

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

May 2018

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

THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER—May 6, 2018

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 unconditional. Jesus says, "You did not choose 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 they 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."¹

¹ *The Inner Voice of Love*, by Fr. Henri J.M. Nouwen, (page 65).

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/050618.cfm>

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

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

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 98:1-4

Second Reading — 1 John 4:7-10

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

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 ASCENSION OF THE LORD SUNDAY—May 13, 2018
(THE OPTIONAL SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER IS AVAILABLE AT THE END OF THIS REFLECTION)

Introduction: During the shooting at the high school in Littleton, Colorado, one young victim was asked by the murderers, “Do you believe in Jesus?” She answered, “Yes,” and was shot. At her funeral the pastor aptly referred to her as a present-day martyr. And so she was. No one probably told her two years earlier that by believing in Jesus she was choosing to share not only in his life, but also in his suffering. However, when she was called upon to do so, she did so bravely.

We all desire to share in the life of Christ, but we must understand that his is the life of a Suffering Savior. When Jesus called the disciples, they did not receive an explanation of what lay ahead. They experienced the dust and grime of his travels and the joy and amazement of his miracles. They delighted in the wisdom of Jesus’ teachings, their increasing understanding, and in the glory that came with being a part of Jesus’ entourage. But they also experienced the judgment and hostility leveled at Jesus by his malefactors, and eventually the threat of death associated with his crucifixion.

With Jesus’ resurrection, and the subsequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost they took on his life in new ways. No longer were they simply accompanying him on his journey of ministry, now they were providing the teaching and miracles as Jesus lived out his life through them. The hostility which was previously directed at Jesus was still directed at him, only now he was indwelling their bodies and the hostility had to go through them to get to him. Yet they never faltered, never thought of exchanging his life for escape. Rather they gloried that they were able to share in his suffering knowing that his power was resting on them. The following anonymous poem says it well.

“But as the Master so shall the servant be,
And pierced are the feet that follow me.
Can he have followed far, Who has no wound, no scar?”

Jesus prayed that we wouldn’t be taken out of the world, thus escaping its misery and pain, but that we would be kept while in the world, making his life present to those experiencing the misery and pain of this world.

As the Gospel reading points out, Jesus was given all authority in heaven and earth. From this position of Lordship and authority he tells his disciples, and subsequently those of us who have joined ourselves in baptism to them, to “Go . . . and make disciples.” This command is not known as the “Great Suggestion” but rather as the “Great Commandment.” It is and should be authoritative in our lives.

Jesus not only faithfully calls us to various tasks in this mission of evangelization but he also provides the means for our accomplishing it. We see this in the first reading where Jesus affirms that he will send to them, and to us, the promised Holy Spirit who will provide the power to live for him, to witness of him, and if necessary to die for him. The Holy Spirit’s transforming power changes us from self-centered, self-preserving individuals into people whose ultimate purpose is to “serve the living and true God.” (1 Thessalonians 1:10)

As we prepare for this “Ascension of the Lord” Sunday we need to picture ourselves standing there watching him ascend into heaven, and once again hear his voice, “You shall be my witnesses.”

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday’s Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/051318.cfm>

First Reading — Acts 1:1-11

1. What areas of your witnessing responsibilities do Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria encompass?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER—May 13, 2018

(THE OPTIONAL SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER WHEN ASCENSION IS NOT OBSERVED ON SUNDAY)

Introduction: “An article ... 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. Similar to 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.

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First Reading — Acts 1:15-17, 20-26

1. In these passages what provisions are provided by Jesus for the on-going development of his Church?

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

Second Reading — 1 John 4:11-16

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

Gospel Reading — John 17:11-19

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. What is meant by the statement “consecrated them in the truth” similar?

6. How would you describe someone who is consecrated?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

PENTECOST SUNDAY—May 20, 2018

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 over-whelming. 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 who are the Body of Christ, and the Holy Spirit's 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).

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First Reading — Acts 2:1-11

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

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

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

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

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?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE MOST HOLY TRINITY SUNDAY—May 27, 2018

Introduction: “The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the ‘hierarchy of the truths of the faith,’”¹

At many times, and in many ways we affirm again and again our belief in the Holy Trinity. Prayers, such as, “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever; Amen,” speak of this mystery of the Christian faith. How was it “in the beginning”? This is an important question, for we profess that is the way it is now, and that is the way it will be in the future. This statement speaks of the individual uniqueness of each person of the Trinity, while simultaneously speaking of the complete unity which exists. Each one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has a distinct role and function, yet they are One, existing in perfect harmony in will and purpose.

In an attempt to explain the Holy Trinity people have developed various analogies. Perhaps you have heard someone explain how an egg, consisting of shell, white, and yoke, expresses the unity and diversity of the Trinity. Or another analogy of how a person can simultaneously be a son, a father, and a husband, demonstrating the oneness, while fulfilling three distinctly different roles. There are other such illustrations; however, each of them leaves much to be desired by way of explanation. The reason they fall short is that the Holy Trinity, by its very nature, defies explanation. That is why it is called a mystery and requires faith to accept its reality.

A mystery is defined in several helpful ways in the book *Catholicism* by Richard P. McBrien, one of which is “truths of faith which are entirely beyond the natural powers of reason to apprehend.”² Somewhere I read that Pope Paul VI defined mystery as “a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God.” The Holy Trinity is also called an absolute mystery inasmuch as it cannot be really understood even after it is revealed to us, it remains a mystery. Thus it is “the central mystery of faith,” professed at our baptism and confirmation and acclaimed at each Mass.

It is in the Holy Trinity that we see the Father, Son and Holy Spirit working in perfect unity to bring about our salvation and their eternal purposes. Though it is a mystery it is a “reality” whose presence and effects can be seen and experienced. Ephesians chapter one is a wonderful exposition of the “mystery of His will.” In it we are able to see how each member of the Trinity is involved in completing our salvation. In verses 3-6 we see the Father choosing us and destining us to be adopted through his Son. In verses 7-11 we see how Jesus the Son accomplishes our salvation through the mercy and grace of his blood. Lastly, in verses 13-14 we see how the Holy Spirit seals our salvation and guarantees it by taking up residency in our lives. This is the Holy Trinity, One in being, united in purpose, yet unique in their roles.

The prayer of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity is a fitting conclusion and response to these truths: “O my God, Trinity whom I adore, help me forget myself entirely so to establish myself in you, unmovable and peaceful as if my soul were already in eternity. May nothing be able to trouble my peace or make me leave you, O my unchanging God, but may each minute bring me more deeply into your mystery...”³

¹ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (234).

² *Catholicism*, by Richard P. McBrien, (page 244).

³ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (260).

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First Reading — Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40

1. What are the promises revealed in these passages?

2. Why do you think the Israelites' well-being and long life was directly tied to their obedience to the Scripture?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 33:4-6, 9, 18-20, 22

Second Reading — Romans 8:14-17

3. What does it mean to be “ led by the Spirit of God”?

4. How would you explain the significance of being heirs of God, and fellow heirs with Christ?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 28:16-20

5. How do you respond to the fact that some of Jesus' original eleven disciples doubted?

6. How do you feel when doubts enter your thinking? How do you handle them?

7. In what manner do you believe that these instructions of Jesus refer to you personally as a member of Christ's Church?

8. What difference will it make if these instructions are viewed as having been given to each of the eleven individually, or if you view them as having been given to them collectively?