

Lesson 12

Sixth Sunday of Easter

The Holy Gospel: John 14:15–21

The Sundays of Easter have moved us closer to the end of the period of forty days during which Jesus appeared to His apostles and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. The thrust is moving toward next Thursday, when the Church will celebrate the Ascension of our Lord and then remember the waiting in Jerusalem for the promised gift from above, the baptism with the Holy Spirit (see Acts 1:3–4). Today’s Holy Gospel continues our study of Jesus’ farewell discourses with His disciples in the Upper Room. It is part of Jesus’ promise of His continuing presence with them and in them through the Holy Spirit. We rejoice to know that His promise extends also to us to bless us in the same way.

“If you love Me” calls for more than the love of affection or friendship. The Greek is *agapate*. It calls for a willed, determined love in response to the willed, determined love that took Jesus to the cross for us. Its present tense calls for constancy. It might be translated, “If you make up your mind to keep on loving Me.”

186. What, according to Jesus, is the evidence of such determined love for Him? (See 1 John 2:1–11; 4:19–5:5.)

187. How may we see a glimpse of the three-personed nature of God in Jesus’ promise to send another Counselor?

“Counselor” is the Greek *parakletos*, which means “one called to stand beside” to encourage, to strengthen, and to defend.

188. Why did Jesus call the Counselor “the Spirit of truth”? (See John 14:25–26; 15:26; 16:12–15.)

189. Why can’t “the world” see, know, and accept this Holy Spirit? (See 1 Corinthians 2:1–5, 12–14.)

190. Why did Jesus follow His “you know Him, for He dwells with you” with “and will be in you”?

Jesus was preparing the apostles for what lay ahead: His suffering and dying. He assured them He would not leave them as orphans, just on their own, but would come to them. He did this as the risen Jesus through the Counselor the Father sent them.

191. What great events lay ahead that would convince the apostles of the truth of Jesus' "I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you"?

There is a circle of blessing in our faith and life as we know Jesus and the indwelling Spirit. Motivated by the realization that Jesus, our Savior, is in the Father and in us, we make it our aim to obey His commands and show our love for Him. In turn, the Father and Jesus and the Holy Spirit love us and live in us, and we grow in the peace and hope and joy that are ours in Christ. This circle of blessing may best be appreciated when you look at its opposite—when people do not have Jesus and His Father living in them through faith in Jesus, God's commands to love Him and our neighbor are not obeyed, the Spirit of Jesus is rejected, and people spiral down into deeper unbelief, sin, and death.

192. What happens in the experience of a Christian who begins to refuse or neglect to obey the commands of Jesus?

The First Lesson: Acts 17:16–31

193. Paul "reasoned" with the Jews and the God-fearers in the synagogue. What did this always involve? He spoke also with anyone in the marketplace who would listen to him. What did he proclaim there that caused the Greeks to call him "this babbling"?

Faithful to his apostolic duties, Paul could not just sit and wait, and his aggressiveness was rewarded. He was brought to a meeting of philosophers on the Areopagus. The events that led to this opportunity, which Paul was happy to grasp, are recorded in the paragraph that precedes his speech at the Areopagus (16–21).

Christian witnesses are encouraged to meet people where they are. This establishes a common ground from which to move to a proclamation of Christ. Paul met the Athenian philosophers on the common ground of natural religion, the truths about God that are available to all. Many Greeks had intellectually rejected the crass idolatry of paganism, which deified nature and saw gods or goddesses relating to every human emotion or earthly circumstance. This is why so many Greeks were attracted to the spirituality and the higher morality of Judaism. The men of the Areopagus who listened to Paul had not become God-fearers, and Paul was not meeting them in a Jewish synagogue, but he did not lack ready ears to listen to him tell about the God they acknowledged as the Unknown God.

194. What points of natural theology did Paul present that he knew would be philosophically acceptable to his hearers?

195. How did Paul finally bring his remarks around to focus on Jesus Christ?

Paul's mentioning the resurrection of Jesus produced a mixed reaction (vv. 32–34).
196. How does this First Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 3:13–22

Peter was writing to Christians who were under threat of persecution if they did not participate in burning incense to the emperor as a personification of the divine spirit of Rome. He urged them to stand strong in their faithfulness to Jesus and told them, "Even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed"; then he added, "Have no fear of them, nor be troubled."

Peter suggested that we will be equipped for the needed decisiveness if in our hearts we will _____. The Greek *kurion ton Christon* is the confession that Jesus Christ is God. (*Kurios* was used in the Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, for "the Lord God, Yahweh.") Its use in the New Testament for Jesus also proclaims His deity. *Hagiaste*, "set apart," calls on us to sanctify Him, to keep Him holy in our hearts.

197. What does it mean for us in our daily living when we "in [our] hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy"?

