

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Reading - Acts 6:1-7

A new section of the Acts of the Apostles begins with our reading for today. We are introduced to two groups in the early community, identified by their background prior to conversion – the Hellenists, and the Hebrews. From this chapter onward, Christians are referred to as “disciples”; this term is no longer applied only to the apostles and to those who were adherents to Jesus during His life on earth – all the baptized are now disciples. Jesus is the Lord of His Church and the Teacher of all: after His ascension into heaven He teaches, sanctifies and governs Christians through the ministry of the apostles initially, and after the apostles’ death, through the ministry of their successors, the Pope and the Bishops, who are aided by priests.

Hellenists were Jews who had been born and lived for a time outside Palestine. They spoke Greek and had synagogues of their own where the Greek translation of Scripture (the Septuagint) was used. The Hebrews were Jews born in Palestine; they spoke Aramaic and used the Hebrew Bible in their synagogues. This difference of backgrounds naturally carried over into the Christian community during its early years.

This chapter relates the establishment by the apostles of “the seven”: this is the second identifiable group of disciples entrusted with a ministry in the Church, the first being “the twelve”. It is clear that the seven have been given a public role in the community, a role which extends beyond distribution of relief; Philip and Stephen preach and baptize as well.

Saint Luke uses the term *diakonia* but he doesn’t call the seven “deacons” (*diakonoi*). Nor do later ancient writers imply that these seven were deacons in the sense of the word today, constituting with priests and bishops the hierarchy of the Church. It is possible that the ministry described in the Acts of the Apostles for these *diakonia* played a part in the instituting of the diaconate proper.

**<sup>1:1</sup> [A]s the number of disciples continued to grow, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.**

This most likely refers to the day-to-day survival effort by the unworldly, enthusiastic Christian community rather than to any assistance program to the Jewish society at large. You can easily imagine why widowed immigrants faced special economic hardships and why they might be “overlooked” in a food distribution run by the native contingent.

**<sup>2</sup> So the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table.**

Could possibly mean to keep accounts in the dole to the poor.

**<sup>3</sup> Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task,**

This seems to conform to the Old Testament model (Deuteronomy 1:13; Exodus 18:21) where Moses chose helpers.

**<sup>4</sup> whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."**

In contrast to "serving at table". Nevertheless, we later find both Stephen and Philip engaged in this "apostolic" activity of preaching and baptizing.

**<sup>5</sup> The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism.**

The seven names are all Greek.

**<sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them.**

The Jewish ritual which expresses both transfer of function and bestowal of powers (see Numbers 27:18-23). This is also an ecclesiastical practice of Luke's own time (1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:6). This graphically expresses the subordination of this originally independent Hellenistic leadership to Jesus' chosen apostles.

**<sup>7</sup> The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly; even a large group of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.**

This minor summary of Luke's marks the further progress of the Word of God. Members of many Jewish priestly families were obedient to the faith. A difference is to be noted between the role of the converted priests in the Christian Church and the clearly defined roles of priests and Levites.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading - 1 Peter 2:4-9**

The newly baptized are like babies recently born to a new life of grace. Just as little children clamor for their food, Christians should long for the spiritual nourishment that lies in the Word of God and the sacraments. Baptism makes us members of the Church. Saint Peter uses the idea of constructing a building to explain that Christians together go to make up the one, true people of God.

**<sup>4</sup> Come to him,**

Join fully in the community of the New Israel by joining yourself to Christ.

**a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God,**

The words of Psalm 118:22 (revised with inclusive language) are applied to the Risen Christ, who was rejected but whose precious quality in God's sight is found in the new life He shares with those who come to Him.

**<sup>5</sup> and, like living stones,**

In contrast to the inanimate blocks used in pagan temples those who are "alive in Christ" are living stones. By sharing the life of the Risen Lord, Christians become with Him a household formed by the Holy Spirit.

"This is how Peter describes the way in which those who have been accepted by God are integrated into the Church. It is by sharing a common origin, and by being in harmony with one another, by thinking and saying the same things, by having the same mind and the same thoughts, that we are built into one house for the Lord." [Theodoret of Cyr (ca. A.D. 430), *Catena*]

**let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.**

Christians, viewed corporately as a body of priests, present their lives of faith and love as a sacrifice to God (see Romans 12:1; Ephesians 5:2; Philippians 4:18).

"The temple which Christ built is the universal (catholic in Greek) Church, which He gathers into the one structure of His faith and love from all the believers throughout the world, as it were from living stones." [Saint Bede the Venerable (ca. A.D. 416), *Homilies on the Gospels*, 2,24]

**<sup>6</sup> For it says in scripture: "Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame."**

An adapted form of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament dating from 200 B.C.) Isaiah 28:16.

