

THE SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD THE SEVENTH WEEK OF THE EASTER SEASON

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Sunday

LOVING CHRIST IN HEAVEN & ON EARTH

A reflection from a homily on the First Letter of John by St. Augustine

On the fortieth day, at his Ascension into Heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ entrusted us with the body in which he would remain among us here below. He saw the many would honor him because of his Ascension but this honor would be worthless because at the same time they were trampling on his members. He wanted to prevent the error of worshiping the heavenly Christ and simultaneously trampling on the earthly Christ. Do you remember his words to St. Paul: "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" Christ has ascended into Heaven but he remains on earth in the members of his body.

We have his last words on earth as he was about to ascend. The Head of the Body that is Christ entrusted to us the other member of the Body. They are on earth. Yes, you can no longer find Christ speaking to you on earth but will hear only words from Heaven. Why does he speak to us from Heaven? He does it to complain that we are trampling on his feet, on the members of his body here on earth, at the same time we praise him. That is why he spoke to Paul, the persecutor, as he did.

What does he say to us? Here I am at the Heavenly Father's right hand, he says, but I am still hungry and thirsty and without shelter. You see how Christ entrusted to us the members of his Body that are still on earth and at the very moment of ascending into Heaven!

Recall that a disciple once asked: "*Lord, has the time come for you to reveal your-self? When will sovereignty be restored to Israel?*" His response was: "*It is not for you to know that time which the Heavenly Father has reserved to his own authority; but you will receive authority when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and it will make you my witnesses in Jerusalem, and the whole of Judea ad Samaria and to the ends of the earth.*" This tells us where Jesus remains on earth. This tells us where Jesus doesn't want to be trampled on! Take care not to hurt my Body, to violate it, to strike it, or to oppress it.

These are Christ's words, Christ's last words! Think, now, of the words of one who is preparing to die. They are so important to us, and especially to heirs. If the words of one who is going to the grave are to be treasured what about the words of one who is going to Heaven? When a person has finished life and is dying, that person's soul is born away to God but the body is laid in the ground. Such a person isn't worried whether a last wish has been carried out or not. That person has other things to do and to suffer. A corpse is left behind to be buried and it won't feel anything. Why is it, then, that the person's dying wishes are so important and so carefully obeyed?

What will be the lot of those who hear the parting words of Christ, who is looking down from heaven to see whether those words are being obeyed? He remembers on the Day of Judgment all that his members have suffered and all the help they have received. Are you keeping this in mind whenever you see Christ's Body in need of help and kindness? The measure you use in deciding what to give is the measure that will be used when God decides what to give you.

Monday

TWELVE -STEP SPIRITUALITY

from Eucharist as Touchstone by Fr Richard Rohr OFM

Although I have never belonged formally to a Twelve-Step group, I have learned many lessons about life and spirituality from those in recovery. I truly believe that the Twelve Step program, also known as Alcoholics Anonymous will go down in history as America's greatest and unique contribution to the history of spirituality. It represents what is good in American pragmatism. We want a spirituality which is relevant, that changes people, and that really makes a difference in the world. For many people, the Twelve Steps make the Gospel believable, practical, and even programmatic.

My first 8 years in Albuquerque, I lived downtown, next door to a little church where Twelve Step meetings were held. As the members gathered right outside my back door almost every other evening, we became friends. They invited me to join them even in their closed sessions. I felt very privileged. It was like being invited into a sacred sanctuary of people who were not afraid to openly admit that they were "sinners. It was like a Sunday liturgy, as if each person was a priest, and they were all healing one another. The God talk was honest and experience based. There was no hesitancy for each person to describe their history of failure and recovery- or death and resurrection in Christian vocabulary.

Jesus tried to teach us that the love of God is not dependent on our worthiness. He healed and ate with sinners and outcasts while he was on earth. He told parables about the Pharisee and the tax collector and the prodigal son where the one who did wrong ended up being right and the one who seemingly did right ended up being wrong. The entrance requirement for an AA meeting is not worthiness, but unworthiness, not capacity but deep need- just as it should be.

