

# **The Ascension of the Lord**

## **Seventh Week of Easter**

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Sunday, May 21

## COMMENTARY ON THE ASCENSION

### From a sermon of Gregory of Nyssa

The gospel describes the Lord's life upon earth and his return to heaven. But the sublime prophet David, as though unencumbered by the weight of his body, rose above himself to mingle with the heavenly powers and record for us their words as they accompanied the Master when he came down from heaven. Ordering the angels on earth entrusted with the care of human life to raise the gates, they cried: *Lift up your gates, you princes; be lifted up you everlasting doors. Let the King of glory enter.*

But because wherever he is he who contains all things in himself makes himself like those who receive him, not only becoming a man among human beings, but also when among angels conforming his nature to theirs, the gatekeepers asked: *Who is this King of glory?*

He is the strong one, they were told, mighty in battle, the one who is to grapple with and overthrow the captor of the human race who has the power of death. When this last enemy has been destroyed, he will restore us to freedom and peace.

Now the mystery of Christ's death is fulfilled, victory is won, and the cross, the sign of triumph, is raised on high. He who gives us the noble gifts of life and a kingdom has ascended into heaven, *leading captivity captive*. Therefore the same command is repeated. Once more the gates of heaven must open for him. Our guardian angels, who have now become his escorts, order them to be flung wide so that that he may enter and regain his former glory. But he is not recognized in the soiled garments of our life, in clothes reddened by the winepress of human sin. Again the escorting angels are asked: *Who is this King of glory?* The answer is no longer, *The strong one, mighty in battle* but, *The lord of hosts*, he who has gained power over the whole universe, who has recapitulated all things in himself, who is above all things, who has restored all creation to its former state: *He is the King of glory.*

You see how much David has added to our joy in this feast and contributed to the gladness of the Church. Therefore as far as we can let us imitate the prophet by our love for God, by gentleness and by patience with those who hate us. Let the prophet's teaching help us to live in a way pleasing to God in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

*Monday, May 22*

## **ST RITA OF CASCIA**

**From the *Catholic Saint Medals* website**

St. Rita of Cascia is a unique saint, in that during her life she was a wife, a mother, and later, a nun. Many were called by God to either marriage and children or the consecrated religious life; however, there have been some throughout time who have been blessed with living out both vocations. St. Rita is one such saint.

Born in 1381 in Cascia in Italy, Margherita Lotti was the daughter of noble parents. Given the nickname of "Rita" from her youth, St. Rita was baptized in the church of St. Augustine and became familiar with the Augustinian nuns of St. Mary Magdalene during her youth. She was attracted to their way of life; however, her parents arranged a marriage for her to Paolo Mancini, a nobleman who would provide her with safety and security. They married when St. Rita was twelve years old.

Paolo Mancini's wealth may have been attractive to St. Rita's parents, since they wanted to be sure she would be provided for in the future. However, in addition to being wealthy, Paolo was also quick-tempered and immoral, gaining for himself many enemies in the area. He treated St. Rita very poorly – insulting her, physically abusing her, and being unfaithful to her. Yet, St. Rita endured these pains with humility, kindness, and patience, hoping her virtuous example would both glorify God and lead to the conversion of her husband. St. Rita bore Paolo two sons: Giangiacomo (Giovanni) Antonio and Paulo Maria. She raised her boys in the Christian faith, praying that they would be able to avoid the fighting and feuding that were a major part of the culture in which they lived.

St. Rita's prayer and example did break through Paolo's brutish exterior, and he began to accept the Christian faith of his wife, amending his ways to become a better person. However, Paolo was stabbed to death by Guido Chiqui, a member of a feuding family. At this time, St. Rita's sons vowed to avenge the death of their father. St. Rita was terrified at the thought of her sons committing murder and prayed that God would prevent them from carrying out their plan. Before they were able to kill in an act of revenge, both of her sons died of dysentery. Though her heart was broken over the loss of her family, she thanked God that her boys had not died with malice and mortal sins on their souls.

Now a 30-year-old childless widow, St. Rita turned her eyes to the Augustinian monastery she had felt called to join prior to marrying Paolo. She asked to be allowed to enter the convent. When she publicly denounced the feud between the Mancini and Chiqui families, at age 36, St. Rita was allowed to enter the Augustinian community.

