

# Reflections

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The 50-day Easter season, which extends through the celebration of Pentecost, offers marvelous opportunities for ongoing spiritual growth. By the third century, Christian communities used this season for “mystagogical catechesis,” which provided the newly baptized neophytes with further instruction in the faith they professed at the Easter Vigil. The revised RCIA, initiated by Vatican II, calls for mystagogical instruction in the period after Easter to help the new members of the church live the Christian life more fully. Now, fifty years after the Council began, it seems opportune to emphasize again that the Easter season is a rich spiritual resource not only for neophytes but also for all Christians striving to deepen our relationship with the risen Christ.

Most Catholics have a clear understanding of the 40-day Lenten season as a unified and structured time for prayer, fasting and almsgiving leading to a more fruitful celebration of Easter. Many of us, however, do not have a similar sense of the Easter season as an integrated period with its own resources for spiritual growth. In popular piety, Easter is a one day event. Large crowds attend festive Sunday Masses. The liturgy celebrates the resurrection, the central mystery of our faith. After Mass, family gatherings generally extend the joyful mood of the day. By that evening, the popular celebration of Easter is all over.

From the viewpoint of the liturgical calendar, however, the celebration of the risen Christ is not over on Easter Sunday, but continues through the next seven Sundays, including Pentecost. To make the Easter season more fruitful, we could think of it as a 50-day retreat leading to a deeper immersion in the Paschal Mystery or as a seven-week course on the meaning of the resurrection. The paschal candle, lit each Sunday of the Easter season, is a visible reminder that we have an extended opportunity to encounter Christ, the light of the world. The scripture readings for the season present diverse faces of the risen Christ and various ways his resurrection illumines the mystery dimension of our daily lives. From this perspective, the Easter season, sometimes called the “Great Sunday,” has a contemporary mystagogical character, inviting us to reflect on the deeper meaning and purpose of our lives from the viewpoint of the resurrection.

On the Sundays of Easter time, the first scripture readings are from the Acts of the Apostles, Luke’s sequel to his Gospel. They are read sequentially throughout the season with no attempt to relate them to the Gospel of the day. In broad outline, Acts tells the story of the development of the early church, often reported in idealistic terms. The community of believers, guided by the Holy Spirit and led first by Peter and then by Paul, expands from a small Jewish community centered in Jerusalem to a largely Gentile movement spread all the way to Rome. These readings offer an opportunity to reflect on the vocation of the church, the whole people of God, to give witness to the presence of the risen Christ in the world. We carry on Christ’s work more by actions than by words. We do so not in an abstract and general way, but by practicing Christian love in the concrete circumstances of our everyday lives. Reflecting on the Acts of the Apostles reminds us that we are empowered by the Spirit to bring the light of Christ to our tiny, but important, corner of the world.

The epistles for the first six Sundays of Easter are all from the first letter of John. They provide a profound meditation on the divine love made manifest in the death and resurrection of Christ. This letter was written near the end of the first century, probably to correct some erroneous notions about Christ and to deepen the spiritual life of the Christian community. These readings instruct us in the essential truth of the faith: God is love and manifested the depth of that love by sending Christ to bring us eternal life. We respond to this gift by believing in Christ and keeping his command to love one another, not just in words or speech but in deed and truth. If we say we love Christ, but do not keep his commandments, we are liars. When embraced wholeheartedly, Christ’s command of love is not burdensome but leads to eternal life. These uplifting readings are especially helpful to those plagued by harsh images of God and suffering from low self-esteem

and paralyzing fears. They encourage all of us to persevere in living the law of love despite our limitations and failures.

The Gospels for the Easter season invite an extended, prayerful reflection on the risen Christ and his relationship to us. The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins suggests we let Christ “easter in us” and “be a dayspring to the dimness of us.” Hopkins also reminds us that “Christ plays in ten thousand places lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his.” The crucified and risen Lord is no longer confined by space and time, but is now available as life-giving spirit to all people everywhere on the earth. We are the limbs and eyes of Christ charged with the task of spreading the reign of God in our tiny, but important, corner of the world.

This theological background provides a framework for a fruitful meditation on each one of the Gospels proclaimed during the Easter season. For example, we can begin a meditation on the well-known story of doubting Thomas (Jn 20:19-31) with a prayer that God will open our minds and hearts to the deeper meaning and personal significance of the story. Thomas is not present when Jesus appears to the other disciples and he remains unmoved by their enthusiastic report that they had seen the Lord. He is not going to believe this good news until he has empirical proof. Thus, Thomas represents a type of modern scientism that accepts as true only that which can be verified empirically. He also represents all the more subtle forms of doubt that can paralyze believing Christians: for example, praying regularly but wondering if God is really listening; knowing God is merciful but doubtful if divine mercy includes one’s own sins; being the first to apologize after every fight with a spouse or friend, but questioning if this is genuine charity or personal weakness; engaging in the struggle against injustice, but tempted to give up for lack of progress. As we bring our personal doubts to the risen Lord, we hear him say to us “Peace be with you,” just as he addressed Thomas and the other disciples. His comforting words touch our hearts and suggest a new perspective on our doubts. They need not impede our spiritual growth, but can serve as a catalyst for deepening our relationship with Christ. Doubt can move us to deeper prayer for help and to further study of our faith. Commitment to the risen Christ is the key to effective Christian discipleship for us, just as it was for Thomas. His witness becomes more credible when it is reinforced by our own experience of the risen Lord; for instance, recognizing him in the Eucharist, seeing him in the faces of the poor and oppressed, feeling his strength as we bear our crosses, and encountering him in the joy and beauty of life.

Resurrection faith enables us to appreciate the great achievement of the empirical sciences without making an idol out of the scientific method. Commitment to the crucified and risen Lord provides perspective and motivation for transforming all the subtle forms of doubt into opportunities for spiritual development. At the conclusion of our meditation, we pray for the grace to say with Thomas “My Lord and my God” and to do so with deeper meaning and greater resolve.

This type of structured meditation can be employed to find personal meaning in all the other Sunday Gospels. The Lord who revealed himself to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus speaks to us today when we gather for the Eucharist (Lk 24:35-48). The Good Shepherd calls us to renewed effort to work for Christian unity so we can move toward the ideal of one flock and one shepherd (Jn 10:11-18). Christ the true vine continues to nourish us today and calls us to share his grace with others (Jn 15:1-8). The risen Lord calls us not slaves but friends, enabling us to move beyond isolation and loneliness (Jn 15:9-17). The ascended Christ commands us to go into the world and proclaim the gospel (Mk 16:15-20). Finally, a meditation on the Gospel for Pentecost reminds us that the risen Lord breathes the Holy Spirit on us as he did on the apostles, calling us to share his forgiving love with others (Jn 20:19-23).

The “Great Sunday,” with its inspiring scripture readings, provides a marvelous opportunity for Christ to “easter in us” so that, with our renewed cooperation, he can play in “ten thousand places lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his.”

