

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

May 2009

The following series is **free, downloadable small-group materials** based on each week's Mass readings and taking into account the seasons of the liturgical year. Each study provides an introductory reflection on some aspect of the readings or on personal spirituality. Each of the readings is provided along with a few questions designed to engage the heart and stimulate the group's discussion. These small-group materials will be provided on a continuing basis in monthly segments.

We would suggest the following 60-to-90 minute format for the small group:

1. Open with a moment of quiet reflection and prayer.
2. Discuss the introductory reflection with a question or comment like, "What do you feel is important for us to grasp in this introduction?" or "What stood out to you from these opening paragraphs?" As the facilitator of the discussion be ready to share one or two things which were important to you from the introduction.
3. Have someone read the First Reading and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions. **Effective group-dynamic techniques should be used to further stimulate the discussion and affirm the participation.**
4. The Responsorial Psalm provides a reflective transition from the First Reading to the Gospel Reading, so have the Psalm read aloud. You may do this without additional comment, or you may want to draw their attention to something you feel is pertinent.
5. You can either read this week's Second Reading next and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions, or cover the Second Reading after you cover the Gospel Reading. The Second Reading does not always have a clear connection to the other Sunday Mass readings, **so do not feel like you need to force a connection.** However, you can provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to draw a connection by asking, "How do you see this passage tying into the theme of the readings?"
6. Move on to the Gospel Reading, repeating the process by asking several people to share their answers to the reflection questions.
7. Approximately equal time for discussion should be given to each of the sections: Introduction, First Reading, Gospel Reading, and the Second Reading. Obviously, if one section is especially stimulating, you should give some additional time to discussing it.
8. Close the discussion with group prayer, using various prayer formats.

We trust that God will use these materials to make His Word more meaningful to you, both within the small group environment and during Mass as you hear the Scripture is read and taught. **We would appreciate knowing if you are using the *Reflecting on Sunday's Readings*, and would welcome your feedback, either through the Emmaus Journey web page form, or by direct e-mail.**

Sincerely in Christ,

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Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER—May 3, 2009

Introduction: Many of us in the baby-boomer generation can recall learning, and reciting from memory, the Twenty-third Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” Though thousands memorized this wonderful psalm it is doubtful how many actually gave any consideration as to what it meant to have Jesus as our shepherd. This week’s Gospel reading, and the verses from John 10:1-21, begin to open up for us the significance of Jesus as shepherd.

For the most part shepherds were not particularly esteemed in the time of Jesus’ life and ministry. As this passage indicates there were many that were hirelings, irresponsible and unreliable, especially in the face of danger. But by communicating this simple allegory Jesus elevates the role of shepherd to something significant which we are to emulate.

Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd which is in contrast to the evil shepherd. The evil shepherd takes his responsibility for the sheep lightly, and puts his own interests ahead of the sheep’s well being. Whereas Jesus takes this responsibility as shepherd very seriously, even to the point of dying to save the sheep. He is devoted to their care and protection.

By contrast the hireling does not own the sheep, he does not know the sheep individually, and does not love the sheep, therefore he has no qualms about abandoning the sheep in the face of peril. Jesus on the other hand owns the sheep, having bought us with his own blood. We are his prized possession. He also knows us individually and calls us each by name. In this intimacy of knowing and being known personally by Jesus there is great assurance and peace. In addition he loves us with an everlasting love, even as the Father loves us. Consequently, he brings all of his resources to bear to sustain our life and relationship with him. That is why in the parable of the lost sheep the shepherd is so intent on finding the one that is lost, because he knows the lost sheep personally and loves it deeply.

It is also important to note that the sheep respond differently to the Good Shepherd than they do to the hireling. The hireling they do not know, whereas Jesus they know. Some of us have been born into a Catholic Christian home and have grown up with a vicarious relationship with Jesus based on the faith of our parents. When a vicarious relationship is the sum and substance of our faith we often cannot say that we “know” Jesus the Good Shepherd. For those of us who fall in this category it is imperative that we personally embrace Jesus as our Savior. “This is crucial: we must be converted—and we must continue to be converted! We must let the Holy Spirit change our lives! We must respond to Jesus Christ.”* This conversion will enable us to be ever more confident in our relationship with him.

