

THE TIME

REDEMPTIVE

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LIVING TO GOD—
The Easter Season.

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Pamphlets on the Liturgical Year

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Living to God

The Easter Season

by

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(With Study-Club Questions)



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Introduction

Every practicing Catholic is aware of the holy season of Lent and feels an obligation to do something to observe it. But our Christian life cannot attain its proper fullness and maturity until we also observe the holy season of Eastertime. Easter is the culmination of Lent which prepares us for it. This is the season of joy, and we need to learn how to "rejoice in the Lord." It is also the season in which we come to know the Risen Christ and to see that He is the same Jesus who walked our earth, but who now lives in a new way which makes Him able to be our life and to send us the life-giving Spirit.

During these weeks, the Church forms us in the manner by which Jesus formed the Apostles, through the forty days of His pres-

ence with them, living His risen life but still visible on earth; through the nine days of prayer while they waited to be "filled with power from on high"; and, finally through the coming of the Spirit on the fiftieth day in wind and fire to inaugurate the mission of the Church to the world. This season which begins with the renewal of the grace of baptism ends with that of the grace of confirmation.

"Rejoice to God, All the Earth, Alleluia"

We have already seen that Our Lord's redeeming work is the true Exodus, the true Pasch, foreshadowed by the first Exodus of the Jews from Egypt and taking place at the time of the Passover celebration. The weeks of the Easter season are one continual Paschal celebration, lasting through eight Sundays instead of eight days, and concluded by the feast of Pentecost which took place at the time of the Jewish feast commemorating the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai.¹

¹ To the mind of the ancients, fifty was a perfect number, made up of seven sevens with one more for completion. The fifty days between the Passover and Pentecost therefore were like one great day. When this symbolism was lost sight of, the feast of Pentecost was given its octave, like other great feasts.

As Mass-chants during this season, therefore, the Church takes psalms celebrating God's great deliverance of His people. Psalm 117, used in every Mass of Easter week and also during the season, is the great song of Christ's triumph. Here, as in the psalms of Passiontime, we are to understand Christ as the chief speaker, He who has triumphed over His enemies by the Lord's power; we are the joyful chorus celebrating His victory. "This is the day the Lord has made, let us be glad and rejoice therein."

Psalm 65 is also frequently used—a psalm of the deliverance of God's people "through fire and water" to final triumph. This is our song, the song of the new people of God whom He has brought through the new Exodus of baptism to Christ's freedom.

Psalm 80 (Low Sunday) is a Passover chant.

Psalm 32 (Introit of 2nd Sunday) calls us to rejoice in the "plan of God's heart," the plan of redemption which makes the "whole world overflow with God's goodness."

Psalms 97 (5th Sunday), 95, 46 and 67 (Ascension and Pentecost) are chants that may have been first composed to celebrate the enthronement of the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple, a foreshadowing of the triumph of Christ in His glorification. Above all, the

Church continually repeats the one word "alleluia," meaning "praise Yahweh!", a holy shout of joy, a prayer of praise to the God who reveals Himself to His people and redeems them.

"The Victory That Overcomes the World, Our Faith"

In the ancient Church, the Sunday after Easter was the first day on which the newly baptized, having taken off their special white robes the day before, joined the ranks of "ordinary Christians." The Epistle and Gospel, therefore, stress the primary requisite of the Christian life—faith. In both passages, St. John brings out the primary object of Christian faith: "that Jesus is the Son of God." "My Lord and my God!"

The faith that is meant here is not mere assent to the abstract proposition, "proved" by arguments, that Jesus is true God and that He truly rose from the dead. It is a vital belief in the God who so loves the world as to send His Son to take our nature, to suffer and die and be raised to glory in that nature, to draw us into His life and make us "sons in the Son." This faith means, as the Epistle tells us, that we consent to believe the witness God gave His Son through His passion

and glorification and the sending of the Spirit, the witness that He gives us now in the sacraments of the Church. For these, particularly baptism and the Eucharist, at once proclaim Christ dead and risen again and unite us with Him in faith, hope and love.

