

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

THE SEVENTH WEEK OF THE EASTER SEASON

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- Sun. **SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD**
April 13 **WHAT THE ASCENSION MEANS**
A reflection from Wellspring of Worship by Fr. Jean Corbon
- Mon. **The Feast of St. Matthias**
14 **HUMILITY BEFORE OUR GOD**
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- Tues. **The Memorial of St. Pachomius**
15 **A LIFE OF CONVERSION TO GOD**
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- Wed. **Wednesday of the Seventh Week in the Easter Season**
16 **LIVING OUR GLORIFIED HUMANITY**
A reflection from a Treatise of St. Pope Leo the Great
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17 **ACCEPTING GLORIFIED HEARTS**
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A reflection taken from a homily by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

THE MEANING OF THE LORD'S ASCENSION

A reflection from The Wellspring of Worship by Fr. Jean Corbon

“Jesus appeared to the Eleven and said to them: Go into the entire world and proclaim the good news to all creation. Those who believe in it and accept baptism will be saved.” We can only wonder at the insight shown by the early Christians who placed the image of Christ ascending in the domes of their churches. When the faithful gathered as the Body of Christ they saw their Lord as both present and coming. He is the Head and draws his Body toward the Father while giving it life through the Spirit. The iconography, both east and west, is an extension of the mystery of the Ascension. Christ, Lord of All, the cornerstone rejected by the builders, when raised up on the Cross, but raised to the Father's side and made one with the Father as well-spring of the river of life. His humanity becomes life-giving for us.

In iconography The Woman & her Child accompany Christ. The Virgin and the Church are together and with them are the angels of the Ascension and various theophanies of the Spirit. On the walls are the living stones, the throng of saints, the cloud of witnesses who are the Church of the First Born. The Ascension of the Lord creates this new sort of space for the liturgy of the Last Times, and the iconography is a transparent symbol of what this means.

In his ascension Christ didn't at all disappear. On the contrary, he began to appear and to come. For this reason, the hymns used sing of him as “Sun of Justice” rising in the east. He is the splendor of the Father. He descended into the depths of our darkness and now, as exalted, fills all things with his light. Our “last times” are located between a past ascension and an ascension to come when he carries us to the zenith of his glorious revelation. The Lord hasn't gone away to rest from his redemptive toil; his work continues but now at the Father's side. Because he is there, he is much closer to us—“very near to us”, in the words of the liturgy of these last times. He leads captives, namely us, to the new world of his resurrection, and bestows gifts, his Spirit, on humankind. The ascension is a progressive movement from one beginning to another.

Jesus is, of course, at his Father's side. If we reduce this ascent to just a particular moment in our mortal history, we simply forget that, beginning with the hour of the Cross and resurrection, Jesus and the human race are henceforth one. He became a son of humankind in order that we might become children of God. The ascension is progressive until we all form the perfect human person, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself. The movement will be complete only when all members of his Body are drawn to the Father and brought to life by the Spirit. That is the meaning of the angel's words to the disciples: *“Why are you standing here looking into the sky? This Jesus who has been taken into heaven will come back in the same way.”* The ascension is the activation of the Paschal energy of Christ as filling all things. It is the ever-new moment of Christ's coming.

HUMILITY BEFORE OUR GOD

A reflection from a sermon by John Henry Cardinal Newman

Our observance today seems to me to be the only Saint's Day whose celebration mingles feelings of joy and of pain. We are reminded of the fall of Judas, an apostle, as well as the election of Matthias in place of the traitor, Judas. In the history of Judas, we hear a kind of warning, confirmed by his very deed. The Lord is shown warning all of us, and perhaps Judas especially: "Hold fast to that which you have received so that no one make take away your crown". No doubt there were many words of warning like this which might have awakened wretched Judas before in the end he betrayed Christ.

A reflection rises in our minds if we consider carefully the election of St. Matthias. It is the thought that God may so very easily bring about his purposes without us. God may so easily put others in our place, if we are disobedient to Him. It often happens, unfortunately, that those who have long served the Lord and lived in his favor, grow secure and become presumptuous. They think not only that their salvation is certain but that their service is necessary to God—though all God has done is graciously accept it. A feeling of self-importance and of self-reliance are everywhere to be avoided according to the Scriptures. This is emphasized most especially by the replacement of Judas by Matthias.

