

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

12-18 May

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- Sun. 12 **THE SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD  
NO ONE HAS EVER ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN  
EXCEPT THE ONE WHO DESCENDED FROM HEAVEN**  
From a Sermon by St. Augustine
- Mon. 13 **Monday of the 7<sup>th</sup> Week of Eastertide  
A CALL TO CHRISTIAN MATURITY IN FAITH**  
A Reflection taken from a Sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great
- Tues. 14 **The Feast of St. Matthias  
WHAT MATTHIAS AS AN APOSTLE TEACHES US**  
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Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis on Ascension Sunday 2021 –*Part 1*
- MONASTIC DESERT DAY**
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THE STRUGGLE TO PUT LOVE FIRST**  
A Reflection at the end of a Retreat made by St. Pope John XXIII
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Sunday

## **NO ONE HAS EVER ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN EXCEPT THE ONE WHO DESCENDED FROM HEAVEN**

**From a Sermon by St. Augustine**

"Today our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven; let our hearts ascend with him. Listen to the words of the Apostle: *If you have risen with Christ, set your hearts on the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God; seek the things that are above, not the things that are on earth.* For just as he remained with us even after his ascension, so we too are already in heaven with him, even though what is promised us has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies.

Christ is now exalted above the heavens, but he still suffers on earth all the pain that we, the members of his body, have to bear. He showed this when he cried out from above: *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* and when he said: *I was hungry and you gave me food.* Why do we on earth not strive to find rest with him in heaven even now, through the faith, hope and love that unites us to him?

While in heaven he is also with us; and we while on earth are with him. He is here with us by his divinity, his power and his love. We cannot be in heaven, as he is on earth, by divinity, but in him, we can be there by love.

He did not leave heaven when he came down to us; nor did he withdraw from us when he went up again into heaven. The fact that he was in heaven even while he was on earth is borne out by his own statement: *No one has ever ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven.* These words are explained by our oneness with Christ, for he is our head and we are his body. No one ascended into heaven except Christ because we also are Christ: he is the Son of Man by his union with us, and we by our union with him are sons of God.

So the Apostle says: *Just as the human body, which has many members, is a unity because all the different members make one body, so is it also with Christ.* He too has many members, but one body. Out of compassion for us, he descended from heaven, and although he ascended alone, we also ascend, because we are in him by grace. Thus, no one but Christ descended and no one but Christ ascended; not because there is no distinction between the head and the body, but because the body as a unity cannot be separated from the head."

Monday

## **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 lifeblood 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 the 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 at 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.

Tuesday

## WHAT MATTHIAS AS APOSTLE TEACHES US

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Romano Guardini

What makes one an apostle? It isn't a matter of having special talents, even special spiritual capacities! It isn't a matter of being what is described as "a great religious personality". Personal giftedness, spiritual creativity, dynamic faith and all such things are not the decisive marks of an apostle. People often think of St. Paul or St. John as exceptional individuals in various senses, but that doesn't make them apostles. If it were what would we make of the fact that Judas was an apostle?

If you consider all these facts in the light of what we know about Matthias it becomes clear that being an apostle is simply a matter of being called. What counts is that Jesus Christ has called and, in some way, placed the seal that is his choice upon a person. *"You have not chosen me but I have chosen you, and I have appointed you to go and bear fruit"*. An apostle is one who is sent by God!

What is an apostle's task? It is to bear witness to Christ. As St. Paul says, it won't be the apostle who speaks through deeds and words but Christ in the apostle. One has to be as much like Christ as possible—otherwise one becomes like Judas. One becomes like Christ by seeking only what Christ seeks. St. Paul makes a clear distinction between Christ's message and his own advice. The Lord's words constrain us to follow them, but an apostle's advice or even commands are only his own and don't *require* following them as we do Christ's.