Jesus told His apostles that they would be brought before kings and governors on account of His name and that this would result in opportunities to be His witnesses. He told them not to worry beforehand how to defend themselves because He would give them words of wisdom their adversaries would not be able to resist or contradict. But here Peter tells Christians that part of their needed decisiveness involve their "always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you."

198. How do you reconcile Jesus' assurance about the Spirit's giving words of wisdom and Peter's instruction to be prepared to witness to your faith in Jesus? How can you prepare yourself to be ready to use opportunities "to make a defense" and give "a reason for the hope that is in you"?

199. Why is it important to bring your witness with gentleness and respect, especially with regard to those who may be disinterested and even antagonistic?

200. Why are we to be willing to suffer wrong as a result of our Christian witness and not think of returning evil for evil? (See Romans 12:9–21.)

This lesson includes words that are a "seat of doctrine" for the article of faith that we state in the Apostles' Creed: "He descended into hell." Peter said that Jesus was "made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison." His descent into hell, then, really was the first display of the exaltation of the God-man after completing His saving work. He did not descend into hell to suffer for sin. He had done that once for all in the eternal moment on the cross when His Father turned from Him (see

Matthew 27:45–46). But He had said, “It is finished”—*tetelestai*, “paid in full.” Nor did He go to preach “a second chance” to the disobedient in hell (see Hebrews 9:27–28). It helps us to note that the Greek word for “proclaimed” is not *euangelizo*, “to preach Good News,” but *kerusso*, “to make a proclamation.” What Jesus did as the first step of His exaltation was to go into the camp of the enemy to make a proclamation of His complete and final victory!

201. How is the ark riding above the waters of the flood a symbol of Holy Baptism? What gives Baptism its saving power?

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O God, the giver of all that is good, by Your holy inspiration grant that we may think those things that are right and by Your merciful guiding accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 14:15–21

186. Once again it is important to remind ourselves of what agape love means and to see that obeying Jesus' commands is the way we are to evidence it. The two Scripture references from 1 John both emphasize the motivation of God's love and our necessary response and its expression toward those around us.

187. God in three persons is seen in Jesus, the Son, asking the Father to send the Spirit. Note that Jesus and His completed work of salvation are at the center of this. The Spirit is "another" Counselor in that He comes to take Jesus' place and do for His disciples what Jesus Himself did for them—display the saving love of God as He continually testifies to us and teaches us what Christ has accomplished for us.

188. As the Spirit of truth, the Counselor is not so much our advocate before God as He is God's advocate to us. Jesus has been and is our fully successful advocate before God (see 1 John 2:1). The Spirit comes to make Jesus personally meaningful to us as our Savior and Lord so that we find new life in Him.

189. "The world" of unbelief cannot see, know, and accept the Spirit because it refuses to see, know, and accept the Spirit's testimony to Jesus as God's Son, the Savior and Lord. This brings up the age-old question "Why do some believe and are saved and not others?" Since we, in our sinful nature, are no different from "the world," we can only conclude in wonder that it is entirely the grace of God that has led us to respond in faith to Jesus and to enjoy the life-renewing presence of this other Counselor, and we can only be surprised that others reject what Jesus offers.

190. That the Spirit was known to and already lived in the apostles is evidenced by their faith and their confession of Christ. That the Holy Spirit would be in them in the future pointed them to the promise of the baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire that would enable their mission for Jesus.

191. As Jesus said, before long the world would not see Him anymore, but the apostles would at the time of His resurrection and during the course of His appearances to them during the forty days that followed. The great events were Easter and Pentecost. Easter convinced them and convinces us that Jesus is truly "in the Father" and that we can be in Him by faith. Jesus' ascension into heaven was the conclusive evidence and built their assurance that His promise to send the Holy Spirit and fire to them would indeed happen. Pentecost then convinced them and convinces us that Jesus comes to live in us in a continuing relationship through the Holy Spirit.

The "circle of blessing" paragraph describes the spiritual process by which God makes us His own and continually confirms our relationship with Him. He loves in Christ, we love in return, and the relationship grows. The Spirit leads us to faith in Jesus and to Christian discipleship, Jesus blesses us continually with the Spirit, and the relationship grows.

192. When a Christian breaks the circle—and it is always broken from the human side—his neglect of the Word and the Sacrament and his refusal to obey the commands of Jesus to work in the Kingdom

distance him from Jesus and strain and ultimately break the relationship. Willful sins of omission are as deadly to relationship with Jesus as are willful sins of commission. Seeing this should encourage us not only to take seriously what Jesus has done for us as believers but also to take seriously the new life we are called to live as disciples. Anything less threatens the relationship with Jesus and may become spiritual suicide.

The First Lesson: Acts 17:16–31

193. Paul’s reasoning in the synagogues always involved him showing that he was not introducing something new or different, for the death and resurrection of the promised Messiah was foretold in their sacred Scriptures, the Old Testament. When Paul spoke to Greeks in the marketplace about the resurrection of Jesus, he touched a nerve and they, in their self-styled wisdom, accused him of babbling something that didn’t make sense.