St. Rita lived the life of an Augustinian nun, her days filled with prayer, contemplation, and spiritual reading according to the Rule of St. Augustine. On Good Friday in 1442, St. Rita was struck in the forehead with a thorn from the crown with which Christ was crucified. This wound remained open and visible for the next 15 years, until her death. As such, St. Rita was graced with the opportunity to share in the sufferings of Christ for the conversion of sinners throughout the world.

St. Rita spent her years in the convent praying for the souls of her husband and sons, that they may find repose in the arms of God. St. Rita died peacefully on May 22, 1457. Soon after her death she was kept on display, as so many local people came to look on the face of the "Peacemaker of Cascia." As her burial became more and more delayed, it was noticed that St. Rita's remains were not suffering nature's usual course of decay; rather, her body was perfectly preserved as though she had just passed away. To this day the body of St. Rita is on display in a glass enclosure in the basilica in Cascia.

*Tuesday, May 23*

## **THE HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER IN JOHN 17**

**From *Living in the Father's Embrace* by Fr George T Montague**

The Old Testament Jews had a keen sense that sin must be atoned for. Their failings against God's covenant must be made up for, covered, wiped away, deleted. They did this mainly by offering sacrifices of grain, incense, or animals. In most cases, it was individual Jews who brought their offering to the priest. But on one day of the year, the feast of the Atonement, Jews flocked together as a people for a liturgy they believed would wipe away the sins of the last year for all the people.

The high priest would take a bowl of blood from a sacrificed animal and enter the Holy of Holies where the ark of the covenant was kept behind a veil. None but the high priest was allowed to do this, and only once a year. He would then dip his finger into the blood and use it to cleanse the propitiatory, the front part of the ark. This symbolized his cleansing the site of God's presence from the sins of the people that had contaminated it during the past year. When finished, he would come out and bless the people with prayer.

Scholars see this scene as background for what has been called "Jesus' priestly prayer" in John 17. Jesus has taken the blood of his own sacrifice on the cross and "passed through the veil" into the presence of the Father and cleansed his people of their sins, reconciling them with God once and for all. Then, as if already in heaven, he asks the Father's blessing on the people reconciled by his blood.

But the prayer is more than the unique blessing made possible by Jesus' sacrifice. It is also his personal farewell blessing that includes intercession for those he is leaving. It echoes the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples.

Earlier, we saw the disciples "eavesdropping" on Jesus' prayer. When asked to teach them to pray, Jesus said, "When you pray, say . ." But in Jesus' priestly prayer, we hear his own version of this prayer when he himself addresses the Father. It is not surprising that just as Jesus taught his disciples to begin with the word "Father," he would also begin here with the same affectionate address: "Father," Abba!

At this climactic moment in Jesus' life, on the eve of his total self-gift on the cross, we hear the earthly expression of the eternal relationship of the second Person of the Trinity to the first—one earthly sound, one earthly word that contains the entire self-revelation of God. In the synoptic Gospels, we hear it on the lips of Jesus struggling with the Father in the garden prior to his passion. Here we hear it as the "liftoff" into glory. How can this be, since Jesus faces the most brutal suffering the world has ever known? It is not simply that Jesus sees the light of his resurrection already stealing beneath the dark door of the cross. Rather, it is the glory of the act of Love itself, Jesus' gift of himself to the Father, for your sake and mine.

It is the hour when the Father will glorify Jesus as Jesus glorifies the Father. Thus, Jesus begins, "Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your son, so that your son may glorify you, just as you gave him authority over all people, so that he may give eternal life to all you gave him." This is Jesus' version of "Hallowed be thy name," which means, "Show the glory of your name." Jesus has never left the Father's embrace, so the gift of himself on the cross is also the Father's gift: the cross reveals the mutual love of Father and Son. "I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do. Now glorify me, Father, with you, with the glory that I had with you before the world began." It was as if Jesus were saying, "Let the cross reveal on earth the glory of our eternal embrace." "The Father loves his Son" and "The world must know that I love the Father."

*Wednesday, May 24*

## **PAUL'S FAREWELL TO THE ELDERS OF EPHESUS**

**From a reflection by Fr Warner D'Sousa**

Paul's farewell speech to the elders of Ephesus, the only one he makes to an entirely Christian community, ends most emotionally and one can sense the great bond that Paul developed with the Ephesians, for it is here that he spent three years of his life during the last missionary journey.

