

7th Sunday of Eastertide (A)

21st May 2023

‘Jn 17 & Acts 1: Ordination & Confirmation’

Acts 1: apostles returned to Jerusalem and joined in continuous prayer with Mary

Ps 26: ‘*Seek His face*’

1Pt 4: *If you can have some share in the sufferings of Christ, be glad.*

Jn 17: *I am not in the world any longer, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.*

The scene is clearly set for this 7th Sunday of Easter by the opening reading from Acts (1:12–14):

“Then they returned to Jerusalem ... And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, ... All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.” (ESV)

These sacred days between Ascension Day (last Thursday) and Pentecost (next Sunday) are always days of special prayer for the Church. They are like a *retreat*, a ‘novena’ of days, in which we, like the apostles, Our Lady, and the others in those very first days of the Church, gather for prayer and expectation, longing for the promised Holy Spirit to invigorate us with the mission that Christ has planned.

Isn’t it interesting how Mary, the Apostles, and others close to them gathered in the *upper room* for this

retreat time, for their days of prayer? Are we to take it that this is the same “upper room” that Our Lord had used for the Last Supper, for His discourses that final Passover night, and for His first Mass, and perhaps for some of His Resurrection appearances? Yes, I think we *are* meant to presume that. We can’t prove it either way, but it is clearly the indication of St Luke as he writes that 1st chapter of Acts that they return after the Ascension to a place that has been made sacred by the Lord Jesus Himself: the ‘chapel’ of the first Mass! What that means is that the context of the 1st Reading, and the context of the Gospel Reading (Jn 17) are the same, that upper room of sacred memory. Here, awaiting Pentecost, the Church gathered in its infancy would pray fervently in that very place where Jesus had instructed them, consecrated the Apostles as His priests, and instituted the abiding memorial–Sacrament of His Real Presence.

Let’s think about that Jn 17 text, first — the apostles gathered at the Last Supper — and then go back to the Acts 1 text after — awaiting Pentecost. Jn 17, the final chapter

of the five that St John writes up us as an account of the Last Supper, is always given us to hear on this 7th Sunday of Easter: each year of the 3-yr cycle we hear a portion of it. This chapter is often called the *High Priestly Prayer*, because that's what it is: it's a *prayer* from start to finish, uttered by Jesus, addressing "You," the Father: "*Jesus ... lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify You, ...'*" In this beautiful prayer of 26 vv., the Lord Jesus associates His own coming glorification — the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension — with the consecration of His followers: "*in them, I am glorified.*" I always think Jn 17 is effectively the prayer of *ordination* of the Apostles as Jesus's first priests or, better, *bishops*. The Last Supper is, we believe, a gathering only of Jesus and the 12 ... reduced to 11 as Judas went out into the night. It's not an open gathering of the wider group of disciples, ... No, not this time: for now, just the Apostles. It is in their presence, and *over* them, that He is praying this awesome High Priestly Prayer: "*I pray for them; ... for those You have given Me,*

because they belong to You: ... in them I am glorified. I am not in the world any longer, but they are in the world, and I am coming to You." Along with much of the rest of Jn 17, it points to the solemn consecration of these 11 men as the first sharers in His priesthood, the *ministerial* priesthood, Holy Orders. This ordination of bishops, the foundation stones of the new Israel, was seen by Christ as springing out of His own priestly ministry, perpetuating His work and His sacrifice, newly offered in the Eucharist and about to be fulfilled on the Cross. And it sprang, too, from the fact that He was to "go from the world" in a physical, visible sense at the subsequent Ascension. Therefore, a visible, physical expression of Jesus's priesthood was needed in the world, sacramentally present, and this we see in the Apostles consecrated that night in close association with the Institution of the Holy Eucharist. Mass and ministry both arise at that one celebration: both are fully intended in the mind of Christ; both are His gift to the world, and come as one package! For the holy Mass, you need the sacred Priesthood. And vocations do not

spring out of nowhere. In fact, the most efficacious source for priestly vocations is devotion to the Mass: a fervent love for Jesus in the Mass, and a worthy celebration of the sacred mysteries, is always going to lead to men offering their lives to the Lord in a special way; and families that have the Mass at the heart of their lives — your families, one day! — will find that priests spring out of such devotion. If we are to have Jesus in the Mass, then we really need Jesus's priests, and more of them, and truly holy ones. "*I have made Your name known to the men You took from the world to give Me. They were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word.*" May this beautiful prayer of consecration by Jesus find a deep echo in the hearts of those whom Jesus is truly calling to His ministerial priesthood — that they may truly be His, for the Church and for the world. There's no better meditation for those of you discerning a priestly vocation than this chapter, Jn 17. I recommend it to you for prayerful reading.