What sort of solemn and even overwhelming thoughts must have crowded the mind of St. Matthias when he was greeted by the eleven apostles as their peer and given a place among them? His very election would be a witness against him if he didn't fulfill the office rightly. And that will surely be true for us as well, whatever the offices with which we are entrusted. We take the place of others who have gone before us, as Matthias did. In this sense we are "baptized", so to speak, for the dead. We fill up the ranks in the army of those who have fought the good fight before us, but also those places occupied by persons who have failed in their calling.

The truth is that Christians of every age are the successors of the lost and the dead. How long we, or our community, will continue to be entrusted with the Gospel message we do not know. But while we have this privilege we must keep it in mind that we stand in the place of some Christians who were corrupted or utterly fell away, and so scarcely let their light shine before others as they were called to do. We are witness of the truth, at present. Our very glory is a warning. We are called upon to be humble minded, even when we preach by word or deed, and we are called upon to tremble while we rejoice.

Let us, both as a Church, and as a community, and as individuals, look one and all to God who alone can keep us from failing or falling. Let us with single hearts look up to Christ our Savior and put ourselves into his hands. From Christ comes all our strength and wisdom and success in the services to which we have been called.

A LIFE OF CONVERSION TO GOD

A reflection from the Bohairic Life of Pachomius

Constantine had not been reigning long as emperor when he was attacked by Persia. He sent orders throughout the empire to draft sturdy young men into the army. Young Pachomius, then twenty years old, was drafted. He was put on a boat to Alexandria and, in distress, he raised his eyes to heaven and sighed, praying: "My Lord Jesus, may your will be done". When they arrived at the city of Ne, the draftees were brought into the city and put in the prison. In the evening, some local citizens brought bread and other foods and compelled the recruits to eat so as to help them cope with the depression many felt. When young Pachomius saw this, he asked some of the men with them, "Why are these people so good to us when they don't even know us?" The answer came, "They are Christians and treat all with love for the sake of the God of Heaven".

He withdrew to a corner and spent the night in prayer, saying: "My Lord Jesus the Christ, God of all the saints, may your goodness quickly come upon me, deliver me from this affliction and I will serve humankind all the days of my life". The next day they reembarked and were taken to the city of Antioch. He and some companions were sent into the city to get rations, payed for by the empire, and they tried to drag him to evil places of pleasure, but he rebuked them out of love for the purity of God and the holy angels. While they were in the prison there Constantine defeated the Persians and decreed that conscripts be discharged. All went back to their homes in the south, and Pachomius with them.

But when he arrived at a sparsely inhabited village called Seneset, scorched by intense heat he went down to the river where there was a small temple and prayed. The Spirit of God seized him and said: Settle down here and struggle! This pleased him and he settled there, cultivating vegetable and palm trees in order to feed himself and a few poor men living there as well as the occasional stranger. He was used to talking with many people and thus some decided to give up their homes and come and live with him due to his way of encouraging others. It was because of this gift that many made their dwelling in that place.

After he had been there a while he was taken to a church and baptized so he would be fit for the holy mysteries, especially the Body and Blood of Christ. On the night of his baptism he had a dream. He saw dew for heaven descend on his head and condense in his right hand, turning into a honeycomb. While he was thinking about this, it dropped to the ground and began to spread across the earth. This disturbed him, but a voice came from heaven: "This will happen to you in a short time; contemplate this!" He stayed in that place and made progress by his charity toward all. He encouraged all who came and his renown went abroad. Many came and he established a holy koinonia (sharing of life) and warned all of the temptations of the devil and about trusting in the Lord. He gathered all each day to speak about the holy commandments and the Holy Scriptures and showed all how to put them in practice. Blessed be Father Pachomius who became a guide to eternal life.

LIVING OUR GLORIFIED HUMANITY

A reflection from a Treatise by St. Pope Leo the Great

We have come to the end of the period following the blessed resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. This season was set up in order that our belief in the Lord's resurrection might be strengthened by such evidence as faith can require. The truth is that Christ's death seriously disturbed the minds and hearts of his disciples, as it may our own. They had been oppressed by the sight of his agony on the cross, his giving up the spirit and the burial of his lifeless body. Their minds were stunned and they suffered an insidious loss of confidence. When the holy women brought news of the stone rolled away, the tomb emptied and angels witnessing to his resurrection they thought it was pure raving.