Paul is no idealistic fool or sentimental leader. He is fully aware of the opposition faced by him in Ephesus both from the Greeks and the Jews. There were also the Judaizers, Jews who now followed Christ but who had rejected the decision of the council of Jerusalem which opened its doors to the Gentiles albeit with conditions. These Judaizers continued to be a thorn in Paul's side, questioning his authority as apostle and his teachings. The seeds of doubt that they sowed were scattered in practically every city that Paul had ministered to.

Paul now entrusts the Church of Ephesus to be guarded by the elders; not only the care of the flock but also of themselves. Christian leaders are no strangers to the assault of the evil one. Jesus himself said that the shepherd will be struck and the sheep scattered. Paul wants the elders to guard themselves first from "the savage wolves" who "will spring from the flock."

The enemies of Christ are not always an adversary standing outside the door of the Church but perhaps holding a prayer book inside. So how should the Christian leader protect oneself? This they must do by keeping communion with the Lord. The Christian leader must be in fellowship with the Lord or they cannot expect to be spiritual guides to "shepherd the Church."

The shepherds of the Church must be able to recognize the voice of Christ the shepherd and the Holy Spirit. It is by the mandate of the Holy Spirit that they are selected leaders and not by some popular vote. The Church does not belong to the leaders but "is the Church of God" and "obtained by the blood of his own Son."

Most Christians think that if they are attacked it will be in the form of physical persecution from outside. The greatest danger to the faith is doctrinal attacks that come from within and Paul acknowledges this when he says, "Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them." The Christian leader must also have the courage to identify traditional behaviours that seem here to stay and corrupt the true practice of the faith.

But mere fidelity to doctrine is incomplete without the same reflected in one's manner of life. Paul's credentials as leader are not only seen in the way he upheld doctrine but by the very manner of his life. Even though Paul made a large collection for the poor for the Church in Jerusalem, he never "coveted any one's silver, gold or clothing" but worked as a tent maker to support himself and his companions. Paul's manner of life is exemplary and puts in focus the judicious use of Church money.

There is a crying need for lesser administrative costs and a greater need for pastoral spending in the Church. I feel proud to belong to an Archdiocese where the Bishops have told the clergy repeatedly to spend the money of the Church on pastoral needs and on the poor. Paul recognized that his own life must be lived as a witness to the Ephesians so that his very manner of life becomes his legacy and testament.

Paul now knows it is time for him to depart for Jerusalem and as he declared earlier, he has a premonition of suffering and persecution that awaits him. He kneels down with the elders in prayer and there is much weeping. They all know this is the last time they will set eyes on Paul. Their hearts broken, they still hold on to his words. Paul is led to the ship that will take him to Jerusalem.

Thursday, May 25

## **BEDE THE VENERABLE**

**From the *Catholic News Agency* website**

The Catholic Church celebrates the feast of St. Bede on May 25. The English priest, monk, and scholar is sometimes known as “the Venerable Bede” for his combination of personal holiness and intellectual brilliance.

Bede was born during 673 near the English town of Jarrow. His parents sent him at a young age to study at a monastery founded by a Benedictine abbot who would later be canonized in his own right as St. Benedict Biscop. The abbot's extensive library may have sparked an early curiosity in the boy, who would grow up to be a voracious reader and prolific writer.

Later, Bede returned to Jarrow and continued his studies with an abbot named Ceolfrid, who was a companion of St. Benedict Biscop. The abbot and a group of other monks instructed Bede not only in scripture and theology, but also in sacred music, poetry and the Greek language.

Bede's tutors could see that his life demonstrated a remarkable devotion to prayer and study, and Ceolfrid made the decision to have him ordained a deacon when he was 19. Another Benedictine monk and future saint, the bishop John of Beverley, ordained Bede in 691.

He studied for 11 more years before entering the priesthood at the age of 30, around the beginning of the eighth century. Afterward, Bede took on the responsibility of celebrating daily Mass for the members of his Benedictine community, while also working on farming, baking, and other works of the monastery.