When Jesus speaks the sheep listen to him. This passage implies that the Good Shepherd is desirous of communicating with us, but also that we need to listen to him. Very simply this means that when we hear the Scripture read, read them ourselves, pray, or listen to the Scripture proclaimed we should not simply listen with our ears, but endeavor to have our heart attuned, asking, “What is Jesus saying to us?”

Having heard his voice the sheep follow him wherever he goes, obeying his voice. As his followers this is where our faith becomes alive. It remains no longer simply an intellectual tenet of faith, but becomes a belief that we act upon. Faith and obedience are really one in the same. If you look at Hebrews 11 where is listed an honor roll of faith filled believers, you will find that these heroes’ faith is always expressed by obedient behavior. Our faith becomes alive and vibrant only as we follow the Good Shepherd and respond to his leading in loving obedience. Only then do the truths of Psalms 23 become a reality for us.

* *Go and Make Disciples*, published by the National Council of Catholic Bishops.

First Reading — Acts 4:8-12

⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a cripple, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. ¹²And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

1. How do you respond to Peter's statement that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"?
2. Explain why this must be true. (A helpful reference is *Mission of the Redeemer*, paragraph 5)

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 29

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures for ever! ... ⁸It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to put confidence in man. ⁹It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to put confidence in princes. ...
²¹I thank thee that thou hast answered me and hast become my salvation. ²²The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. ²³This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. ...
²⁶Blessed be he who enters in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD. ...
²⁹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever!

Second Reading — 1 John 3:1-2

¹See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

3. Children usually manifest some characteristics of their parents. As a child of God which characteristics of the Father would you like to see become prominent in your life?
4. What is the most outstanding benefit of being God's child?

Gospel Reading — John 10:11-18

¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father."

5. Who are the "other sheep" to whom Jesus was referring? What "fold" was he referring to?
6. What helps you to listen to his voice?
7. What new thing have you learned about Jesus from this passage?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER—May 10, 2009

Introduction: Any of us who have ever gardened realize the significance of Jesus' allegory about the vine in this week's Gospel reading. Nothing can be more disheartening than to labor for weeks and months in anticipation of reaping the fruit of your labors, only to find that the seemingly healthy plant is failing to produce any fruit. We will go to great lengths inquiring about a remedy for the problem of a plant that doesn't produce. Why? Because the whole purpose of cultivating the plant is to enjoy its fruit. On the other hand when we have a plant that is highly productive we go out of our way to show off its fruit to others. We enjoy some degree of glory from the healthy fruit our plant produces. So in the allegory, Jesus is communicating that bearing fruit is included in his purpose for us and critical to our purpose of glorifying the Father.

The questions immediately come to mind, "About what kind of fruit is Jesus speaking? Is it the fruit of godly character or the fruit of new believers?" We know from Galatians 5 that character, love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self control, is the fruit of the Spirit. Could this be what Jesus is referring to since it is the result of his life dwelling in us? Fruit by its nature is the reproductive element of the plant. The nature of fruit is that it contains the seeds that produce new plants. So, it is quite possible that Jesus is also talking about the ability to see Christ's life in us reproduced in others, i.e.: the spread of the Gospel from person to person. And in reality, it is as non-believers see Christ's life reproduced in our words, attitudes, and actions, that they are attracted to the faith.

Jesus in his wisdom did not lay on us the responsibility to produce fruit, but rather to remain in a relationship with him in which the Spirit could produce fruit in our lives. Fruit is the excessive life of the plant, its overabundance and vitality. If a plant only receives enough nourishment to survive it will not produce fruit. On the other hand if a plant is robust with health this extra nourishment is channeled into the production of fruit. Jesus knows that this kind of life comes through him, and so he does not put the stress on being fruitful but rather on the need to remain intimately attached to him, living our life in union with him, and allowing his life to permeate us. This is from where spiritual vitality and fruit come.

Abiding in Christ need not be a complicated thing. Jesus was in fact talking to simple, ordinary, people just like us. The word "abide" means to continue dwelling in a relationship. When we become believers we are indwelt by Christ, we enter into a new relationship of dependence and grace, wherein all that is needed for life and godliness (1 Peter 1:3) comes through him. Jesus is reminding us to continue to dwell in union with him, and as we do his life will increasingly permeate our lives. The need is to simply deal with those things in life that distract us from him as they arise, through confession and rededication. As we do we are constantly restored to that dwelling place in him.