“Following in His Footsteps”

The Epistles of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Sundays of Easter continue to bring out the basic requirements of the Christian life into which we have been newly inducted by the Paschal renewal of the grace of baptism. We are now, liturgically, starting to live the Christian life again, with all the joy and freshness of a new beginning. On the second Sunday, St. Peter tells us that we are to follow Christ's example. As He laid down His life so that we could die to sin and live to holiness, so we are to lay down our lives to bring others back to Him, “the shepherd who cares for our souls.”

On the 3rd Sunday, St. Peter tells us that we are to be “like strangers and exiles”—to estrange ourselves from everything in ourselves and our world which is foreign to Christ's life. We have to act in such a Christ-like way that our neighbors can tell from observing our actions what the Christian life

really is. (The Greek word for “observing” was, scholars tell us, the current term for the process of initiation into the secrets of the mystery-religions.) Our neighbors are to be “initiated” into the secrets of the Christian life by seeing our good acts, so thoroughly initiated that they will be ready to welcome God and praise Him when His grace is offered them. Here is material, indeed, for an Eastertime examination of conscience!

On the 4th and 5th Sundays, St. James tells us how we should act as God’s children whom He, giver of every good gift and “Father of all that gives light,” has begotten by the “word of truth.” We are, therefore, to discipline ourselves so that we shall not be giving bad gifts to our neighbor—anger, irritation, ill-will—and we do so by cherishing the Word implanted in us, the Word which is Christ. But we must be doers of this Word and not merely hearers. We are to find in Christ the “perfect law of liberty”; we are to look closely into it so that we will come to be like what we see, and then go and act accordingly.

For many of us, it will mean a real “conversion” to think of our Christian life as a life of freedom from constraint. For many reasons (not by any means our own fault), most of us unfortunately have grown up to

think of it as a life of restraint, of things we have to do or not do. One of the great lessons of Lent, Holy Week and Eastertime is that we have been freed from slavery to sinfulness and selfishness; we have been made free to love God and one another with His own love. We are to live as free children of God who will do His will because they want to, because it is their will as being His. The commandments and prescriptions of God and the Church are not meant to be constraining, except in the sense of showing us where we would cease to "walk in the Spirit." The "great commandments" and Christ's new command are wholly positive—to love.

"The Disciples Were Glad When They Saw the Lord"

In the Gospels of this season, our Lord Himself introduces us into the mystery of His risen life. As the Gospel for Low Sunday says plainly, Christ is not a spirit but a real man, a whole human body-soul composite. Yet He comes and goes like a spirit; He has a spirit's freedom from all the limitations of our psycho-physical nature. He is the same Christ who lived on earth as we do, but now His human nature is completely refashioned by the Spirit, charged with the freedom and

power of the Spirit and able to communicate the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins.

This glorified Christ is still present with us. In the Gospel accounts, His Easter appearances to His disciples seem to be the visible manifestations of a continuous presence, inaugurating His new mode of presence with the Church through the ages, while anticipating the life of heaven where we shall see Him always. During Eastertime then, we are to be "glad when we see the Lord," glad that we see Him by faith. For we are those whom He called blessed because we have not seen Him with our bodily eyes and yet have learned to believe in Him, our Lord and God.

"I Know Mine and Mine Know Me"

The second Sunday after Easter is called "Good Shepherd" Sunday because both the Epistle and Gospel show our Lord as the shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep, the shepherd who is continually present with His sheep, caring for them, feeding them and guiding them.

In the Old Testament, Yahweh frequently called Himself the "shepherd of Israel"; He promised to gather His flock together again after their dispersal into exile, to feed and

care for them as of old. When our Lord called Himself the Good Shepherd, He showed Himself to be God, now fulfilling His promises.

In this image of the shepherd and the sheep, He shows us the infinite difference between Himself and us. But in the same breath, He shows us the amazing personal intimacy we are to have with Him. We are to be known by Him and to know Him as He is known by the Father—a closeness of knowledge and love and intimacy beyond all human images. It is to such intimacy that He calls each of us and all His “other sheep” not yet in the fold. This intimacy is possible because Christ’s human nature now shares in the complete self-givingness of the Spirit. His presence is no longer limited by time and space; we can be “joined to the Lord so as to be one spirit” with Him. And this intimacy enables us to become like Him. We are to follow His example, laying down our lives for others as He died for us.