The Spirit of Truth had to remove all these doubts and feelings from them if they were to be preachers of the "good news". They wavered in uncertainty and were filled with anxiety and hesitation. All this was part of God's preparations for our own perplexities and crises of faith. We were, so to speak, in them and through were being taught how to cope with slanders and worldly wisdom. We have been instructed by their example. We have been convinced by what they saw and heard him say. We are strengthened by their touching him. We need to give thanks and be grateful to God's providence. Their caution and their doubts are shared by us so that we may, in the end, never waver.

Thus, the days between the Lord's resurrection and ascension weren't uneventful. They saw the confirmation of great sacramental mysteries. Great truths were then revealed. By means of all this the fear of death and all the horrors that go with it was taken away. Our immortality was confirmed. The Lord breathed on his disciples and filled them with the Holy Spirit. The Lord entrusted Peter with the care of his flock and showed him what the "keys of the Kingdom" mean. Imagine yourself in the place of the two disciples journeying to Emmaus. Jesus was their companion but they didn't have eyes to recognize it was Jesus. They were filled with fear and timidity and a kind of despair. He swept away all the clouds of doubt and uncertainty and opened their eyes and fired their hearts so they burned with the light of faith. The culmination of all this was the sharing of a meal with him. Isn't this our story too? Don't we see him in the breaking of the bread? When we see the bread and the wine we see through outward appearances to the inward reality that is Christ Risen.

It isn't always easy to see Christ in these signs, any more than it is to see him in our neighbor. But faith makes this possible and makes it possible to see Christ in ourselves. If we genuinely see ourselves as Christ then we can begin to live like Christ. We can begin to love and help others as we would help Christ. Isn't this what we shall be judged for? To see Christ in ourselves, however, is to see our risen selves. And the same holds for seeing Christ in others. We start by seeing Christ in his Risen self, then we see him in ourselves, in spite of our weaknesses. Then faith gives us glorified eyes, opened to see Christ in others, especially in those who are in need—spiritually as much or more than physically.

ACCEPTING GLORIFIED HEARTS

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great

Throughout the whole of the period between the resurrection and ascension, God's Providence was at work to instill a new hope into the hearts of disciples. It was a hope based on accepting the truth that the Lord is truly Risen. Think of the difference that made. It meant all who accept the truth of the Lord's resurrection no longer placed their hopes on a reality such as we experience on earth—e.g., being enthroned in glory as kings are—but on sharing in Divine Loving.

At first, the disciples couldn't imagine resurrection life except as continuing the sort of life we know on earth. As long as that was the case they feared losing the Lord and so thought of his ascension to the Father as a loss rather than a gain. But when they came to believe in the Lord's resurrection, and to believe in their own resurrection too, they believed that they would share in Divine Life. But what is Divine Life? It is certainly not like any life anyone experiences on earth. Their hopes had to be transformed just as their living would be changed radically by sharing in God's life.

That blessed company of disciples, as a result, had a great and inexpressible cause for joy when it saw human nature rising above the dignity and ways of life of every created being—even above angels and archangels. Nor would there be any limit to that rising until humanity was admitted to a place at the right hand of God, as was Jesus. Christ's ascension is our elevation. We who are his body are invited to rise above our old hopes to a new hope shown in the Risen Christ.

Not only are we confirmed in the possession of a new and greater paradise but in Christ we have entered into the very heaven of heavens and gain more than was lost by sin. We are members of Christ's own body and so we are with him as he becomes God's "right hand person". He is now to share in God's re-creation of all things because he is the first fruit of that re-creation. We say that Christ's lives and reigns with the Heavenly Father.

But we have to pause as ask ourselves what we know about the living of God before we can imagine what reigning with God can mean. We know that God is love. So, we know that God's living is a loving. That loving has created and re-created us. We prepare for living with God by loving one another as Jesus has loved us. We are to share in such loving forever and our reigning with God is to be a giving of this gift to all to whom God sends us.

We have to let our God enlarge our hearts if we are to prepare ourselves for this transformation both of our hope and of its realization. When our hearts are glorified what we love and hope for is transformed. No eye has seen what this will be like, nor has any ear heard the tale of it as it really will be. Indeed, no one has even found a way to conceive of what we are already told about what God has in store for those who love as Jesus loves. It is enough that we know that loving like Jesus makes us one with Him and brings us all this.