To be nothing in oneself but everything in Christ, to be obliged to contain such tremendous contents in so small a vessel, to be a constant herald of a life that is not one's own is difficult. Something of the trials such a life involves dawns on us when we read about an apostle's work in the Acts of the Apostles.

Listen to Paul and apply the words to Matthias and to yourself. *"I think God has sent forth us apostles as though doomed to death and as a spectacle to the world, to angels and to humans. We are fools for Christ, we are weak, ...we are without honor, to this very hour we hunger and thirst and are naked and knocked about and have no fixed place to live. We work hard and with our own hands. If bad-mouthed we bless those who do it, if we are persecuted, we put up with it. When put down we ask for help gently. Indeed, we are the refuse of the world and its throw-aways, right up to the present."*

Would you want to be an apostle? You would need to love God and Christ far above self to want, let alone fulfill, the requirements of such a call. But, then, you are not asked. You are appointed an apostle. You are chosen even though you did not choose on your own.

The only appropriate response to God's calls is to trust in God and God's grace. That alone can enable one to show the living Christ in one's own living. That is how Christ draws people to himself through you. That is what we are reminded of when we gather to celebrate the choice of Matthias as an apostle. He teaches us what Christ has called each of us to do in a way that matches the life God gives us.

Wednesday

## THE MONK'S WAY TO GOD

### A reflection from The Instructions of St. Pachomius

My child, turn to God and love him. Flee the enemy and despise him. May the graces of God come your way and may you inherit the blessings of Judah, son of Jacob that your brethren may praise you. Keep away from pride, for it is the beginning of every evil. The beginning of pride is keeping your distance from God and hardening your heart following this. If the Lord loves you and gives you glory persevere in humility. Blessed is the one who is found watching for that one will enter the kingdom with gladness. The friends of the bridegroom will love him because they have found him keeping watch over his vineyard.

My child, be merciful in all things. Approach God as one who sows and into whose barn God's goods will be gathered. Don't pray for show but give up your whims and do what you do simply for God. If a passion arouses you, whether it is the love of money or jealousy or hatred or any other passion, watch out. Fight against these passions. May Jesus fight for you. Do not be fainthearted. Faintheartedness fills you with pretexts for laziness, mistrust and negligence until you are destroyed.

If you are in the desert, do battle by prayers, fasting, and mortification. If you are with people, be wise as a serpent and simple as a dove; if someone curses you put up with it cheerfully, hoping that God will bring about what is best for you. Do not yourself curse the image of God in others. If, on the other hand, someone praises you don't take delight in it but put your hope in the glory of Heaven.

My child, shun the satisfactions of this age so as to be happy in the age to come. Don't be negligent, letting the days pass until you arrive at the door to a dark place and in danger of death. Be sad only when you sin. Scorn vainglory. Vanity is the devil's own weapon. That was how Eve was fooled. No one wrote to her to warn her of this battle before she was tempted but that is why the Word became flesh of the Virgin. You have been warned by the saints who have gone before you. Become guileless like a sheep whose wool is sheared without it saying a thing. Don't go from one place to another thinking you will find God better there than where you are. God has said, *"I fill the earth and the heavens"*. Be aware, then, that God is within you. Wherever you are you dwell in God's law and commandments. Look, a thief was on the cross and entered paradise, but Judas was among the apostles and betrayed the Lord. In every place, then, seek out God and at every moment seek God's strength.

My child, as long as you are negligent there will be no progress for you. You stand where God's battle is being fought. Don't fall asleep because the devil lays ambushes. He whispers not to be concerned but if you listen you become weak and without strength. Watch out, then, and keep your promises in mind and don't let the devil cause you to neglect the counsels of the Spirit. You might forget the way to the City of God. Watch yourself, put up cheerfully with one who insults you, be merciful to all and don't fear the sufferings of the flesh. Flee to God, for it is God who created you and suffered for you. He will grant your requests if you carry your cross and follow your Lord.