“Your Joy No Man Shall Take from You”

The Gospels from the 3rd Sunday through Pentecost are all taken from the chapters of St. John called the “discourse at the Last Supper.” On the 3rd Sunday after Easter, our

Lord repeats that in a little while the Apostles will not see Him, and after a little while they will see Him again, because He is going to the Father. Then they will be glad with a joy that no man can take from them.

In the context of the Last Supper, the little while when they did not see Him was the time of His Passion and death. They saw Him again at the resurrection, and their joy was not taken away by His ascension into heaven, for the removal of His visible presence meant His far more intimate presence with them in the Church.

But our Lord often refers to two interconnected realities in the same phrase. Here, since we see Him present with us here on earth by faith and not yet by sight, this “little while” when we do not see Him means also the time of our earthly life and of the life of the Church on earth, at the end of which we will rejoice in seeing Him for all eternity. Yet even now our joy is to be full and one that no one can take from us (“Who can separate us from the love of Christ?”) This is the primal Christian joy—the presence of the Risen Christ with us in the Church.

“I Will Send Him to You”

On the 4th Sunday after Easter, Our Lord

begins to speak to us about the Holy Spirit whom He will send us from the Father. During Jesus' life on earth, He was a "Paraclete" to His Apostles — their counsellor, consoler, strengthener, their advocate with the Father, their defender against God's enemies. When He has made His way to the Father, He will send the very Spirit of God to take His place, but from within.

It will be the Spirit, working in and through those whom Christ sends as He Himself was sent by the Father, who will show the world that sin finally consists in refusing Christ; that Christ, now at the Father's right hand, is truly the Lord, the source of all "justice," life and salvation; that by His death and resurrection the "prince of this world" has already been judged and condemned. It will be the Spirit who will teach the Apostles all truth, opening out to them the meaning of what Christ has revealed and done.

"Ask and You Shall Receive"

In the Gospel for the 5th Sunday, our Lord tells us, "If you ask the Father for anything in My Name, He will give it to you . . . ask and receive that your joy may be full." Here is the charter, so to speak, of Christian prayer.

We are to feel free to ask the Father for anything in the Name of His beloved Son; He will give us His best gifts for the asking, and translate our mistaken prayers into prayers for these gifts. His purpose in granting or refusing some specific prayer is the same: that our joy may be full, that His purpose of love be fulfilled in us.

“And Now, Father, Exalt Me at Your Side”

The Mass for the Vigil of the Ascension prepares us to understand the true meaning of the feast. For our Lord’s “going up to heaven” was simply the visible manifestation of what had already taken place—the glorification of His human nature at the right hand of God. His resurrection from the dead and His complete glorification are all one act of God’s power; He had already “ascended” when He appeared to His disciples on the first Easter. His visible ascension shows us in terms of time and space that He has now “placed at the right hand of the Father’s glory the substance of our frail human nature united to Himself” (*Communicantes*). After the forty days of Eastertime, our Lord was seen “going up” to heaven—how else could His going beyond the conditions of earthly life be visibly indicated? Yet we should not

think of His present state as being "up." It is "other," and we need not confuse our imaginations by giving it a cosmological "where."

This complete glorification is what our Lord asks of His Father in His priestly prayer pronounced before His Passion and death, given in the Gospel of Ascension Eve. Here He shows us the whole scope of His redeeming work—to bring us to the knowledge of the Father and of His Son which is eternal life. We are the Father's gift to Christ; we are still in this world through sharing His life—and His life is one with that of the Father.

St. Paul tells us in the Epistle of the Vigil that Christ "rose high above all the heavens in order to fill all creation with His presence." He did not ascend to be farther from us, but to take on the higher mode of existence which would enable Him to be nearer us, to make us into His Body, the Church, to be the source of its life and growth, "to give us a share in His divinity" (Preface).