194. Natural theology is the awareness of God and the information about God that is available to all people in the world around them and in their moral consciousness (see Romans 1:18–20; 2:12–15). This is the impetus that leads people everywhere to know about God generally and to attempt to worship Him in some way even without knowledge of His revelation in Jesus Christ. The points of natural theology presented by Paul that they would easily accept were these: (1) God is the Creator of the world and everything in it. (2) This Lord of heaven and earth does not live in temples built by hands. (3) He is not dependent on human service to supply His needs. (The Greek is *therapeutai*, a word used for a physician serving the needs of the sick.) (4) He is the Source and Giver of life and breath and everything else. (5) He made every nation of men from one creation, “one man.” (6) He is in charge of human destiny regarding times and places. (7) He has designed men to seek Him, but in the end He is the one who comes close to us. (8) Their own writers had acknowledges that “in Him we live and move and have our being” (Minos’s address to Zeus) and that “we are indeed His offspring” (Epimenides), so since man is a reflection of God as His offspring, it is foolish to think He is like man-made images, even of precious metals. (9) God wants repentant turning from such ignorance to acknowledge Him for who He is. (10) God will finally judge the world with justice. Up to this point, the Athenian philosophers could readily agree with Paul. All of Paul’s points were logical, natural theology, things they had thought through for themselves.

195. Paul moved beyond natural theology and began to focus on Jesus Christ by saying God “will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed,” and adding “of this [God] has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.”

Paul surely intended to give much more information about God’s forgiving love in Jesus but was cut short by the reaction of his hearers. Greek philosophy saw spirit as good and matter as less than good, even evil. Human life was seen as the spirit “imprisoned” for a time in physicality and the material universe. They scoffed at the idea of a resurrection of a physical body as proof of someone’s being God’s special man in His plan for humanity. They thought that a physical resurrection of the body was neither logical nor desirable.

196. In the Gospel, Jesus said the world cannot accept the Spirit because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. The reaction of the philosophers in Athens is a case in point.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 3:13–22

Fill-in Answers: We Christians will be equipped for decisive moments in our discipleship when our faith and our faithfulness are put to the test if in our hearts we will honor Christ the Lord as holy.

197. As we regard Christ the Lord as holy and sanctify Him in our hearts, we are consciously putting Him in charge of all of our lives. Practical implications of this abound; your group will offer some. They include subordinating our will to His (Matthew 16:24); turning from sinful desires to holy living (1 Thessalonians 4:3–8); giving priority to seeking His kingdom and righteousness instead of focusing on money and material things (Matthew 6:19–21, 24, 33); and changing resentment and hatred into forgiveness and love (Matthew 5:44–45; Colossians 3:12–14).

198. Trusting the Spirit’s guidance and blessing in our witnessing does not mean we should not prepare ourselves for witnessing. Jesus’ words to the apostles were to men who had a good foundation in the Holy Scriptures. Understanding God’s Word and its application to our own lives equips us to share it with others.

Being familiar with Holy Scripture is the key to witnessing. Even writing out and memorizing a personal testimony that incorporates Scripture that is especially meaningful may be helpful. It will provide a basic approach and some appropriate ways of expressing ourselves that the Spirit can help us adapt to the moment.

199. Gentleness and respect for others, especially those who are antagonistic, has spiritual power that exceeds bombastic, irritating efforts to force the truth on people. We may win a battle but lose the war, win an argument but lose the person. The preacher with the bullhorn at the Rose Parade, the people who sneak “John 3:16” into the TV background, the T-shirts and bumper stickers—all may just be irritations that diminish the impact of real, personal, Christian witnessing. Jesus reaches out with love and doesn’t shove faith down people’s throats. We will respect others in that way when we respect Jesus and count on Him to accomplish His purposes in the Kingdom in His own quiet, powerful ways.

200. We are to be ready to suffer for doing good if this is God’s will for us because “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God.” Jesus is our supreme example in this. More than that, His suffering for doing good has freed us from our sins—their consequences and their power. We are free now, in His name, to refuse to take matters into our own hands and repay evil with evil. We may turn things over to God for His judgment of the matter. Like Jesus, we can suffer patiently and repay evil with forgiveness and love and thus possibly win even our enemies to faith in Christ.

Help your group understand that Jesus’ descent into hell was *exaltation*—a clear statement of His victory. We share that victory. Hell no longer threatens us.

201. Just as the waters lifted the ark to keep Noah and his family alive, the waters of Holy Baptism lift us up to new life in the power of the Spirit. The resurrection of Jesus, the fact that He is the living Lord, gives Holy Baptism in His name its saving power (see Romans 6:1–11; Titus 3:4–7).