Let's go back, now, to Acts 1, and to that 2nd

gathering in the upper room, the one after the Ascension. I would like to propose it, in a parallel with the one we have already been considering, as a gathering of the *priesthood of the baptized*, i.e. of "priests and people," of clergy and the lay faithful. Because this assembly, as we heard in the 1st Reading, was of the named Apostles, and also, along with Mary herself, a number of other women and men in close association with the Lord. And what were they awaiting, but an outpouring of the Spirit common to them all — in effect, the Sacrament of Confirmation, a sacrament offered to all believers? This anointing of the Spirit shows in a profound way how the Christian faith differs from the Jewish practices of old. In the OT, only priests, prophets, and kings were anointed: the Jewish bible recounts these anointings often, a setting-apart for sacred duties — prophets for their preaching the Word; priests for their offering of the Temple sacrifices; kings for their sacred duty of governing in accordance with God's will. But that's not the Christian dispensation: in the Church *everyone* is anointed and set apart for a sacred duty!

Everyone is anointed as a preliminary to Baptism; and more specially, everyone is anointed at their Confirmation — we are all anointed to exercise our common priesthood. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sums up this high calling of ours:

1546 Christ, high priest and unique mediator, has made of the Church “a kingdom, priests for his God and Father.” The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly. The faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood through their participation, each according to his own vocation, in Christ's mission as priest, prophet, and king. Through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation the faithful are "consecrated to be . . . a holy priesthood."

We are all called on to offer our lives as a true “sacrifice of prayer and praise” and to be ministers of the Word in the way we share the Gospel. This is different to, and preliminary to, the ministerial priesthood. But without the common priesthood of all the baptized, the ministerial priesthood has nothing to work with: it is at the *service of* the common priesthood. And, as the Church awaited the event of Pentecost, it longed for the Spirit to be poured out in abundance upon *all*. Remember those words of Moses, long ago: “*Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the*

Lord's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” (Num 11:29).

These days of prayer / ‘retreat’ for us between Ascension & Pentecost are days that we should give to the Lord in a special way. Now, I know that this week ahead falls at a strange time in the academic year, with you all on different tracks, different speeds: some haven’t started exams yet; some are done with exams; some are about to leave London for the summer (some have already left!); some are in a second mode, exams done but dissertations beckoning; and others are on the regular grind of research and PhD-thesis writing. True! ... it’s not an ideal time to be saying ‘give this week to the Lord and pray extra fervently for the Spirit.’ And yet, no time is ‘ideal’, and life is always busy. Let’s all offer this final week of Easter as special in our own way, whatever way we can manage. For two of our students, along with a few others, it *is* a truly special week in the Spirit, as they come to be confirmed on Wednesday. *Deo gratias!* But for us all, no matter how tricky a time of year it is, we can ask the Lord

for a greater share in those gifts of the Spirit — Wisdom, Courage, Piety etc. — that we are most in need of *this* Pentecost 2023.

The Church is always being re-born, made new and youthful, in the Spirit: the Spirit never lets the Church be dismayed or overcome: the Holy Spirit still acts, filling our lives with hope and grace. The Spirit acting in our lives means that we are bursting with faith, keen to do good and direct our lives in the service of God. It means, too, that we approach Pentecost with a hope and a vigour for the Spirit to sustain us: the Spirit, let's never forget, is a spiritual fire than never goes out ... So let's join in prayer with the host of heaven — the apostles and Our Lady and those other early Christians who gathered in that upper room — to pray for the Holy Spirit to keep aglow in our souls the life of Jesus who overcame all sin and evil, allowing us to radiate truly Christian goodness and hope.