And so, in the Epistle and Gospel of the feast, our Lord's ascension is directly associated with the mission of the Church. "You are to be witnesses to me to the ends of the earth." "Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature." And this mis-

sion is in turn connected with Christ's visible return in glory. "This Jesus who was taken from you into heaven will come back as you have seen Him going into heaven."

This feast brings home to us the paradox of the Christian life. We are to "live in the heavenly places" with Christ (Collect), and yet to be about His work on earth, preparing for the day when He will take us all, body and soul, to share the glory that is His in His Father's house.

"Persevering in Prayer with Mary. . . ."

The nine days between the Ascension and Pentecost form, of course, the original novena, first kept by the Apostles and Mary and the other disciples, waiting in Jerusalem until they were "imbued with power from on high." Whatever other novenas we make during the year, we should always make this one, in our parishes and our houses, asking for the new and fuller coming of the Spirit on the whole Church and on ourselves, for a renewal of the graces of Pentecost and of our own confirmation. "O Lord Jesus Christ, who today ascended in triumph over all the heavens, do not leave us orphans, but send us the Promise of the Father, the Spirit of truth, alleluia" (Antiphon at Vespers).

“Come, Holy Spirit”

But, if we are really to desire the Gift of the Spirit, we need to realize more clearly Who and what He is, as the Scriptures reveal Him to us.

In the thought of the Old and New Testaments, “spirit” means aliveness in all its positive aspects; power, freedom, vitality, glory. The word in Hebrew, as in Latin and Greek, comes from the root meaning “breath,” for the breath of a living creature is what most clearly shows that it is alive. God is supremely “Spirit,” not because “He has no body,” but because He is infinitely removed from the limitations of a body; He is supremely alive, powerful, free, glorious, creative of life. And so the Holy Spirit is God’s “breath,” His very vitality, freedom and creative power. The Spirit hovers over the primeval waters to make them fruitful. Psalm 103, used in the Pentecost liturgy, sings, “Send forth Your Spirit and they shall be created, and You shall renew the face of the earth.”

The Spirit is associated with the fire and tempest and shining cloud that visibly manifested God’s presence in the burning bush on Mt. Sinai, at the dedication of Solomon’s Temple, in the prophets’ visions. At the In-

carnation, the Spirit “overshadowed” Mary to make her the Mother of God; at our Lord’s transfiguration, a shining cloud enveloped Him. And it was in wind and fire that the Spirit came down on the apostles on Pentecost.

In Scripture the Spirit is also associated with water—as hovering over the waters in Genesis, as pictured by the dove sent out by Noah at the flood and by the shining cloud, at once fire and water, of Exodus. We observe this in prophecies, too, especially Ezechiel quoted in the Introit of Pentecost Eve: “I will pour clean water over you and cleanse you from all your stains and I will breathe into you a new spirit.”

In the New Testament, the dove is present at Christ’s baptism in the Jordan; our Lord tells the Samaritan woman about the “living water” He will give. At the great festival, He cries out, “If anyone thirst, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture says, (of the Messiah) ‘From within him there shall flow rivers of living water.’” St. John adds, “This He said of the Spirit who was not yet given because Jesus had not been glorified.” And, in the Apocalypse, the Spirit is the river of life flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, the river of

Ezechiel's vision which would sanctify the holy city and go out from there to make the whole earth fruitful.

Above all, in the Old Testament, the Spirit was given to those whom God entrusted with some special mission — priests, kings and prophets. The promised Servant of Yahweh was to have the Spirit resting on him, to be “anointed” with the Spirit, receiving in fullness what we call the “seven gifts of the Holy Spirit,” to carry out his universal mission of salvation. And the prophet Joel, quoted by St. Peter on Pentecost Sunday, had foreseen the time when the Spirit would not be limited to a few chosen persons, but “be poured out on all flesh.” This is what is fulfilled in the Church through the ages, in different ways in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and orders.

Our Lord's final revelation, then, is that the Spirit of God is what we call a Person, a “who” and not merely a “what”—a Person who was to be their Paraclete, with them always, leading them into all truth, giving witness to Christ and enabling them to give witness. And, He said, His reason for “making His way to the Father” through His Passion and death was precisely to send them the Spirit.