Worthiness, the, is not the issue but trust and surrender. Therese of Lisieux puts it well "Jesus does not demand great actions of us but simply surrender and gratitude". Let us resolve this once and for all, of course you are not worthy. None of us are. Don't g down the worthiness road. We are all saved by grace. We are loved in spite of ourselves. AA had the courage to say that you don't come to God by doing it right but by doing it wrong and then falling into the infinite mercy that you can't fall out of.

The gospel adds that you are absolutely worthy of love! Yet, this has nothing to do with earned worthiness on your part. God does not love you because you are good but because God is good!

Tuesday

A CALL TO CHRISTIAN MATURITY IN FAITH

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

The Lord's Ascension increased the faith of the infant Church and this was strengthened by the gift of the Holy Spirit. That faith remained unshaken by chains, imprisonment, exile, hunger, fire, being fed to starved beasts, and the most refined tortures that could be devised. Not only men but boys, not only women but girls as well, shed their life blood in this struggle to keep the faith. It is a faith that cast out devils, healed the sick, and raised the dead.

Even the apostles, though they had been strengthened by witnessing many miracles and much teaching by the Lord himself, were afraid by reason of the cruel sufferings of the Lord's passion and couldn't accept his resurrection without hesitations. Yet they made such progress by means of Christ's ascension that they began to find joy in what had terrified them before. They were now able to fix their attention on Christ's divinity and his having gone to sit at the right hand of the Heavenly Father. What was present to their senses no longer hindered them from fixing their attention on the realization that the Son had not left the Father when he descended to the earth and so neither had he abandoned his disciples when he ascended into heaven.

This was a kind of great spiritual growth. The Son of Man was revealed to them as Son of God in a more perfect way once he had entered into his glory. He now was even more present to them than he had been when he lived among us. A more mature faith enabled them to stretch their minds upward to the Son in his equality with the Father. Contact with Christ's tangible body isn't necessary.

The Lord's glorified body retained its human nature but the faith of those who believed in him was raised to new heights. They now could know that, as the Father's equal, the Only Begotten Son isn't reached physically but by spiritual discernment. We see why the Lord said to Mary Magdalen: "*Don't cling to me*". In other words, I don't want you to come to me by what you sense but I want you to wait for something higher. I am preparing you for what surpasses all ordinary knowledge. When I have ascended you will experience me in a more perfect way and believe what now you can't see.

While the disciples were watching the Lord ascending into heaven, two angels came to them. "*Men of Galilee, why are you standing here gazing into heaven? This Jesus who has been taken from you will come again, in the same way you saw him leave.*" By these words, we have all been taught to believe that Jesus Christ will come again, visibly and in the same flesh. He had been served by angels from his birth and now they assure us that all things are subjected to him. An angel announced Christ's conception to the Blessed Virgin. Angels announced his birth to shepherds. Now angels tell us that he is Lord and will come again in his full Lordship.

All these things are intended to lead us to believe what tremendous authority he will have in the end of all things. Do you want to accompany him into his heavenly home? Then you must follow the angels and accompany him in ministering to others, especially to our brothers and sisters in faith. That is full maturity in faith.

Wednesday

ENTRANCE INTO THE NIGHT OF FAITH from Story of a Soul by St. Therese of Lisieux

Dear Mother, you know well that God has designed to make me pass through many types of trials. I have suffered very much since I was on earth, but, if in my childhood I suffered with sadness, it is no longer in this way that I suffer. O Mother, you must know of the secrets of my soul in order not to smile when you read these lines, for is there a soul less tried than my own if one judges by appearances? Ah! If the trial I am suffering for a year now appeared to the eyes of anyone, what astonishment would be felt!

O Mother, you know about this trial; I am going to speak to you of it, however, for I consider it a great grace I received.