Thursday

## **BE WITNESSES OF THE RISEN CHRIST AND HOPE OF HEAVEN Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis on Ascension Sunday 2021 –Part 1**

In the last hours of his life, Jesus prays. In those sorrowful moments, as he prepares to take leave of his disciples and this world, Jesus prays for his friends. Even though he bears in his heart and in his flesh all the sins of the world, Jesus continues to love us and pray for us. From his prayer, we learn how to deal with dramatic and painful moments in our own lives. Let us think about one particular word that Jesus uses in his prayer to Father: it is the word “*keep*”. ... What we are being called to keep?

In the first place, *to keep the faith*. We need to keep the faith lest we yield to grief or plunge into the despair of those who no longer see a way out. In the Gospel, John tells us that Jesus, before uttering a word, “looked up to heaven” (Jn 17:1). In these, the final hours of his life, Jesus is weighed down by anguish at the prospect of his passion, conscious of the dark night he is about to endure, feeling betrayed and abandoned. Yet in the same moment, he looks up to heaven. Jesus lifts his eyes to God. He does not resign himself to evil; he does not let himself be overwhelmed by grief; he does not retreat into the bitterness of the defeated and disappointed; instead, he looks to heaven. This was the same advice he had given his disciples: when Jerusalem is invaded by armies, and people are fleeing in dismay amid fear and devastation, he tells them to “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Lk 21:28). To keep the faith is to keep our gaze lifted up to heaven, as here on earth, battles are fought and innocent blood is shed. To keep the faith is to refuse to yield to the logic of hatred and vengeance, but to keep our gaze fixed on the God of love, who calls us to be brothers and sisters to one another.

Prayer leads us to trust in God even in times of difficulty. It helps us to hope when things seem hopeless and it sustains us in our everyday struggles. Prayer is not a retreat, an escape, in the face of problems. Instead, it is the only weapon at our disposal for keeping love and hope alive amid the weapons of death. It is not easy to lift our gaze when we are hurting, but faith helps us resist the temptation to turn in on ourselves. We may want to protest, to cry out to God in our pain. We should not be afraid to do so, for this too is prayer. An elderly woman once said to her grandchildren: “Being angry with God can also be a form of prayer”; the wisdom of the just and the simple, who know when to lift up their eyes in difficult moments... At times it is a prayer that God hears more than others, since it comes from a wounded heart and the Lord always hears the cry of his people and dries their tears. Dear brothers and sisters, keep looking up to heaven. Keep the faith!

Second, *to keep unity*. Jesus asks the Father to preserve the unity of his disciples, so that they may be “completely one” (Jn 17:21), one family in which love and fraternity reign. He knew what was in the heart of his disciples; he had seen them argue at times about who was the greatest, who should be in charge. This is a deadly disease: the disease of division. We experience it in our hearts because we are divided within; we experience it in families and communities, among peoples, even in the Church. Sins against unity abound: envy, jealousy, the pursuit of personal interests rather than the common good, and the tendency to judge others. Those little conflicts of ours find a reflection in great conflicts, like the one your country is experiencing these days.

Friday

## THE STRUGGLE TO PUT LOVE FIRST

### A Reflection at the end of a Retreat made by St. Pope John XXIII

My retreat master suggested to me to reflect on the Gospel episode of the miraculous catch of fish ending in the dialogue between Jesus and Peter, ending with the command "Feed my lambs"! There is great authority in these words, investing the first pope in his task as universal shepherd. It is to be an answer to the thrice-repeated assurance of love for Jesus who has deigned to ask for it with gentle insistence. It is love, then, that matters. Jesus asks Peter for it and Peter assures Jesus of it.

Peter's successor knows that in in his person and in all that he does there is the grace and the law of love. It sustains, inspires and adorns everything. In the eyes of the whole world, it is this mutual love between Jesus and Peter that is the foundation of the Holy Church, a foundation which is at the same time visible and invisible, Jesus being invisible to the eyes of the flesh and the Pope being visible to the whole world. When I ponder this mystery of intimate love I think what an honor and a joy it is for me, but at the same time what a reason for shame for my own littleness and worthlessness.

