

THE SIXTH WEEK IN THE EASTER SEASON

- Sun. **The Sixth Sunday in the Easter Season**
April 6 **LOVE OVERCOMES ALL SIN**
A reflection developed from two sermons by St. Augustine
- Mon. **Monday of the Sixth Week in Easter**
7 **KILLING THE GOLIATH WITHIN US**
A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Bernard
- Tues. **Tuesday of the Sixth Week in Easter**
8 **LETTING GOD'S LOVE OVERPOWER ALL EVIL**
A reflection developed from a homily by St. Augustine
- Wed. **Wednesday of the Sixth Week in Easter**
9 **STRUGGLING ON BY GOD'S GIFT OF HOPE**
A reflection from a homily of St. Bernard
- Thurs. **Thursday of the Sixth Week in Easter**
10 **THE LAST HOUR**
A reflection developed from a homily by St. Augustine
- Fri. **The Memorial of the Holy Abbots of Cluny**
11 **CELEBRATING THE LOVE OF THOSE WHO LEAD US**
A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rivaulx
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A reflection developed from a homily by St. Augustine

LOVE OVERCOMES ALL SIN

A reflection developed from two homilies by St. Augustine

We are all friends and travelers who are making our way as fast as we can toward our Heavenly Homeland. As long as we hold onto our hope of reaching it we are all right; if we despair we lose our strength and collapse. Yet it is God's will that we arrive at our goal. God gives us nourishment for our journey precisely so we will come to the safety of this homeland. Part of this nourishment comes from his Word.

Let's listen carefully to what follows: *"If we claim to have fellowship with God while we are still walking in the dark, we are liars and are not practicing the truth"*. Now listen to this second word: *"But if we walk in the light, as God is light, then we have fellowship with God and with one another"*. So, we must walk in the light and not in the dark. Now the dark is sin. Isn't it our sin that causes us to despair and lose the strength we need for our journey? Then listen to yet another word: *"The blood of God's Son Jesus Christ will cleanse us from every transgression"*.

We have had our past sins forgiven. But all too often, even after that guilt has been taken away, we fall again into sin. We live in the midst of a world filled with temptations to rely on ourselves and that is what we try to do when we sin. All of us must admit our condition so we may be healed by one who never changes, who has always existed and always will, and who everlastingly loves us. Listen to Scripture again: *"If we deny our sins we are deceiving ourselves and the truth doesn't abide in us"*. But if you enter into the truth, first by confessing yourself to be a sinner, then the truth abides in you. Your life may not yet be perfectly free from faults, since there are still sinful moments of attempted self-reliance, but you have begun to see the true light. Scripture says: *"If we confess our transgressions, the one who is faithful and just will forgive them and cleanse us of all our iniquity"*.

What is the basis of our hope in spite of the weakness and hesitancy we find in ourselves? It is love. Confession of our guilt comes first but it is accepted by love. It is said of charity that it covers a multitude of sin. The charity is not simply that of God. It is the charity we show to others. Sin comes of an absence of charity. Where there is charity we don't have to try to depend on ourselves but can turn always to the one who loves us. When we turn to our God, and to our Savior Jesus Christ, we are given the gift of loving others as they love us. Turning to them is an act of love and from this love comes endless love.

Listen to another Scripture: *"This is the text by which we can be sure we know God: Do we keep his commandments?"* But God's commandment is to love! Listen again to the Lord: "I give you a new commandment; love one another." We know we have been made perfect in God when we keep this commandment. The perfection of love is to do good even for your enemies. Loving like this transforms enemies into brothers and sisters. One who loves like this has a hope that will never fail.

KILLING THE GOLIATH WITHIN US

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Bernard

We all know the story of how David, relying completely on God, was able to kill the giant, Goliath. David was a mere youth, and there he was coming forward with only a sling and five stones to attack an armed and trained warrior of monstrous bulk protected by a shield and a helmet. David bore no armor and carried only a shepherd's staff and his sling. Zeal for God filled him and he took the insults hurled at Israel's army—God's army—personally. We marvel at his faithfulness to God and the way he overcame all fear for himself. You trust in your strength and armor, he told Goliath, but I trust in the Lord of Armies, the God of Israel. It is a wonderful story that has a spiritual application. The fact is that each of us faces, within, a kind of giant named pride and if we are to win the victory, for ourselves and our own people, then we must trust in the Lord as David did. Pride is most dangerous because it easily leads us to rely on ourselves rather than on our God.