As a monk, Bede gave absolute priority to prayer, fasting and charitable hospitality. He regarded all other works as valueless without the love of God and one's neighbor. However, Bede also possessed astounding intellectual gifts, which he used to survey and master a wide range of subjects according to an all-encompassing vision of Christian scholarship.

Bede declined a request to become abbot of his monastery. Instead, he concentrated on writing, and produced more than 45 books – primarily about theology and the Bible, but also on science, literature, and history. He also taught hundreds of students at the monastery and its school, which became renowned throughout Britain.

During Bede's own lifetime, his spiritual and intellectual gifts garnered wide recognition. His writings on scripture were considered so authoritative that a Church council ordered them to be publicly read in English churches. Some of the most illustrious members of English society made pilgrimages to his monastery to seek his guidance, and he was personally invited to Rome by Pope Sergius.

Bede, however, was unfazed by these honors. Perhaps inspired by the Benedictine monastic ethos, which emphasizes one's absolute commitment to the monastic community, he chose not to visit Rome, or to travel any significant distance beyond the Monastery of Sts. Peter and Paul in Jarrow, during his entire adult life.

Instead, the world came to him – through the visitors he received, according to the Benedictine tradition of hospitality, and through his voluminous reading. And Bede, in turn, reached the world without leaving his monastery, writing books that were copied with reverence for centuries and are still read today. He is one of the last Western Christian writers to be numbered among the Church Fathers.

But Bede understood that love, rather than learning, was his life's purpose. “It is better,” he famously said, “to be a stupid and uneducated brother who, working at the good things he knows, merits life in heaven, than to be one who – though being distinguished for his learning in the Scriptures, or even holding the place of a teacher – lacks the bread of love.”

Bede died on the vigil of the feast of the Ascension of Christ in 735, shortly after finishing an Anglo-Saxon translation of the Gospel of John. Pope Leo XIII declared him a Doctor of the Church in 1899.

*Friday, May 26*

## **THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN JESUS AND PETER**

**From a morning meditation of Pope Francis on June 2, 2017**

“This dialogue between the Lord and Peter,” Pope Francis pointed out, “is a calm dialogue, between friends, a peaceful, subtle dialogue on the shore of the lake where Peter had been called at the beginning.” As the conversation unfolds, the Pope explained, Jesus uses words like “love, feed my sheep, follow me: peaceful words, words arising from the atmosphere of the resurrection” that “the Lord is carrying forth.” It is “a dialogue of friends and service, since it is taking place after the breakfast which Jesus himself prepared.” And it is a dialogue, the Pope continued, “in which Jesus, who is the Good Shepherd, entrusts his sheep to Peter.”

Thus, “it is a dialogue between friends.” And in fact Jesus asks Peter: “Do you love me? Love. And do you want to be my friend? Are you my friend?” This, the Pope continued, “is the atmosphere of this dialogue, of this page of the Gospel so clearly peaceful, so clearly subtle.”

Francis chose to “point out three things” about “this dialogue.” The first was the phrase, “follow me.” Jesus, the Holy Father explained, “chose the greatest sinner of the Apostles: the others had also run away, but this one denied him,” saying: “I do not know him.” And yet “Jesus asks him: ‘Do you love me more than these?’” Thus, the Pope affirmed, “Jesus chose the greatest of sinners.” In this regard, the Pope recalled, “There comes to my mind a dialogue between Jesus and a 17<sup>th</sup> century saint, a saint for whom Jesus had done many, many favours. It was a woman, a holy woman: ‘But Lord, to me who am so small, and so great a sinner.’ And the Lord said: ‘Had I found a greater sinner than you, I would have given it to him’.” Thus, the Pope continued, “The great sinner was chosen to tend the People of God, to ‘feed’ the People of God: it makes us think.”

The second point suggested by the Pope is “the word ‘love’” being used in this dialogue: “‘feed’, because you love me, ‘feed’, because you are my friend, ‘feed’”. And thus, “feed with love.” And “Peter takes this up in his first Letter: he has learned.” We should not “feed with our head held high, as a great dictator, no: feed with humility, with love, just as Jesus did.” And “this is the mission that Jesus gives to Peter: yes, with his sins, with his mistakes,” such that “right after this dialogue, Peter slips, makes a mistake: he is tempted by curiosity and he says to the Lord: ‘But this other disciple, where will he go, what will he do?’” It is “with love, amid his mistakes, his sins, but with love.” Because “these sheep are not your sheep, they are my sheep”, says the Lord.” Thus, “love: if you are my friend, you must be their friend”.