“The Gift of God Most High”

In the light of God's revelation, we begin to see why the Spirit is *the* Gift, the supreme Gift of God to men, reserved to these “last times” after Christ's Incarnation and glorification. The Spirit is the very breath of God's life, breathed into us at baptism to make us alive with God's own life, as He first “breathed on Adam and made him a living soul.” God's life is not an abstraction; it is the fiery, tempestuous, outpouring glory of His holiness and love, giving us “grace,” to permeate and transform and vitalize our whole human selves with the aliveness of God's own life.

We can dimly see also why the Spirit could not be poured out on men before Christ's death and glorification. Mankind was estranged from God! We could not turn to Him and return by ourselves. The Son of God had to take on our nature so that mankind in Him, the new Adam, would once more completely turn to God, and return to Him through a free and loving acceptance of the conditions of our fallen nature. Now that He has returned to the Father, now that His human nature is fully charged with the Spirit whom He always possessed, He can communicate the Spirit to men who are

united with Him by faith and baptism. We have to be one with Christ in order to receive the Spirit, for in Christ our human nature is already “inspired.”

And so the Spirit comes to us as “the Spirit of Christ,” poured out on us through the human nature of the Son of God. “From His heart will flow streams of living water.” Here, once again, we see how fully human and fully divine is God’s plan for our salvation. The Spirit does not come to us as something alien, but as the Spirit of the glorified human Christ, the New Man, in whom we are all to become sons of God.

The Gospel for Pentecost Sunday develops this mystery of our life in God. If we keep Christ’s word, He and the Father will come and abide with us. It is the indwelling Spirit who will teach us what this presence means. For He is uncreated Love, and He pours the love of God into our hearts—the very current of love that unites the Persons of the Blessed Trinity.²

² The Sequence of Pentecost brings together these attributes of the Holy Spirit. Following the Fathers, it also calls Him the “finger of God’s right hand.” God’s right hand, so frequently mentioned in Scripture, is His Son, His Word, and the Spirit is the finger through which Father and Son directly work on us, forming us to the image of Christ and engraving the Law of God in our hearts.

“I Am Come to Cast Fire on the Earth”

In the Epistles of Pentecost Week, we see the Holy Spirit at work in the early days of the Church, while the Gospels of this week bring out various aspects of the work of Christ now continued on earth through the Church, by the power of the Spirit. Christian tradition associates the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit on the infant Church with His coming down on Christ at His baptism in the Jordan at the beginning of His public life, and with the coming of the Spirit to us at confirmation. We receive the Spirit at baptism to make us “sons in the Son”; but we receive a new outpouring of the Spirit at confirmation to send us out to others, giving us the strength of prophets and witnesses, that is, martyrs.

We can see from the accounts in the *Acts* what the effects of this new gift of the Spirit are to be—praise of the wonderful works of God and public proclamation of these works, of the “Good News of Jesus Christ.” Many of us could find more opportunities than we do to carry out our mission as confirmed Christians by proclaiming the Good News to our own children, or by taking part in the work of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. In any case, we are all called to give

public witness, by our lives and actions, to the reality of God's love given us in Christ and poured into our hearts by the Spirit. For it is desperately necessary today that those outside and inside the visible Church come to realize Christianity, not as something to make people tame, respectable, "adjusted," but as "fire on the earth"—the fire that our Lord came to cast upon earth and that He longs to have kindled to a mighty flame.

On Pentecost and during the octave we may well pray for a renewal of the grace of our confirmation, and for a renewal of the graces of Pentecost for the whole Church. This is the hope that the Holy Father expressed for the Council—the wonder of a new Pentecost; this is the hope we should all be voicing to God and striving to make a reality in our own lives. "Send forth Your Spirit and they shall be created, and You shall renew the face of the earth."

Study-Club Questions

1. How might the Easter season be made real as Lent in modern Catholic life?
2. Why do so few people think of making the Pentecost novena to the Holy Spirit?
3. What can each of us do to cultivate Chris-

tian joy, not the irritating cheerfulness which sometimes passes for the real thing?

Suggestions for Reading

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