dead. Yet even the blessed apostles, strengthened by so many miracles and instructed by so much teaching, took fright at the suffering of the Lord's passion and could not accept his resurrection without hesitation. Yet they made such progress, and through Christ's ascension, that they came to find joy in what had before terrified them.

They learned to fix their minds on Christ's divinity as he sits at the right hand of the Heavenly Father. This was so true that what was presented to their bodily eyes no longer held them back. They could turn all their attention to the realization that the Son has not left the Heavenly Father when he descended to earth, nor had he abandoned his disciples when he ascended into Heaven.

The truth is that the Son of Man was revealed as Son of God in a more perfect and transcendent way by entering into the Heavenly Father's glory. He now began to be indescribably more present in his divinity to those from whom he was further removed in his humanity. A more mature faith enabled their minds to stretch upward and reach the Son in his equality with the Heavenly Father. It no longer required contact with Christ's tangible body—the body in which he is as human inferior to the Heavenly Father. His glorified body retains the same nature as before, but the faith of those who believed in him was now summoned to heights which cannot be reached by physical handling but only by spiritual insight.

They learned a kind of discernment. That is why Christ said to the Church, represented by Mary Magdalene as she ran forward to cling to him: Do not hang onto me; for I have not yet ascended to my Father. He did not want her to come to him corporeally and recognize him only by the body's senses. He wants us to wait for something higher. What he prepares us for surpasses every sort of ordinary knowledge. After he ascended to the Heavenly Father we became able to experience him by far more perfectly, and as he really is. We now grasp what we cannot touch. We believe what we cannot see. This ability is what prepares us to face every trial. We find we can look "through" all that is only earthly and, beyond it, see what is spiritually real. In doing this we are given a hope that can overcome all fear. It rests on the new love we have in the Spirit.

# **Loving without Doubting**

**A reflection from a letter by St. Bernard**

No one who loves God need have any doubt about God's love; and whoever has received God's Spirit need be in doubt about having the ability to love God in return. God joyfully gives us love and God gladly returns our love. After all, God's love for us precedes our love for God, so how could God be reluctant to love in response to our return of love when God has already loved us to move us to this love? Yes, I say it again, God loved us already. Further, we now have a pledge of God's love in the Spirit, as we have a faithful witness to it in Jesus. We have a double and irrefutable proof of the love God bears toward each one of us. How, then, could we hesitate to love God in return?

Christ died for us. So Christ deserves our love. The Spirit moves us by grace and so enables us to love Christ no matter what happens. Christ gives us the reason for loving and the Spirit gives us the power to love. The one sets before us the example of great love but the other gives us that love itself. In Christ we see the object of our love, and by the Spirit we are empowered to love him.

How shameful it would be to see God's Son dying for us without being moved to gratitude. Yet this could easily happen if the Spirit were lacking. But now the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which God has given us. So we merely love God in return for God's love, yet by loving God in return we become the kind of person who can be loved still more.

So we have a double evidence of our salvation. It is the two-fold outpouring of blood and the Spirit. Neither is of any use to us without the other. The Spirit is only given to those who believe in the Crucified, and faith is only effective when it works through the love which is the gift of the Spirit. The second Adam, Christ, became not merely a living being but a life-giving spirit. As a living being Christ died; as a life-giving spirit Christ rose from the dead. The mortal principle could not help me without the life-giving principle. The flesh is of no avail; it is the Spirit that gives life.

To say all this is only another way of saying that the Spirit justifies us by rectifying our relationship with God. Who are the just? Aren't they the ones who pay their debt of love to the God who loves them? It is impossible for them to do that unless they have received in faith the Spirit's revelation of God's eternal plan for their salvation. That revelation is none other than an infusion of spiritual grace through which, as we mortify the works of the flesh, we are made ready for that Kingdom which flesh and blood by themselves cannot possess. To know God's plan is to see the beginning of its fulfillment in us. In the one Spirit we receive both the audacity to believe ourselves loved and saved, and in the Spirit we receive the power to love in return. God's love for us must not go unrequited! Give thanks that it will never be unrequited because love has given us the Spirit.

# **The Humility of Loving Trust in God**

## **A reflection by Cardinal Newman on St. Matthias' Election**

This is perhaps the only saint's day which has to be celebrated with mixed feelings of joy and sadness. We are reminded of the fall of one chosen to be an apostle and the choice of St. Matthias to replace him. The traitor of Judas lost his place and it was given to St. Matthias. In the history of Judas we receive a warning and encouragement. We hear the text: "Hold fast to what you have so that no one may take your crown." But this warning also gives rise to a reflection that humbles us and so prepares us to hold fast. In the choice of St. Matthias we see how easy it is for God to accomplish his purposes without our cooperation by putting someone else in our place, if we are disobedient.

It can easily happen that one who has grown secure in service to God becomes presumptuous. One thinks salvation certain and one's service necessary to God just because he has graciously accepted it. But the story of Judas and St. Matthias should take away every feeling of self-importance and replace it with one of humble gratitude for what we have been given by God's election.

Put yourself in the place of St. Matthias. What sort of solemn and overwhelming thoughts must have crowded his mind when he was greeted by the eleven apostles and took a seat among them. His choice as an apostle could be a witness against him if he did not fulfill his responsibilities fully. That will certainly be true for us as well. We have stepped into places that once were filled by others, by those who have gone before us. We have been, so to speak, "baptized for the dead" so that we may fill up the ranks of those who battle for Christ. Some who have gone before us have "fought the good fight" but others have seemingly made void God's call to them. Many are called but few are chosen. The monuments, as we may call them, to sin and to unbelief are everywhere.

God works according to inscrutable divine plans and by divine power. Christians in every age are the successors of people who were either lost or died in their struggle. How long will we claim to put our trust in the Gospel if we do not live according to it? We are witnesses to the truth but are glad for the warning that we may fall away. We are called to be humble even as we call to others and strive to help them be faithful. We, as a Church and as individuals, have to look to Christ. Only Christ can keep us from falling. We must look to our Savior with a single heart and put ourselves wholly into his hands. From Christ is all our strength and wisdom.

Does that make you fearful? Then you have not yet fully placed yourself, and your ability to be faithful, into Christ's hands. We do not find strength and fidelity in our own powers or abilities. If Judas failed it was because he did not entrust himself to Christ and allow Christ to fulfill God's plan as God chose to have him do this. Humility is precisely a trust in Christ that imitates Christ's trust in the Heavenly Father. All we are and do is God's gift. Let us rejoice in this, and be glad that we have another in whom to trust, another far stronger and wiser than ourselves.