

THE SEVENTH WEEK OF EASTER

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

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Sunday **The Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord**
May 28 **Imagining the Lord's Ascension**
 A reflection taken from a text by Fr. Romano Guardini

Mon **Monday of the Seventh Week of Easter**
29 **The Many Departures of Jesus**
 A reflection taken from a text by Hans Urs von Balthasar

Tues **Tuesday of the Seventh Week of Easter**
30 **Rejoicing in Christ's Ascension**
 A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Gregory
 of Nyssa

Wed **The Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary**
June 1 **The Hidden Presence of the Lord**
 A reflection developed from a sermon by John Chrysostom

Thurs **Memorial of St. Justin Martyr**
2 **Sharing the Good Life Christ Gives**
 A reflection developed from A Dialogue with Trypho by
 St. Justin the Martyr

MONASTIC DESERT DAY

Fri **Friday of the Seventh Week of Easter**
3 **Consummating our Oneness with God**
 A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Romano Guardini

Sat **Memorial of Sts. Charles Lwanga & Companions**
4 **The Dignity that is Spiritual Freedom**
 A reflection developed from a homily by Bl. Pope Paul VI

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IMAGINING THE LORD'S ASCENSION?

A reflection taken from a text by Fr. Romano Guardini

Why did the Lord linger on earth after the Resurrection? Why didn't the Lord return home immediately? What was happening during those forty days between his resurrection and ascension?

Suppose we try to imagine what the first disciples and apostles expected after Jesus rose from the dead. They imagined a time filled with demonstrations of the Risen One's power. He would shatter his enemies; his glory would blaze forth from the Temple; his followers would be covered with honors. He would fulfill the hopes and longings of the oppressed and initiate the disciples into an almost heavenly life, revealing the future and the end of all things. So they let themselves imagine.

But nothing like this occurred. What happens is wholly unspectacular and almost delicate. The past is confirmed and the reality of the life Jesus of Nazareth lived becomes eternal. For forty days they watched, experienced, that transition. We need this time of transition too for the development of our faith, because we still have a journey to make. We can use ancient images to talk about what has happened—e.g., Christ is enthroned at the right hand of God, Christ will come on the clouds to judge living and dead. But we must not lose the earthly figure of the Lord in these imaginings.

Everything depends on the eternal Christ remaining also Jesus of Nazareth, who walks among us until the day when all things will be enfolded in whatever the reality we call eternity turns out to be. We think of it as a kind of blending of what exists here and now with something vastly different. We think of this as part of the process of salvation. But these are only imaginings, like that of a Lamb standing as if slain but alive before God. Our earthly reality, what we often call our earthly "destiny", has entered into what we call "eternity" to become "everlasting life". We don't know the reality of any of these realities to come. We are living in a period of transition too!

We are like archeologists looking at an ancient inscription without knowing how to decipher it. Everything that Jesus of Nazareth was and said and did remains in some unknown way. The same will be true for us! All shall be transfigured. We don't know how but we know it will be—because it has been in Jesus and we are somehow one with him. We are an inscription that we can't decipher but we know it says something wonderful. God will reveal it when it is time. We wait in faith and don't cling to mere imaginings.

THE MANY DEPARTURES OF JESUS

A reflection taken from a text by Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar

Jesus announced his departure more than once and was not understood. He told a crowd, "*Where I am going you cannot come.*" and they asked if he intended to kill himself. But even the apostles failed to understand. All had his earthly presence in mind. Some naively declare their willingness to die rather than be separated from him or assert they will remain with him no matter what happens or they ask him where he is going so they can follow. What they receive as an answer puzzles them. In John's Gospel he says: "*Little children, I shall be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, but where I am going you can't come.*"

The distance, as we imagine it, between heaven and earth remains. On the whole, Jesus' experienced presence is merely a means or point of departure for setting the believing Church in motion on her unimaginably long and seemingly lonely journey through time.