My life must be filled with the love of Jesus and with a great outpouring of goodness and sacrifice for individual souls and the whole world. Jesus foretold this to Peter: "*When you are old you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go*". I have not yet entered upon helpless old age, but having completed eighty years I am on the threshold. O Jesus, I am ready to stretch out my hands, now weak and trembling, and allow others to dress and support me along the way. After so many graces, showered upon me during my long life, there is nothing now that I can refuse. You have shown me the way, O Jesus, I will follow you wherever you go, to sacrifice, to mortification, to death.

Oh, what joy I feel in concluding the last notes of my retreat with the hymn which Holy Church dedicates to the most holy and august Trinity: "O holy Trinity, your suppliant servants spare. Grant to us to rise to heaven for Joseph's sake and prayer. And so our grateful hearts to you shall every raise exulting canticles of praise. Amen."

*Saturday*

## **BE WITNESSES OF THE RISEN CHRIST AND HOPE OF HEAVEN Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis on Ascension Sunday 2021 –Part 2**

Once partisan interests and the thirst for profit and power take over, conflicts and divisions inevitably break out. The final appeal that Jesus makes before his Passover is an appeal for unity. For division is of the devil, the great divider and the great liar who always creates division.

We are called to keep unity, to take seriously this heartfelt plea of Jesus to the Father: to be completely one, to be a family, to find the courage to live in friendship, love and fraternity. What great need we have, especially today, for fraternity! I know that some political and social situations are bigger than we are. Yet commitment to peace and fraternity always comes from below: each person, in little things, can play his or her part. Each of you can make an effort to be, in little things, a builder of fraternity, a sower of fraternity, someone who works to rebuild what is broken rather than fomenting violence. We are also called to do this as a Church; let us promote dialogue, respect for others, care for our brothers and sisters, communion! We cannot allow a partisan way of thinking to enter into the Church, a way of thinking that divides, that puts each individual in first place while casting others aside. This is very destructive: it destroys the family, the Church, the society and everyone of us.

Finally, and third, we are called *to keep the truth*. Jesus asks the Father to consecrate his disciples in truth as they will be sent throughout the world to carry on his mission. Keeping the truth does not mean defending ideas, becoming guardians of a system of doctrines and dogmas, but remaining bound to Christ and being devoted to his Gospel. Truth, for the apostle John, is Christ himself, the revelation of the Father's love. Jesus prays that his disciples, although living in the world, will not follow the criteria of this world. They are not to let themselves be enticed by idols, but to keep their friendship with him; they are not to bend the Gospel to human and worldly ways of thinking, but to preserve his message in its integrity. To keep the truth means to be a prophet in every situation in life, in other words to be consecrated to the Gospel and bear witness to it even when that means going against the current. At times, we Christians want to compromise, but the Gospel asks us to be steadfast in the truth and for the truth, offering our lives for others. Amid war, violence and hatred, fidelity to the Gospel and being peacemakers calls for commitment, also through social and political choices, even at the risk of our lives. Only in this way can things change. The Lord has no use for the lukewarm. He wants us to be consecrated in the truth and the beauty of the Gospel so that we can testify to the joy of God's kingdom even in the dark night of grief, even when evil seems to have the upper hand.

Dear brothers and sisters, today I wish to lay upon the Lord's altar the sufferings of his people and to join you in praying that God will convert all hearts to peace. Jesus' prayer helps us keep the faith, even in times of difficulty, to be builders of unity and to risk our lives for the truth of the Gospel. Please, do not lose hope: even today, Jesus is interceding before the Father, he stands before the Father in his prayer. He shows the Father, in his prayer, the wounds with which he paid for our salvation. In this prayer Jesus intercedes for all of us, praying that the Father will keep us from the evil one and set us free from evil's power.