God granted me, last year, the consolation of observing the fast during Lent in all its rigor. Never have I felt so strong and the strength remained with me until Easter. On Good Friday However, Jesus wished to give me the hope of going to see him soon in heaven. Oh! How sweet this memory really is! After remaining at the tomb until midnight, I returned to our cell, but I had scarcely laid my head on the pillow when I felt something like a bubbling stream mounting to my lips. I thought that perhaps I was going to die. It seemed to me it was blood I coughed up. The next night, I had to go to my rest; but just as the preceding night, good Jesus gave me the same sign that my entrance into eternal life was not far off.

At this time, I was enjoying such a living faith, such a clear faith, that the thought of heaven made up all my happiness, and I was unable to believe there were really impious people who have no faith. I believed they were actually speaking against their own inner convictions when they denied the existence of heaven, that beautiful heaven where God Himself wanted to be their eternal reward.

During those very joyful days of Easter, Jesus permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and that the thought of heaven, up to then so sweet to me, be no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment. This trial was to last not a few days or a few weeks, it was not to be extinguished until the hour set by God Himself and this hour has not yet come. One can only travel through this dark tunnel to understand the darkness.

Your child, however, O Lord has understood your divine light. She is resigned to eat the bread of sorrow as long as you desire it. You will bring me into your bright kingdom. The only grace I ask is that I never offend you!

Thursday

LOVING IN DEEDS AS WELL AS IN WORDS

From a homily on the First Letter of John by St. Augustine

“By this we know what love is, that He laid down his life for us and that we too ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” John is calling us to a perfect love and does it in a way that gives us the key to understanding the Lord’s words after the resurrection to Peter: *“Do you love me? Feed my sheep!”* Peter was called to do this even to the point of laying down his life. Notice the words which follow: *“When you were young you put on your belt and went where you wanted; when you are older, another will put on your belt and take you where you would rather not go”*. This, the evangelist tells us, indicated the kind of death by which Peter was going to glorify God.

How does charity begin? You have heard that it is brought to perfection in laying down one’s life for God and others. The Gospels repeat this: *“No one has greater love than that which lays down one’s life for one’s friends”*. That is perfect love. That is what we are called to. But perhaps you don’t know how much or perfectly you love. When, you ask, will I be able to love like that? Don’t despair of yourself too soon. Perhaps charity has already been born in you but hasn’t yet grown to obvious maturity. Foster it! Don’t let it be stifled! But maybe this doesn’t answer your question about how you can know the maturity of your love. Listen to what is said next in our text.

“If anyone who has this world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in want but has a closed heart toward that person, then in the one who does this the love of God doesn’t dwell”. This is where charity begins. If you aren’t yet capable of dying for a brother or sister, at least let yourself be capable of sharing what you possess! Someone is hungry and in need. They may be racked with anxiety. They may be hard pressed by debts. If they have no money, do you? They are a brother or sister and you were both ransomed together and at the same price—purchased by the blood of Christ! See if you are capable of showing pity for them. You possess the world’s goods, after all.

Are you going to ask: What business is that of mine? Am I supposed to give my money to get them out of trouble? If that is the way your heart answers then you don’t have the Father’s love dwelling in you. If the Father’s love doesn’t dwell in you then you aren’t a child of God. You can’t boast of being a Christian without doing Christ’s deeds of love. You can’t have the name without the deeds.

If the name is endorsed by the deeds then it doesn’t matter who calls you a heathen. You show yourself to be a Christian by your deeds. But if your actions don’t prove you are a Christian, then even if the whole world calls you a Christian the name won’t be of any value to you. The name brings no profit without the reality.

“My little children, let’s not love in words or talk alone but in deed and in truth”. This is what Christ calls us to. This is the path that brings one to perfect charity. And that is the path that brings one to God and to an eternity of wonderful things.