"...for the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one's neighbor with limitless zeal."^{*}

^{*} *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, by Pope Paul VI, (41).

First Reading — Acts 9:26-31

²⁶ And when he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, ²⁹ preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists; but they were seeking to kill him. ³⁰ And when the brethren knew it, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him off to Tarsus.

³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied.

1. How would you feel if someone who was notorious for abusing Christians dropped in on your small-group meeting?

2. How can we facilitate the acceptance of strangers in our various Christian meetings?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 22:25-27, 29-31 (26-28, 30-32 NAB)

²⁵ From thee comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. ²⁶ The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD! May your hearts live for ever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. ... ²⁹ Yea, to him shall all the proud of the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and he who cannot keep himself alive.

³⁰ Posterity shall serve him; men shall tell of the Lord to the coming generation, ³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, that he has wrought it.

Second Reading — 1 John 3:18-24

¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.

¹⁹ By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God; ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us.

3. From where within us, do you think feelings of self-condemnation arise?
4. Of what can we be assured, based on this passage?

Gospel Reading — John 15:1-8

¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.

² Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.

5. What is the primary topic about which Jesus is speaking?
6. What role do Jesus' words play in this process?
7. What is the most difficult aspect of abiding for you?
8. How do you respond to the statement Jesus makes to his disciple, "that you bear much fruit"?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER—May 17, 2009

Introduction: The crux of Jesus' message, and the essence of our life in Christ is encapsulated in the word "love." Love answers the question, "Why?"— the enigma of salvation, why a holy God would expend his love on such a people as us. Love captures both the goal and meaning behind our existence as believers; to live in the Father's love. Love identifies the means by which the Gospel is advanced. For it is not through our flashy gimmicks that hearts are won, but rather by the proof that they are loved as God's love is expressed through our lives. Love is a cycle starting with the Father's love, shown forth by the Son's love, until eventually through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, we realize we are loved. Then in love, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we carry the love of the Father and the Son to others, beginning the cycle again.

Jesus makes three statements in this week's Gospel reading that help redefine and clear up our murky concept of love. First and foremost love is self-sacrificing; "...love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend." The way Jesus loved us was by living and giving his life to bring about our well being, our salvation, our awareness that God loves us. If we are to love as he loved us, we must love others at our own expense.

Second, the way to love sacrificially, is to do so in keeping with the will and direction of Jesus; "If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love." There are many difficult situations in life, times when we wonder which of our actions will really be the loving thing to do. Though commercialization has made trite the meaning of "What Would Jesus Do," this phrase does in fact provide direction as to how we should love others. We simply must keep his Word, his will, and his nature in mind if we are to love others as Jesus would if he was here walking among us. And guess what, he is literally here, of course, as he lives in and through us.

Third, the way to love is unconditionally. Jesus says, "You did not chose me, but I chose you." Coupled with this is the second reading which says; "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us." In other words, Jesus did not find something in us that warranted his love, actually we were disdainful of his love. Yet Jesus took the initiative, sought us out, and demonstrated the Father's love for us. Jesus' kind of love seeks out the unlovable and ungrateful, expecting no payment in return. We are called to also love the unlovely, not so that they can fulfill some need we have but so that Christ's love, shown through our words and actions, might meet some need they have. This kind of love becomes redemptive in the same manner as Jesus' love is. As people experience unconditional love they are often drawn to its source, Christ in us, and respond back to him in love. This then becomes the fruit that abides forever.

"Only when you know yourself as unconditionally loved—that is, fully received—by God can you give gratuitously. Giving without wanting anything in return is trusting that all your needs will be provided for by the One who loves you unconditionally. It is trusting that you do not need to protect your own security but can give yourself completely to the service of others."*

* *The Inner Voice of Love*, by Fr. Henri J.M. Nouwen, (page 65).

First Reading — Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48

²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." ...

³⁴ And Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ...

⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ "Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

1. What are some areas where we might think that God is partial?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 98:1-4

¹O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

²The LORD has made known his victory, he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. ³He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

⁴Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

Second Reading — 1 John 4:7-10

⁷Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. ⁹In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.