Saul urged David either to give up or at least wear armor. But that was worldly wisdom speaking. It took what was actually David's strength as a weakness. In admitting that he couldn't defeat Goliath by his own strength David laid hold of what seems weakness but actually is the strongest weapon, humility. He tossed away worldly resources and even confidence in his own skill with sling and stone and trusted in the Lord. He was like Peter when the Lord called him to come to him walking on the water. When Peter considered the wind's intensity, the seas' depth and his body's weight he began to sink. He cried out to the Lord and the Lord saved him. So, David cried out to the Lord. We must do the same.

Besides his staff and sling David took only five stones with him in his shepherd's pouch. I think of these five stones represent the five types of monitory words found everywhere in Scripture. They are words of warning, words of promise, words of love, words that invite us to imitate our God, and words of prayer. Our world is passing away but these five sorts of words never pass away. Indeed, as our world passes the words become ever more powerful and work more strongly in our minds and hearts. We must take these word-stones and put them in our pouch of memory. Reflect on how serious God's warnings are, on how great are God's promises to each of us, how great a love God shows us, and how God reinforces the impact of all these words by examples of holiness—lived words showing us how to live the other four types of words in every sort of circumstance. Finally, God calls us to earnestness and constancy in prayer. If you are fighting with the giant that is pride you have to overcome it with these stones—strike it as it were in the forehead and stun it.

Then you can draw closer and witness pride's inability. Your own strength can't accomplish any of the things you sought by using it and this weakness when admitted leads us to God's words and shows us the humility that makes us truly strong. If you grasp that humility as your own it becomes, like Goliath's sword, a weapon you can wield so as to kill its owner. Not in our own strength but by prayer and by God's love do we triumph.

LETTING GOD'S LOVE OVERPOWER ALL EVIL

A reflection developed from a homily by St. Augustine

The Lord has commanded us to love one another as he has loved us. This love has to be more than simply a natural affection. For instance, we must love our enemies with the kind of love that longs to have them as brothers and sisters and even to welcome them into our community. This is the kind of love we were shown by Jesus. As he hung on the cross he prayed: "*Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing*". This is a prayer utterly filled with compassion. Jesus was doing everything he could—and his power is almighty—to save them from everlasting death.

Indeed, many of those who witnessed his crucifixion did believe and receive forgiveness for their part in shedding the blood of their Messiah. Scripture says: "*We can know that we abide in God if we have been made perfect in him*". We have been called, by Jesus our Lord himself, "*to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect*". This perfection is ours when we genuinely love our enemies and those who do us wrong.

Those who love their brothers and sisters dwell in the light and have no occasion for stumbling. Thus, we are promised. Those who themselves stumble, or cause others to stumble, are people who are scandalized by Christ or by the Church. But if we hold fast to charity then we, as God's Church and Chosen People, will never cause others to stumble. And if others see Christ through you then they can't be scandalized when they see your genuine love, even for your enemies. Only if we experience this love in ourselves and see it as coming from Christ and through the Church will we be immune to stumbling.

You won't abandon those through whom you have learned and lived love. To abandon Christ or the Church is to stumble. They cry out: "*I can't stand this; I won't endure this*"! And they walk out. Recall the way Christ's words about eating his body and drinking his blood scandalized many disciples, who walked out on him. But we must imagine that those who remained were doing God or Christ a favor by remaining, listen to what Peter said when Christ asked the Twelve if they would leave also. "*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life!*"

There is no stumbling block in those who love their brothers and sisters, and even their enemies. Such persons endure all things for the sake of God and to bring all to unity in God and in his Christ. It is the unity of charity. They are keeping the "new commandment": Love one another as I have loved you! Have you experienced the love of Christ? You can tell by the way you bear patiently with one another's weaknesses. Listen again to God's word: "*Bear with one another in love, sparing no effort to reserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*"! Listen to Paul: "*Bear one another's burdens and you will be fulfilling the law of Christ*"! Those who cry out and leave must be loved. We must spare no effort to find way to help them live again in the love of Christ—bearing the burdens that come from living together and seeking always to find ways to love those who have been hurt but the lack of such love. Then, indeed, we fulfill the commandment of love. God's love overpowers every hurt and burden.

STRUGGLING ON BY GOD'S GIFT OF HOPE

A reflection developed from a homily of St. Bernard

We so often pray: *"A thousand may fall at your side, ten-thousand at your right hand, but you it will not approach"*. We live in hope and we don't lose heart no matter what tribulation befalls us. We do this because we know we can look forward to never-ending joys. Our hope never seems doubtful because it rests on the promises of the Eternal Truth. The fact of the gifts we have already received undergirds an expectation of others to come. We must courageously resist all attacks because the Truth will surround us as with a shield.