RETURNING THE LOVE WITH WHICH WE ARE LOVED

A reflection developed from a letter by St. Bernard

No one who loves God need have any doubt about God's love. God gladly returns our love, which was called forth by God's own love for us. How could God be reluctant to love us in response to our love for him? God has loved us and given us the pledge of God's everlasting love given us in the Spirit. Jesus' love and the gift of the Spirit are a double and irrefutable proof of the love God bears toward each of us. Christ died for us; Christ deserves our love.

The Spirit moves us by grace and so enables us to love. Christ gives us the reason and the Spirit gives us the power. The one sets before us the example of his own love and the other gives us that love itself. How shameful it would be to look upon God's Son dying for us without being moved to gratitude. That could happen if the Spirit were lacking. Yet God's Spirit has poured into our hearts God's own loving. We love God and so we become fit to love more and more.

We possess a double token of salvation in the pouring out of Christ's blood and of the Spirit. Neither could help us without the other. The Spirit is given only to those who believe in the crucified and faith is only effective when it works through love. The flesh is of no avail; it is the Spirit that gives life. To say this is only another way of expressing the truth that the Spirit justifies us by setting right our relationship with God. Death is the fruit of sin but justice and righteousness bring life. They are God's gift through the gift of the Spirit.

Who are the just? They are those whose relationship with God is set right. They are people who love God with the love with which God loves them. Now it is impossible for them to do this unless they have received in faith the Spirit's revelation of God's eternal plan for human salvation. That revelation is nothing other than an inpouring of spiritual grace. Through it, as we put to death the works of the mere flesh, we are made ready for the Kingdom which flesh and blood of themselves can't possess.

In the one Spirit we receive both the audacity to believe ourselves loved unendingly and the power to return that love. God's love for us will not go unrequited. We have received the Spirit in who's power, in who's very being, we receive and experience all that is needed to enable us to love as we are loved, and in our God's very creating and re-creating love.

THE STRUGGLE TO LIVE THE ASCENSION'S GRACE

A reflection taken from a homily by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

For more than forty days we have kept before our minds and hearts the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now we have to direct our attention to his call to prepare to follow him. He is preparing to raise us up to our homeland, to heaven. He did this due to our sins and he rose for our justification; he has ascended into heaven for our glorification. We ought then to be filled with joy for there can be no greater glorification of a human person than what we see in Jesus. He has given us the Holy Spirit and by this gift commended to us the double gift of loving God and of loving our neighbor.

If we want with our spiritual eyes to see Jesus ascending into heaven and if we want to arrive in heaven with and through him, we have to go forth from the world as it now is both in mind and in contemplation. We raise our hearts from merely earthly things and take up the bright weapons of obedience, as St. Benedict calls them. And our contemplation and obedience ought to be on charity. Whatever we do let us do in charity, first toward our God and then toward our neighbor.

On the day of his ascension he led his disciples to Bethany and blessed them with uplifted hands. O how happy those who were of that company and were found worthy to be blessed by those hands! But notice what he said as he blessed them. *"See, I am with you unto the end of the ages"*. He did depart from us in his physical presence but as far as his divinity is concerned he is always with us. By his loving Providence he always surrounds us. We should never forget that *"if God is for us who could condemn us?"* We ought to take a bold stand against the devil and his snares and to have a great hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Our hope ought to be firmly fixed on him.

Our Lord has ascended to the Father and we, like his disciples, hear this news with mingled exultation and sorrow. They exulted know that where he had ascended they would also come to be. They exulted know his promise that *"where I am they too shall come to be with me"*. They exulted because of the gift of the Holy Spirit who would brace them against every temptation. They exulted because the Lord commanded them to preach the Good News to all nations.

We who are mere paupers shall see our poor Lord, but we will not see him in poverty but in glory. We shall see him as he truly is. We can listen to insults unperturbed. We can bear patiently with persecutions. We can be silent when evil is said against us. Our only concern is to remain attached to our God with our whole heart and our whole mind and our entire strength. Our task is to live as befits members of that Head. Our objective is to fix our minds on God and on that marvelous place where our Christ is. Let all our devotion be directed to Jesus Christ and where He is, seated at the right hand of God. Where he is we are to be. The only requisite is love.