2. What are the evidences seen in this passage of being born of God? Which ones are normative and which ones are extraordinary?

3. How many specific truths about love can you identify? Which one is most important to you?

Gospel Reading — John 15:9-17

⁹As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷This I command you, to love one another.

4. What is the difference between joy and happiness?

5. What is the significance of Jesus' moving the disciples from the position of servant to one of friend? How are these relationships, servant and friend, different?

6. To what degree do you believe that we, the members of Christ's Church, have been “chosen” to “go” and to “bear fruit”?

7. For you, what is the most difficult aspect of loving others? The most enjoyable aspect?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER—May 24, 2009

Introduction: “An article in National Geographic several years ago provided a penetrating picture of God’s ‘wings.’ After a forest fire in Yellowstone National Park, forest rangers began their trek up a mountain to assess the inferno’s damage. One ranger found a bird literally petrified in ashes, perched statuesquely on the ground at the base of a tree. Somewhat sickened by the eerie sight, he knocked over the bird with a stick. When he struck it, three tiny chicks scurried from under their dead mother’s wings. The loving mother, keenly aware of impending disaster, had carried her offspring to the base of the tree and had gathered them under her wings, instinctively knowing that the toxic smoke would rise.

“She could have flown to safety but had refused to abandon her babies. When the blaze had arrived and the heat had scorched her small body, the mother had remained steadfast, because she had been willing to die, so those under the cover of her wings would live...” (Source unknown).

In this week’s Gospel reading Jesus also is about to enter a fiery ordeal and willingly die in order to secure eternal life for his followers. The events of the coming week, his last meal with his friends, his betrayal, abuse and the mockery of a trial, and his cruel death were known to him as assuredly as was the approaching holocaust to this mother bird. What was on his mind as he saw the end approaching?

John 17 provides an indelible snapshot of Jesus’ inner focus and concern. Like the protective mother bird his utmost thoughts concerned the care and well being of his followers. Consequently we see him praying; Holy Father—keep them safe, keep them united (“that they may be one”) keep them joyful (“that they may have my joy”) keep them consecrated (“sanctify them in the truth”) keep them mobilized for the mission (“so I have sent them into the world”). These men and women represented all those that would believe in the future, these disciples were the seed-corn of Christianity. If they were worth dying for, it was imperative that they should be protected.

What did Jesus rely on to preserve their faith? Four things; his Heavenly Father’s power, the Holy Spirit, his sacred Word, and his Mission. Jesus was able to leave them and fully give himself to his saving work on the cross, because he knew preserving their lives was fully consistent with the Father’s will, and fully within his Father’s power.

Second, Jesus set in place the conditions that would ensure that his Word would be available to all his followers for all eternity, providing strength and direction. We must keep in mind that when Jesus prayed, “I have given them thy Word,” not one of Jesus’ words had been recorded or written as we know them in the Gospel. But the promise was given of the coming Holy Spirit who “will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you,” (John 14:26). And so he did, inspiring and reminding the Gospel writers of Jesus’ words, and guiding them into the truth, which they recorded in what we now know as the New Testament books.

Lastly, Jesus left his followers with a mission that would provide the impetus for all they did; to take the knowledge of salvation in Christ to all the world, no small task. This mission provides focus and meaning for our existence, without which we would become complacent. As we know, complacency lends itself to a great degree of vulnerability. It is only as we stay focused on the mission Jesus gave us that we remain alert and ready to advance the Kingdom of God.

Jesus, on this last evening with his disciples, was focused on our care and well being. As he went to his fiery ordeal he entrusted us to his Heavenly Father, the Holy Spirit, to his Word, and to his Mission. We in turn should cooperate with his attempt to insure our well being by snuggling under these wings of protection.

First Reading — Acts 1:15-17, 20-26

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the brethren (the company of persons was in all about a hundred and twenty), and said, ¹⁶ “Brethren, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David, concerning Judas who was guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For he was numbered among us, and was allotted his share in this ministry. . . .

²⁰ For it is written in the book of Psalms, ‘Let his habitation become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it’; and ‘His office let another take.’ ²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” ²³ And they put forward two, Joseph

called Barsabbas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias.²⁴ And they prayed and said, “Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two thou hast chosen²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside, to go to his own place.”²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was enrolled with the eleven apostles.