"*Happy are they who do not see and yet believe*". (Jn 20:29) Our relationship with Jesus is always one of faith. His earthly life was full of partings, separations and withdrawals, both outward and inward. Even when he was publically present his essential identity was unrecognized. The Baptist tells us, "*There stands among you one whom you do not recognize*", (Jn.1:26). That is as true for us and it was for the Baptist's contemporaries. Even when we know he is present we don't know how to recognize him. His seemingly impossible presence is veiled in mystery and appears to be an absence.

The faith of Jesus' disciples was insufficient to recognize him—even when he came walking to them on the water or walked with them after rising. They can't believe it is really him. "*I have been with you all this time, Philip, and you do not know me?*" (Jn 14:9) His presence was and is misunderstood and not benefited from. Can this be the time of salvation granted by God?

The expression "a little while" becomes a kind of key to Jesus. The disciples said, "*What does he mean by this 'little while'?*" There is an economy of grace bestowed from above, allowing the invisible to become visible briefly, and a counter-economy of sin that refuses to see what is shown and declaring it an absence. We stand in a time of developing faith that must refuse all sin and cling to grace. We must become Jesus' presence, even if the world cannot see Him—even if we doubt. We must believe in his presence, even in ourselves.

REJOICING IN CHRIST'S ASCENSION

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Gregory of Nyssa

The Gospels speak of the Lord's life upon earth and of his return to the Heavenly Father. We can't describe the reality of the return but we can use imagination to help us enter into its joy. For instance, David, writing psalms as a prophet, imagined the angels accompanying Christ as he ascended. He pictures them as crying out, "Lift up your gates, you princes; be lifted up everlasting doors to admit the King of Glory"

We do not know "where" God is and even the idea is probably foolish; how can one speak of God who contains all things being contained by a place? But even the Only Begotten Son became a human being so that human beings might receive him perhaps he also adapted himself to angelic being so that he might come among them, as David imagines. He imagines angels as doorkeepers of Heaven, even though it may not be a place or have walls or doors or gates. David, however, uses his imagination to remind us of deep realities. He has the angels ask, "Who is this King of Glory?" Even they could not immediately identify the Son in the human being who was ascending to the Heavenly Father.

The mystery of God which he worked in Christ has been fulfilled in his death. Victory is won and the cross has become a sign of triumph. To signify this we speak of it as "raised on high", though literally this is not the case. God gives us great gifts in Christ, and we signify it by calling them "noble" and saying Christ "ascends" to a "kingdom", none of which presents literal truth. We are invited to be "escorts" of Christ as he comes to our fellows, as are the angels in his coming to them. We are escorts because we recognize the reality of Christ and so can help others do likewise, as our guardian angels help us.

Who is the King of Glory? Christ is king, though not in any ordinary sense, because he doesn't exercise power in the way that kings do. He brings all things to God in a way we can't describe literally, which means that he calls us to help him draw all to God and to do all they do for love of God. But this is not a sad task or one to be done with downcast faces. So we imagine all sort of glorious things and use them to call forth joy in our hearts, so that our faces may radiate the joy of belonging to God in Christ. That is what David teaches us to do by his psalms. He helps us live in a way pleasing to God and at the same time attractive to our fellows. We radiate the joy Christ will give us when we imagine his true glory and the fact that we all will rejoice in it forever and ever. We don't need to know the future facts to do that.

THE HIDDEN PRESENCE OF THE LORD

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. John Chrysostom

When the redeemer of our race arrived among us, he went without delay to his friend John, who like him was still hidden in his mother's womb. In spite of the limits set by nature on communication between one womb and another John became aware of the Redeemer. In effect, he cried out, "I see the Lord, even though he has set nature within its limits, and so I cannot proclaim him until I am born, but to perceive him I need not wait for the One who is eternal is within me!" John was to come forth from his dark tabernacle and proclaim the one he had recognized in such a marvelous way. We too must do likewise.