Friday

AN ASCENSION TO CHARITY BY CHARITY

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

We are rejoicing and even exulting before the Lord filled with thanksgiving and spiritual joy because Christ has ascended to the Heavenly Father. We have raised the eyes of our hearts on high where Christ is at the right hand of God the Father. No merely earthly longings ought to weight down our minds now. We are summoned heavenward so how could a perishable thing disturb the contemplation of those predestined for what is everlasting? Don't let any snare entangle your feet because they need to run swiftly through this passing world. We know we are pilgrims but we are on the path to truth and true life.

It may be that at times the world's consolations attract you. But you have to be brave and put them aside. It would be unworthy to take hold of them. We are called to the same total dedication as the apostle Peter was when he met Christ on the lakeside after Christ's resurrection. He made a three-fold profession of love for his Lord, and that was also a dedication to feeding the Lord's sheep. Remember the Scripture: "*You are strangers and pilgrims in this world, abstain from fleshly desires that war against the spirit*". On whose behalf do such desires wage war? They are tools of the devil.

The Evil One enjoys bringing upward-striving people into bondage. He lures them to nurture passions for passing pleasures in order to rob them of the place from which he himself fell. Against his plots each believer must keep careful watch. You must be ready to repulse this enemy no matter the direction from which he attacks.

There is nothing more effective against the devil's wiles than tender compassion and unselfish love. It is by means of these that every sin is either avoided or overcome. But to acquire a virtue like this you must get rid of what opposes it. The contrary of charity is love of money. There isn't anything so hostile to compassion and unselfish love as clinging to money. This last is a noxious weed and it has to be starved to death. The heart in which this narrowness has taken root brings forth thorns and briars of vice rather than any flower of virtue. We have to resist this most pestilent evil.

We do this by making charity our aim. No good can flourish in us without charity. It is the very path by which Christ ascended to the Heavenly Father. Christ trod the path of love when he came down to help us and save us. He ascended by that same path. We shall be able to ascend with Christ if we walk the same path and do it with Him. If we ascend with Christ we will rise with Christ and we will be with God forever

Saturday

WHY IT IS GOOD FOR US THAT CHRIST LEAVE US **From a homily on the Gospel of John by St. Augustine**

“I tell you the truth: it is for your own good that I am going away, because unless I go the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you.” Christ dwelt among us in the condition of a servant, as Word made flesh, but he won't go on loving us with a merely natural affection. We aren't to be content with baby's milk but must long to grow up fully in Christ. Unless I wean you, Jesus says, you will never have an appetite for adult food. As long as you cling to my bodily presence in a natural way you will remain incapable of receiving the Holy Spirit.

Did the Lord mean that it was impossible to send the Holy Spirit while he was still on earth? Of course not! He had never left the dwelling place of the Spirit nor had he left the Father in such a way as no longer to be with Him. Indeed, we know that Christ himself received the Spirit at his baptism. We know that the Son and the Spirit are inseparable.

The Gospel passage you have just heard means that the disciples couldn't receive the Holy Spirit as long as they only knew Christ according to the flesh. That is what is behind the assertion by St. Paul, made after he had received the Holy Spirit. Here it is: *“Even if we used to think of Christ in a human fashion, we don't do this anymore.”* When we know the incarnate Word spiritually, our knowledge, even of his humanity, becomes more than merely human. This is the lesson the Master wanted to give the disciples that it was good for them that he was going away. If he didn't change their way of thinking the Spirit wouldn't come to them.

The withdrawal of Christ's bodily presence from the disciples meant not only that the Holy Spirit would come to them but that the Heavenly Father and the Son would dwell with them in a spiritual way. Christ's departure didn't mean that the Holy Spirit would simply take his place. It meant rather that together with Christ the Spirit would make his home in the hearts of the disciples. If this weren't so what would become of our Lord's promise to be with his disciples always?

Here is another promise: *“The Father and I will come to you and make our home with you”*. The fact is that the Lord promised to send the Holy Spirit in just this way so he would always be with his disciples. When their purely natural and human affections had become spiritualized—through the Spirit—then they would be capable of the indwelling of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Let this give us hope and courage and confidence.