Are you ever troubled by the knowledge that thousands may fail and fall? When this happens listen to what relates to the promise of life to come: Where you treasure is, there will your heart be also. Recall what happened to the false prophet Balaam, who wanted to bring evil upon the righteous. In the end he could only pray that his end would be like that of God's Chosen People. The fruit of godliness is so great, and so great their recompense, that even the wicked could desire nothing else. Yet those who are being tossed about in a storm at sea take scant pleasure in the promise of safety before it comes.

If you are approaching the port of salvation by meditation and an ardent longing you already have an anchor of hope, as it were. You need to be moored unwaveringly to that longing for the land of the Lord. No matter how difficult the combat you face, act like a warrior and never forget the promise of victory for those who persevere. Between your present struggles and your divine calling and justification there is a certain link, like that of glorification to predestination. Listen to Paul: *"Those whom God foreknew God also predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son"*. You are in the middle position between two extremes. Listen again: *"Those whom God predestined God also called, and those whom God called God also justified, and those whom God justified God also glorified"*. The outcome of our way of living makes it unnecessary to worry. Travel this road securely and vigorously. If you hold fast to the means to your end how can you fail to draw closer and closer to it? Those who trust in themselves will fall in thousands. Those who trust in the Lord will be victorious.

God's mercy comes to meet us as we struggle to move forward. The other day one of you woke up terrified by dream visions and screamed in a loud voice, frightening the whole lot of you. Probably this happened so we would remember that we are fighting enemies too strong for us, but nothing to God's strength. The enemy is terrified because he sees the end coming! But we can rejoice! *"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil while you are with me—O Lord, my God."* We now walk by faith. Remember that one word of the Savior forced an entire legion of evil spirits to leave a possessed man. We can trust in our Savior. Recall that whatever a person sows that person will reap. Sow trust and faith and you will reap salvation. Do not be frightened by the terrors of the night but remember that the Lord covers us with a shield. Sing to the Lord, for God has triumphed. Horse and rider God has cast into the sea. And you will come through safely and enter into God's Promised Land.

THE LAST HOUR

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Augustine

In the first Letter of John we are given a piece of advice that puzzles many readers. "*Children*", it says, "*it is the last hour*". This is followed by an exhortation to grow up quickly, precisely because the last hour is here. Now it is a fact that no one can grow up spiritually except by making a deliberate decision. Thus, chronological age has little to do with such decisions. This kind of growth is demanded of those who have been "born of water and the Spirit". If such a person chooses to go forward there is growth but choosing to go backwards brings only a withering away. The warning, "children, it is the last hour" is given in case any of us might be lazy or indolent.

What Scripture calls the "last hour" may extend over quite a long period. But it is definitely one that demands action which cannot be put off. People think of it only as the time of the Second Coming of Christ, and that is often the way Scripture uses it. Even when John wrote his letter some asked how one could know when the last hour had come, and they were given the answer that it was when the antichrist came. But they John went on to say that not only has The Antichrist come but that many of them have come. He adds that these were Christians but wouldn't remain loyal to Christ or the Church and so walked out.

All of us have observed the fact that many who appear to be of our fellowship, who are baptized and receive the sacraments, including the Eucharist and all this implies, haven't behaved like followers of Christ. They may stand beside us at the altar but they are not really our brothers or sisters in Christ. We see this when times of trial come. Then they separate themselves from the Christian community as quickly as they can. It is as though a gust of wind had blown chaff away. John's letter adds, "*They left us but they never truly belonged; if they had really belonged to our community they would have remained with us; they left so that it would be clear that they didn't belong with us.*"

What makes us behave and live as Christians is the Holy Spirit. We have received an anointing with the Spirit. Yes, it is given us in a sacramental sign, an anointing, but the sign of its being real and having really been received by one who is anointed is that such people begin to love others as they have experienced Christ loving them. If we understand this we can understand what it means that the "last hour" has come. It is the hour when Christ and the Spirit, dwelling within us and acting through us, are determined to draw those who left back to the community that is the Church and to living as true Christian disciples. We can't put this work of love off—especially for those who have left.

Between Christ's resurrection and ascension God's providence was at work to instill a lesson of love into the disciples' hearts. He was binding them together unending love. The Risen Lord Jesus loved them first when he called them and does it yet again in re-calling them. He calls by love, even those in doubt or denial, as was Thomas until he saw and touched the love shown by the Risen Lord's coming to him. We are to imitate Jesus for those called by Christ but who walked away. It is our task of love and it won't wait. It must be begun now or it won't be done. Now is the hour to become one in Christ!

CELEBRATING THE LOVE OF THOSE WHO LEAD US

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rivaulx

The title “Abbot” comes from a word meaning “Father”. The fatherhood in question is not physical, however, but spiritual. If we clearly see and understand the benefits that the Lord has bestowed on us through our Holy Father Benedict we would see how greatly monks should love their abbot and spiritual father. Through the ministry of Moses, the Lord led the Jews out of Egypt, and through the ministry of Benedict he led us all out of the present world. The ancient Jews were enslaved to Pharaoh but we were under slavery to the devil and in bondage to our own vices. Have you forgotten what you suffered in order to follow Benedict and your abbots, when you decided to leave all things to follow Christ?