**<sup>7</sup> Therefore, its value**

"Value reflects "precious" in the previous verse.

**is for you who have faith, but for those without faith: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,"**

Quotes Psalm 118:22.

**<sup>8</sup> and "A stone that will make people stumble, and a rock that will make them fall."**

Quotes Isaiah 8:14.

**They stumble by disobeying the word, as is their destiny.**

The unbelievers are destined by God to “stumble”. In the context used here, these are the pagan persecutors.

**<sup>9</sup> But you are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises"**

The first three titles (chosen race, royal priesthood, a holy nation) are titles promised to Israel prior to the sin of the golden calf (Exodus 19:6). The final title (a people of his own) is a combination of Isaiah 43:21 and Malachi 3:17. Christians have become God’s possession by the shedding of the precious blood of Christ.

“All who have been born again in Christ are made kings by the sign of the cross and consecrated priests by the anointing of the Holy Spirit.” [Pope Saint Leo (The Great) I (after A.D. 461), *Sermons*, 4]

**of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**

This most aptly applied to converts from paganism [see 1 Peter 1:18 (3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter, Cycle A)].

### **Gospel - John 14:1-12**

Today’s reading takes place at the Last Supper – just after Judas has left and Jesus has told the remaining eleven that He must soon depart too. This reading has been called “Jesus is the way to the Father”. The reading opens and closes with the commands to believe in God and believe in Jesus. It makes the claim that, if one will not believe Jesus’ words, then his “works” should provide the grounds for knowing the Jesus and the Father are one.

**Jesus said to his disciples: <sup>14:1</sup> "Do not let your hearts be troubled.**

Jesus begins His teaching with reassurance in view of the fact that His preceding words about His departure had saddened the disciples.

**You have faith in God; have faith also in me.**

Jesus has never hesitated to put Himself on the same level with the Father in the common work of salvation, thus He and the Father are equally the object of faith. To be a Christian, you must have faith in God and faith in Christ, who is God.

**<sup>2</sup> In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.**

This is usually interpreted (even in ancient times) to mean the heavenly kingdom to which Jesus is returning (although there are no grounds for understanding “many” to mean “many kinds” or “many degrees”). However, John probably means another sense as well: In one way, after all, Christ has never left heaven and consequently need not return. The Father’s house is where God is, and

whoever is with God is in His house; one of Paul's favorite metaphors for the Church is this "House of God". In this sense, the "many" would refer to the many members of the Church on earth, where Christ will also be (this too is an ancient interpretation).

**If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?**

Though He has told the disciples that He will join them only later, Jesus has just reassured them that there is ample room where He will be. Therefore, they need have no fear that they will not find a place for them in His company.

**<sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be.**

These words could refer to the parousia – the end of time – but could also refer to Christ's invisible return through the Spirit.

**<sup>4</sup> Where (I) am going you know the way."**

The way here, is of Jesus Himself. The term "The Way" is also a designation of Christianity in Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.

**<sup>5</sup> Thomas said to him, "Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?"**

Although Jesus has repeatedly told the disciples that He is going to the Father, and in what way, through His sacrificial death, which the model that all must take if they would follow Him, Thomas reflects the ignorance of all the disciples. The disciples have shown themselves to be as obtuse as Jesus' Jewish opponents – what saves them is their good will.

**<sup>6</sup> Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life.**

Truth in John is the divinely revealed reality of the Father manifested in the person and works of Jesus. The possession of truth confers knowledge and liberation from sin (John 8:32).

**No one comes to the Father except through me.**

Jesus is not just a guide to salvation, the map of the heavenly geography, He is the source of life and truth; the only way. "Unless you eat My Flesh and drink My Blood . . ."

**<sup>7</sup> If you know me, then you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him."**

With the glorification of Christ and the coming of the Spirit, their understanding will be made perfect; even though they don't understand now.

**<sup>8</sup> Philip said to him, "Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us."**

The incomprehension is such that Philip asks for some kind of extraordinary manifestation. He is asking for a theophany like Exodus 24:9-10; 33:18.

**<sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? <sup>10</sup> Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?"**

Jesus repeats almost word-for-word what he has stated on other occasions (John 7:16; 8:28; 10:38).

**The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works. <sup>11</sup> Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup> Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these,**

It follows from this that the Christian will also perform the works of God, even as Christ has done on the same principle. These words, as addressed to the first apostles, refer not only to the fact that the works of the Christian believer are performed within the supernatural order, but, first and foremost, to the Church as possessing and continuing Christ's divine power for salvation. Performance of greater deeds doesn't refer primarily to miracles, though these will continue, but to the far greater scope, geographically and numerically within which the Church will exercise its salvific power.

**because I am going to the Father.**

The condition of this activity is Christ's glorification and the giving of the Holy Spirit.