See, beloved, how new and wonderful is this mystery. John was not yet born but spoke by leaping. The Lord had not yet appeared in the ordinary way and already he gives a hint. He cannot cry out but he can be heard by the gift of the Spirit. He has scarcely begun to live but is proclaiming God's grace already. John is like Jesus. He has not seen the light of day but he can already point toward the sun! He hasn't yet been born but is already hurrying to do what God has appointed.

Tell us, John, how do you see and hear when you are still enclosed in your mother? How do you contemplate a divine reality when you are so enclosed in darkness? How can you leap and exult when you haven't yet learned to walk and talk? A great mystery is taking place—that is John's reply. Things far beyond human understanding have taken place. The world experiences something new because of God's work in me. I show the way that all must walk in recognizing the presence of our Savior and Lord.

The Lord hid his forerunner in a womb and yet taught him to see what ordinary sight could not perceive. More, he perceived one who himself was hidden. We perceive Christ present to us in bread and wine but he hastens to hide himself again in the hearts of those who eat and drink that food. He makes himself invisible within us who eat and drink what appears by faith. Now we must imitate John by crying out because we contemplate the Father's Only Son hidden in our flesh. We too must leap to grasp what the world cannot see because it is not too high for us if we leap by faith. We are the presence of Christ as was his precursor. By our confession we prepare his way to other hearts and minds and bodies within whom he wishes to take flesh. What we cannot do by nature we do by God's gift of faith. We don't need to wait nine months for this to mature in us but like John may begin now. The Virgin Mother has brought the Savior to us lets us proclaim him.

SHARING THE GOOD LIFE CHRIST GIVES

A reflection developed from A Dialogue with Trypho by St. Justin

God invites all who come to salvation to share the new hope this brings with it. The Dialogue with Trypho is an effort to imitate the strategy the Risen Jesus himself used to share new hope with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. They had lost their old hope because it visualized the wrong outcomes from Jesus passion and resurrection. Justin made a career of persuading people to examine their personal hopes critically as Jesus had done. Justin's strategy was to persuade people that the source of real hope for a good life lay only in Jesus and he did this by interesting them in Israel's prophets and their message. Prophecy had great prestige in his time and place, if it had been fulfilled. That had happened with Israelite prophecy.

Justin's example challenges Christians of all ages to consider what the people of their time and place find believable and then show how accepting it as truth can lead to Jesus as one's Savior. He used his profession to do this. Justin earned his living as a "philosopher"—which in his time meant something like a counselor for people looking to give meaning to their lives. When people came to him he sought to lead them to Christ as the best possible way out of despair or puzzlement and into a path to a better life. He was martyred, together with some of those he was counseling, because he did this.

He invites all who seek truth, no matter what that truth may turn out to be and no matter where it may lead one who accepts it, to consider the teachings of Israel's prophets and then to show them how these lead to Christ. Jesus Christ is the teacher of that truth which alone leads to a good life, here and hereafter. The Dialogue is with a Jew because Jews believed Israel's prophets spoke God's word of truth. He begins by telling the story of how he himself was led to Christ in just this way. He was out for a walk and encountered a man who led him into conversation about truth and the necessity of learning how to please God if one wants a good life.

The substance of the argument that convinced him went as follows: As a philosopher one is a lover of truth and a practical person. One can't do better than use reason to show that reality is governed by reason and that if one is willing to be ruled by reason one can find the path to a good life. That means one has to start with truth. So many start from error. One can find a foundation of truth in Israel's prophets. This provides a reliable foundation for the search for a happy life. He pointed to his own life to illustrate this. If we live in Christ and follow Christ's teachings then we find our life good. Christ teaches us not to follow false ideals and impossible goals, as he did the disciples going to Emmaus. Can you point to your life to show how good it is to walk the path of Jesus? That is what we are called to do. Consider how good your life in Christ is and seek to share that goodness. "I am now a philosopher for Christ and I never turn away from our Savior's words. Rather I seek to share them whenever I can."