Think of the beating people take trying to gain riches or property. Think of what people suffer trying to satisfy their appetites for pleasure and excitement. How painful is it when all these desires and the unprincipled and disgraceful ways of satisfying them are made public! Perhaps some of you had to feel such pain and shame. Compare this with the spiritual delight you often experience as you follow Christ and the satisfaction you feel when you overcome evil desires within you. Moses gave the Jews a law so they might enter the Promised Land, but Benedict gave us a law that shows us the way to enter Heaven itself as heirs in God’s Kingdom.

We have been called to give up professions, churches, riches, families and all else that gets in the way of serving God. You answered that call, but perhaps you then heard within you a voice that led you back toward former things. Who helps us reject that temptation and helps us to stay on the path to God and God’s Kingdom? Isn’t it our abbots who help us listen to Blessed Benedict and God’s call? The first degree of humility is fear of the Lord, so you have been taught. How could you have given yourself, and all you had, if you hadn’t heard a Father’s voice helping you make the journey that gives this gift? The second step in humility is not to love one’s own will nor delight in satisfying the desires of the flesh. This is how we avoid our former vices and enter into virtue. Who helped you persevere? After all, the third step of humility is for the love of God to subject yourself to your abbot in all obedience.

Anyone who chooses to scorn riches, honors and amusements, who decides to live simply, soberly, chastely and religiously, is made fun of by worldly people. So, you have had to journey into the desert and find a worthy guide to lead you there. Offer your sacrifice to God. Put to death within yourself all that the world loves. Love to be insignificant for Christ’s sake, to be a pauper, to be rejected by many. Love and follow your abbot that you may come to the eternal place of happiness. When we celebrate the anniversaries of holy abbots that is what we are celebrating. Rejoice in the goodness of our Lord Jesus Christ and all you have received of help and comfort and mercy and love, as you have followed Christ, and Benedict, and the abbot’s God’s providence has sent you as guides and helpers.

STRETCHING FORWARD TOWARD GOD'S KINGDOM

A reflection developed from a homily by St. Augustine

“See what love the Father has given us that we should be called and should be the children of God!” It is obvious that being called children of God would be of no value to people who were not really God's children. Many are called doctors but can't cure and many are called watchmen but sleep all night. Just so there are many so-called Christians who are such only in name but not in reality. If we are truly Christians we must show this by our faith, hope and charity. There are huge numbers of Christians, so how can it be that the world is godless and that the godless can't tell who the Christians are!

Scripture tells us that the world doesn't recognize us as Christians because it didn't recognize Christ for who he is. The Lord Jesus walked the earth; he was God hidden in the weakness of human flesh, so why wasn't he recognized? It was because he didn't tell people what they wanted to hear but convicted human beings of every sort of sin they were hiding. Loving sin, they didn't recognize God among them because he rejected what they thought good.

What about us? We are born of Christ. But at present we aren't obviously God's children—at least as the world sees things. We live in hope. St. John said, ***“Beloved, we are even now the children of God”***. Already? Then what are we waiting for? ***“It hasn't yet been shown us what we shall be like in the future.”*** So, we can become more the children of God than we already are. Listen to what John replies, ***“We know that when Christ appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is”***. What is God? God is love! When we see clearly what God's love is then we will see God. What is it that we will see? At this point the tongue has done all it can and only the heart can go farther. We can long to love as Christ did and we can ponder the love he has already shown us. But there is much more to come.

Let us return to the anointing through which we came to be taught inwardly realities that can't be expressed in words. Since we can't yet see our work must find its path through longing. The entire life of a good Christian consists in holy longing. We can't yet see what we long for but we must long. Only then can we be filled.

Paul talks about stretching forward toward the prize we long for but can't yet take hold of. He tells us that he isn't yet perfect and doesn't yet have what he seeks but he strives to forget what lies behind and stretch forward to what lies ahead. ***“I press onward with all my might toward the prize that is our heavenly calling”***. He knew he was too small to take in ***“what eye has not seen, nor ear heard of, nor the human heart conceived”***. That is our way of life! We are called to exert ourselves to the utmost in longing. The more we detach our hearts from what is already in this world the more our holy longing will increase. What are we called to do? Stretch yourself forward and toward Christ. He will come to us and satisfy our longing. That is what living in hope means. What will happen to us? We shall be like Christ! Then we shall be like him. Then we shall see, love, him as he is—who is love.