The third point that springs from the dialogue between Jesus and Peter is exemplified by “two images.” There is the one “from Holy Thursday,” the Pope explained, “when Peter, sure of himself, with that same self-assurance with which he had said: ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,’ then says to the servant of the High Priest: ‘I don’t know the man, I am not from his group’”. In other words, the Holy Father pointed out, “Peter denies Jesus and then their eyes meet: when Jesus goes out, He looks at him, and Peter, courageous, even courageous in his denial, is capable of weeping bitterly”. And “then after all of his life in service to the Lord,” Pope Francis added, “he ends up exactly like the Lord: on the cross. But he doesn’t boast,” saying: “I shall meet the same end as my Lord!” No, he asks: “please, hang me on the cross upside-down, because at least in this way all can see that I am not the Lord; I am his servant”.

“This is what we can take from this dialogue, so beautiful, so peaceful, so friendly, so subtle,” the Pope said. He then concluded by asking “that the Lord give us all the grace to go about in life with our ‘head down’; with our head held high with the dignity God gives us, but with our head down, knowing that we are sinners and that Jesus alone is Lord: we are servants.”

*Saturday, May 27*

## **THE CHARACTER OF ST AUGUSTINE OF CANTERBURY**

**From an article on St Augustine by Harold F. Bing**

Physically Augustine was tall and imposing. But was his moral character comparable to his physical? On this the evidence is conflicting and estimates have differed. Some, recognizing the greatness of Augustine's achievement, argue that it must have been the work of a man of outstanding moral and intellectual qualities. Others argue that he was a man of rather weak character and many failings, and that but for the continual encouragement, support and direction of Pope Gregory the Great, who knew Augustine well, he would have achieved little. What are the faults imputed to him?

First, that he lacked courage, the outstanding instance of which is his return to Rome from Provence in 596 for which he was severely reproved by Gregory. Secondly, that he was proud and haughty.

The chief evidence of Augustine's weakness, however, is to be found in Gregory's admonitory letter, warning him of the dangers of self-exaltation and presumption because of his success and particularly on account of the miracles he had performed. Part of Gregory's letter must be quoted: "I know, most loving brother, that Almighty God, by means of your affection, shows great miracles in the nation which He has chosen. Wherefore it is necessary that you rejoice with fear; you may rejoice that the souls of the English are by outward miracles drawn to inward grace ; but that you fear lest the weak mind be puffed up in its own presumption, and as it is externally raised to honour, it may thence inwardly fall by vainglory." Gregory concludes: "I say these things because I desire to prostrate the soul of my hearer in humility." It seems unlikely that Gregory would have written so strongly or at such length on this matter, if he had not been aware that Augustine was in fact liable to these weaknesses. But Augustine's human failings must not blind us to his real achievements.

We must try to see his whole work in true perspective and perhaps we cannot better conclude than by quoting the judgment of Sir Frank Stenton, an authority on Anglo-Saxon England. He says of Augustine :

"It is easy to emphasize the limitations of his success, his failure to conciliate the British clergy, and occasional signs of weakness in conduct, and to conclude that he was a man of meagre personality associated almost accidentally with a great historic movement. He certainly cannot be given a high place among the leading missionaries of the Dark Ages. There is no sign in his history of the strength and passion which distinguished Willibrord or Boniface. Without the advice and support of Gregory the Great he would have accomplished nothing. But no one who possessed Gregory's confidence should be dismissed as negligible by a modern writer, and Augustine's mission was faced with its own peculiar difficulties. Unlike later missionaries of Germanic stock he was attempting the conversion of a people whose culture he did not understand. In the background of his mission stood the hostile clergy of an ancient church suspicious of his ultimate designs and conscious of justification for refusing their help. Under the conditions which governed his activities it was a notable achievement to secure the establishment of Christianity in one English kingdom and to provide for the training of a clergy who would continue his work."

Augustine remains an outstanding figure as the founder of the English Church, in some ways a shadowy and uncertain figure, but nevertheless he stands out clearly as the first of that long line of archbishops of Canterbury whose succession continues to the present day.