1. What provisions by Jesus for the on-going development of his Church do you see in these passages?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 103:1-2, 11-12, 19-20

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name! ²Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, ...

¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹²as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. ...

¹⁹The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all. ²⁰Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word!

Second Reading — 1 John 4:11-16

¹¹Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. ¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

2. Explain what you think it means to “abide” in God, and to have God “abide” in us?

Gospel Reading — John 17:11-19

¹¹And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I kept them in thy name, which thou hast given me; I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³But now I am coming to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. ¹⁴I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁵I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. ¹⁸As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth

3. Meditate on the implications of this passage by replacing the pronouns that refer to Jesus’ followers with your name. What are your reflections after doing this?

4. What sense of mission, and conflict do you see?

5. How are the statements “sanctify them in the truth” and “consecrated in truth” similar? How are they different?

6. How would you describe someone who is consecrated?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

PENTECOST SUNDAY—May 31, 2009

Introduction: It is hard to think of an analogy that would depict what the Christian life would be like without the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the closest analogy would be to picture the chaos and impotency that would come if language, verbal and non-verbal, were suddenly to cease existing. One can only begin to imagine the sense of hopelessness we would experience not being able to communicate with even one other person. The powerlessness would be overwhelming. We would be unable to accomplish much of anything. There would be no information system, no books, and no written instructions on how to do things. The sense of isolation and dislocation would be unbearable. Love, appreciation and belonging would not be able to be expressed or received. Needs would not be able to be communicated nor could help be provided. Communication, one of the essential elements that make us distinctively human, when removed, would change life beyond recognition or description.

Pentecost Sunday celebrates the Father and Son's gift to us of the Holy Spirit. Similar to the above example, the Holy Spirit is the essential ingredient that makes us distinctively Christian, the absence of which would change our life beyond recognition or description. To appreciate the Holy Spirit's presence we want to think for a minute of what life would be like without him, if history was suddenly turned back, and the Holy Spirit was removed. How would our Christian life be different? There would be:

- No belonging—"But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." (Romans 8:9)
- No assurance—"In him you... were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it." (Eph 1:13,14)
- No revelation (Scripture)—"The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." (John 14:26)
- No illumination—"So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God." (1 Corinthians 2:10-13)
- No power in prayer—"... we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words... the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." (Romans 8:26,27)
- No power to witness—"... you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses." (Acts 1:8)
- No unity—"For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body..." (1 Corinthians 12:13,) "... maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit..." (Ephesians 4:3-4)

Scary isn't it? These are just a few of the things made possible to us by the Holy Spirit's presence.

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit was given to us his Body, and his presence will remain with us until Jesus returns. How can we more fully express our appreciation for the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday? We can do this by fully opening our heart and life anew to his indwelling presence.

"In our day too, the Spirit is the principal agent of the new evangelization. Hence it will be important to gain a renewed appreciation of the Spirit as the One who builds the Kingdom of God within the course of history and prepares its full manifestation in Jesus Christ, stirring people's hearts and quickening in our world the seeds of the full salvation which will come at the end of time,"*

* *On the Coming of the Third Millennium*, by Pope John Paul II, (45).

First Reading — Acts 2:1-11

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. ³ And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and wondered, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God?"

1. Why do you think this first manifestation of the Holy Spirit was so distinctive?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 104:1, 24, 29-31, 34

¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, thou art very great! Thou art clothed with honor and majesty...

²⁴ O LORD, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy creatures...

²⁹ When thou hidest thy face, they are dismayed; when thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust. ³⁰ When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the ground.

³¹ May the glory of the LORD endure for ever, may the LORD rejoice in his works...

³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD.

Second Reading — 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13

³ Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good...

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

2. What does the presence of such variety in the Church tell us about the nature of the Holy Spirit?
3. Which of the activities of the Holy Spirit, as seen in these passages, is most meaningful to you? Why?

Gospel Reading — John 20:19-23

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

4. What do you think would have happened to the disciples if Jesus hadn't appeared and the Holy Spirit hadn't been given to them?
5. How were the disciples transformed by this experience?
6. Looking at this week's Scripture passages which manifestations of the Holy Spirit do you feel are normative and which do you feel are exceptional?
7. What do the exceptional manifestations communicate about him?
8. How do you feel about experiencing the Holy Spirit?