CONSUMMATING OUR ONENESS WITH GOD

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Romano Guardini

“Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come! Glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you.’!” The Farewell Prayer of Jesus opens with a confession that the hour has come for him to die and that he has dedicated himself to making that hour the revelation of what it is to be wholly one with the Heavenly Father. The glory of God can’t be measured. It is both joyful and terrible. The glory is shown in Jesus’ way of going to his death in complete oneness with his Heavenly Father. That glory will be perfect in his rising from the dead. His ascension is his entering into that glory forever, and opening the way for us to enter it with him.

In Christ God came among those who were his own, but they did not accept him. Christ came to show oneness with God and what it brings about. That revelation, begun in his rising from death, is perfected in his ascension. But all depends on oneness. In his high priestly prayer Jesus speaks as “we”, as though all humankind we speaking through him. But the Messenger of Love was left standing in isolation, abandoned by those he had loved, even to the very end of his life. But he tells us that this is all done in obedience. The Son gives himself and the Spirit not only carries that to the Heavenly Father but into our hearts. Here is peace. Here is the ultimate source of strength. We see it in the Garden and in his agony crowned by the words, *“Not what I wish but what you will be done.”* If we didn’t see this we wouldn’t know what was done on the Cross.

On the cross Jesus consummated the task given by the Heavenly Father. He seems a failure—his word rejected, his message misunderstood, his commands ignored. Yet, the task is accomplished, through obedience to the death—a pure obedience given to overwhelm sinful disobedience—Jesus delivers the message that oneness with God is The Only Answer. To live in this obedience is to live in God’s Kingdom.

Now we see how Christ is the Way and the Truth and the Life. When we feel the desolation of Jesus in the Garden, God invites us into the same obedience as Jesus showed, and so into a like resurrection and ascension. If we die with Christ we rise and ascend with him. You will know that your personal hour has come when you receive this call in your own agony. Accept obedience to the will of our Heavenly Father and your will becomes God’s will, you becomes like Jesus Christ. This is salvation. It is consummated through oneness with God’s will.

THE DIGNITY WHAT IS SPIRITUAL FREEDOM

A reflection developed from a homily by Bl. Pope Paul VI

In earlier centuries Christian faith spread only in Africa only in the norther parts and in Ethiopia. Now it has filled all of Africa and, just as in the earlier times, its message often has evoked violent opposition. The role of martyrs, headed by the names of Cyprian, Felicity and Perpetua, now contains the equally illustrious names of Charles Lwanga and Matthias Mulumba Kalemba and their companions.

The earlier martyrs shed their blood on behalf of freedom of conscience embodied in the refusal to worship any human creation, even the Roman State, as though it were divine. The modern martyrs shed their blood in the cause of spiritual dignity and freedom, since all human persons have this freedom and the dignity it brings with it. No one can be compelled to let another use him or her as a tool for any purpose, in this case for sexual pleasure. They refused and were killed, many of them burned. In their witness they teach us all a lesson about spiritual freedom as an inalienable gift from God our creator. Now in his Son, Jesus Christ, he has redeemed us from the slavery that results from blindness to our true dignity. Today's world needs this message badly.

The African martyrs of today herald the dawn of a new age. This is both our belief and our prayer. If only the human mind could direct itself toward a rebirth in spiritual freedom as so make inward growth possible and show how we might express our full humanity in mutual love and respect! Most of those killed were young men; they were killed for refusing to let themselves be used sexually even by one who held absolute political power, the power of life and death. With them were killed those who had brought them to faith in Christ, and so to knowledge of their human and spiritual dignity. They witnessed by their deaths that these treasures are more precious than physical life.

A new world requires firm foundations that must be spiritual and reveal the beauty of our common humanity and our potential to build one another up in loving respect that doesn't kill those who refuse to make themselves pleasure tools at the cost of their dignity and faith. Only genuine respect for our humanity and personhood will found a new world. It is wholly fitting that Africa should show us what we need to do and become. Perhaps that means a new humanity may come from this continent as so many rich gifts of civilization and culture have come from it in the past. Through the blood of martyrs, may we all be inwardly recreated in the image of Jesus Christ! As he gave all for our rebirth, may we too be ready to give all for the sake of a renewed and redeemed humanity.